



Humanitarian
Topics explained:

Forgotten Crises to go

Eddo Westland
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Abstract

During the current #InDenFokus / #IntoFocus campaign, several German NGOs and the German Federal Foreign Office aim to highlight so-called 'forgotten crises'. Although the attention to forgotten crises is not new, no single definition or identification method exists. This paper introduces the topic and briefly highlights the history of the term. It highlights definitions of and criteria for forgotten crisis and related funding procedures of various organisations, combined with four recent lists of forgotten crises. It is finalised with a concise reflection of the discussion around the term.

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1. Forgotten crises – an introduction

The largest humanitarian donors and humanitarian organisations adhere to the four core principles of humanitarian action: humanity (suffering is addressed where it is found), neutrality (humanitarian actors stay neutral in controversies such as conflicts), independence (humanitarian organisations operate independently from other actors and only address humanitarian needs), and, specifically important for this paper, impartiality, meaning that humanitarian assistance is based on needs alone.

Fully adhering to the principle of impartiality is in practice, however, rather complex, and some humanitarian crises are more attended to by donors than others. Currently, many crises occur largely unnoticed, often leading to a deterioration of the situation. These crises have received increased interest in the past two decades and are often referred to in various ways such as ‘forgotten crises’ (European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations 2022), ‘forgotten emergencies’ (Médecins Sans Frontières 2022), ‘neglected displacement crises’ (Norwegian Refugee Council 2022), or ‘under the radar crises’ (START Network 2023).

Forgotten crises are seen as a direct result of reduced interest from the media, society and politicians.

Forgotten crises (or equivalent) are seen as a direct result of reduced interest from the media, society and politicians, which is argued to lead to fewer financial resources (European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations 2022). These crisis

contexts are usually not the result of sudden ‘shock’ events but are rather protracted, develop gradually and are a combination of complex and various factors, meaning that they often take place in conflict-affected regions that are simultaneously affected by natural hazards. This *to go* paper provides a brief summary of the topic, highlighting the interest in forgotten crises over the past two decades, and elaborating on the definitions of and criteria for forgotten crises and related funding procedures of different organisations. The paper is concluded with a small reflection on the discussion around the term.

A brief history

Drawing media and public attention to neglected crises is not new. In the early 2000s, there were several reports, conferences and campaigns related to the topic. For example, Oxfam published a paper on the topic in 1999, where they compared funding in so-called forgotten crises to the well-funded and visible Kosovo crisis in that year (Oxfam 1999) followed by a briefing in 2000, where they highlighted that funding should be based on needs alone, and not on media or donor interest (Oxfam 2000). In 2002, the Humanitarian Practice Network’s ‘Humanitarian Exchange’ editorial committed an edition to ‘silent emergencies’ (Humanitarian Practice Network 2002) and The Economist reported on forgotten ‘disasters’ in 2003, highlighting that the United Nations (UN) listed 21 disasters that required urgent funding as they were politically and financially neglected (The Economist 2003). Likewise, Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) issued a top ten list of most underreported humanitarian crises in 2002 (Médecins Sans Frontières 2002).

Media coverage of humanitarian crises played a central role in the conference organised by the Danish Refugee Council (DRC) in 2002 (Danish Refugee Council 2002), and the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (ICRC) published a World Disaster Report on ‘neglected crises’ in 2006 (International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies 2006). More recently, the German Foreign Federal Office (Auswärtiges Amt) issued a discussion paper on the topic (Binder, Koddenbrock, and Horváth 2013) and, together with multiple German NGOs, initiated the ‘#nichtvergessen’ campaign in 2016 (Auswärtiges Amt 2018). According to the current German Humanitarian Strategy, the ministry further commits to increasing attention and funding to forgotten crises (Auswärtiges Amt 2019), and is currently also involved with the #InDenFokus / #intoFocus campaign of over 30 German NGOs that aims to draw attention to forgotten crises (see indenfokus.de).

2 . Identification and crisis funding procedures

Organisations that focus on forgotten crises make use of different typologies and various related funding procedures.

Organisations that focus on forgotten crises make use of different typologies and various related funding procedures. Although the mechanisms and indicators that identify forgotten crises differ, it generally includes (a lack of) media and political attention, combined with inadequate funding. The section below elaborates on organisations that periodically report on forgotten crises (or equivalent) and highlights the mechanisms and indicators that these organisations use to identify or in reaction to fund forgotten crises.

The European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations (ECHO)

The European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations (ECHO) identifies forgotten crises through its Forgotten Crises Assessment (FCA) every year and reserves 15% of its funds for these crises. The assessment is based on multiple sources and indices (European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations 2022).

ECHO includes risk as a factor in their Forgotten Crises Assessment, based on the INFORM Risk Index, which aims to identify countries at risk of humanitarian crises and disasters. The INFORM risk model is based on scientific concepts of risk and builds up a score between 1 (very high risk) and 5 (very low risk), by bringing together 54 different indicators that are connected to three overarching risk dimensions: hazards & exposure, vulnerability and lack of coping capacity (Marin-Ferrer, Vernacci, and Poljansek 2017).

