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International Organisations and the Evolution of Humanitarianism: Cross-perspectives on the Commonwealth and the European Union

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ABSTRACT *As international relations actors in the post-Second World War world, international organisations have played a significant role in the standardisation of global policy concepts during the 20th century, and humanitarian assistance has been no exception. While the study of the role of international organisations in shaping a dominant model of humanitarian aid has recently gathered pace, few historians have focused on different, less successful models and interpretations developed by other international organisations. Recently declassified Commonwealth Secretariat records show that discussions within the Secretariat and among member states regarding the potential objectives and scope of Commonwealth humanitarian assistance programmes took place as early as the 1960s, and continued throughout the following decades. This article provides an overview of the origin and evolution of the Commonwealth's approach to humanitarian assistance since the 1960s. Its objective is to document this hitherto little known aspect of Commonwealth assistance policies, and, based on an initial literature and archival survey, to contribute to the identification of further research questions and gaps in this aspect of Commonwealth history. Although they are very different in nature and scope, the Commonwealth and the European Union share at least one common feature in so far as humanitarian assistance is concerned, namely their difficulty in reaching a consensual definition of it. By exploring the links and discrepancies between, as well as within, each organisation's approach to humanitarian assistance, and by examining the initiatives of some of their member states, this paper seeks to highlight the plasticity of the definition of humanitarian assistance.*

KEY WORDS: Africa, Europe, humanitarian aid, international organisations, International Committee of the Red Cross, Commonwealth, European Union, Department of Humanitarian Affairs

Introduction

At the Malta Commonwealth Heads of Governments Meeting (CHOGM) in November 2005, Commonwealth member states tasked the Secretary-General with developing a mechanism for 'establishing and operationalising' the proposed 'Commonwealth Programme for Natural Disaster Management', with the aim of fostering cooperation between member states for 'capacity building for disaster risk reduction and disaster

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response management'.¹ What motivated this decision was a concern with 'the devastating and increasing impact of natural and man-made disaster on human lives, infrastructures and economies'.² Member states also pledged to 'support efforts to further strengthen the international humanitarian response system, including the proposed extension of the UN Central Emergency Revolving Fund and the strengthening of the UN humanitarian coordination'.³ A few months earlier, the United Nations had launched an ambitious plan to reorganise the global humanitarian system, the Humanitarian Reform process, following a study commissioned by the Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator (USG-ERC), the head of the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) (Adinolfi *et al.*, 2005).

Considering the Commonwealth's usually narrow focus on specific development issues and on democracy and human rights promotion on the one hand, and its limited resources in comparison with larger international organisations on the other, its involvement in humanitarian assistance may appear as a historical oddity. Yet, recently declassified Commonwealth Secretariat records show that discussions within the Secretariat and among member states regarding the potential objectives and scope of Commonwealth humanitarian assistance programmes took place as early as the 1960s, and continued throughout the following decades. This development followed the establishment of the Commonwealth Secretariat in 1965, an event commonly viewed as reflecting the modernisation of the organisation.

As actors of international relations on the post-Second World War world scene, international organisations have played a significant role in the standardisation of global policy concepts during the 20th century, and humanitarian assistance has been no exception.⁴ In the last decade, studies have investigated the role of the League of Nations, the United Nations, and, more recently, of regional organisations such as the European Union, in shaping a dominant model of humanitarian aid.⁵ However, few historians have focused on different, less successful models and on interpretations developed by other international organisations. Coincidentally, this question has been largely neglected by Commonwealth studies and Commonwealth historiography. It is this double gap in the literature that this paper seeks to address through a case study of Commonwealth approaches to humanitarian aid.

The examination of the organisation's humanitarian programmes reveals that the actual scale of Commonwealth humanitarian assistance has been modest, to the point of appearing somewhat tokenistic. However, the Commonwealth's apparent compliance with humanitarian agendas set by larger players since the 1990s, such as the European Union, conceals a more nuanced historical evolution. The objective of this article is therefore primarily to document this hitherto little known aspect of Commonwealth assistance policies, and, based on an exploratory survey of the literature and archives on the subject, to contribute to the identification of further research on this aspect of Commonwealth history. Although they are very different in nature and scope, the Commonwealth and the European Union share at least one common feature in so far as humanitarian assistance is concerned, namely their difficulty in trying to reach a consensual definition of it. By exploring the links and discrepancies between, as well as within, each organisation's approach to humanitarian assistance, and by examining the initiatives of some of their member states, this paper seeks to highlight the plasticity of the definition of humanitarian assistance.

Considering the Commonwealth's tentative participation in humanitarian assistance from the 1960s onwards, how have Commonwealth approaches to humanitarian assistance since 1965 compared with those of other international organisations such as the United Nations and the European Community/Union, and with broader trends within the humanitarian system? Has this tentative model been marginal, or has it contributed to highlighting gaps in this system? The examination of relevant Commonwealth Secretariat records and open official documents provides a number of answers to these questions and highlights the need for further scholarly interest in these topics.

