

BOOK REVIEWS

The Politics of Protection: The Limits of Humanitarian Action, 2011, Elizabeth G. Ferris, Washington DC: Brookings Institute.

Ilan Kelman

Center for International Climate and Environmental Research – Oslo (CICERO)

Email: ilan_kelman@hotmail.com

Disasters, including conflict, continue to exact a large toll on humanity. Now, an international system—some would say “business”—exists to provide aid to those affected. Often, that is not enough. Gender-based violence is rife in temporary settlements for displaced people. Those locally controlling humanitarian relief easily abuse that power to continue excluding certain groups from society, such as lower castes, ethnic groups who are not part of the elite, and people with disabilities.

Uncoordinated, inappropriate, or poorly considered assistance can frequently cause more harm than good. Food aid potentially undermines local markets or can be anathema to cultural beliefs. Stories abound of disaster-affected people being given loads of winter clothing in tropical climates. Following the 31 May 1970 earthquake and rock avalanche in Yungay, Peru, Tony Oliver-Smith published the iconic phrase about disaster aid “First the earthquake, then the avalanche...and then the disaster”.

As similar concerns appear repeatedly and as lessons are learned, re-learned, and still ignored, the humanitarian system is seeking to adjust. One approach that has recently come to the forefront is “protection”. Humanitarian organizations are increasingly adopting phrases such as “protection of civilians” or “responsibility to protect”.

Does that improve humanitarian work? What does it mean in theory, in policy, and in practice? What are the opportunities and challenges? Could much more be done with “protection” in the context of humanitarianism—or is it causing more problems than providing resolutions? How are various definitions, attitudes, and interests addressed through “protection”?

In *The Politics of Protection: The Limits of Humanitarian Action*, Elizabeth G. Ferris sets out these questions and more, while providing answers or approaches that should be used to find answers. In an impressive, thought-provoking, detailed volume, Ferris collects in one place a deep and insightful overview of history, meanings, intentions, applications, and realities of “protection” in humanitarianism. She covers all forms of disaster, including conflict.

The book comprises ten chapters with extensive endnotes. But first, the Introduction provides brief background about the author (including her extensive field experience), a summary of each chapter, and the book’s purpose. Several theoretical and practical

questions frame the latter—which is succinctly and appropriately defined as to “sharpen the understanding of what protection means in the context of humanitarian action” (p. xvii). That goal is resoundingly achieved, especially in framing the best questions to ask and how to ask them, even if satisfactory answers are explicitly not yet available.

Chapters 1 and 2 set the stage with background on the history and emergence of humanitarian protection topics. They cover humanitarian principles, international law, a rights-based approach, international parties involved in protection, genocide, and the rights of specific groups. That indicates how the topic has evolved to its current status, summarized in Chapters 3 and 4. This material highlights roles, responsibilities, and lack of responsibilities of communities, governments (disaster-affected and non-disaster-affected), non-state actors, the UN system, other international initiatives, NGOs (international and national), the media, and the military, amongst others. Personalities and the private sector are listed as “new actors” (p. 112)—an ironic term in the context of naming Hollywood celebrities—although that section implies a long history in this area.

On the basis of this detailed background, wider contexts are explored. Chapter 5, titled “Global Governance”, focuses on the UN. Aspects of UN reform, undertaken and needed, are examined along with opportunities and challenges for justice and accountability. The pros and cons, plus successes and failures, of “responsibility to protect” are noted, segueing into Chapter 6 on challenges faced in implementing humanitarian protection. Examples are the safety and security of field staff, the implementation and relevance of neutrality and impartiality, connecting relief and development, and (again) accountability.

Chapter 7 analyzes many of these topics specifically for disasters involving environmental hazards. Then comes quantification and critical discussion of financial sources for humanitarian work in Chapter 8. Particularly chilling is Table 8-6 (p. 240) comparing the amount of money pledged for specific crises with the amount of money actually delivered.

The final two chapters present incisive analysis and summaries of the previous material. “Future Challenges for Humanitarian Actors” (Chapter 9) selects the main topics as changing forms of conflict, urbanization, and climate change. While prioritizing those three is arguable, the importance of them is not. They would be essential to include in any such discussion and Ferris does so admirably. Chapter 10 represents a nice wrap-up, looking to the future for resolving the main gaps that the book identifies without losing the important historical perspective which is maintained throughout.

The Politics of Protection is filled with solid, detailed discussion, framed intelligently and structured logically. Researchers, policy makers, and practitioners would all gain from reading it. The topic is dense, drenched in the usual acronym soup, but Ferris goes out of her way to make it easy for the reader to navigate. Well-placed boxes and tables provide definitions, summaries, and lists as easy references to acronyms, policies, laws,

and numbers. The text provides the necessary baseline that most readers would need for the topics, but without being simplistic or patronizing.

The book also continually embraces many fundamental scientific aspects of the issues while being atop the most recent discussions. For example, the phrase “natural disaster” is used to differentiate from conflicts. Yet the long-standing scientific view that “natural disaster” is a misnomer is acknowledged and discussed (p. 201), as is the importance of small, underreported disasters compared to the headliners (p. 202). When Chapter 2 highlights the rights of certain sectors of the population, not only are the standard groups of women, children, and the elderly included, but also the often overlooked stateless persons, migrant workers, and persons with disabilities (although neither non-heterosexuals nor prisoners are mentioned).

Some fact checking would have eliminated small errors that creep in. For instance, the 2008 China earthquake is labeled as being in 2009 (p. 173) and 2005 (p. 224) while the 1972 Nicaragua earthquake is mentioned as 1976 (p. 210).

Similarly, the impressive and needed level of critical analysis applied throughout the book could have been better applied to the various statements on climate change such as “it seems certain that changing climatic conditions are increasing the severity and frequency of natural disasters” (pp. xv-xvi). Climate change is certainly altering hazards, making some worse across many parameters and some easier to cope with depending on the location and timeframe considered. But, as disaster science has been pointing out for decades, society can deal with disasters if the choice is made to do so. It is not climate change that increases disasters, but humanity’s unwillingness to implement disaster risk reduction, including in the face of climate change.

Overall, the book is excellently balanced, thought through, and well-written. Good practice case studies, such as genocide prevention in Burundi (p. 169), are compared with the bad, avoiding painting an especially positive or negative picture. Detailed research based on scientific literature is expertly combined with the pragmatism of the author’s practical experience. *The Politics of Protection* provides an up-to-date, cutting-edge synthesis and analysis of a topic, the implications of which are still not fully understood, that is filtering into many humanitarian policies and actions.