



HPG Working Paper

# Dignity in displacement

## A review of the literature

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# Acronyms

<b>ALNAP</b>	Active Learning Network for Accountability and Performance
<b>APRRN</b>	Asia Pacific Refugee Rights Network
<b>ASEAN</b>	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
<b>CONCORD</b>	European NGO confederation for relief and development
<b>CRC</b>	Convention on the Rights of the Child
<b>DFID</b>	Department for International Development
<b>DRC</b>	Danish Refugee Council
<b>ECHO</b>	European Commission Humanitarian Office
<b>ESSN</b>	Emergency Social Safety Net
<b>GBV</b>	Gender-based violence
<b>HPG</b>	Humanitarian Policy Group
<b>IASC</b>	Inter-Agency Standing Committee
<b>ICRC</b>	International Committee of the Red Cross
<b>IFRC</b>	International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies
<b>IHL</b>	International humanitarian law
<b>INEE</b>	Inter-Agency Network for Education in Emergencies
<b>IRC</b>	International Rescue Committee
<b>MSF</b>	Médecins Sans Frontières
<b>NGO</b>	Non-governmental organisation
<b>NRC</b>	Norwegian Refugee Council
<b>OAU</b>	Organization of African Unity
<b>ODI</b>	Overseas Development Institute
<b>SIDA</b>	Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency
<b>SRSG</b>	Special Representative of the Secretary-General
<b>UN</b>	United Nations
<b>UNFPA</b>	UN Population Fund
<b>UNGA</b>	UN General Assembly
<b>UNHCR</b>	UN High Commissioner for Refugees
<b>UNICEF</b>	United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund
<b>UNSG</b>	UN Secretary-General
<b>USAID</b>	United States Agency for International Development
<b>WASH</b>	Water, sanitation and hygiene
<b>WFP</b>	World Food Programme
<b>WHO</b>	World Health Organisation
<b>WHS</b>	World Humanitarian Summit



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# 1 Introduction

Dignity is a pervasive concept in current international humanitarian discourse. Mentioned in all foundational human rights documents, it is central to humanitarian principles and is often invoked in the context of modern humanitarian action. Throughout the past two decades, it has appeared in most humanitarian policy and programme documents and in donor requirements; has been listed among key project goals; and has been used widely in advocacy campaigns. Yet, rather than an ideological lynchpin, dignity is often used as merely a word with positive connotations; virtually no humanitarian organisations or aid donors identify exactly what it is, or how they are trying to support it.

This literature review explores conceptualisations of dignity in humanitarian action and its philosophical, legal and medical underpinnings, with a specific focus on dignity in displacement, and compares how dignity is understood in principle with how it is (or isn't) implemented in practice. Despite a strong emphasis on dignity within the policies and rhetoric of the international humanitarian system, there is a dearth of literature analysing whether, and in what ways,

humanitarian action really does uphold and further, or indeed detract from or undermine, the dignity of crisis-affected people, particularly in displacement responses.

This working paper discusses whether, why and how the different meanings of dignity vary across different times and in different places, as well as between different aid donors, humanitarian responders and aid recipients. For example, Abdi (2005: 7) argues that 'encampment and protracted refugee situations leave thousands of men, women, and children living in limbo, resulting in wasted human capacity and deprivations of human dignity', suggesting that many displacement settings represent a clear challenge to human dignity. By contrast, the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC) and the Camp Management Project (2008: 24) assert that 'camps exist to ensure that the basic human right to life with dignity is upheld for displaced communities'. The tension that exists when dignity is used both to denounce refugee camps and to defend their existence highlights the need for further study into the use of dignity in humanitarian action, particularly in displacement situations.

Defining dignity is not the aim of this report: even if a concrete definition could be agreed, its meaning and application would depend heavily on the context, thus making a single definition unhelpful in most situations. Instead, this report seeks to provide a better understanding of what dignity means to displaced people in different places at different times, to help humanitarian action accomplish what it so often sets out to do – to uphold the dignity of the displaced.

