

Disasters and capitalism: Towards an idea of and political action around 'humanitarian sovereignty' in Myanmar's agrarian societies

Gum Sha Aung

Abstract

This paper explores the concepts of a 'humanitarian sovereignty' in the context of agrarian societies, building on an argument that 'shocks' brought about by extreme weather, wars, famine, economic crisis, or violent expulsions unfold in long-running agrarian social relations, pre-existing agrarian structures and institutions, and broad agrarian and societal transformations. This paper argues that, firstly, humanitarian crisis is shaping the agrarian landscape and vice versa agrarian transformation could shape upon the humanitarian crisis as well. Secondly, agrarian justice is a co-constitutive part of humanitarian justice: what humanitarian justice means is therefore inherently embedded within the interpretations of what agrarian justice means. This argument requires bringing agrarian justice into humanitarian justice debates. For the last few years, a network of local humanitarian actors in Myanmar are attempting to conceptualise the intersection between agrarian justice and humanitarian justice as "Humanitarian Sovereignty"- while the former concerns democratising food systems, the latter concerns democratising humanitarian systems. Though, the conventional humanitarian concepts emphasized that humanitarian work must be non-political. However, many first responders, national and local NGOs ran into contradictions and dilemma with such position. The "Humanitarian Activists" are actors who are not only grounded in life-saving daily humanitarian assistance but also strongly believe that it is essential to address root causes of these crises. They believe that it is essential to understand and influence the (unfair) power relations and resources control within and beyond the humanitarian architecture and that politics exist at the core of every humanitarian strategy. This paper focuses the period since the 2008 Cyclone Nargis to the present-day including Kachin and northern Shan State resumed armed conflict in 2011. This paper employed mixed methods with data generated through archival work and participant observation methods. The paper is framed from the tradition of critical agrarian studies.