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Mitigation

Broadly put, there are three meanings of the notion of mitigation in the humanitarian context. The first meaning refers to the prevention or avoidance of humanitarian crises often caused by armed conflict (Lane 2016). Here, mitigation takes the form of anticipatory responses aimed at tackling three aspects: the societal preconditions of violent politics, the potential of violent conflict itself, and the potential effects of the conflict (Albala-Bertrand 2000). The second meaning of mitigation refers to the alleviation of suffering caused by humanitarian emergencies through the provision of relief aid that creates temporary administrative, personnel, and financial compromises (Hoffman, Weiss, and Egeland 2017). The third meaning is that mitigation is a specific phase of the so-called “disaster management cycle,” which is typically divided into different stages (Coetzee and Van Niekerk 2012) such as mitigation, preparedness,

and response and recovery phases. In this context, mitigation deals with complex emergencies, considered the outcome of “societal/institutional weakness” and multicausal factors such as food insecurity, epidemics, conflicts, or displaced populations, and also with natural disasters, perceived as the result of the “physical weakness” of structures and processes (Albala-Bertrand 2000: 216).

Following the end of the Cold War, the boundaries between humanitarian relief and development have been progressively blurred and integrated into a resilient life cycle. There is now no clear division between communities directly experiencing crises, those vulnerable to future disaster/emergencies, or those in recovery stages. In parallel, the notion of mitigation has shifted from being primarily reactive to being integrated into a larger project to build “better societies” (Hoffman, Weiss, and Egeland 2017: 19). In this logic, mitigation is merged into the broader framework of sustainable development that seeks to create safer communities (Schneider 2017). Although complex emergencies are integral to political and economic structures, the logic of mitigation in humanitarian settings “derives from a natural disaster model that pays little attention to social or political factors” (Duffield 1994). However, the violent and entrenched political nature of complex humanitarian emergencies requires more multifaceted mitigation measures and responses than natural disasters (Albala-Bertrand 2000).

By the end of the Cold War, mitigation measures were less focused on rescue or protection and more on the modulation of social and economic processes to promote “adaptative coping strategies” (Duffield 2013: 8). The division between ex-ante and ex-post disaster related activities emerged as a separate yet interconnected stream of humanitarian aid (Hollis 2014). This included a shift towards the view that disasters were the outcome of interconnected events and that emergencies were integral to the human–environment relationship. Subsequently, disasters seemed not only very predictable, but their magnitude also seemed reducible to advance planning (Schneider 2017). Akin to this new trend, disaster risk reduction required the implementation of measures and policies with a twofold aim: to enable societies to be resilient to natural hazards and to decrease societal vulnerability (UN 2004). Disaster risk reduction conceived the lessening of risk as a series of endeavors tracked across social, economic, governmental, and professional sectors of activity (UN 2004). Instead of fearing disasters per se, societies are “urged to learn the new life-skills of preparedness and resilience” (Duffield 2013: 480). Disaster mitigation centers on the technical and material inputs to “prepare for the predetermined roles” that different actors and processes have in pre-disaster, during the disaster, and during post-disaster operations (Sushil 2017). In this vein, the United

Nations General Assembly established an open-ended intergovernmental expert working group to update the terminology used by the United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction (UNISDR) (UN General Assembly 2015). In June 2015, the UNISDR working group defined mitigation as “[t]he lessening or minimizing of the adverse impacts of a hazardous event” (UN General Assembly 2016: 20).

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