## Box 1: Dignity versus dignified

The literature makes little distinction between a response that promotes dignity and a dignified response. Although a dignified response could mean the response is implemented in a dignified way, with the focus on aid providers, in practice the humanitarian documents that use this language almost always link it with the dignity of aid recipients (see, for example, WFP, 2012; Adeso, 2016; Cordner et al., 2016; UNSG, 2016). Similarly, 'a safe, dignified return' and 'repatriation in safety and with dignity' are used synonymously by almost all authors (see, for example, UNHCR, 1996; Bradley, 2008; Global Protection Cluster Working Group, 2010; MSF, 2016; NRC, 2017). Other uses of dignified relate to dignified lives, livelihoods, conditions, situations, etc. – all of which use 'dignified' and 'with dignity' interchangeably.

## 1.1 Methodology and outline

This literature review provides an overview of how dignity has been conceptualised generally, and specifically in the humanitarian sector's responses to displacement. It provides a foundation for HPG's 'Dignity in displacement: from rhetoric to reality' research project, which is exploring how affected people conceptualise dignity, and their perception of whether humanitarian action has upheld or undermined dignity in contexts of displacement.

The project will compare these conceptualisations with how dignity has been understood within the humanitarian sector and within international and locally led responses to displacement crises. The project explores how responses have differed between international and local responders, and tests a core assumption of the discourse around localisation, namely that greater funding to local actors will in itself lead to a more dignified humanitarian response (for a clear example of this link, see Adeso's recent publication *A more dignified and equitable humanitarian system: how to truly localize aid* (Adeso (2016))). The project aims to showcase different examples of the ways dignity has been upheld or undermined in displacement contexts, and draw out key lessons for improving aid delivery in this respect.

This report is divided into five chapters. This first chapter has briefly touched on the motivations for

researching dignity, as well as the main objectives of the 'Dignity in displacement' project. Chapter 2 traces the philosophical roots and historical uses of dignity, with a particular focus on legal and medical discourse. It shows how these discussions have influenced the use of dignity in the humanitarian sector, particularly regarding human rights and the disposal of the deceased. Chapter 3 unpicks the differences and similarities in conceptualisations of dignity across locations, ages and genders. Chapter 4 looks at dignity in humanitarian policies and guidelines, displacement interventions and humanitarian publicity. Chapter 5 explores how dignity is expressed in humanitarian programmes such as food and cash assistance, livelihoods, education, health and hygiene (specifically dignity kits), shelter, protection and repatriation. The paper concludes by outlining the key research questions that have emerged, which will be tested more fully during the case study phase of the 'Dignity in displacement' project.



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# 2 Western philosophical roots and historical uses of dignity

While the commitment to dignity seems widely shared by human rights activists and humanitarians, ‘the precise meaning and requirements behind the term [remain] elusive’. Dignity is subject to different interpretations among scholars and practitioners, and is often expressed differently by different aid recipients (Chapman, 2015: 7). International legal instruments and humanitarian programme documents rarely elucidate the notion of dignity, and the majority present it as a self-evident concept, leaving ample margin for ambiguity. According to Dworkin (2011: 204), ‘the idea of dignity has been stained by overuse and misuse’; for Mattson and Clark (2011: 305), the concept ‘is in such disarray that it does not provide even a minimally stable frame for global discourse and action’. Dignity can simultaneously and interchangeably indicate an essential quality of all human beings, a sense of self-worth and self-respect and/or an inalienable right, either in itself or achieved through respecting basic human rights (i.e. the right to life, health and personal integrity) (Bradley, 2008). Dignity’s various philosophical roots and definitions, discussed in this chapter, contribute to this vagueness.

Despite several centuries of debate over the concept, dignity does not have a definitive philosophical foundation and contains conceptual ambiguities that have passed into today’s usage without ever being clearly defined. This chapter identifies the philosophical and historical roots of dignity – from Greek philosophy and Christian theology to twentieth-century philosophers and human rights activists – and aims to unpick these complexities and analyse how different notions of dignity combine to form the basis of human rights, legal, medical and humanitarian discourse.