Another index included is the Inform Severity Index which measures the severity of humanitarian crises based on multiple indicators. These indicators are based on three overarching dimensions: the impact of crises, the conditions of people affected and the complexity of crises (Poljanšek et al. 2020).

Furthermore, they include media coverage, which is assessed by Europe Media Monitor, and humanitarian aid per capita based on OCHA's Financial Tracking Service (FTS). The exact calculation of media coverage remains unclear.

Finally, it includes a qualitative assessment of ECHO's experts that are both located in operational contexts or at the European Commission's headquarters.

CARE International

CARE International reports on the most 'underreported humanitarian crises' each year, currently organised in their 'Breaking the silence' report. In their 2021 report, they selected countries in which at least 1 million people were affected by a crisis. Hereafter, with the help of media monitoring service Meltwater, they analysed more than 1.8 million online articles in Arabic, English, French, German and Spanish. The least reported crises are listed, and poignantly compared with highly covered events in the entertainment industry. They aim to increase awareness of these forgotten crises, and increase funding levels for these contexts (CARE International 2023).

United Nations Central Emergency Relief Funds (CERF)

The United Nations Central Emergency Relief Fund (CERF) reserves a third of its financial resources for 'underfunded emergencies'. Unlike the previously mentioned organisations, it excludes media attention as a factor, but it highlights that its allocations in turn draw attention and consequently lead to more funding to these contexts (United Nations CERF 2022). CERF allocates additional funding to underfunded emergencies according to the following procedures as outlined in their methodology (OCHA 2022):

At first, CERF identifies needs, risks and vulnerabilities through their CERF Index for Risk and Vulnerability (CIRV). The CIRV includes all countries and ascribes a score to each country ranging from 0 to 100. The CIRV is based on a combination of the INFORM Risk Index, the

INFORM Severity Index, and a combination of indices that is based on multiple qualitative reports and assessments, including reports on food security and food crises, and early warning systems. The funding coverage is based on the data of OCHA's Financial Tracking Service (FTS).

Hereafter, the CERF secretariat consults with a variety of stakeholders, including the Underfunded Working Emergencies Group (UFEWG), which is made up of representatives from different UN organisations, and multiple NGO representatives via the International Council of Voluntary Agencies (ICVA). Based on the quantitative data and these consultations, CERF recommends a list of countries to the Emergency Relief Coordinator (ERC).

Finally, the Resident Coordinator/Humanitarian Coordinators (RC/HC) of the selected countries, combined with a variety of stakeholders, identify projects that might be eligible for funding. The CERF secretariat reviews the proposed projects, after which grant allocation is possible.

Norwegian Refugee Council

The Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC) publishes a list of the most neglected displacement crises every year. It starts with identifying large displacement crises, where at least 200,000 people are displaced. The crises selected are analysed concerning three different aspects with equal importance (Norwegian Refugee Council 2022).

At first, media attention is analysed with the help of media monitoring company Meltwater. By using data from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and their own Internal Displacement Centre (IDMC), NRC calculates the 'media coverage relative to the number of people displaced by each crisis'. Still, the index does not specify the number of articles, the languages analysed or the exact calculations used.

Next to this, the index analyses a 'lack of political will', which is based on the effort the international community has taken to find a political solution for a crisis. This is measured qualitatively and is a combination of the number of resolutions from the UN

Security Council, discussions among high-level bodies or commitments to peacebuilding or human rights, and the number and importance of international delegations to a conflict. The outcomes of this exercise is analysed and compared to the 'size and severity' of a conflict, based on data from ACAP's Severity Index, FFP Fragile States Index, and other data on displacement.

Finally, the index integrates the lack of international aid, for which the coverage of the humanitarian appeal for each crisis is assessed.

Other approaches

The organisations previously mentioned are not the only organisations involved with forgotten crises. The Start Network, for example, allocates funds to so-called 'under the radar crises', through their global Start Funds. It classifies under the radar crises as "those which are not the subject of, or linked geographically or thematically to, an active emergency response, whether or not it is coordinated by the respective, responsible government or the international system". The global Start Fund can be activated by any Start Network member, and funding decisions are made by the Start Fund allocation committee. If approved, the network releases the funds within 72 hours. The Start Network further highlights that, in contrast to other organisations, its funding reaches smaller unknown crises, as the network does not work with a certain threshold (Start Network 2023).

The Underfunded Crisis Index highlights chronic underfunding rather than a snapshot.

Other organisations point out the unequal funding in humanitarian action and aim to address this. A relatively recent initiative is the Underfunded Crisis Index of Humanitarian Funding

Forecast, which analyses and measures which crises had the biggest funding gap over the timespan of a few years. It therefore highlights chronic underfunding rather than a snapshot. This includes crisis contexts that have had a humanitarian appeal for at least three years in a row and compare that with funding reported through OCHA's Financial Tracking Service, complemented by UNHCR's Refugee Funding Tracker (Humanitarian Funding Forecast 2022).

