

Department of Economics

What is a "Complex Humanitarian Emergency"? An Analytical Essay

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Working Paper No. 420

October 2000

ISSN 1473-0278



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Abstract: The prevailing usage of the concept of *complex humanitarian emergency*, even if valuable, is often fuzzy and misleading, and rarely articulated in a consistent framework, which could be used advantageously for research, interdisciplinary exchange, and policy making and analysis. We analyse critically the prevailing usage of the concept, and end up by setting up a more consistent and all embracing definition. Both the analysis and the proposed definition are based on a general analytical framework, coined *disaster situation*, we proposed a few years back in connection to natural disasters. The main conclusion is that the mostly implicit conceptual usage of the term, rather than the term itself, is akin to that of a *disaster situation*. As such, it can be used flexibly enough by various disciplines, especially from a political economy perspective, to design research, advance knowledge and propose policies within an analytical framework which is more consistent and systematic than that currently used.

JEL Classification: H56, O00, O17, J15, Z10

Key Words: disaster situation, complexity, emergency, institutional setting

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1. Introduction

It is our contention that loose definitions, ambiguous concepts and unclear terms contribute to create self-protected and self-preserving myths about the subject in study. It also contributes to misunderstanding between professionals that are active in the field and to unnecessarily shapeless research studies. The definition of any useful concept requires the explicit or implicit reference of a well-defined analytical framework; otherwise, the concept would hang from nowhere and mean almost anything. At the level and needs of specific disciplines and users, this would not necessarily disqualify studies which are carried within their confines. But it would restrict its usefulness and transcendence to other disciplines, as it is bound to create serious inconsistencies and misinterpretation elsewhere. That is, there would likely be serious difficulties to reconcile viewpoints between economics, sociology, geography, politics, anthropology, technology, and the like. Any consistent framework is intended to serve as an articulated context for policy analysis, theoretical foundation and research design, and hopefully also for exchange across diverse disciplines and professions. The latter is certainly more conducive if there was available a flexible, but coherent, conceptual body about an interdisciplinary subject to which most disciplines and researchers could relate. This would necessarily imply a high level of generality, but not necessarily a high level of conceptual ambiguity. In the case of “complex humanitarian emergencies”, it seems that the usage of the terms “complexity”, "humanitarian", "emergency", and their context, are often fuzzy, contributing to confusion and making the potential interdisciplinary exercise less

likely or fruitful than otherwise it should have been.

We approach the definition and context of this wholesale concept with reference to the analytical framework of a *disaster situation*, as proposed by Albala-Bertrand (1993) to tackle natural disasters. This framework is flexible enough to be also applied to other types of disasters. It has advantageously been used for comparisons between disaster types, e.g. natural disasters and complex humanitarian emergencies (see Albala-Bertrand 2000a, 2000b). This framework is a highly consistent and all-embracing conceptual context, which is used there as a tool for political economy analysis, from the viewpoint of a social economist, but it also opens useful avenues for other disciplinary perspectives.

This framework can accommodate and clarify what has come to be called *complex humanitarian emergencies*. In the case of natural disasters, there was a need to design an all-embracing concept, like “disaster situation”, because the normal usage of the term “disaster” was mainly associated only with the societal impact of a natural phenomenon. This was the case, even if there were precedents about the inappropriateness of conceiving a disaster in such a narrow way (see references in Albala-Bertrand, 1993), as this usually incorporated inconsistently both the responses and the societal interfering processes that were generated by the disaster situation itself. In the case of “complex emergencies” the opposite appears to be true, as the term “emergency” is commonly associated with the response to a hazard, but the implicit usage of the term appears to include also the impact and related effects without much consistency. We therefore intend to clarify the concept of *complex humanitarian emergency* so that fuzziness can be significantly reduced.

