

Defining, operationalising and translating 'vulnerability' in humanitarian work in Jordan

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'Vulnerability' saturates contemporary humanitarian discourse and practice in English. But how is 'vulnerability' operationalised and translated – both literally and figuratively – and what can these dynamics tell us about the humanitarian system? Drawing on an extensive engagement with humanitarianism in Jordan, this article explores how 'vulnerability' is turned from a ubiquitous designator of need to an operationalizable indicator in humanitarian assessments, how 'vulnerability' overlaps and collides with national systems for determining need and targeting, and how the idea of 'vulnerability' is communicated in Arabic. I argue that, despite 'vulnerability's' unquestioned centrality in humanitarianism, there is a pervasive unclarity about how it should be understood, with parallel and largely disconnected debates, using strikingly different frameworks and terminology, happening in English and Arabic. This Anglo-centric system both expresses and reinforces the humanitarian sector's intersecting hierarchies of race and labour, as 'local' humanitarian workers take on the work of translating 'vulnerability,' while 'international' colleagues centre their work on concepts that have very little meaning to those they are ostensibly for and about. If localisation is to involve a meaningful transfer of power to local and national actors, humanitarianism's Anglo-centrism must be dismantled.

More Information

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