## 2.1 Western philosophical and historical roots

The word ‘dignity’ comes from the Latin *dignitas*, meaning worthiness. Its philosophical roots in Western

thought date back to classical Greek philosophy, when dignity was defined as relative and social, based on the hierarchical rank of individuals in society. Cicero’s *De officiis* (On duties) ascribed dignity to humans because they are superior to animals, able to study, reason and reflect, rather than being driven by needs and impulses (Jacobson, 2007; Rosen, 2012). In later Christian theology, dignity was absolute and sacred, based on humanity’s unique relationship with God, having been created in his image. Like Cicero’s conception of dignity, it was also an attribute only possessed by humans as set apart from all other animals.

Early modern ideas of dignity formed in the fifteenth century with the work of Giovanni Pico della Mirandola who, in *On the dignity of man* (1486), linked dignity to autonomy and claimed that everyone has the capacity to do what they choose and be what they will. In the seventeenth century, the philosopher Thomas Hobbes countered della Mirandola by claiming that dignity was bestowed through an individual’s power and privilege (Horton, 2004). Similarly, John Locke argued that only social contracts could protect individual rights and dignities, and therefore they are not automatically available to all unless agreed by the state (Donnelly, 1982).

Hobbes’s and Locke’s conceptualisations of dignity were challenged by the man who most directly shaped how the concept is conceived in Western philosophical thought today: the eighteenth century philosopher Immanuel Kant. Kant’s idea of dignity as the inherent worth and inviolable property of all human beings is often cited as the foundation of modern human rights but, at the time, it was a direct response to an unequal system that prioritised privilege, rank and wealth (Sullivan, 1989). For Kant (1900: 63), ‘everything has Value or Dignity. Whatever has a value can be replaced by something else which is *equivalent*; whatever, on the other hand, is above all value, and therefore admits of no equivalent, has a dignity’. In Kant’s interpretation, like others before him, since humanity has no equivalent, only

humans possess dignity, and the basis of humanity's dignity is autonomy and individual moral capacity (Griffin, 2017). As McCrudden (2008: 659) explains, the Kantian idea is that treating people with dignity means treating them as 'autonomous individuals able to choose their destiny' – or, in other words, who possess agency. The core proposition in Kant's notion of dignity, then, is that, because no value can be put on human life, individuals should never be treated as a means to an end, but only as an end in themselves.

Following the emergence of human rights discourse in the mid-twentieth century, philosophers and social scientists sought to distinguish dignity from human rights. In 1976, Aurel Kolnai differentiated between the two concepts by claiming that dignity is 'inherent in being a Person', and thus can be 'impaired and destroyed, temporarily or irreversibly', while human rights can only be 'disregarded, negated, insulted, violated or suppressed' (p. 258). Although Kolnai does not give a concrete definition of dignity (other than 'that which is "dignified"'), he does define 'un-dignity' as the difference between 'what things ought to be ... and what things are' (pp. 251, 262). Therefore, in Kolnai's view, dignity is the universal, natural state of human beings, and anyone who is not in their natural state has had their dignity impaired. Dignity and human rights are related, however, since ethical human relationships are built on mutual respect for others' dignity and natural rights (Kolnai, 1976).

More recent philosophers have continued to grapple with the substance and meaning of dignity. Ronald Dworkin sees dignity as comprising two mutually reinforcing concepts: self-respect and authenticity (Dworkin, 2008; 2011). Dworkin believes that, in order to have dignity, individuals must take their own lives seriously, expecting success, and that each person must define for themselves what a successful life looks like. In other words, individual lives have value because people live their lives according to values. In Dworkin's view, if individuals see their own lives as important, then others' lives are equally important. George Kateb returns to earlier discussions of dignity by taking Cicero's definition one step further, to argue that humans have dignity not only because they are superior to nature, but also because they are stewards of it (Kateb, 2011). James Griffin expands on della Mirandola's idea that human beings have dignity because they are normative agents – in other words, rather than trying to define dignity, which he regards as too easily manipulated precisely because it is too

difficult to define, Griffin analyses dignity through the lens of people's active agency (Griffin, 2008).