2. Complex Humanitarian Emergencies

2.1. Proponents and Usage

This is not a well-defined concept, but most authors somehow agree on its fundamental components. When analysts work in actual cases of “complex humanitarian emergencies”, or “complex emergencies” for short, this appears to be less of a problem, as within the confines of their disciplinary frameworks they seek some consistency. But when they attempt a more all-embracing approach, both the concept and its usefulness appears to suffer greatly. According to Duffield (1994a), the term “complex humanitarian emergencies” emerged in Africa in the late 1980s. This author analyses the UN definition of complex emergencies, which is

“a major humanitarian crisis of a multi-causal nature that requires a systemwide response. Commonly, a long-term combination of political, conflict and peacekeeping factors is also involved.” (p.38).

But he appears unhappy with this definition, as it does not appear to distinguish between complex emergencies and other man-made emergencies. Furthermore, it does not appropriately differentiate the former from natural disasters, given that natural disasters have also been recognised to be multi-causal phenomena. He therefore suggests that

“complex emergencies are essentially political in nature... resulting from sectarian

and predatory indigenous responses to socio-economic stress and marginalisation”...[unlike natural disasters], complex emergencies have a singular ability to erode or destroy the cultural, civil, political and economic integrity of established societies...[they] are internal to political and economic structures...different from natural disasters and deserve to be understood and responded to as such.” (Ibid. p.38).

This means that the political domain appears as fundamental in these multi-causal phenomena, which qualifies further the UN definition. There is however no attempt at differentiating between an emergency and a disaster, as both are used interchangeably, which may be misleading, unless emergency is forcibly redefined to mean disaster, as is shown later. In a similar vein, for other authors, complex emergencies are

“conflict-generated emergencies... [caused by] the breakdown of the state, and its replacement by a political culture which reinforces and condones the use of violence to secure and maintain power.” (Macrae and Zwi 1994, p. 21).

They consider that a complex emergency is a consequence of internal war, this being the result of complex societal processes associated with “underdevelopment and maldevelopment”, in a context of vested international relations, conflict and control.

The focus on war may appear excessive (see Steward 1998), but especially in Sub-Saharan Africa, where all these authors have been involved, most if not all major humanitarian emergencies have actually derived from war, and only secondarily from

overt government violence on some social groups. The break-up of Yugoslavia over the 1990s is also a point to note in this direction (see Albala-Bertrand, 2000). Therefore, the shift of attention moves towards the causes of war as well as the response choices open to emergency institutions. As such, attention to issues related to the societal structure and dynamics of countries under emergency seem unavoidable for understanding conflicts and induced emergencies.

That is, issues such as state building, international relations, ethnicity, gender, inequalities, marginalisation, underdevelopment, and the like, become fundamental subjects of analysis. Furthermore, the understanding of these issues appears to be basic to establish the range and efficiency of the policy choices that can be deployed by the international and domestic institutions involved in these emergencies. These authors also use the term disaster and emergency as equivalent.

For other authors, there is nothing new in the concept of “complex emergencies”, as humanitarian crises, derived from societal conflicts, have been around for a long time. According to them, what distinguishes the modern breed is the wider and more varied range of response choices available to international institutions (Slim and Penrose 1994). This is considered to be a consequence of the end of the Cold War and the opening of a new international political space as part of the testing of the new-world order. But if all that was complex were the wider range of international responses, i.e. the international community being spoiled for choice, then we would logically expect that the number and duration of emergencies should be both smaller and shorter than it ever was. The unprecedented fact is precisely the sheer numbers of current major emergencies and their long lasting persistence. For such a reason, Ake

(1997) focus on “why humanitarian emergencies have been so substantial in the post-Cold War era, a period expected to be less violent.” (p.ix).

The causes of this may be explained to a large extent precisely by the termination of the Cold War. Before, the world order was well understood and had reasonably clear, and often tested, rules of both engagement and foreign intervention in domestic affairs. In addition, in the Soviet area of influence, order was paramount, so simmering ethnic or other primary factionalism was suffocated from the very outset. It is not surprising, therefore, that most conflict in this area of the world is due to the collapse of centralised power and the ensuing fragmentation that was stimulated by primary groupings, in a context of institutional weakness, economic shortage and social uncertainty. This would also apply to the end of colonial rule, especially in Africa (Albala-Bertrand, 2000). Therefore, there appears to be two main conflicting traits related to the end of the Cold War. On the one hand, there is relaxation or non-existence of central state control, which generates both conflict proneness and conflict-related emergency conditions. And, on the other, there is more freedom of action by the international community, which increases its general choices, but makes more difficult the intervention, as the conflict is no longer disciplined along the traditional lines of international influence and allegiance, common to the Cold War. This means that by default the international response may fuel and sustain, rather than suppress, the conflict and the derived emergency. These authors also work with a rather frameworkless approach, failing to locate the emergency as a part of a distinct phase from the disaster impact and its effects, as will be shown later.