First, this paper considers the complex definition of humanitarianism and assesses how significant evolutions in the humanitarian system from the 1960s to the late 1980s provided opportunities and incentives for international organisations to become increasingly involved in humanitarian initiatives. It then discusses Commonwealth involvement in humanitarian aid before the 1990s, and the potential impact of this involvement for the broader history of humanitarianism. The subsequent section examines evolutions within the humanitarian system and within international organisations from the 1990s onwards, focusing on specific Commonwealth and EU case studies. By so doing, I seek to highlight commonalities and discrepancies between Commonwealth perceptions and the broader humanitarian system, and the specificities of Commonwealth views during subsequent stages of humanitarian history. I shall also highlight the variety of approaches and interpretations that coexisted within the organisations themselves, including among member states and Secretariats.

Humanitarian Assistance: A Historiographical Discussion

The very definition of humanitarian assistance, or, as a number of political scientists and historians put it, humanitarianism, is the subject of ongoing scholarly discussions. Until recently, research on humanitarianism had been the preserve of political science and sociology, and had tended to focus on the institutional frameworks of specific international organisations, as well as on their moral and ethical underpinnings.⁶ Although historical research on the topic started gathering pace a decade ago, attempts at connecting these within a wider, *longue-durée* framework remain scarce.⁷ The more recent historiography has thus tended to liken the history of humanitarian assistance to a patchwork of heterogeneous, overlapping, loosely interconnected trends rather than to a coherent movement.⁸ In this context, determining what constitutes, or qualifies as, humanitarian assistance at different stages of history remains a tentative process. As Michael Barnett and Thomas G. Weiss have noted, it may range from any act 'intended to save lives and reduce suffering' to 'the impartial, independent, and neutral provision of relief to those in immediate need because of conflict and natural disasters' (Barnett and Weiss, 2008, p. 5).

Historians have argued that the 18th century abolitionist movement constituted an early manifestation of humanitarianism, thereby highlighting the importance of various philanthropic, religious and missionary groups in the development of the movement's moral and cultural framework (Haskell, 1985).⁹ The period from the late 19th century to the Second World War is commonly presented as a stage of haphazard consolidation of this nascent humanitarian system.

The first Convention for the Amelioration of the Condition of the Wounded in Armies in the Field (1864) constituted one of its earliest official frameworks. Its

signatories agreed that ‘ambulances and military hospitals shall be recognized as neutral, and as such, protected and respected by the belligerents as long as they accommodate wounded and sick’.¹⁰ Having undergone multiple revisions throughout the first half of the 20th century, the 1949 Geneva Convention, as it became known, still constitutes the main pillar of humanitarian law today.

The explicit recognition of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) as major humanitarian relief players, such as the Red Cross, which was founded in Geneva in 1863, was an inherent component of the rise of this state-endorsed legal humanitarian framework.¹¹ One obvious limitation of this legal definition, however, was that it restricted the concept of humanitarian assistance to the context of armed conflicts. However, from the late 19th century onward, humanitarian responders were also active in the aftermath of natural disasters (Hutchinson, 2000, pp. 4, 9).

The devastation of the First World War and the famines that stemmed from it provided a fertile ground for the development of a culture of humanitarianism in the inter-war period, leading to the establishment of new charitable organisations, such as the Save the Children Fund, which was founded in the United Kingdom in 1919 (Chabbott, 1999; Mendlesohn, 1999; Barnett, 2011, pp. 83–85). The movement was, at that point, still rooted in the paternalistic, imperialistic tradition of earlier forms of humanitarianism; it was also, however, influenced by the epoch’s faith in scientific progress and techniques (Mendlesohn, 1999, p. 10).¹² The Second World War accelerated the specialisation of the humanitarian sector. From 1945 to 1990, as European colonial empires were dismantled and the geographical focus of humanitarianism moved away from post-war Europe to the Third World, this phase of the movement’s history culminated with the affirmation of a standardised, apolitical model of humanitarian assistance between 1980 and 1990 (Barnett, 2011, p. 2).¹³ Although the historiography on the topic is virtually non-existent, the question of pre- and post-disaster assistance as additional components of humanitarian assistance seems, on the whole, to have come to prominence during this period.¹⁴

By contrast, the post-Cold War era has been portrayed as a phase of redefinition of humanitarian aid, when foreign military interventions and humanitarian aid have constituted two sides of the same coin. In Michael Barnett’s own, ironic words:

In the 1990s, everything changed. The Cold War was history, replaced by ‘new wars’ that were creating ‘complex humanitarian emergencies’. In fact, these wars were not so new, and humanitarian emergencies had always been complex, but the international community acted as if they had never seen anything like them ... The humanitarian community did not completely meet these challenges ... but did expand dramatically in scope and scale and provided new forms of assistance to more people than ever before. (Barnett, 2011, pp. 2–3)

Although this dichotomy has been, and must be, nuanced, including through an analysis of the continuities between these two phases, it seems a valid framework when looking more specifically at humanitarian aid in international organisations.

