THE DEVELOPMENT COOPERATION SYSTEM BEFORE A CHANGING WORLD ORDER AND THE GLOBAL CHALLENGES

Feminist Humanitarian Action: a Matter of Human Rights

Marta Pajarín García

Illustrator: Hansel Obando

Humanitarian Action (HA) has come to be managed as a specific type and sector of international development cooperation, with its own characteristics, time frames, principles, objectives and procedures. This differentiated action has led to the sectorisation of interventions and the specialisation of organisations and agencies, making it difficult to articulate a fluid dialogue aimed at the harmonisation and complementarity between different actions.

Changes in the understanding of development and international cooperation are challenging this sectorisation and driving the search for formulas that enhance complementarity and increase the potential for convergence between development and Humanitarian Action. This integrated perspective can also be seen in the link between peace, security and sustainable development emphasised by the 2030 Agenda.

The feminist perspective can help us sketch these theoretical and practical bridges. Feminist criticisms to a development vision limited to economic growth have played a key role in exposing the androcentric and ethnocentric bias of development strategies, nurturing the notion of maldevelopment and pointing to the existence of a global systemic failure of the hegemonic development model.

> Feminist criticisms of a development vision limited to economic growth have played a key role in exposing the androcentric and ethnocentric bias of development strategies

In addition, empowerment strategies have amplified the principle of protection, emphasising the importance of the structural causes of humanitarian crises and promoting actions focused on protecting and guaranteeing human rights and, specifically, the defence of women's rights. In this sense, the feminist perspective has revealed the connection between the expansion of the hegemonic neoliberal globalisation model and the appearance of new forms of women's rights violations, control and misogynist violence on a global scale.

Changes in our understanding of development

The predominant understanding of development as economic growth has been shown to have theoretical and methodological limitations when it comes to integrating elements essential for the well-being of human beings and conserving the natural environment. In this context, the development narrative is now being nourished by new approaches that challenge the idea of development centred on an unlimited economic growth that leads to inequalities and environmental deterioration; or transcend the understanding of development as a universal goal, questioning the individualistic and exclusive bias of liberal values.

The consequences of neoliberal globalisation and the ecological crisis, as well as the proposals for alternative models that reconfigure our social relations and interaction with nature, have an important gender reading. For example, feminist economics points to the fact that the capitalist production and consumption model are based on a patriarchal model of social organisation that undervalues and neglects social reproduction and care.

Feminist economics is committed to a change of model that revolves around the sustainability of life and understands the interdependence between human beings and their need for care as the basis of the community organisation system [1]. Similarly, and in tune with eco-feminism, it addresses the eco-dependence of development processes, emphasising the limits of the current globalisation model, its anthropocentric and androcentric nature, and linking the conservation and care of nature —environmental justice— with equality and gender justice. These inputs are making a decisive contribution to redefining the concept of development and the collective construction of alternative models of coexistence.

In recent decades, the development cooperation system has begun a substantial transformation process that affects its nature, configuration, measurement, and operation. This process of change is motivated by the transformations that have taken place on the international scene, as well as by the new content in the debates and development agendas.

> Feminist economics points to the fact that the capitalist production and consumption model are based on a patriarchal model of social organisation that undervalues and neglects social reproduction and care

The increased prominence of debates on inequalities, the search for international governance formulas that are more representative and effective at managing global public goods collaboratively, and policy coherence are the driving elements of a renewed international cooperation. Furthermore, the comprehensive vision, interdependence and the structural nature of current development challenges call for the development model to become a sphere of action for work in international cooperation. This transformation would be oriented towards implementing new, more sustainable production and consumption relationships based on social and gender justice; or towards the consolidation of more democratic, inclusive and cohesive socio-political environments, focused on the empowerment and participation of citizens.

The principle of protection from a human rights perspective

The assistance approach that has traditionally characterised Humanitarian Action has been the subject of heavy criticism since the 1980s due to more political, comprehensive and integrative perspectives on humanitarian crises [2]. Since then, new approaches have emerged, such as the link between emergency aid, rehabilitation and development (VARD), disaster risk reduction and management (DRR), or the resilience approach, which emphasises the importance of preventive work. These approaches promote actions to assess the risk factors that can cause a humanitarian crisis or improve the response preparedness capacity of countries and communities to reduce vulnerability to future risks.

