



Lunch meeting

The Collapse of the Liberal World Order: Implications for the Humanitarian System and the Future of Humanitarianism

3 April 2025, webinar

Summary report

This report was written based on the discussion taking place at the time of the meeting and has not been updated to include developments and events that have occurred since then.

2025 has brought to light how much the world order has moved into a multi-polar direction and how global power relations are shifting. These changes and uncertainties have a profound impact on the humanitarian system and, most importantly, on the lives of people affected by crises. How can humanitarians think beyond these concerns and utilize the possibility of doing things differently? On April 3, KUNO organised a lunch meeting to discuss the collapse of the 'liberal world order', its implications for the humanitarian system,, and the future of humanitarianism.

Polly Pallister-Wilkins, Associate Professor at the University of Amsterdam, explored the current geopolitical shifts, examining their implications for the field of humanitarianism. She spoke about how the geopolitical landscape is shifting rapidly, which is profoundly impacting the humanitarian sector, and is most acutely felt by aid recipients. However, it is not unusual for the humanitarian system to operate in uncertain times, and the fears of a collapse of the liberal world order – including the shrinking humanitarian space - have been a key concern in the sector for decades. At the same time unprecedented changes are unfolding. This includes a clear lack of outrage of actors and governments towards violations of international humanitarian law. In addition, the explicit acknowledgement by the current United States government that humanitarian aid serves as a soft power tool was surprising to many in the humanitarian system. In these uncertain times, it is important to be mindful of how critiques of the humanitarian system can be co-opted by political actors in ways that undermine the system's core intentions. Striking a balance between voicing critique while also displaying continued support for the fundamental purpose of the aid system is a difficult, but essential position to maintain.

Polly ended by underlining that aid recipients and crisis affected communities need to be at the centre of the discussion on how work should be done in the humanitarian

sector. This moment can be used to address long-held frustrations and to reconfigure the sector, and to solidify solidarity as the starting point for moving forward.

Lata Narayanaswamy, Associate Professor at the University of Leeds, shared insights on the use of language, power structures and the importance of solidarity in the humanitarian system. She explained how foundational to the notion of humanitarianism is the language of crisis. Historically, the term crisis has been used to describe a time-bound event in order to spark a sense of urgency. However, in recent times, the use of the term crisis has become diluted to describe challenges that do not have a clear beginning or end. The lines between urgent humanitarian action and longer-term and political interventions are becoming blurred, which is exacerbated by the collapse of the so-called liberal world order.

Many crises, including the financial crisis and the climate crisis, are the result of decisions made by people and expressions of power. The humanitarian system is not detached from these dynamics. The notion that impartial and neutral actors can operate outside of geopolitical interests has been disproven by many. Elements that resemble 'white saviourism' continue to appear in practice and contribute to reinforcing global inequalities. This raises the question of whether space can be made in the world as it is, rather than the world we wish existed for humanitarianism. The extreme actions of the current United States government are symptoms, and not causes, of the failures of the geopolitical system. In reality, humanitarianism is an expression of both hard and soft power and can be used to reproduce colonial power structures. Hard power is visible in the form of controlling money, which is then put towards fulfilling broader Western geopolitical interests. Soft power in humanitarian action often enables donors to present their involvement as driven purely by care and goodwill, which then masks colonial realities. Lata ended by stating that actors in the humanitarian system can – and need to – be overtly political to call out and be critical of these realities.

Reflection and discussion

The audience expressed concerns regarding the role of humanitarianism in the current global order. First, a shift towards far-right is happening in the political sphere in the Global North. There is a push to keep refugees out of countries, rather than to be in solidarity with them. Second, there is a paradox in how states contribute to humanitarian crises—through actions like arms sales and proxy wars—while simultaneously funding aid programs to address the very crises they help create. Comments were made that the language of providing aid is weaponised by state actors to mask their geopolitical interests. Humanitarianism needs to be overtly political to call out such practices.

The speakers underlined the importance of solidarity in humanitarian action; it should be based on a sense of shared humanity, which is lacking in many cases. In Western contexts a sense of detachment persists, with crises often viewed as problems faced by people far away, rather than as events that could impact us personally. As a result, humanitarian action is often the result of a sense of benevolence, rather than true solidarity. This paradigm can be shifted through relatability driven by the realization that Western states are not immune to threats, such as climate shocks or people losing livelihoods.

Between the audience and the speakers there was agreement that discussions around solidarity, putting affected populations at the centre, and localization are not new. In the current geopolitical context these discussions are amplified. Still, decisions affecting aid recipients continue to be made by Western actors at a distance instead of having direct involvement in these decision-making processes. The fact that the reform agendas have been the topic of discussion for decades means that there is the knowledge available to make a change towards a positive direction. There are organisations that have operationalised locally-led action, however, in many other cases implementation is still lacking.