Overview
When do States and the International system intervene in humanitarian crises? How are those decisions made? What are the ethical dilemmas? And if and how are humanitarian principles maintained in conflict-related crises? Is there a case for non-intervention? Traditionally, the ideal form of humanitarian interventions was about saving lives. However, as humanitarian aid has become politicized, more humanitarian spending is focused on protracted, conflict-related crises, and the closing of humanitarian space due to State and Non-State actors, the ability to maintain these principles is increasingly challenged. If and how does the humanitarian system need to change?

In this course we will cover various topics related to humanitarian interventions, including:

- Principles of humanitarian intervention
- Conflation of humanitarian aid and security policy
- Politics of (non) intervention
- Coercive humanitarianism
- Humanitarian access and security
- Critical and local perspectives on humanitarian sector
- New models of humanitarian intervention

The course will include a number of readings (more on that below) and guests who will shed light on the perspectives of various actors—states, multilaterals, implementers and recipients.¹

After this course, students will have strong knowledge of the core debates in the humanitarian field. They also will learn how to analyze the politics of future interventions, understanding the incentives and constraints on actors, and strategize how to move actors in support of intervention (or not).²

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¹ I spent time debating which word to use: recipient, beneficiary or participant. I chose recipient to not mask the power imbalances inherent in aid. While there are numerous movements to change this dynamic, there’s a long way to go.

² For this course, I pulled from Jeremy Konyndyk’s Field Operations for Humanitarian Assistance and Nick MacDonald’s Conflict & Development courses, with permission. As well as took many people’s very good recommendations.
Assignments

Note: All written assignments are expected to be single-spaced, 12 point font, with one inch margins. Those submitted that don’t follow these instructions will not be graded.

Weekly Reading and Class Participation (25%): It is expected students come to each class prepared to discuss the topic and readings. This is your opportunity to engage more with the material, ask me or guests questions, and debate the thorny issues that are at the heart of humanitarian interventions. In your professional career, you will need to back your opinions with evidence (most of the time), and so use class as an opportunity to hone those skills. To help prepare for class, you will need to submit 3-4 bullet points on the readings. These could be reflections, questions, etc. Quality is more important the quantity. Over the course of the term, you may take 3 “passes” and not submit the bullet points.

Reflection papers (2 @ 15%) Over the course of the semester, you will need to write 2 papers based on the reading list for that class and apply them to either a past or current humanitarian crisis. For example, during the week where we discuss principles of neutrality and impartiality, you may choose to see how an agency (e.g. Norwegian Refugee Council) has balanced those principles in their response to the Rohingya crisis. You do not have to include each reading in your analysis. You will be evaluated on your ability to apply concepts. However, if you make an argument that one of the readings clearly makes and do not acknowledge it, it will hurt your grade. Papers are due before class (11 AM) via Canvas. Submissions over 2 pages long will not be accepted.

Perspective-taking reflection paper (15%): In this course, we will spend considerable time discussing the politics of intervention. However, there are people who suffer while those in power decide what to do. That does not mean intervention is always the answer, but I want you to think about how these crises impact people. For this, you will pick a memoir, film/documentary, a piece of art, a poem or novel created by someone who has lived through a humanitarian crisis (I will provide some suggestions on Canvas), and reflect how that perspective changed or provided you new insight into the crisis. For the paper, provide a brief overview of the crisis, including statistics on displacement, food security, injured, killed, etc, and if and how the international community intervened (no more than 1 page), and then how the piece influenced your thinking. Submissions over 2 pages will not be accepted. Due: May 11 before class

Final Paper (30%) From the perspective of a UN, State or INGO country representative, students will prepare a briefing packet for decision-maker of their agency (Secretary, Director, CEO, etc) on whether or not the organization should get involved in a current crisis, and how. Please pick a conflict/protracted crisis or a slow-onset emergency (e.g. famines). The packet will include a 1-page summary of the evidence and your recommendation; background on the crisis (2 pages); an analysis of how other actors are responding or not (2 pages); and an analysis of the political incentives and constraints on intervening (2 pages). This exercise will assess writing
and analysis skills and understanding of the various issues shaping decisions on whether or not to intervene, and how. **Due: June 10**

**Late policy:** Unless arrangements are made in advance, any assignment that is late will receive 10% penalty for each day late.

**Academic Integrity:** All University of Chicago students are expected to uphold the highest standards of academic integrity and honesty. Among other things, this means that students shall not represent another’s work as their own, use un-allowed materials during exams, or otherwise gain unfair academic advantage. All students suspected of academic dishonesty will be reported to the Harris Dean of Students for investigation and adjudication. The disciplinary process can result in sanctions up to and including suspension or expulsion from the University. In addition to disciplinary sanctions, I will impose a grade penalty of 0 on the assignment and cannot earn higher than a C in the course for students who have committed academic dishonesty. The Harris policy and procedures related to academic integrity can be found at [https://harris.uchicago.edu/gateways/current-students/policies](https://harris.uchicago.edu/gateways/current-students/policies). The University of Chicago Policy on Academic Honesty & Plagiarism can be found at [https://studentmanual.uchicago.edu/academic-policies/academic-honesty-plagiarism/](https://studentmanual.uchicago.edu/academic-policies/academic-honesty-plagiarism/)

**ADA student accommodations:** Any student who believes they may need assistance should inform the Office of Student Disability Services by the end of the first week of class. Once you have received an accommodation letter, it should be presented to the course instructor immediately: [https://disabilities.uchicago.edu/](https://disabilities.uchicago.edu/)

**Office Hours:** Wed 2 PM – 4 PM; #2103

**Books for the Course:** There are a number of books that I will rely on for the course. I rarely assign all of the book, but many of them are compelling reads in their own right, and are available used (for example, there are copies of Reiff’s *A Bed for the Night* for as low as $1.50).