Just like the literature on humanitarianism in general, the sub-topic of the creation of international organisations dedicated to humanitarian aid, or the establishment of humanitarian aid mechanisms within existing international organisations, has tended to

be examined primarily through the theoretical frameworks of political science.¹⁵ While some historians have developed useful analyses of multilateral humanitarian assistance mechanisms over the longer term, efforts to cover the second half of the 20th century remain scarce, and tend to be excessively dependent on institutional accounts.¹⁶

The creation of humanitarian agencies within international organisations in the early 1990s constituted a significant step in the institutionalisation of the humanitarian aid system. In 1992, the United Nations General Assembly established the Department of Humanitarian Affairs (DHA) under the United Nations Secretariat (Steets et al., 2012; United Nations, 1991), and the European Community Humanitarian Office (ECHO) was created the same year (European Commission, 1991). Although no equivalent landmark can be found in Commonwealth history, the organisation also attempted to develop a coherent approach to the question of humanitarian assistance, particularly from the 1990s onwards. This display of common humanitarian principles and objectives within international organisations, however, also concealed internal discrepancies. As this paper will discuss below, Britain, as a member of the European Union and the Commonwealth, has occasionally criticised the humanitarian policies of both organisations.

The tendency of the humanitarian sector to become both more professionalised (Siméant and Dauvin, 2004) but also, crucially, more institutionalised, in fact pre-dated the turn of the 1990s. In terms of external factors, the political context of the Cold War and decolonisation had seemed to vindicate the Geneva Convention's long-held premise that neutral humanitarian organisations were particularly well-equipped to access victims in conflict zones. Whereas until the end of the Second World War and in its immediate aftermath humanitarian responders had been guided by diverse world views and ethical principles, from the 1960s onward, humanitarian organisations started adopting the principles of humanity, neutrality and impartiality as the core values of humanitarianism (Barnett, 2011, p. 6). In terms of public relations, the rapid expansion of a set of standardised humanitarian principles served the double purpose of securing private donations and of influencing the foreign policy of Western governments through the denunciation of war crimes and genocides (Dauvin, 2010, pp. 7–13).

How did this evolution affect the realm of international organisations? Few historical studies have focused on the development of humanitarian policies within international organisations beyond the interwar and Second World War work of the League of Nations, the Red Cross and the United Nations. Based on the broader historiography on the aid and development record of international organisations in the post-Second World War period, it appears that at least two elements have to be taken into account in order to answer this question. First, in the early 1960s, the international organisations scene was deeply influenced by the new membership of formerly colonised states, by the geopolitical alliances of the Cold War, and by the rise of the Third World movement. Second, although aid was generally considered as a highly political issue, the aid agendas of the Eastern, Western and Non-Aligned blocks alike were almost invariably dominated by concerns for development and modernisation rather than humanitarian aid.

In addition, the purposes of humanitarian assistance remained disputed within international organisations. The Commonwealth's original interpretation of humanitarian assistance, which was closely linked to the Rhodesian Unilateral Declaration of Independence (UDI) crisis (1965–80), was often at odds with British views on the matter. Meanwhile, the European Community's mention of foreign humanitarian aid,

although it dated back a 1970s convention, was embedded within a primarily development-oriented technical and financial assistance agenda with the African, Caribbean and Pacific (ACP) countries. This partly explains why a budding humanitarian universalism only belatedly penetrated international organisations.

Early attempts at creating intergovernmental humanitarian organisations had occurred under the auspices of the League of Nations, leading to the short-lived Office of the High Commissioner for Refugees (1921) and International Relief Union (1927). During and after the Second World War, a number of specialised agencies of the United Nations were given a mandate by the General Assembly to address narrowly defined humanitarian issues as part of broader aid portfolios, such as the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Agency (UNRRA), the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) (1950) and the World Food Programme (1961). This phase produced mixed results, and resulted in an unsystematic coverage of humanitarian crises, which partly motivated the creation of the Office of the United Nations Disaster Relief Coordinator (UNDRO) in 1971. UNDRO was specifically in charge of coordinating the humanitarian efforts of the United Nations; however, its mandate applied to natural disasters only. Member states therefore appear to have kept the more controversial topic of humanitarian relief to conflict-affected areas out of the purview of this new, dedicated humanitarian agency (Fromuth, 1988, p. 177); although research into the position of key UN member states is ongoing, conclusions are yet to be made available.¹⁷

By keeping politically sensitive issues at arm's length, the United Nations, therefore, endorsed an interpretation of humanitarian aid that predominated over the period—namely, that humanitarianism did not belong in state-dominated organisations. However, Michael Barnett has challenged the idea that humanitarian NGOs were ever successful in distancing themselves from political agendas during this period. Conversely, the activity of the Commonwealth of Nations tends to support the idea that decision-makers within intergovernmental organisations did not necessarily see humanitarian assistance as prohibited territory before 1990.

The New Commonwealth and Humanitarian Concerns: The Southern African Connection

Between 1945 and 1965, the Commonwealth of Nations evolved from a still largely Anglo-centric, imperial 'club' to an increasingly multilateral organisation (McIntyre, 2001, p. 693). This transitional phase was marked by several internal crises, such as India's application for continued Commonwealth membership as a republic (1949) and the criticism by several member states of London's handling of the Suez crisis (1956), which eroded Britain's organisational leverage (Orde, 1996, p. 183). By the early 1960s, the disillusionment of British foreign policy-makers with the Commonwealth was matched by repeated but unsuccessful attempts at reinforcing the United Kingdom's economic and political ties with the European Economic Community, and by changes in the United Kingdom's Commonwealth immigration policy through a series of restrictive measures (Butler, 2002; Darwin, 1988). In 1965, the Commonwealth's increasing emancipation from London was marked by the creation of the Commonwealth Secretariat. This was shortly followed by a crisis that further crystallised diplomatic tensions among Commonwealth members, as the UDI by Southern Rhodesia's white minority regime threw the organisation into turmoil.

