Over the last two centuries, and particularly so over the last two decades, there has been an impressive expansion of humanitarianism – the desire to reduce the suffering of distant strangers. There now exists a network of states, international organizations, and nongovernmental organizations that count themselves as part of the humanitarian sector. These organizations have helped to create, and been nourished by, a complex of normative and legal principles. The existence of this network and normative fabric have created something that resembles, according to Didier Fassin, a “humanitarian government: [T]he administration of human collectivities in the name of a higher moral principle that sees the preservation of life and the alleviation of suffering as the highest value of action.”

This course will examine several dimensions of this world of humanitarian governance. Section I examines the humanitarian ethic. The first class asks a very simple question without a very simple answer: why care? The growth of humanitarian action over the years suggests that more people are caring than ever before, which itself requires explanation. Not only do more people seem to care, but many are adamant that there should be rules for giving: humanitarian principles. What are these? Why do they exist? Section II asks: How has the humanitarian system evolved? Humanitarianism has come a long way over a rather short period of time. How do we explain its success? Are different historical periods defined by different drivers? How do these periods compare over time? Humanitarianism has gotten bigger over the last several decades, but is bigger necessarily better?

Section III takes a slightly subversive look at the contemporary humanitarian system. One of the underlying themes of Section II is that the humanitarian system is fairly Western-centric (at least in terms of who is the giver, what kinds of gifts are appropriate, and when they are appropriate) and increasingly institutionalized, much like global governance more generally. This section, though, asks two questions that challenge its empirical and (implicit) normative basis. First, is this what the humanitarian system actually looks like? What criteria should we use to determine who is a legitimate, card-carrying member of the humanitarian system? Most sketches of the humanitarian system focus on Western-based NGOs and the UN system? What gets cropped out of such images? Diaspora groups? Faith-based organizations? New donors such as Saudi Arabia, India, and China? Sean Penn’s relief camp in Haiti? Are there parts of the humanitarian system that have grown faster than others? Is the “official” sector smaller than the “unofficial” sector?

Second, it might be true that humanitarianism has become bigger and more bureaucratic, but is this necessarily a good thing? There are lots of ways to organize action, including through markets, networks, and hierarchies. The humanitarian system is characterized by both networks and hierarchy. These are networks (in the loosest sense of the term) because we have lots of independent organizations that frequently act on their own and rarely coordinate their actions with other aid providers. Yet because their lack of coordination and collaboration is seen as...
the ability to help those in need, over the last several decades the humanitarian system has attempted to become more centralized, bureaucratized, and professionalized; that is, it has become more top-heavy. Has this centralization improved the ability to help others in need? Perhaps it has, perhaps not. Are we better off having a little less governance and a little more independence? At issue is not only the effectiveness but also the legitimacy of humanitarian action. Although humanitarianism is a noble cause, it can pursue this cause through anti-democratic means, especially as it ignores the voices of the victims. But do we really want to take time and listen to everyone voices when lives are at stake? In general, we are interested in the what the world of humanitarian action looks like, and how it is and might be organized.

After having discussed these central issues regarding the world of humanitarian governance, we want to examine how they play out in three critical areas: (1) Should humanitarian action to provide relief and protect civilians include the “victims” as more than objects of need? (2) Are the victims better off receiving money rather than care packages? (3) Should, and how should, aid agencies be accountable to those they serve? Students will be divided into three groups and assigned to one of the questions, will prepare a report on their conclusions, and will present that report in class.

Readings. Most of the readings are in the form of articles or are easily accessible on the web. I have assigned a few books, though. These books are available at the GWU Bookstore.


Requirements. All students must come to class prepared to contribute through discussion - which requires you to have read and reflected on the materials assigned for that class session. All students must email 3-4 questions or observations that are provoked by the reading by Wednesday evening prior to Thursday’s class.

You will be evaluated by three assignments: a take-home essay distributed on October 13, due the following week (25%); an in-class presentation due on November 10 (25%); and a group project (50%). I will not give a grade for participation, but those who demonstrate through their class participation that they have read and considered the materials will help their final grade.

Office Hours. I have office hours on Tuesdays, from 10-12, at ESIA 501J. I also am available by appointment. Email is the best way to reach me: barnett@gwu.edu. My telephone number is 202- 994-9301.

Rules on Technology. The expectation is that you come to class prepared to discuss the materials. I no longer allow any technology with an “on/off” button. The one exception is if you
have downloaded your readings to a computer and would like to refresh yourself with the readings and refer to them during class. However, all other uses, i.e. emailing, facebook, gaming, are strictly prohibited.

**Section I: Why Care?**

**September 1 Why Care?**

This first week addresses the basic question: why should we care about other people? What are the various reasons that are given for why we care for distant strangers? Have these explanations changed historically? Are the reasons changing? If so, why?

Singer: *The Life You Can Save*, chaps. 1-5.

**September 8 Humanitarian Principles**

What does it mean to enact a humanitarian ethic? What are the principles of humanitarianism? Are these principles about the goals of humanitarianism? or do they also include the means of humanitarianism? Do these principles go together nicely, or can they be at odds with each other? If so, which principles are most important? Where do these principles come from? Have they changed over the decades? If so, why? What is the relationship between those who want to provide relief and these principles?