The case of Yugoslavia in the current decade represents a good illustration of the

above interpretation. This area of the world has historically been prone to nationalistic tensions and conflicts, resulting in fragmentation (“balkanisation”), re-integration and re-fragmentation, normally along ethnic lines. After the Balkan wars of 1912-13 and the First World War, in the context of the demise of both the Ottoman and the Hapsburg empires, some of the ethnically disparate Balkan regions became a kingdom in 1919, re-named Yugoslavia in 1929. This state was first partitioned under the Nazi occupation, and then re-established in Tito’s Yugoslavia, after the Second World War. Until Tito’s death in 1980, tensions were kept under control from a strong one-party state, in the context of a relatively successful economy, which contributed to shift the centre of allegiances and loyalties from nationalities and primordial groupings to the Communist Party and the State. From 1980 onwards, in the absence of the strong man, especially after the loosening and eventual break-up of the Eastern bloc, and under the pressure of a persistent economic decline, nationalistic and ethnic unrest re-surfaced, starting in earnest in Kosovo and becoming increasingly violent in Slovenia and Croatia. Destabilising as it was, Belgrade still managed to keep the situation under a precarious centralised control. But immediately after the collapse and dismembering of the USSR, the tensions and localised conflicts became widespread and overtly violent, coming to a head, first, in Croatia (1991), then in Bosnia-Herzegovina (1993 and 1995) and finally in Kosovo (1999).

There is little doubt that the key trigger was the collapse of the USSR. The loosening and vacuum of stable allegiances in the international sphere accelerated the domestic erosion of centralised power. In a severe situation of economic shortages and institutional decline, the population resorted to primordial groupings for protection,

survival and prevalence, giving more grist to the mill of separatist movements, deriving in additional ethnic conflict and violence. Additional fragmentation and lack of centralised control ensued, with more and more intractable violence (Ramet, 1996; Silber and Little, 1996; Judah, 1997; Malcom, 1998; Brogan 1998).

From the very outset, especially in the cases of Croatia and more particularly Bosnia, the international response to separatism, annexation and ethnic cleansing, and the ensuing refugee emergency, was ambivalent and insufficient, probably adding fuel to the conflict rather than solving it. Lessons were hard to be learned, and culminated in a wholesale, but not safer, Nato intervention to deal with the Kosovo crisis, exacerbating domestic violence and creating a refugee nightmare (The Economist, Time, The Guardian, see April and May 1999 issues). Under the Cold War rules, neither would there have been any Warsaw Pact tolerance for overt ethnic conflict in the very edge of its area of influence, nor would have Nato been able to intervene in the way it did. The Cold War itself would have probably suppressed any potential nationalistic and/or ethnic violence from the very beginning.

Edkins (1996), focusing on the debate on famines, criticises the “complex emergency approach” and also appears to equate emergency with disaster: “we now have a third form of disaster: ‘complex emergencies’ ” (p.568). She agrees that famines may play in the favour of vested domestic and international interests, so “humanitarian claims must be continually questioned”. She asserts that the decision for famine relief must be political or ethical rather than “scientific”, accusing the “complex emergencies” theorists of indulging in a sort of super-scientific approach that discards political or ethical considerations, which we think it may be a misinterpretation⁽¹⁾.

In turn, Keen (1994), based on Rangasami (1985) and the experience of Southwestern Sudan during the long-lasting Sudanese civil wars, concentrates on the functions of famine, rather than only on its causes. According to this author, and not dissimilar to Duffield (1994b), impending starvation creates profitable opportunities for some sections of the population at the expense of others, i.e. there are interacting winners and losers in most famine situations. These exploitative processes plus other more general utilitarian activities at all levels, conspire against effective relief efforts. In this context, the donors themselves may appear as having institutional-functional agendas, which may make matters more intractable than otherwise it would have been.