Commonwealth involvement in humanitarian assistance may appear as somewhat accidental. Yet, inconsistent as it may appear with the emphasis put on development and democracy-promotion in its 1971 Singapore declaration, it provides a useful illustration of the diversity of organisational views regarding humanitarianism during the post-Second World War period. A retrospective analysis seems to suggest that the Commonwealth Secretariat contributed unintentionally to the creation of the institutional space within which humanitarian programmes were discussed by Commonwealth states. One of the outcomes of the 1966 Commonwealth Prime Ministers' Meeting in Lagos, which took place at the height of the dispute between the United Kingdom and the African members of the Commonwealth over British Prime Minister Harold Wilson's refusal to use force against the Smith regime (Smith, 1981; Roiron, 2013), was the creation of a Commonwealth Sanctions Committee tasked with monitoring the enforcement by Commonwealth member states of the international sanctions imposed by the UN Security Council against the UDI regime, and to make recommendations to improve their effectiveness.¹⁸ From 1973 onward, the Committee became one of the main multi-lateral forums for the discussion of Commonwealth assistance to Southern African nationalists.¹⁹

One of the earliest mentions of humanitarian aid in a public Commonwealth document can be found in the final communiqué of the 1973 CHOGM in Ottawa:

Heads of Government reviewed the efforts of the indigenous people of the territories of Southern Africa to achieve self-determination and independence and agreed on the need to give any humanitarian assistance to all those engaged in such efforts.²⁰

Britain, it should be noted, expressed reservations vis-à-vis such assistance, on the grounds that it might be diverted for military purposes.²¹ The CHOGM's politicised interpretation of humanitarian assistance was not outlandish in the context of the early 1970s: within the NGO sector, discursive paradoxes had arisen between the need to uphold humanitarian neutrality on the one hand, and the 'duty to testify' against human rights and humanitarian law violations on the other (Davvin, 2010, p. 13).

In terms of structure, the Secretariat's humanitarian assistance programmes initially referred merely to existing programmes, such as the Commonwealth Programme for Rhodesians, which had been created at the Lagos meeting.²² Following the 1971 Summit in Singapore, the management of most of these programmes was transferred to the Commonwealth Fund for Technical Cooperation (CFTC), which played a role in the shaping of Commonwealth diplomacy, under the supervision of the Secretariat.²³ Other CFTC interventions in the Rhodesian crisis included financial support to Zambia when the country decided to impose an embargo on all economic exchanges with Rhodesia in 1973.²⁴ In 1976, the Commonwealth Secretariat accepted a UN Secretariat request for the secondment of a CFTC expert to the UN Sanctions Committee, which dealt with sanctions against discriminatory regimes.²⁵ Commonwealth heads of governments later pledged to extend their humanitarian assistance to Mozambique via the Commonwealth Fund for Mozambique, a decision taken at the 1975 CHOGM in Kingston following behind-the-scenes discussions between the Secretariat and FRELIMO (Smith, 1981, pp. 221–223).²⁶

In terms of scale, data on the actual resources of these programmes is patchy, and does not at this stage permit an in-depth analysis of their significance, beyond their symbolic value. For instance, although it remains difficult to ascertain the scope of the actual contributions of Commonwealth member states, India and Tanzania pledged, respectively, 900,000 rupees and 200,000 Tanzanian shillings to the Commonwealth Fund for Mozambique in 1977.²⁷ In terms of their nature, however, the records reveal a focus on scholarship and ‘manpower training’ programmes, which constituted the main model of Commonwealth humanitarian assistance to Southern Africa throughout the 1970s.²⁸

Commonwealth Secretariat records, it should be noted, provide only a partial account of the organisation’s perception of the objectives of humanitarian assistance at the time. Just as the Secretariat viewed humanitarian assistance as a way of advancing a political agenda in Southern Africa, other member states also tended to view such aid as a geopolitical tool. However, their objectives could sometimes be quite different from those of the Secretariat in the context of the Cold War. Two examples in particular may help highlight the discrepancies between the Secretariat’s programmes, which were primarily concerned with the Southern African crises, and the humanitarian agendas of some Commonwealth member states, for whom humanitarian assistance was part of a broader Cold War context. The Canadian government, for instance, is recorded to have used the Colombo Plan, a post-war regional development initiative born from a Commonwealth meeting in 1950, to channel its humanitarian assistance to South Vietnam, as a token of its non-military support to the United States, despite the country’s declared neutrality.²⁹ Some member states, meanwhile, distanced themselves from the Commonwealth Secretariat’s approach to humanitarian assistance because it challenged their foreign policy agendas—Britain, for instance, was sceptical of Commonwealth assistance to African nationalists throughout the 1970s, on the grounds that it might fuel terrorism.