New humanitarianism proposes an even more holistic approach, capable of reinterpreting the objectives of Humanitarian Action and redirecting them towards transforming the structural causes of crises and promoting development, peace and human rights. With this broader perspective, humanitarian work would also be oriented towards preventing conflicts and peacebuilding, including evidence-gathering, reporting and advocacy actions, both in crisis contexts and in the countries of the North [3].

Another line of debate coming out of new humanitarianism argues that the needs-based focus should be expanded to include a wider Human Rights-Based Approach (HRBA), which revolves around the principle of protection. In fact, along with the duty to assist victims of humanitarian crises, the duty to protect was a central element in the emergence of humanitarianism; however, it has proved somewhat more complex to define. From a human rights-based approach, Humanitarian Action would transcend welfare and be articulated by a notion of social justice that emphasises participation and the enforceability of people’s rights.

> New humanitarianism proposes a more holistic approach, reinterpreting the objectives of Humanitarian Action and redirecting them towards transforming the structural causes of crises and promoting development, peace and human rights

Since the late 1990s, the humanitarian system has tried to agree on shared minimum principles and standards, as well as operational frameworks, to articulate common criteria for action (such as, among others, the Sphere initiative, the Essential Humanitarian Standard, the Sendai Framework for DRR, or the Grand Bargain that emerged after the first World Humanitarian Summit). Although the realisation and development of the principle of protection aren't always at the centre of these proposals, they have helped to channel the responsibility of humanitarian actors, improve transparency and accountability, and promote coordination and participation. However, most of these initiatives are ultimately oriented towards the management of economic resources by donors, without effectively underpinning it with quality criteria based on the realisation of rights.

Feminist Humanitarian Action

The inclusion of the gender perspective in Humanitarian Action has come later than it did in development policies and initiatives. Nonetheless, the adoption of an approach more focused on rights, protection and accountability has created a favourable climate for incorporating the gender perspective in the work of humanitarian actors and standardising guidelines for action [4]. Today, there is a broad consensus that including the gender perspective in humanitarian work allows us to recognise the differentiated impact of humanitarian crises on women and men and the specific effect armed conflicts have on women and girls. The gender perspective also makes it possible to see how vulnerability, capacity and resilience (individual and collective) have an important gender dimension, as they are heavily determined by power relations, traditional roles, the quality of participation, the access to and control of resources, and discriminatory social norms.

Considering the different needs, opportunities, priorities or strategies and paying attention to how gender relations change during crises can provide incredibly useful information for effective humanitarian programming and the fulfilment of human rights. It should also be noted that the traditional role assigned to women, linked to reproductive and care tasks, often places them at the forefront of the response. For this reason, it's vital they participate in the programming phases, as they have essential information necessary for effective preparedness, response and rehabilitation planning.

The gender perspective's integral approach to the principle of protection helps to guarantee the application of humanitarian principles: humanity, impartiality and non-discrimination, neutrality and independence. It demands humanitarian actions that recognise the differences and inequalities between women and men and try not to consolidate or perpetuate them; actions that do not place women and girls in a situation of

increased vulnerability, or ones that take specific measures to protect their rights.

From an operational point of view, including the gender perspective in Humanitarian Action must start with a gender analysis capable of guiding the design of targeted protection and empowerment measures, as well as cross-cutting measures, in both the design phase and during the execution and evaluation stages. These measures include identifying situations of gender violence, sexual exploitation or sexual abuse, specifically during armed conflicts; empowering women and girls; and addressing the institutional gender capacities of humanitarian organisations, including the gender balance among their staff.

However, it should be noted that despite the advances in the regulatory and operational frameworks of Humanitarian Action, not least Resolution 1325 of the United Nations Security Council, there is still significant room for improvement with regard to integrating the gender perspective into the Human Rights-Based Approach. In practice, even today, very few humanitarian actions put increasing the prominence, leadership and agency of women at their core, are planned on the basis of gender analysis or prioritise the transformation of unequal gender relations.

> Gender perspective in humanitarian work allows us to recognise the differentiated impact of humanitarian crises on women and men and the specific effect armed conflicts have on women and girls

Critical feminist approaches —especially postmodern and decolonial feminisms— also draw attention to the patriarchal and ethnocentric identity politics that the humanitarian sector (re)creates. They try to put the spotlight on how the humanitarian world puts up significant resistance to prioritising gender equality and, above all, they question the instrumentalization of the equality discourse, the evaporation of its more transformative scope, the risk of simplifying and homogenising diversity and reinforcing a new gender essentialism, or the general silence on the structural causes of these inequalities [5].

