“From Fragile States to Fragile Cities: Conceptual and Operational Redefinitions of Third Generation Humanitarian Practices”

Joao Pontes Nogueira
International Relations Institute
Pontifical Catholic University of Rio de Janeiro
Brazil
jnogueira@puc-rio.br

Abstract

The paper looks into the transformations of the humanitarian “regime” through a set of normative innovations that have characterized what is now conventionally defined as “third generation” humanitarian assistance and complex operations.

The paper argues that the redefinition of internationally accepted principles and rules of humanitarian action can be traced by the analysis of key concepts used by academics and practitioners to define and understand humanitarian crisis in the post-Cold War era. New formulations and interpretations of these concepts are increasingly used to legitimize the widening of the scope of humanitarian agencies, more specifically to allow for their deployment in “non-war” zones such as urban areas in developing or less developed countries.

The definition of humanitarian spaces in urban settings affected by chronic violence depends upon the articulation of core concepts associated to peace-building and state-making strategies developed during the two decades following the end of the Cold War. While actions in non-war situations are justified by the “vulnerability” of civilian populations in particular areas, zones or spaces where government basic services are absent, the underlying assumptions of such diagnosis are basically an updated reconfiguration of the narratives of “failed” “collapsed” “quasi” states of the 90s. The operative concept in the present policy discourses is “fragility”, most often applied to describe the conditions of afflicted states – fragile states – subject to an array of “new vulnerabilities and risks”. The purpose of this paper is to critically review the concepts deployed in the discursive practices of actors involved in humanitarian action in “non-war situations”. The literature on the new generation of humanitarian practices has shifted in at least three important dimensions, in comparison to the 1990’s: it has adopted a vocabulary that emphasizes institutional capacity, human security and aid effectiveness, in contrast to that associated with the problem of state failure, or state collapse and peacebuilding; it has a more subtle approach to state weakness, now generally defined as fragility and articulated to the problem of development in more technical sense; and it has promoted a displacement of the space of humanitarian practice from the macro-level of the state to the local level of the city and other correlate “ungoverned zones”. The analysis of these moves will help us understand how two important gaps in current global governance policies can be bridged: the sovereignty gap, which still hinders the deployment of international agents in territories protected by the rule of non-intervention; and the legitimacy gap, that still undercuts the authority of global actors vis-à-vis the state.