Commonwealth undertakings from 1965 to 1990 therefore seemed to reflect two contradictory trends that characterised the evolution of the humanitarian movement at the time: the affirmation of humanitarianism as an apolitical cause on the one hand, and the duty of humanitarianism to denounce oppressive regimes in a highly antagonised Cold War context on the other hand. By privileging a militant definition of humanitarian assistance in the context of Southern African and the geopolitical crises of the Cold War, Commonwealth member states, with the support of the Secretariat and despite their internal divisions, seem to have adopted a less consensual definition than the United Nations. Yet, the Commonwealth’s use of humanitarianism as a label intended to legitimise assistance to African nationalists also reflected the trans-partisan credentials of the concept, since it seemed to be used primarily to avoid a potential veto by London. Limited as this interest—and its practical implementation—may have been, it was aligned with the contemporary interpretations, and contradictions, of humanitarian assistance.

The extent to which humanitarian assistance simply constituted a bargaining chip in Commonwealth discussions, or translated into actual programmes, remains difficult to ascertain, and would benefit from further archival research, including into the archives of relevant member states. The next section shows that, by contrast, the Commonwealth’s subsequent humanitarian endeavours became increasingly technical and specialised, arguably replicating broader evolutions of humanitarianism.

Bridging the Humanitarian–Development Divide?

Just as institutionalisation has been presented as one of the main characteristics of the evolution of the humanitarian sector from 1945 to 1990, the following phase has frequently been associated with a qualitative and quantitative expansion of the realm of humanitarian assistance. On a macroscopic scale, according to a widespread historical narrative, this was reflected by at least two tidal changes in the humanitarian aid sector.

First, as part of major foreign assistance reorientations, official humanitarian aid funding started to grow exponentially in the 1990s.³⁰ Second, partly as a result of their new-found economic momentum, and partly due to the end of tacit Cold War embargos on foreign assistance, humanitarian actors intervened in ever larger emergencies, such as the Iraqi Kurd refugee crisis (1991), the Rwandan genocide (1994) and the conflicts in the former Republic of Yugoslavia. In exchange for their donors' financial generosity, humanitarian agencies—international organisations included—also faced strong expectations that this should lead to a qualitative growth of their portfolio of activities, including crisis preparedness and prevention, and post-crisis recovery.³¹ This generosity, it could be added, was short-lived, as from the mid-2000s humanitarian organisations came under scrutiny and financial pressure from their donors.

Some NGO executives viewed the increased weight of state-funded humanitarian aid, and the implied reduction of humanitarian aid to a development issue, as a threat to their impartiality.³² Some academics, however, have objected that the impartiality of the NGO sector was never as robust as this argument would imply, and, conversely, that state participation in humanitarian assistance mechanisms was not an unprecedented phenomenon—and as the earlier section of this paper discussed, was in fact one of its founding features (Barnett, 2011, p. 5).

Unsurprisingly perhaps, the scholarship on the involvement of international organisations in the humanitarian sector still appears to grapple with the dialectical tension between two apparently diverging trends: the assumed politicisation of the sector, through its institutional intertwining with development aid; and its increasingly technical and neutral veneer. As mentioned above, 1992 was a landmark for the institutionalisation of humanitarian aid, with the creation of ECHO and the UN DHA (later renamed OCHA). The creation of humanitarian coordination agencies was justified by the failure of existing multilateral humanitarian mechanisms to address humanitarian crises, but also by the need for better institutional responses to the increasing scale and complexity of these humanitarian crises (Cox, 2009; Steets *et al.*, 2012).

Whereas their role had previously been discrete, international organisations, as the repositories of the collective agendas of their member states but also as bureaucracies, acted as catalysts of this transition. The evolution of one of the main multilateral actors of humanitarian aid, the European Community, showed the ambivalence of this pivotal phase of humanitarian assistance.

With contributions averaging around one billion euros annually since the late 1990s, the European Union has constituted one of the largest humanitarian donors globally (Versluys, 2009, p. 93). As development aid became more political after 1990, by contrast, 'the apolitical nature of ECHO has been constantly emphasised' (Stewart, 2006, p. 113). This claim has since been substantiated by the first reference to humanitarian assistance in a European Union treaty in 2009, which affirmed that 'humanitarian aid

operations shall be conducted in compliance with the principles ... of impartiality, neutrality and non-discrimination'.³³

This analysis suggests that with ECHO, the European Union departed from a previously politicised model of humanitarian aid. Humanitarian aid had first been included as a component of European external assistance in the Second Yaoundé Convention (1969–75), which set the terms of trade and economic relations between the European Economic Community and the Associated Countries.³⁴ Until 1992, its implementation was managed by several European Commission Directorate-Generals on an ad hoc basis, with DG-Development considered by at least one scholar as its foremost implementing body (Versluys, 2009; Sicurelli, 2013, p. 37).

But while the literature does recognise that Europe's humanitarian aid was indeed associated with a broader development agenda, whether the developments of 1992 actually reversed this trend remains the object of debate. The European Union's humanitarian programmes are thus still described as "symbolic politics" ... allowing the Union to assert its identity ... on the international scene', and aimed at '[consolidating] the loyalty of European citizens towards European integration' in a post-Cold War world (Versluys, 2009, p. 91).