Greater equality in the face of new humanitarian challenges

In short, incorporating the gender perspective in Humanitarian Action helps to ensure the application of humanitarian principles from an integral vision of the principle of protection, but it also improves the effectiveness and efficiency of humanitarian work by offering a more accurate diagnosis of problems and needs and, therefore, guiding protection and relief actions more appropriately. Moreover, the gender perspective enhances the connectivity between emergencies and development because, on the one hand, it reduces the level of risk, and on the other, because emergency contexts generate important opportunities to transform traditional roles and discriminatory practices and progress towards equality in post-emergency processes.

Today's challenges prove that humanitarian crises can no longer be interpreted as unforeseen or unexpected occurrences but are, for the most part, caused by the global impacts of an extractivist, unsustainable and unjust development model, which has increased the ecological and social vulnerability of societies. Gender inequalities have also been identified as a major factor in vulnerability, weakening social capacity for adequate disaster risk management and eroding social cohesion and the bases for peaceful coexistence.

The intensification of conflicts and situations of violence, refugee crises and the impacts of climate change have made humanitarian work more complex. However, the sector still needs to pay more attention to the structural causes of these crises. Furthermore, we're seeing the securitisation and instrumentalisation of Humanitarian Action to serve geostrategic objectives, justifying military interventions for humanitarian reasons, categorising situations with clear social, economic or political components as humanitarian crises; or, on the contrary, widening the emergency gap in situations that require more attention and protection [6].

In this context, the humanitarian sector must intensify its efforts to return to the work of articulating and channelling citizens' demands for global and gender justice. A task that, in turn, aligns with the feminist approaches that share its goal of contributing to the formation of a critical citizenry that is mobilised and informed about the structural causes of crises, inequalities and rights violations; with global links that nurture exchange and learning while at the same time offering transformative proposals rooted in everyday localised experiences. If humanitarian work could make progress along these lines, it would contribute to the process of transforming and updating international development cooperation and, in turn, to its convergence with current proposals on educating for social transformation and global justice.

REFERENCES

1 — Pérez Orozco, A. (2019). *Subversión feminista de la economía. Apuntes para un debate sobre el conflicto capital-vida (Feminist subversion of the economy. Notes for a debate on the capital-life conflict).* Madrid: Traficantes de Sueños.
2 — Pérez de Armiño, K. (2002). *La vinculación ayuda humanitaria-cooperación al desarrollo (The link between humanitarian aid and development cooperation)*. Workbook 33. Bilbao: HEGOA.
3 — IECAH and HEGOA (2017a). Un sistema humanitario en transformación. Retos tras la Cumbre Humanitaria Mundial (*A humanitarian system in transformation. Challenges after the World Humanitarian Summit*). Working Papers on Humanitarian Action No.1. Vitoria-Gasteiz: The Basque Development Cooperation Agency.
4 — The following documents are noteworthy: the Sphere Manual itself (2018) or the guidelines and guides of the Directorate-General for European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations (2013) and the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (2005, 2008, 2015, 2018).

5 — Ruiz-Giménez, I. (2017b). A critical post-positivist studies perspective on humanitarianism. Barcelona Centre for International Affairs (CIDOB) magazine, 117: 173-196.
6 — IECAH and Doctors without Borders (2017). La Acción Humanitaria en 2016-2017: usos, abusos y desusos del humanitarismo en el escenario internacional (*Humanitarian Action in 2016-2017: uses, abuses and misuses of humanitarianism on the international scene*). Available online.

Marta Pajarín García
Marta Pajarín García holds a PhD in Political Science and International Relations. She is an expert in gender and development. She has extensive professional experience in international cooperation, both as a project technician and in the field. Since 2010, she has been part of the academic coordination team for the Master's Degree in Gender and Development at the Complutense University of Madrid (UCM), and she is currently an independent consultant and associate researcher for the Gender Unit at the UCM's School of Government, where she teaches, researches and advises on gender, development, international cooperation, social intervention and gender policies for several public institutions, universities and NGDOs.