The qualities of rationality and autonomy that characterise humans as normative beings and provide them with dignity also determine the human capacity to abide by universal laws and define the conditions of sociability (Kleinig and Evans, 2013). Grounded in the recognition of these capacities, therefore, dignity also pertains to social relations. If humans ought to behave in a way worthy of dignity, then dignity implies, not only rights but duties too. According to Jürgen Habermas, dignity is 'a domain that must remain absolutely beyond the disposition of others' (Habermas, 2010: 474). This has not always been the case. Hannah Arendt prefaced her work *The origins of totalitarianism* (1951) by stating that, following the rise of antisemitism, imperialism and totalitarianism, 'human dignity needs a new guarantee' through political action that understands the value of humanity. Thus, dignity must be realised through the enjoyment of individual human rights and membership in an interdependent society (Coundouriotis, 2006: 844; Donnelly, 2013).

Looking at both the individual and the social, a more comprehensive notion of dignity emerges. The first component is inward and individual: human dignity as it relates to one's inner mental and emotional sphere, or how one sees oneself. The second component is outward and collective: social dignity as it relates to a person's social and relational identity, or how others perceive that person. The two are inherently connected as the latter is grounded in the former and is a consequence of its recognition. Each human life is individually perceived as valuable, but is also valuable because it is valued by others (Kelman, 1977; Mann, 1998; Dupré, 2009; Kateb, 2011). These two components coexist, although one may take precedence depending on the circumstances or cultural context.

The outward component of social dignity provides the philosophical foundation for human rights protection and humanitarian action. Rainer Ebert and Reginald Oduor argue that, 'while a human being will always keep his or her dignity no matter how he or she is treated by others, he or she needs to be protected from behaviour that *displays disrespect* towards his or her dignity' (Ebert and Oduor, 2012: 51). Similarly, Oscar Schachter claimed, based on a Kantian interpretation of dignity, that because it is the 'intrinsic worth of every person' and the 'source of human rights', individuals should not be 'treated as instruments or

objects of the will of others' (Schachter, 1983: 849, 853). Degrading treatment occurs when people lose their self-control and self-possession (Waldron, 2012). Thus, for Ebert and Oduour, Schachter and Waldron, like Kant, dignity must include agency: in Schachter's 12 broad categories of how dignity can be affronted, seven speak to the removal of a person's agency, including denying someone's capacity to assert their claims to basic rights, giving psychiatric treatment by coercive means, restricting opportunities to maintain family life, denying educational and employment opportunities, restricting equal participation in political processes, forcing someone to live in degrading conditions or depriving someone of their basic needs and giving medical treatment or hospital care that is insensitive to individual choice.

Dignity's complex philosophical genealogy has led to many elaborate typologies. Doris Schroeder's theory of four fundamental notions combines the Kantian idea of dignity as an inalienable and inviolable property of all human beings with the aristocratic idea of dignity as an 'outwardly displayed quality of a human being who acts in accordance with his/her superior rank and position', the comportment idea of dignity as 'the outwardly displayed quality of a human being who acts in accordance with society's expectations of well-mannered demeanour and bearing' and the meritorious idea of dignity as 'a virtue, which subsumes the four cardinal virtues and one's sense of self-worth' (Schroeder, 2008: 233–35). Rather than having one meaning, Schroeder argues that the term 'dignity' often signifies different ideas in common practice. Kant's theory of dignity and the four cardinal virtues (prudence, temperance, fortitude and justice) may be the closest to what is meant by dignity when it is used in humanitarian guidelines and programmes. Yet dignity can still also refer to a dignified person, which has little to do with one's inherent worth and inalienable rights and more to do with one's actions and attitudes in a specific social context.

These competing meanings of dignity remain unresolved. Ideas of the autonomy, rationality and sociability of humans constitute dignity's philosophical bedrock, but they also determine the ambiguity of the concept, preserving intact in today's notion of dignity its original philosophical tensions – between the inherent and inalienable value of an individual and a right that needs to be actualised through society lest a person lose his or her dignity. If dignity can be both inherent and relational, individual and social, then it

can, and does, have different meanings and different implications depending on how it is interpreted.

## 2.2 Dignity in legal thought and medical ethics

Mediated through modern Western philosophy, the meaning and use of dignity in current humanitarianism are indebted to international legal thought and medical ethics.