The above author gives some fact-based analytical views about issues relating to the politics of famine and relief, showing how complex this whole phenomenon is, which makes more necessary an interdisciplinary approach to “complex” emergencies. Economics and political economy have an important contribution, as “predatory” and “functional” factors can all be put within an economic and institutional framework and be therefore analysed with standard tools from these disciplines. Here is another case in which the political opportunism and utilitarian actions of groups and individuals derive from institutional relaxation. For Nafziger (1996), in turn, complex humanitarian emergencies

“are considered to be man-made crises, in which large number of people die and suffer from war, physical violence, disease, hunger, or displacement” (p.1).

Although concentrating mostly on the macroeconomic causes of general vulnerability, he proposes an interdisciplinary articulation that considers economic factors as dominant for creating the ultimate conditions for proximate political or ethnic detonators, which may end up in humanitarian emergencies. There appears to be here also some ambivalence between the disaster impact as such and its derived emergency, as this study shifts the focus to the economic conditions that may generate emergencies, rather than to the emergency itself (see also Nafziger and Auvinen 1997). Likewise, Vayrynen (1996) defines a humanitarian emergency as

"a profound social crisis in which a large number of people die and suffer from war, disease, hunger and displacement, ... while some others may benefit from it" (Ibid., P19).

This definition, like the previous one, no doubt tends to be all embracing, but it clearly misses the main element of an emergency: the urgent response to a dire situation. This definition unambiguously equates a humanitarian emergency with the disaster impact and the impact effects. This creates confusion all over the text, as often the word disaster or crisis is used as equivalent to, or as a synonym of, emergency. For example, he uses the term emergency to refer to the standard negative consequences of poverty, that through malnourishment and disease kills "sometimes early, sometimes slowly" (Ibid., p.22). On this approach, almost anything which affect our sense of justice and fairness would be called "emergency". He also calls a "massive humanitarian emergency" the famine created by the policies of the Great Leap Forward in China in the late fifties, which contributes to confusion as he

equates emergency with calamity⁽²⁾. Holsti (1997), on the other hand, avoids this by considering humanitarian emergencies “only when there is some prospect that the international community can do something about them” (p.20). In other words, it is the response to disaster that defines the concept, rather than the impact of a disaster alone. Vayrynen (1996) later clarifies that the main feature of a humanitarian emergency is that

"the level and intensity of suffering ...depart significantly and suddenly from the prevailing standard"...[but if this happens] in a society where disease and malnutrition are rare, then the society may well be able to cope with it" (Ibid., pp.22, 23).

In other words, a society that can *respond* to a difficult situation, with its own in-built and slightly over-stretched normal structure and dynamics, will not be a case for emergency concerns. This is clearly inconsistent with his previous definition above, but makes a lot more sense. Therefore, we should conclude that emergency exists if and only if society's in-built response mechanisms are significantly overtaken by the impact effects, causing serious malfunctioning in the rest of society. This society would require then a good deal of exogenous and external emergency assistance. Consequently, what defines an emergency is not the negative effects of a disaster (earthquake, war) in themselves, but the available response mechanisms and the need and request for assistance. That is, emergency is associated with the response rather than the impact of a disaster alone.

Finally, his operationalisation of the term "complex" contributes also to confusion.

He clearly acknowledges that the four victimisation variables that he uses, i.e. war, disease, hunger and displacement, are not independent, as war is normally the main cause of the other three; and he also acknowledges that complex emergencies are mostly politically induced and sustained. But he appears to believe that to have a "simple" as opposed to a "complex" emergency all that is required is to have in place only two of the four variables, e.g. war plus displacement or disease plus hunger. This classification may be useful for targeted, and mostly institutionally unconcerned, emergency relief, but can also be quite inadequate to assess complexity. Actually, every time institutionally entrenched power is significantly challenged, the political conflict so derived is likely to make both the emergency source (i.e. the disaster impact and its effects) and the emergency assistance (i.e. the disaster response) a "complex" situation, even if only one of his victimisation variables was present. Violence, certainly, makes all things more complex than otherwise it would have been, for both victims and relief operations.