Although some scholars believe that the venture into the politicised realms of conflict-resolution and development issues was a short-lived phase of ECHO's existence, the articulation between humanitarian aid and development remained a priority for international organisations, as the European Commission's 2001 guidelines on 'Linking Relief, Rehabilitation, and Development' and the 2005 UN World Conference on Disaster Reduction indicated (Versluys, 2013, p. 93). By the mid-2000s, disaster preparedness and disaster recovery were broadly recognised as components of humanitarian assistance.

The decision to create a European humanitarian office in 1992, it has been argued, concealed some internal divisions between member states (Cox, 2009). A deeper investigation of Britain's role in this development would provide a meaningful illustration of the similarities between the Commonwealth's and the European Union's difficulties in the field of humanitarian assistance. Britain, as discussed previously, had not been a fervent supporter of the Commonwealth's humanitarian policies. Its admission into the European Community, in 1973, had been viewed as evidence of its wavering bonds with the Commonwealth.³⁵ However, and although more evidence would be required to buttress this hypothesis, this reorientation did not appear to alter fundamentally its cool attitude towards multilateral humanitarian mechanisms. Rather than supporting the European Community's humanitarian initiative in the early 1990s, Britain has thus been reported to have discreetly supported its opponents, first and foremost the NGO sector, on the grounds that such a scheme duplicated and, possibly, competed with existing national policies.³⁶

Similar tensions could be observed in the evolution of the Commonwealth's approach to humanitarian assistance over the same period, both in terms of its definition of humanitarianism and in terms of its institutional structure and programmes.

As the analysis of the Commonwealth's involvement in Southern African crises demonstrated, the organisation never appeared to consider humanitarian assistance as a separate set of policies, but rather as a mostly symbolic instrument for the pursuit of its political objectives—the termination of segregationist regimes. As this chapter of history came to a close, it would not have been entirely surprising if the humanitarian theme

had disappeared from the organisation's list of concerns altogether. Yet, although archival sources are not available for this period, the official literature indicates that this was not the case. Rather, the Commonwealth, like other international organisations, seems to have progressively treated humanitarian assistance as a distinct set of policies, and to have separated them from its political activities.

In terms of political mandate, the Commonwealth has built its reputation as a consensus-based, non-coercive organisation to promote the principles of human rights and democracy affirmed in its 1991 Harare Declaration, through the creation of dedicated mechanisms.³⁷ One such mechanism was the Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group, a high-level group established in 1995 to provide good offices for peace and pre-emptive diplomacy, and to promote democracy across the organisation. The suspension of Commonwealth member states from the organisation on the grounds of their systematic violations of the Harare principles constitutes a further example of the organisation's human rights advocacy work; however, it also insists on the conciliatory nature of Commonwealth interventions.³⁸

In parallel, the Commonwealth has repeatedly tried to establish a dedicated humanitarian assistance scheme. The first of such attempts occurred in the aftermath of the 1995 CHOGM in Auckland, when Commonwealth leaders asked the Secretariat to take 'follow-up measures' in order to implement the recommendations of the Report of the Intergovernmental Group on the Emergence of a Global Humanitarian Order, 'Towards a More Humane World'.³⁹ However, the drivers and motivations behind this initiative are unclear, and its achievements, if any, remain undocumented. A decade later, large-scale natural disasters such as the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami and the 2005 Pakistan earthquake fostered a sense of renewed urgency among member states, leading to a proposal for a Commonwealth Programme for Natural Disaster Management at the 2005 Malta CHOGM.⁴⁰

By then, Commonwealth Secretariat staff seemed aware of the organisation's limited ability to respond to humanitarian crises in the traditional sense, even though the Secretariat stated that it had 'responded to requests for assistance by member Governments' in the aftermath of natural disasters in Pakistan, the Maldives, Grenada and Guyana.⁴¹ They had, however, taken stock of the emergence of disaster risk reduction as a new field of humanitarian assistance. Therefore, despite the limited success of past Commonwealth humanitarian assistance projects, the Secretariat did dedicate some of its Governance and Institutional Development Division's expertise and, possibly, resources to disaster risk reduction capacity-building programmes. Nevertheless, the sustainability of such projects remains uncertain, considering recent financial setbacks of the Commonwealth Secretariat.⁴²

Since 1990, Commonwealth humanitarian assistance has assimilated innovations within the humanitarian aid system, including the creation of dedicated, specialised entities to manage humanitarian aid separately from other types of assistance, and the inclusion of pre- and post-disaster assistance as components of humanitarian aid. However, it has also mirrored the continuing ambivalence of the concept's definition, by abstaining from establishing a clear distinction between security-related and humanitarian agendas. Arguably, references to the 'security, humanitarian and development dimensions'⁴³ of small arms proliferation and to the 'humanitarian crisis caused by anti-personnel mines'⁴⁴ in CHOGM final communiqués recognise that humanitarian issues have been considered, if only rhetorically, as part of a more global set of security and

development issues. Interestingly, this approach does not seem entirely inconsistent with that of one of the Commonwealth's most active member states, namely the United Kingdom. British and other Western humanitarian programmes in Afghanistan, for instance, have routinely been presented as part and parcel of a broader, civil and military attempt at re-establishing and maintaining peace, democracy and security not only in the country of intervention, but also at home, despite the reluctance of the non-governmental sector to adhere to this agenda.⁴⁵

