

Humanitarianism and the Quantification of Human Needs. Minimal Humanity

This book provides an historical inquiry into the quantification of needs in humanitarian assistance. Needs are increasingly seen as the lowest common denominator of humanity. Standard definitions of basic needs, however, set a minimalist version of humanity – both in the sense that it is narrow in what it compares, and that it sets a low bar for satisfaction. The book argues that we cannot understand humanitarian governance if we do not understand how humanitarian agencies made human suffering commensurable across borders in the first place. Drawing on a range of archival sources, including the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR), Médecins sans Frontières (MSF), and the Sphere Project, the book traces the concept of needs from its emergence in the 1960s right through to the present day, and United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon’s call for “evidence-based humanitarianism.” Finally, the book assesses how the international governmentality of needs has played out in a recent humanitarian crisis, drawing on field research on Central African refugees in the Cameroonian borderland in 2014–2016. This historical inquiry into the universal nature of human suffering will be an important read for humanitarian researchers and practitioners, as well as readers with an interest in international history and development.

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"In this innovative and grounded study, Joël Glasman reveals how it came to be that the smallest unit of our shared humanity—its least common denominator—is neither you nor me, but the calorie, the liter of water, the metrics of our need in our moments of deepest distress. This fascinating work deserves wide readership and demands deep reflection."

- Gregory Mann, author of From Empires to NGOs in the West African Sahel: the Road to Nongovernmentality (2015)

"Combining a provocative perspective with a meticulous eye for detail, Joël Glasman’s insightful history traces humanitarian efforts to define human suffering through an index of vital needs. Minimal Humanity reminds us of the fundamental complexity of apparently simple matters."

– Peter Redfield, author of Life in Crisis: The Ethical Journey of Doctors Without Borders (2013)