Melkas (1996), in turn, concentrates on the measurement of humanitarian emergencies and defines a complex humanitarian emergency as

“a disaster resulting from a long-term destructive socio-politico-economic process - often exacerbated by cultural and/or historical factors - that gradually increases in intensity, and typically leads to deaths due to direct violence, starvation, diseases, and/or to involuntary displacement of people...this incorporates three important issues (i) the complexity of the underlying factors, (ii) the process behind disasters, and (iii) the complexity of the characteristics of emergencies, and the difficulties in their identification and measurement” (Ibid., p.3).

In addition, she appears to equate emergency approach with famine approach, and argues that Sen (1981)'s framework, with some little modifications, can be applied "to cover also other types and aspects of humanitarian crises and their causes." (Melkas 1996, p.17). This framework is likely to contribute to that aim, but it may required significant alterations, as Sen explicitly excludes considerations that lead to institutional breakdown, which should somehow be included to cater for "complex emergencies" (see Albala-Bertrand, 2000). As with the two previous authors, there is also here some confusion between disaster and emergency, as emergency *is* defined as a disaster, and this would be misleading. In passing, her three important emergency issues can also be incorporated to the existing *disaster situation* framework, which may probably enhance the articulation of these factors, between themselves and with all the other variables associated to this wholesale analytical device (see Albala-Bertrand 1993).

The fast perusal through the writings of the above authors throws a good deal of useful information about these phenomena. Although not in a clearly structured manner, it shows the need to differentiate these phenomena in three main parts, which in the *disaster situation* terminology would be pre-disaster factors, disaster impact and effects, and disaster response. In other words, this is akin to the concept of disaster situation (Albala-Bertrand, 1993). But our contention is that the definitions and the usage of the term "complex humanitarian emergencies" are rather frameworkless and often misleading.

3. A Definition

All the above definitions and approaches offer some valuable insights, but they do not appear to be properly articulated within an analytical framework that establishes hierarchical levels, dominant sources and likely sequences of the factors that may lead to a “complex” emergency. Because of this insufficiency, emergency is inconsistently equated to disaster and thereby complexity appears often as a substitute for fuzziness. Let us try to define a “complex humanitarian emergency” by starting from the basic definitions of its constituent terms.

3.1. *Emergency*

According to the Oxford Dictionary an emergency is a “sudden state of danger, conflict, etc., requiring immediate action” or “a medical condition requiring immediate treatment”. From this, it appears clear that emergency is made of two main elements: a critical state or condition and the *requirement* of an immediate response to it. An emergency is then the *consequence* of a negative condition, as without it there can be no demand for immediate action or treatment. Therefore, the negative condition itself does not define the emergency but its pairing with an urgent response, this response being *after* the dire situation emerged. This is the reason why in the conception of a *disaster situation* (see *Ibid.*)), the emergency is located as a part of the response to a disaster impact, rather than as a part of the impact itself.

The Oxford Dictionary definition is however too succinct to characterise societally an

emergency. The reason why an emergency demands special social attention and action is because society's normal mechanisms of response have been overtaken by the intensity of the impact effects. This means that calamities that can be tackled by in-built responses, and/or normal "emergency services", would not affect significantly the standard operation of society, although it could do so for a segment of it, e.g. standard building fire or car crash. In other words, negative situations for which society has an available in-built response mechanism should not be considered as an emergency for society. In this case, we simply say that society is not *vulnerable* to these negative situations, as it can cope with them without major disruptions.

In a similar vein, for biological processes at an individual level, a disease or accident that can be dealt with by in-built body defences cannot constitute an emergency for the individual, e.g. common cold or common bruises. The individual would not be *vulnerable* to suffer a *worsening* condition from it, and he is bound to recover with endogenous reactions. Only if the disease overtakes both the body natural response mechanisms (endogenous response) and also common available medicine (common exogenous response), the individual may enter a state of emergency, requiring special treatment from exogenous sources that stimulate endogenous reactions or otherwise (especial drugs, hospitalisation, etc.). Endogenous vulnerability can also decrease over time, via diet, exercise, and life style. In turn, exogenous vulnerability can also decrease with new and more readily available drugs and medical services. As a point to note, individual emergencies may have also the potential to become a social emergency, as in the case of epidemic diseases, e.g. Ebola or Aids.