International law places dignity in a foundational relationship with human rights. In other words, human rights are both justified through human dignity and 'a means to the end of realizing human dignity' (Mattson and Clark, 2011: 306). If dignity-bearing beings are entitled to rights because of their humanity, then dignity is the ultimate foundation of human rights (Biletzki, 2010). Schroeder (2012), however, argues against this foundational claim for three reasons: increasing secularisation challenges the possibility of dignity as a self-evident belief; a Kantian interpretation of dignity does not support universal human rights; and the opposition to dignity in moral and legal discourse is more intense than the opposition to human rights. Instead, Schroeder sees dignity not as the foundation for human rights, but as a concept that informs the substance of human rights. Jeremy Waldron, on the other hand, believes dignity to be both the foundation *and* the content of human rights (Waldron, 2012). Regardless of whether dignity is the foundation or the reference point for human rights, as Gro Harlem Brundtland, the former Director-General of the World Health Organisation (WHO), put it: 'at the root of the concern for equality and freedom from discrimination in human rights thinking and practice, lies the notion of human dignity: the equal and inherent value of every human being' (Brundtland, 2003).

In international political and legal discourse, dignity came to prominence with the preamble to the UN Charter, which 'reaffirm[s] faith in fundamental human rights, in the dignity and worth of the human person, in the equal rights of men and women and of nations large and small'. Since then, every foundational UN document and other major international legal instrument, as well as many national constitutions and judicial texts, have enshrined the notion of human dignity and presented it as the moral source for human rights. Article 1 of the Universal Declaration of Human

Rights (1948) proclaimed that ‘all human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights’, and affirmed that ‘recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world’. Phillips (2015: 81) suggests that dignity was given a prominent role in the Declaration ‘because of the difficulties of otherwise getting agreement on the nature of human rights’ from the diverse body of signatories – some of whom prioritised individual rights and others social relations. Thus, although dignity is its underpinning concept, the Declaration does not attempt to define or elaborate on the concept, largely due to disagreements during the drafting process. While delegates believed that human dignity was inherent and worth upholding, they disagreed on its substance and its source. Instead of continuing the debate, the chair of the commission, Eleanor Roosevelt, ended discussion and removed all language that might favour one philosophical position over another, avoiding mention of dignity’s origins altogether. Dignity, then, was formally proclaimed as the foundation of human rights without ‘any explicit referent, concept, philosophical explanation, or political justification’; rather, the Declaration was purposefully drafted so that various concepts could be simultaneously encompassed within it (Bennett, 2016: 141).

Dignity continues to occupy a prominent place in international documents and frameworks. The preamble to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (1966) stated that human rights ‘derive from the inherent dignity of the human person’. Ten years later, Principle VII of the Helsinki Accords (1975) promoted ‘respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms ... which derive from the inherent dignity of the human person and are essential for his free and full development’ (Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe, 1975). Dignity has also been linked specifically with education in the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (1966), which states in Article 13 that everyone has a right to education, and that ‘education shall be directed to the full development of the human personality and the sense of its dignity, and shall strengthen the respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms’. The global reach of the concept is apparent in the Organization of African Unity (OAU)’s African (Banjul) Charter on Human and Peoples’ Rights (1981), which states that ‘every individual shall have the right to the respect of dignity inherent in a human being’, and in the vision statement of the Association of Southeast Asian