Conclusion

This survey has demonstrated that over the studied period, Commonwealth engagement with humanitarian assistance has shifted from its original opposition to oppressive regimes to a focus on issues of preparedness in the face of natural disasters. Yet, despite this apparent contrast, little change has occurred as far as the methods of this humanitarian assistance—capacity-building—are concerned. Overall, this evolution and the continued ambivalence of the organisation's perception of humanitarian assistance have followed the sweeping reorganisation of the aid sector, which the European Union and the United Nations helped crystallise. A common feature of European and Commonwealth policies regarding humanitarian assistance has indeed been their hesitation between a more neutral, disaster relief-oriented definition of humanitarian aid and a more holistic but also less neutral definition that includes disaster preparedness and recovery dimensions, as well as security concerns.

Although British views could have appeared, at least for a while, as compatible with the European Union's post-1990 humanitarian assistance agenda, European aid mechanisms have been routinely criticised by British aid officials, alongside other multilateral aid systems, such as the Commonwealth.⁴⁶

The scholarship on humanitarian aid in international organisations after 1945 has revolved around the dichotomy between development aid as a political tool and humanitarian assistance as an apolitical one; or, in other words, the varying politicisation of humanitarian assistance through the different phases of its history. As Commonwealth humanitarian assistance has indicated, this analytical framework tends to overlook a wider variety of political and operational constraints within international organisations. A more detailed, systematic analysis of the internal debates and tensions within international organisations as well as between them may help to produce a more nuanced understanding of the significance of this phenomenon. With a view to encouraging such research, this paper has explored a possible comparative framework for the study of humanitarian assistance in international organisations since 1945, and highlighted the value that case studies of less frequently studied players, such as the Commonwealth, may bring to such historical political surveys.

Notes

1. 'The Malta Communiqué (2005) Final Communiqué from the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM) in Malta, 25–27 November 2005, <http://assets.thecommonwealth.org/assetbank-commonwealth/action/viewAsset?id=19556&index=11&total=1000&categoryId=22&categoryTypeId=1&collection=CHOGM&sortAttributeId=7&sortDescending=false#imageModal>.
2. *Ibid.*

3. Ibid.
4. See in particular chapter 10 of Mazower (2012, pp. 273–304). For an overview of recent historiographical discussions on the global role of international organisations, see, for instance, Iriye (2004) and Reinalda (2009); and thematic issues of international history journals (Kott, 2011; Rodogno *et al.*, 2012).
5. Such studies include Hutchinson (2000), Barnett (2011) and Cox (2009); as well as other studies quoted in this article.
6. The dominant institutional focus, in its realist and functionalist versions, is discussed by Kott (2011). See also Fassin (2012).
7. Michael Barnett's attempt at such *longue-durée* analysis, although criticised for some of its shortcomings, is a useful example of this (Barnett, 2011). See also Rodogno (2012).
8. For an illustration of this contrast see Philippe Ryffman's and Michael Barnett's respective accounts (Ryffman, 2008; Barnett, 2011).
9. See also Barnett's chapter 'Saving slaves, sinners, savages, and societies' (Barnett, 2011, pp. 57–75).
10. Convention for the Amelioration of the Condition of the Wounded in Armies in the Field, 22 August 1864, <https://www.icrc.org/ihl/INTRO/120?OpenDocument>; see also Convention (I) for the Amelioration of the Condition of the Wounded and Sick in Armed Forces in the Field, 12 August 1949, <https://www.icrc.org/applic/ihl/ihl.nsf/Article.xsp?action=openDocument&documentId=200E2B4090502A44C12563CD00519EF8>.
11. On this topic, see Finnemore's chapter (1999, pp. 149–168).
12. On the rise of nutritional sciences in international organisations, see Staples (2006, pp. 64–81).
13. See on this topic Johanna Siméant's thoughts on scholars' symbolic use of the end of the Cold War in Siméant and Dauvin (2004, p. 13).
14. For a contemporary account of the inclusion of disaster preparedness in humanitarian policy, see Fromuth (1988, p. 178).
15. See, for instance, the discussions in Weiss (2012).
16. For instance, for a study of the International Relief Union in a *longue-durée* framework, see Hutchinson (2000). On the creation of UNDRO, see Nishimoto (2014).
17. For a first-hand testimony on the history of UNDRO, see Peter Macalister-Smith (1980); see also Nishimoto (2014).
18. Resolution 66/232 of the United Nations Security Council (United Nations, 1966), 2006-152, Rhodesia, Miscellaneous Correspondence Part 2, COMSEC; *Report on the Work of the Sanctions Committee, January 1971–June 1973*, n.d., 2005-101 Ottawa Circular Papers, COMSEC, Arnold Smith Papers.
19. Minutes of Commonwealth Sanctions Committee Meeting, 10 December 1971, 2004-048 Rhodesia: Internal Affairs, COMSEC; *ibid.*; Report on the Meeting between Mr Anyaoku and Sir John Carter, Chairman of the Sanctions Committee, at the Guyana High Commission at 10.00 am, on 2 March 1972, n.d., 2004-48 Rhodesia, Internal Affairs, COMSEC; *Report on the Work of the Sanctions Committee, January 1971–June 1973*; Arnold Smith, Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting, May/June 1975, Commonwealth Humanitarian Assistance to Southern Africa, Background Note by Secretary-General, n.d., 2006-141 Heads of Government Meeting 1975 Kingston Part 2, COMSEC, Arnold Smith Papers; Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting, June 1977. Draft Report of the Sanctions Committee, July 1975–May 1977, n.d., 2009-161 Heads of Governments Meeting Lancaster House 1977, Part 2, COMSEC, Shridath Ramphal Papers.
20. Ottawa Final Communiqué, 1973, 2005-101 Ottawa Heads of Governments Meeting 1973, COMSEC.
21. *Report on the Work of the Sanctions Committee, January 1971–June 1973*; Ottawa Final Communiqué.
22. Commonwealth Assistance to Rhodesian Africans and Namibians: Rhodesia, n.d., 2007-140 Countries Aid to Mozambique, 1975–76, COMSEC, Shridath Ramphal Papers.
23. Commonwealth Secretariat (1987, p. 10); Commonwealth Assistance to Rhodesian Africans and Namibians, n.d., 2007-148, Southern Africa 1976, COMSEC, Shridath Ramphal Papers; Smith, Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting, May/June 1975, Commonwealth Humanitarian Assistance to Southern Africa, Background Note by Secretary-General, p. 2.
24. Message from the High Commissioner of Zambia to A. Smith, 12 January 1973, 2006-152, Rhodesia, Miscellaneous Correspondence Part 1, COMSEC; Letter from A. Smith to High Commissioner of Zambia, 15 January 1973, 2006-152, Rhodesia, Miscellaneous Correspondence Part 1, COMSEC.
25. Emeka Anyaoku, Possible Relations with UN Sanctions Committee, 8 March 1972, 2004-066 Rhodesia Exchange with UN Sanctions Committee, COMSEC; Minutes of the Meeting of the Sanctions Committee,