Therefore, a (social) emergency requires three conditions to be characterised as such:

(i) a negative state, (ii) a state that overtakes normal (societal) responses, and (iii) the need for an extra response, affecting normal (social) processes significantly. These three aspects are in turn the result of other processes. The negative state can be the result of a natural event affecting a vulnerable social setting, or the unleashing of a political conflict imposing a breakdown on a normal social setting, or more generically a *disaster impact*, as is called in Albala-Bertrand (1993). This is represented by an uncompensated interaction between a social system and an unleashing event. The overtaking of normal response processes is the result of disaster impact effects that cannot be tackled with standard endogenous and exogenous reactions alone or efficiently. When these effects are major, they and their associated response are bound to create an important interference with society, affecting significantly its normal operations and output, which is what it is called *societal interference* in the disaster situation framework (Ibid.).

Thus, an emergency has to derive from a disaster impact, the emergency being subordinated to this previous event. This means that the way in which the term “complex emergency” is currently used appears to be a misnomer, as it does not just represent the emergency response, but also the causes of it and more, i.e. the disaster impact and the pre-disaster factors and interrelations. In this latter use, it is akin to the conceptual framework that Albala-Bertrand (1993) called *disaster situation*. That is, an articulation of pre-disaster factors, disaster impact and effects, and disaster responses, including the societal interference. Therefore, if the concept of emergency is going to be used as an all-embracing framework, as it appears to be inconsistently and unsystematically used, then we would suggest that the word “situation” should (at least) implicitly follow that of emergency, as in “complex humanitarian emergency

[situation]”. But then this requires that the emergency response be called *emergency proper*. This would move our focus of attention from the emergency response alone to the wider picture that contains it.

However, notice all the strain to language simply because the concept has been too loosely used by relief operators and researchers, becoming conventional to designate almost anything that is directly or indirectly associated with an emergency. We would like to suggest that the conceptual framework of *disaster situation* makes significantly more intelligible the issue in question. But we are aware that once a name/word/concept has developed some common practical use, it is almost impossible to dislodge it in favour of a more consistent one. We suggest therefore that we should use the label “complex humanitarian emergencies” anytime a politically induced calamity is observed *as a whole* from the point of view of the emergency response. That is, it should be understood at least implicitly as a *disaster situation*, unless otherwise is indicated.

3.2. Humanitarianism

Some authors use the adjective “humanitarian” as in “complex humanitarian emergencies” or simply “humanitarian emergencies” (e.g. WIDER). This should also be qualified with caution to avoid misinterpretations. According to the Oxford Dictionary, humanitarian means “concerned with improving the lives of mankind and reducing suffering”. This definition is ambiguous enough to accommodate the full range of motivations behind those aims. The fact however is that the term humanitarian has the connotation of philanthropic, altruist, selfless, which in our case

would be highly misleading. Even if there are unselfish elements in all emergency responses, it is safer to assume the opposite, as all emergency can be easily put within a mostly utilitarian framework, especially the response coming bilaterally from abroad (Albala-Bertrand 1993, Keen 1994, de Waal 1994).

During the Cold War most emergency response was motivated by political and economic, tactical and strategic, needs across the political divide (Albala-Bertrand 1993). The end of the Cold War also generated state fragmentation everywhere, especially in Yugoslavia and Africa, as the stable support of international allegiances vanished overnight (Ake 1997). Since the end of the Cold War, the response motivation appears to come mostly from the repositioning of world powers in the yet undefined new political and economic order. It would not be far-fetched to assert that some responsibility for the economic collapse, and the ensuing predicament of the people, of the ex-Soviet Union appear to have been motivated by the West via the IMF/World Bank “transition” programmes. In retrospect, these appear to have mainly been a political agenda, far removed from any humanitarian consideration. Likewise, the institutional collapse and the exacerbation of violence in other areas of the world appears to have partly been the result of the unwise international recognition of countries within weakened federations, notably Croatia by Germany (Holsti 1997). It would then be safer to take the term “humanitarian” as defining the response aims, of relief and rehabilitation of masses of people, than the response motivation.