**Tentative Course Schedule and Readings:**

**Weeks 1-2:** *Introduction to Humanitarian Intervention*
March 30: Introduction and course expectations

- “Alms Dealers” – Philip Gourevitch:  
- “First, Do No Harm” – Samantha Power:  

April 1: History of humanitarian intervention: When did the world start intervening?

- Barnett: Introduction and Chapter 1
- Power: A Problem From Hell, Chapters 1-3
- Dromi, S. (2020). Chapter 1

April 6: Humanitarian Principles

- “The Politics of Principle: the Principles of Humanitarian Action in Practice” – Kate Mackintosh, ODI:  
  [https://www.odi.org/resources/docs/305.pdf](https://www.odi.org/resources/docs/305.pdf)
- Code of Conduct for the ICRC and NGOs in Disaster Relief -  
- “The Humanitarian Ethos In Action” (Overview of the four core humanitarian principles and their application) -  
- SPHERE Handbook - READ the Humanitarian Charter –  

Week 3: Types of Crises: Natural vs. Man-made Disasters

April 8: “Natural” Disasters.

  [http://bostonreview.net/global-justice/alex-de-waal-mass-starvation-crime%25E2%2580%2594its-time-we-treated-it-way](http://bostonreview.net/global-justice/alex-de-waal-mass-starvation-crime%25E2%2580%2594its-time-we-treated-it-way)
  [https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736(08)61641-4/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736(08)61641-4/fulltext)
  [https://doi.org/10.1177/0022002708322157](https://doi.org/10.1177/0022002708322157)
  [https://www.mercycorps.org/sites/default/files/from_conflict_to_coping_-_final.pdf](https://www.mercycorps.org/sites/default/files/from_conflict_to_coping_-_final.pdf)
• **Cases**: Ethiopia and Yemen

April 13: Protracted Crises: What’s Different?

• Mercy Corps (2015), Root Causes of Complex Crises (on Canvas)

  https://www.unocha.org/sites/unocha/files/An%20end%20in%20sight%20Multi%20YearPlanning.pdf

• Case Syria (Part I)

Weeks 4-5: Politics of Intervention—Perspectives from States & Multi-laterals

April 15: Overview of actors, tools and the calculus of intervening


April 20: Coercive Humanitarianism

• Reiff, Chapter 4 & 6

• Powers, Problem, Chapter 9


• Cases: Bosnia and Kosovo

April 22: Is intervention always the answer? Examining short and long-term objectives

• Reiff, Chapter 5
• Powers, Problem, Chapter 10
• King & Samii (2020). Diversity, Violence and Recognition
• Case: Rwanda

April 27: Idealism vs. Reality: Use of Aid to Enhance National Security

• Power, An Education of An Idealist (Chapters TBD)

Weeks 6-7: Politics of Intervention: Perspectives from Implementers

April 29: Closing of humanitarian space

• Stoddard, A. (2020). Necessary Risks, Chapter 1
• Fast, L. (2014) Aid in Danger. Chapter 3
• Case: Afghanistan

May 4: Maintaining humanitarian principles

• Reiff, Chapter 7
• Barnett, Chapter 10
• Stoddard, A. Necessary Risks. Chapter 2
• Dromi, S. Chapter 5.
• Case: Syria (Part II)

May 6: Paternalism and the political economy of humanitarian interventions

• Barnett, Chapter 10
• Polman, Linda. Chaos Caravan (Chapters TBD)

Weeks 7-8: Politics of Intervention: Perspectives from Recipients
Perspective-taking reflection assignment due: May 13

May 11: Local perspectives on interventions

- Other readings TBD

May 13: Protection, safeguarding and abuses

- *The Humanitarian #MeToo Movement*
- UK Parliament Review of Sexual Exploitation and Abuse in the Aid Sector (Read Introduction and Conclusion; further reading/skimming optional) [https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201719/cmselect/cmintdev/840/84002.htm](https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201719/cmselect/cmintdev/840/84002.htm)

May 18: Critical perspectives

- Other readings TBD

Weeks 9 and 10: The Limits and Future of Humanitarian Interventions

May 20: What is success?


Other readings TBD

May 25: No Class

May 27: New Models and Reform


June 1: The triple nexus: Humanitarian, development and peacebuilding


June 3: Wrap up: Is the Humanitarian System Broken?

June 10: Final papers due