- 31 March 1976, 6, 2007-009 Sanctions Committee 1976 Circulated Papers and Minutes, Part 1, COMSEC.
26. Arnold Smith, Telegram, 27 April 1974, 2006-141 Heads of Governments Meeting Kingston, Part 1, COMSEC, Arnold Smith Papers.
27. J. R. Syson, Letter to M. Malhoutra, 1 June 1977, 2008-013 HGM 1977 Background Papers, COMSEC; see also Commonwealth Assistance to Rhodesian Africans and Namibians; and Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting, June 1977. Draft Report of the Sanctions Committee, July 1975–May 1977.
28. *Report on the Commonwealth Committee on Southern Africa, June 1977–June 1979*, n.d., 7–12, 2010-017 HGM 1979 Zambia Background Papers Part 2, COMSEC.
29. Aide Humanitaire Canadienne Aux Vietnamiens, *Présent 2e Édition Nationale*, 7 May 1970, Les Archives de Radio-Canada, http://archives.radio-canada.ca/guerres_conflits/guerre_vietnam/clips/6132/, accessed 14 April 2015.
30. Official assistance tripled between 1990 and 2000 (Barnett, 2011, p. 3).
31. On the recent history of the humanitarian sector, see Ryfman (2008).
32. On this topic, see the position of one of the founders of Médecins Sans Frontières (Brauman, 2009).
33. Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU), Art. 214-2, in Cremona (2011, p. 13).
34. See Versluys (2009, p. 91).
35. See Darwin (1988, p. 235).
36. See Cox (2009).
37. The Harare Commonwealth Declaration (1991), <http://assets.thecommonwealth.org/assetbank-commonwealth/action/viewDownloadFile?CSRF=AC4sa3MAdMjK0IK5mrxS&returnUrl=viewSearchItem%3findex%3d1%261%3d1&id=19499>, accessed 14 April 2015.
38. See also the denunciation of ‘ethnic cleansing’ and ‘mass murder’ in Bosnia-Herzegovina. The Auckland Communiqué (1995), <http://assets.thecommonwealth.org/assetbank-commonwealth/action/viewAsset?id=19554&index=6&total=36&view=viewSearchItem#imageModal>, accessed 15 April 2015.
39. Ibid.
40. The Malta Communiqué (2005) Final Communiqué from the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM) in Malta, 25–27 November 2005.
41. Commonwealth Secretariat (2009).
42. Department for International Development (2011); Commonwealth Secretariat (2013).
43. The Durban Communiqué (1999), n.d., <http://assets.thecommonwealth.org/assetbank-commonwealth/action/viewAsset?id=19564&index=2&total=6&view=viewSearchItem>; Kaberere (n.d.).
44. The Edinburgh Communiqué (1997), n.d., <http://assets.thecommonwealth.org/assetbank-commonwealth/action/viewAsset?id=19549&index=3&total=36&view=viewSearchItem#imageModal>, accessed 15 April 2015.
45. Barnett (2011).
46. For a glimpse of such rebukes, see Short (2015); Commonwealth Secretariat (2013).

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