3.3. Complexity

“Complex” is the opposite of “simple”. Something is *complex* when it cannot be easily understood and tackled with *simple* conceptions and tools, as complexity itself refers to something that is the result of several parts linked in not straightforward ways. If that something is a living organisation, like an individual or a social setting, then complexity also implies sets of interconnected outcomes that are not amenable to simple observation. This emphasises that the analysis of “complex emergencies” requires the articulation of a complex analytical framework that establishes hierarchy, levels, interconnections, so that partial analysis is not carried in a vacuum.

A disaster impact creates negative effects because of unusual events that cannot be compensated with current societal resistance, i.e. society is vulnerable to them. Given that a violent social conflict (civil wars, ethnic conflict, etc.) has as an aim to impose casualties on the opponent, as the main tactical means to weaken the enemy and achieve an institutionally strategic victory, it is not surprising that the effects cannot be tackled in institutionally normal ways. An exception would be a society that exists in a “normal” war state (e.g. Vietnam in the 1950s and 60s). This society at war was prepared to accept, as a normal state of affairs, some death and injuries, hunger and disease, destruction and damage, as a necessary trade off to keep the war machinery effective and the majority of society stable, creating and adapting an institutional framework for the task.

It is then the interference of disaster effects, and their ensuing response, with normal society that make up the complexity of a disaster situation and thereby that of an emergency. Therefore, major disasters whether naturally or socially made are complex, but the complexity increases significantly when the disaster impact is

deliberately society-modifier, like a violent political conflict. That is, interference is not just the side or incidental effect of fairly neutral negative impacts, like that of natural disasters, oil spills or chemical pollution, but a purposeful set of actions that seeks to create this type of effects, in the first place. For a comparison between natural disasters and complex emergencies see Albala-Bertrand (1999). We can now attempt a definition of the phenomenon in question.

3.4. *Defining Complex Humanitarian Emergencies*

A complex humanitarian emergency is a purposeful and unlikely neutral *response*, mostly intended to counteract the worse effects of the massive human destitution that derive from an overt *political* phenomenon, which takes the form of a violent, entrenched and long-lasting factionalist conflict or imposition with *ultimate institutional* aims.

Firstly, this emphasises the fact that the political conflict or imposition is normally overt, responding to entrenched factionalist tensions that cannot be absorbed or contained within existing institutional frameworks. Therefore, the overt conflict tends to be long lasting, which makes the emergency response more difficult and unstable. This also stresses the fact that the societal complexity of these phenomena derives both from the institutional source of a conflict, as distinct from unorganised violence, and from the institutional aim of a conflict, as distinct from random plundering. The ultimate or strategic objective of factionalist warfare, or state-backed factionalist imposition, is to control, impose and abolish *institutions*, subordinating thereby the competing opposition.

Secondly, complexity also derives from the response itself, as this may not be fully neutral or may not be perceived as such by the parties in conflict. That is, the emergency response is likely to affect societal behaviour and existing institutional frameworks, as it is unlikely to operate fully independent from the conflict itself. In addition, the definition above suggests that there can be no complex humanitarian emergency if there is either no purposeful response to calamity or no intended massive human destitution. If this were not intended, then the emergency would unlikely be complex. This means that the deliberate response intends to tackle the plight of a large number of people that undergo violence, hunger, disease and displacement, within a general state of livelihood precariousness and societal disenfranchisement, induced by the conflict or imposition. Finally, the definition also stresses that the emergency intends primarily to tackle the worse effects of human tragedy and only secondarily to address the societal causes of the conflict.