## Box 2: Countries whose constitutions include statements containing the word ‘dignity’<sup>1</sup>

Afghanistan, Albania, Algeria, Andorra, Angola, Antigua and Barbuda, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Bahrain, Bangladesh, Barbados, Belarus, Belgium, Belize, Benin, Bhutan, Bolivia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Brazil, Bulgaria, Burkina Faso, Burundi, Cambodia, Cape Verde, Chad, Chile, China, Columbia, Costa Rica, Côte d'Ivoire, Croatia, Cuba, Czech Republic, Democratic Republic of Congo, Dominica, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, Egypt, El Salvador, Equatorial Guinea, Eritrea, Estonia, Ethiopia, Fiji, Finland, Gabon, Gambia, Georgia, Germany, Ghana, Greece, Grenada, Guatemala, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Guyana, Haiti, Honduras, Hungary, India, Indonesia, Iran, Iraq, Ireland, Israel, Italy, Jamaica, Japan, Jordan, Kazakhstan, Kenya, Kosovo, Kuwait, Kyrgyzstan, Laos, Latvia, Lesotho, Libya, Liechtenstein, Lithuania, Macedonia, Madagascar, Malawi, Maldives, Mauritania, Mexico, Moldova, Monaco, Mongolia, Montenegro, Morocco, Mozambique, Myanmar, Namibia, Nepal, New Zealand, Nicaragua, Niger, Nigeria, North Korea, Oman, Pakistan, Panama, Papua New Guinea, Paraguay, Peru, Philippines, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Russia, Rwanda, Sao Tome and Principe, Serbia, Seychelles, Sierra Leone, Slovakia, Slovenia, Solomon Islands, Somalia, South Africa, South Korea, South Sudan, Spain, Sri Lanka, St. Kitts and Nevis, St. Lucia, St. Vincent and the Grenadines, Sudan, Suriname, Swaziland, Sweden, Switzerland, Syria, Tajikistan, Tanzania, Thailand, Timor-Leste, Togo, Trinidad and Tobago, Tunisia, Turkey, Turkmenistan, Tuvalu, Uganda, Ukraine, Uzbekistan, Venezuela, Vietnam, Yemen, Zimbabwe.

Nations (ASEAN) (1997), which affirms its focus as being ‘the welfare and dignity of the human person and the good of the community’. Dignity also appears in the UN’s 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development’s core area of ‘people’, which aims ‘to ensure that all human beings can fulfil their potential in dignity and equality and in a healthy environment’ (UNGA, 2015).

1 [www.constituteproject.org/](http://www.constituteproject.org/).



Dignity has also appeared in national documents: see Box 2 for countries whose constitutions contain statements upholding the dignity of the individual.<sup>2</sup> Despite the number of international documents and national constitutions employing the word, however, few offer any concrete definitions of dignity or how it should be put into practice. Countries that use dignity in a more restricted way link it to more specific contexts, such as the provision of education or protection from cruel punishment, in their constitutions. In Lebanon's constitution, for example, dignity is mentioned, but only in terms of the dignity of religion, not the inviolable dignity of the individual. Likewise, in Zambia's constitution dignity refers only to the dignity of the human family, not the individual.

Dignity is also mentioned in human rights law, international humanitarian law (IHL) and refugee law, and it is these three bodies of law that the Global Protection Cluster Working Group (2010) believes must be followed to achieve full respect for the rights of the individual. Here again, dignity is simultaneously the foundation of human rights and their ultimate goal; when dignity is maintained, human rights are protected and promoted (Jacobson, 2007).

Contemporary medical ethics have also contributed to shaping the notion of dignity in humanitarian action. Dignity is a core principle of medical treatment, care for elderly and terminal patients and biomedical innovation (Macklin, 2003; Jacobson, 2007). Medical research and practice have influenced the way humanitarians articulate the right to privacy and autonomy in emergency healthcare provision; how they protect patients' cultural practices and religious beliefs; and how they preserve their dignity after death. Research has shown that being treated with dignity and being involved in medical decisions play an important role in respecting patient autonomy and promoting positive health outcomes (Beach et al., 2005). Human rights in patient care seeks to promote a model 'in which patients are active agents in their health care and in which their basic dignity and freedom must be respected, protected, and fostered' (Cohen and Ezer, 2013: 16). In the humanitarian

sector, aid workers aim to defend the right to health, to respect cultural values and religious beliefs and to foster patients' agency in delivering healthcare services.

Humanitarian policies and practices have also borrowed from medical tradition in dealing with the deceased – particularly following debates during the 1970s on what constitutes a dignified death, and whether and how to avoid burdensome, life-prolonging medical treatments (Jonsen, 1978). Humanitarians have long sought to ensure dignified burial, and IHL sets clear rules for preserving the memory and dignity of the deceased. The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) Guiding Principles state that the dead should be treated with respect and dignity, including identifying, registering and burying the deceased in individually marked graves (Grant, 2016). Similarly, in *Management of dead bodies after disasters: a field manual for first responders*, a collaborative effort by the ICRC and WHO, the dignity of the dead is promoted through the allocation of a unique code to each body, to ensure traceability and prevent loss. Respect is shown to the bereaved by allowing families and communities to dispose of the deceased according to local customs and practices (Cordner et al., 2016). Recently, the response to the Ebola outbreak in West Africa focused the international community's attention on ensuring safe, as well as dignified, burials. Annex 6 of *Management of dead bodies after disasters* deals specifically with the disposal of bodies after an infectious disease epidemic such as Ebola, and notes that, prior to beginning the burial procedure, 'the family must be prepared, with the burial process and all steps explained, especially with regard to dignity and respect for the deceased person'. Without the family's agreement, burial, even in such a dangerous and time-sensitive context, should not proceed (Cordner et al., 2016: 56).