International Committee of the Red Cross. *Codes of Conduct*

**Section II A Centralized Humanitarianism**

**September 15 Emergence and Evolution of the Humanitarian System, Part I**

In this first of three weeks that examines the evolution of the humanitarian system, we are focused on its origins and early development. What are the different styles of humanitarianism? Do these different styles have different historical origins? Are they built for different purposes? What distinguishes them? To what extent do the anti-slavery movement and the International Committee for the Red Cross have different lineages? What is the justification for a
humanitarianism that focuses exclusively on saving soldiers versus a humanitarianism that imagines trying to eliminate the root causes of human suffering?


**September 22  Emergence and Evolution of the Humanitarian System, Part II**

This second installment on the evolution of humanitarianism pays particular attention to its consolidation beginning with World War Two. Why did humanitarianism become so popular? Is it because, for whatever reasons, powerful states finally cared? Is there a connection to the decline of colonialism and the rise of independent states in the global South? If so, does that make us more or less suspicious of its expansion?


**September 29  Emergence of the Humanitarian System, III**

This final installment in the evolution of humanitarianism examines its post-Cold War life, with particular attention to global expansion into complex emergencies and saving failed states. To what extent is humanitarianism being ruined by its success? Should humanitarians accept the challenge of trying to help more people with more needs? Is the growing role of states a necessary evil? just an evil? or possibly a welcome development?


**October 6  Armed Humanitarianism**

Special Guest: Nathan Hodge

Historically, humanitarians have been rather reluctant to contemplate the use of force to further civilian protection or work alongside the military. Yet the growing legitimacy of humanitarian intervention and growing recognition that militaries can sometimes use their
tremendous power not just to destroy but also to save has led to a grudging reconsideration by humanitarians. And, like it or not, the military is increasingly engaged in relief and reconstruction. Is this good for humanitarians, solders, and victims of conflict? Or are all three losers?

Hodge, *Armed Humanitarians*, Prologue, Chapters 1-2, 4-8, 10-11, Conclusion.  
Polman, *The Crisis Caravan*, chap. 5.

October 13  Humanitarian Governance

There is an international humanitarian order. What are its organizing principles? If the states system is organized around anarchy and the balance of power, and the economic system is organized around dollars and capitalism, what about the international humanitarian order? And because all orders and governance structures contain and distribute power, what sort of power defines the international humanitarian order? Is humanitarian governance a “humane” governance? Does it operate according to democratic principles and rights?


*Take Home Essay Distributed.*

**Section III:**  
**How is and Should Aid be Organized?**

October 20  Hierarchy, Networks, and Markets, I

A theme of the first part of the course is the centralization and institutionalization of humanitarianism. In other words, it has become bigger and brawnier. But does this mean that it is more effective and efficient? In this week we examine the organizing principles that underlie three different ways of coordinating collective action: hierarchy, networks, and market. What are the advantages and disadvantages of each way of organizing activity?
October 27  Hierarchy, Networks, and Markets, II

In this week we ask ourselves two fundamental questions: How is the humanitarian system organized? Has it become more top-heavy? Is it still as efficient as herding cats? Is it disorganized anarchy? Are there countervailing pressures for centralization and decentralization, especially evident as humanitarian organizations vow to be more efficient if only because it might save lives but also continually demonstrate a deep desire to protect their autonomy? The second question examine not what does exist but what should exist? The humanitarian system appears to be drawn to two images of the future, one in which there is more coordination from the very top and the other in which there is genuine partnership with local actors.


Polman, The Crisis Caravan, chap. 1-4.


Humanitarian Exchange. 2011. Special Issue on “Humanitarian Partnerships,” Humanitarian Practice Network, London: Overseas Development Institute. Read the essays by Houghton; Knudsen; Brown; Bannerman, et al.; Perdaus; Twigg and Bottomly; Lowrie and Hounjet; Martin and Darcy; Shaw-Hamilton; Allen; Street;  

UN OCHA. “The Four Pillars of Humanitarian Reform.”  
ochaonline.un.org/OchaLinkClick.aspx?link=ocha&docId=1146894

http://www.icva.ch/doc00003933.pdf
November 3 A Growing Diversity of Actors?

This week of in-class research presentations will survey the emergence of new actors in the humanitarian system. There are hints that these “new actors” are becoming more important than ever, though very few have bothered to systematically investigate the question. In order to build a conversation and knowledge base, I am going to assign you to one of the following actors: Christian faith-based organizations; non-Christian faith-based organizations; corporations; diaspora groups; southern-based NGOs.


November 10 Who Cares When Disaster Strikes?

It is difficult to figure out the map and organization of the humanitarian system (and whether we should even call it a system) in part because we actually do not know what does exist. Specifically, we have a fairly good fix on the “official” humanitarian system, but we have a very limited understanding of the “unofficial” system. This week we want to see what happens if we compare the “official” to the “unofficial” system in several emergencies. Each student will be asked to pick a single site, gather data on who contributed (both in terms of who donated and who showed up), and present these findings in class. We will then compare across the sites to see if we can find any patterns and trends.

November 17 Can “Victims” Participate in their Own Relief and Protection?

Class Presentation. Readings to be Assigned.

December 1 Should We Hand Over Money to Victims?

Class Presentation. Readings to be Assigned.

December 8 Can, Should, and How Should Relief Agencies be Accountable to Local Populations?

Class Presentation. Readings to be Assigned.