This definition narrows the concept by excluding the complexity of emergencies that derive from the plight of powerless and marginal people caught in a sudden survival predicament (e.g. by a natural disaster), in an oligarchic context that is indifferent towards them. Once the situation has been acknowledged by the elitist state in question, the institutionalised and simmering violence is apparently more tractable for the emergency response than in a overtly violent conflict. Therefore, if we somehow extend the above definition to include this emergency type, we can consider it as the *wider* concept of *complex emergency*, as distinct from the more bounded, or *narrow*, definition above. Hence, the only type of emergency that would be excluded is that one deriving from natural, or socially made, disasters in a “normal” socio-political

setting. Here, there would still be a good deal of complexity, especially associated to discriminatory economic policies and social structure, but the emergency response is bound to be more expeditious and effective, if only because entrenched and elitist politics would not likely to be the main obstacle.

The fact however is that the overwhelming majority of both current emergencies and victimised people are the result of violent factionalist conflict, especially in Africa and the Balkans, like wars, civil wars, state-backed racial cleansing, local guerrilla warfare, etc. (Brogan 1998, WIDER 1996, IFRCR 1994). Consequently, it would be all right to stick to the *narrow* definition above, without losing too much generality, but it is important to be fully aware of its boundaries and limitations. This creates three areas of attention from the very outset: the conflict and its causes, the societal and physical effects, and the various responses.

Contrary to the one-off impacts of sudden natural disasters, But akin to slowly developing natural disasters (e.g. drought-induced famines), the impact source and its effects remain, and interact, for as long as the violent conflict persists. The emergency, therefore, is no longer a short-term and focused activity, but a more permanent adaptive process of widespread compensation and counteraction of direct and indirect effects, which normally happen while the conflict is still alive, whether overtly or in some sort of truce. Therefore, the social interference is mostly and intended and adaptive societal behaviour that derives from the conflict itself (Albala-Bertrand, 1999). This normally takes the shape of a largely deliberate restructuring of societal frameworks, to serve both offensive and defensive actions. The aim of any conflict is to defeat or weaken the opponent, so as either to impose institutional

structures on them, to serve the purpose of the victors, or at least to win the upper hand in the control of resources. At any rate, society is bound to undergo significant institutional changes during and after conflicts.

4. Conclusion

The prevailing usage of the concept of *complex humanitarian emergency*, even if valuable, is often fuzzy and misleading, and rarely articulated in a consistent framework, which could be used advantageously for research, interdisciplinary exchange, and policy making and analysis. The above analysis goes some way to clarify and classify the concept by observing it through the lens of a disaster situation. The main conclusion is that the conceptual usage of the term, rather than the term itself, is akin to that of a *disaster situation*. As such, it can be used flexibly enough by various disciplines, especially from a political economy perspective, to design research, advance knowledge and propose policies within an analytical framework which is more consistent and systematic than that currently used.

NOTES

(1) The practice of emergency assistance, which is what the criticised authors are mostly involved, can be easily shown to be the result of non-humanitarian considerations, as they themselves often observe. Most “humanitarian” response can be put in a utilitarian framework, which makes relief perfectly “decidable” in terms of political and/or economic losses and gains, without reference to any “complete and closed” scientific approach. This likely vested interest of the international response may have counterproductive consequences: as the victims are only the pretext or expedient factor to seek utilitarian aims, this process may exacerbate the emergency and/or keep it going for longer than otherwise it should have been. She appears to miss this, which is a direct consequence of her rather narrow application of the Derrida’s “decidability approach” (Derrida 1992). In addition, contrary to her views, managerial and technical considerations will in this case be useful, rather than the opposite, as they may constitute a monitoring and disciplining element for the amount, type and aims of distributed relief assistance, whatever its first motivation.

(2) This policy-induced disaster, in a context of limited choices for the people affected, was no doubt a massive calamity. But is this a humanitarian emergency? We think not. To have an emergency in place, an imminent, urgent, response is required. In this case, the starvation was not declared; the government did not acknowledge the situation; there was no official demand for emergency assistance; and the NGOs, the West and even the Chinese were not fully aware about the victimisation levels. Therefore, the consequences of appalling misery and brutality are not in themselves

an emergency, not anymore than the Nazi massacres in concentration camps were.

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**This working paper has been produced by
the Department of Economics at
Queen Mary, University of London**

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