## 2.3 Conclusion

Given these complex, Western-dominated philosophical, historical, legal and medical underpinnings, it is not surprising that humanitarian policies and practices have failed to fully engage with the intricacies of the concept of dignity. Indeed, due to its ambiguity, Macklin (2003) concludes that dignity is a 'useless' concept – a mere slogan or a vague restatement of more precise concepts, easily reduced to the right to privacy or respect for the autonomy of the individual. For her part, Bradley (2009) suggests that there is value

2 Notable exceptions to this list include France and the UK. In France, a proposal to amend the preamble to the Constitution of the Fifth Republic to include a provision regarding human dignity has been proposed but has yet to materialise (Barak, 2015). In the UK, the lack of a written constitution prevents its inclusion on this list.



in vagueness. A univocal and precise definition would not necessarily make it easier for the international humanitarian community to respond to complex crises, while ambiguity allows for ‘all those concerned with refugee protection to continually reflect on and refine their approach’ in different contexts and displacement situations (Bradley, 2009: 381). This project favours the second position, which would see dignity as a more encompassing concept, allowing policies and programmes to be adapted to realities on the ground and better respond to changing needs.

This chapter has illuminated several key research questions, some of which will be further explored in the fieldwork stage of this project:

- How do different groups of people – from different regions, speaking different languages,

practising different religions – conceptualise dignity? Are some regions more likely to see dignity as individual, and others to view it more as social?

- How does the humanitarian sector view dignity? What does the tension between individual and social dignities mean for how humanitarians uphold the dignity of people affected by crisis?

The following chapter will start to explore the first research question, discussing what the current literature says about differences in conceptualisations of dignity in different geographies, and for different ages and genders. Chapter 4 will begin looking at the second research question, reviewing how dignity has been operationalised in humanitarian practice, with a particular focus on interventions in displacement situations.

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# 3 Dignity across locations, ages and genders

While notions such as self-esteem, self-worth, equality, liberty, choice and autonomy remain central to the notion of dignity across different societies, cultural and contextual characteristics affect how dignity is expressed. As McCrudden (2008) explains, during the drafting of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, delegates agreed that dignity was important, but there was no consensus on how or why. What ‘dignity’ means in practice, therefore, may vary greatly according to geographical location, gender and age. More research is needed into these different conceptualisations, as well as how these differences can be incorporated effectively into targeted humanitarian action that aims to uphold the dignity of the people it is seeking to help.

## 3.1 Geographical similarities and differences in conceptions of dignity

Based on available literature, translating ‘dignity’ into various languages and cultures seems less challenging than assumed. While most trace the word’s origins back to the Latin word *dignitas*, others place its origins in the Sanskrit word *dec*, meaning to show or indicate, and the late Sanskrit *dacas*, meaning renown or fame; the Latin *dignus*, meaning brightness or distinction; the Greek *δόξα*, meaning renown or glory, and later *digne* in French, *werth* in Old English, *wurde* in German and *ДОСТОИНСТВО* (*dostoinstvo*, meaning dignity or worth) in Russian (Rotaru, 2016). Similar conceptions existed in numerous ancient languages, including Arabic, Chinese, Japanese, Korean and Persian (Rosen, 2012: 11). These terms continue to shape and inform modern languages around the world, although the way they are conceptualised differs based on cultural context.