3. Overview of current forgotten crises

| | CARE International | European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations (ECHO) | UN Central Emergency Relief Funds (CERF) | Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC) |
|----------------------------|---|--|--|--|
| Title | Humanitarian crises that didn't make the headlines 2022 | Forgotten crises assessment 2022-2023 | Underfunded emergencies 2021 | Neglected displacement crises 2021 |
| Action | Publication of a report on the 'most underreported humanitarian crises' each year. | Identification of 'forgotten crises' through its 'Forgotten Crises Assessment' and allocation of 15% of its funds towards these crises. | Identification of 'underfunded emergencies' and allocation of a third of its funding to this. | Identification and publication of a list of 'most neglected displacement crises' each year. |
| Indicators | Countries in which at least 1 million people were affected by a crisis are analysed, combined with the number of articles in the media on these crises. | Combination of qualitative and quantitative assessments: INFORM Risk and Severity Index, media coverage, humanitarian aid per capita and qualitative assessments from staff. | Combination of quantitative and qualitative assessments: CERF Index for Risk and Vulnerability, funding coverage as reported through FTS, and qualitative consults with the Underfunded Working Emergencies Group (UFEWG). | Large crises with over 200,000 people displaced are selected. They are compared with the number of media articles written about the crisis, the political will to find a solution and funding coverage of the humanitarian appeal. |
| Countries in latest lists: | Angola | Algerien Bangladesh | Burkina Faso | Burundi |
| in 1 list | Burundi | Cameroon | Chad | Chad |
| in 2 lists | Central African Republic | Colombia | DR Congo | DR Congo |
| in 3 lists | Chad | Ecuador | Lebanon | Ethiopia |
| in 4 lists | Malawi | Mali | Mali | Mali |
| | | Mozambique | Myanmar | |
| | Niger | Nigeria | | |
| | | Peru | South Sudan | |
| | | Sudan | Sudan | |
| | | Uganda | Venezuela | |
| | West Darfur | Yemen | | |
| | Zambia | | | |
| | Zimbabwe | | | |

4. Forgotten crises or funding inequality?

Media coverage is, according to the organisations focussing on forgotten crises, often directly related to public (and therefore political) interest and a lack of coverage consequently leads to inadequate funding. Therefore it is a crucial objective to increase awareness (CARE International 2023). This claim echoes the often examined and criticised ‘CNN Effect’, which indicates that extensive reporting of an event influences policy decisions and can lead to foreign (military) intervention (Peksen, Peterson, and Drury 2014). Eisensee and Strömberg (2007) analysed the influence of media coverage on emergency relief allocations and conclude that the only ‘plausible explanation’ is that decisions on these allocations are driven by media coverage. When considering private funding, Stoianova (2013) argues that ‘emergency specific’ funding largely depends on the

The real underlying problem is unequal funding.

media coverage a disaster receives. Still, the term ‘forgotten crisis’ is simultaneously criticised and seen as a policy tool, as the definition remains unclear and is often based on multiple and controversial typologies, while the real underlying problem might be unequal funding (Binder, Koddenbrock, and Horváth 2013). Although donors commit to the humanitarian principles, Narang (2016) shows that the distribution of humanitarian aid is often also based on political imperatives, especially when considering post-conflict settings. Moreover, while studies on fast onset crises show a strong influence of media coverage on funds allocation, there is no conclusive evidence that media coverage increases the long-term funding of a humanitarian response (Scott, Bunce, and Wright 2022). Hence, reports on forgotten crises urge donors to provide funding merely based on impartiality, as their focus on media or strategic interest exacerbates funding inequality (Oxfam 2000).

Further Reading

Lists of Forgotten crises

CARE International. 2023. ‘Breaking the Silence. Most Under-Reported Humanitarian Crises of 2022’. <https://www.care-international.org/sites/default/files/2023-01/Most%20Under-Reported%20Humanitarian%20Crises%20of%202022.pdf>

European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations. 2022. ‘Forgotten Crises Factsheet’. 2022. https://civil-protection-humanitarian-aid.ec.europa.eu/what/humanitarian-aid/needs-assessment/forgotten-crises_en

Norwegian Refugee Council. 2022. ‘The World’s Most Neglected Replacement Crises 2021’. <https://reliefweb.int/report/democratic-republic-congo/worlds-most-neglected-displacement-crises-2021>

Humanitarian Funding

OCHA Financial Tracking Service. <https://fts.unocha.org>

United Nations Central Emergency Response Fund. <https://cerf.un.org/apply-for-a-grant/underfunded-emergencies>

Humanitarian Funding Forecast. <https://humanitarianfundingforecast.org/>

Humanitarian crises, media and funding

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Other CHA To Go Publications

- Faltas, Charlotte 2021. *Humanitarian topics explained. Understanding Counterterrorism and Humanitarian Action to go*. Berlin: Centre for Humanitarian Action.
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CHA - Centre for Humanitarian Action e.V.

Wallstrasse 15a

10179 Berlin

+49 (0)30 2864 5701

info@chaberlin.org

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