In situations where the language is based on Latin, translating the word and meaning of dignity is straightforward, as many of these languages have kept

the root ‘digni-’. Conceptions of dignity, or *dignidad*, were being discussed in the Mexican context in the mid-1990s, and largely match the Western conceptions and discussions current during this period. Ligouri (1995) identifies a relationship between the concept of dignity and the priority given to health in Mexico, and equates dignity with non-discrimination (*ibid*: 303). Thus, for Ligouri, dignity is social and discrimination collective. Western languages not based on Latin have similar definitions, though the extent to which dignity is defined as either individual or social varies. In German, for example, the word for human dignity is *menschenwürde*, which is attached to all human beings irrespective of their achievements and the opinions others may have of them, due to their capacity for rationality, freedom and autonomy. Because everyone is equal in this conception of dignity simply by virtue of being a person, everyone has the same basic human rights (Nordenfelt, 2004).

Conceptions of dignity in Sub-Saharan Africa largely match those found in Western cultures. In a study linking dignity with capital punishment, Metz (2010)<sup>3</sup> contends that, rather than out of respect for a God-given soul or respect for humans because of their ability to make autonomous decisions, as promoted by Christian theologians and Kant, in Sub-Saharan Africa capital punishment is deemed degrading due to a person’s innate capacity for harmonious or communal relationships, since human beings have an ability to love that is not found in other animals. Metz’s theory is grounded in the Nguni word for humanness (*ubuntu*) and its synonyms *botho* in Sotho-Tswana, *hunhu* in Shona and *utu* in Swahili, which express the maxim translated into English as ‘a person is a person through other persons’ or, alternatively, ‘I am because we are’ (Metz, 2010: 83). While Metz sees this Sub-Saharan African conception of humanness, or

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<sup>3</sup> This study is, however, highly overgeneralised and in need of social anthropological validation. It has been included here as it is one of the only studies looking at dignity in Africa, and it raises interesting points about dignity as a social concept.

dignity, as contradictory to Kant's and other Western conceptions of dignity, it neatly maps on to the theory of dignity's dual forces – the individual and the social – discussed in the previous chapter.

In China, dignity (尊严, or *zūnyán*) is conceptualised as a social value, embodied in the idea of national dignity, which has historically both supported and contradicted individual dignity. As Fitzgerald (2006b: 98) argues: 'the struggle for individual dignity in China appears to be closely related to the struggle for national dignity'. Fitzgerald uses the concept of dignity to explore the tensions between nationalism and individual rights, defining individual dignity through autonomy, freedom and equality, and national dignity as a recognition of equal and sovereign statehood (Fitzgerald, 2006a: 3). At the point of the Communist Revolution of 1949, national and individual dignity were 'momentarily congruent' (Fitzgerald, 1999: 49). The national anthem of the Republic declared 'Arise, all people who refuse to be slaves' (Fitzgerald, 2006b: 108). Thus, the nation was dignified when the people also had dignity through autonomy. More recently, the rhetoric of equality and dignity has begun to contradict nationalism. The same national dignity that 'incubated an ideal of individual rights and individual self-determination' now manifests itself through conceptions of individual, or private, dignity (Fitzgerald, 1999: 49).

Dignity does not translate easily in Arabic. Rather than connote Western notions of self-worth or respect, dignity (كرامة, or *karama*) has both literal and symbolic meanings that relate to physical and emotional needs, as well nationalism, pride, honour and women's chastity. Dignity carries a very specific and powerful meaning in Arabic that could make communities uncomfortable, and rather than *karama*, synonyms such as respect (*ihтираام*) or humanity (*insaaniyya*, *bashariyya*) may come closer to Western conceptualisations of dignity.

## 3.2 Similarities and differences in dignity between genders

Even within the same cultural context, geographic location and generation, men and women may interpret dignity differently. The UN Population Fund (UNFPA) found this to be true in interviews evaluating a humanitarian programme in Mozambique aimed at restoring dignity through dignity kits. Many men

interviewed identified dignity as 'something that a good man has, like a good home, good health and good food'. Because they viewed dignity as something that is possessed, men believed that women who received dignity kits would also receive dignity. Women, on the other hand, defined dignity less clearly than men, often as a 'feeling of being "remembered"', and identified the kits as improving their daily lives and their health more than their dignity (Abbott et al., 2011: 31, 125). In South Kordofan, women showed a similar interest in improving the daily conditions they and their families faced by consistently requesting items such as hair extensions and perfume for themselves and musical instruments and sporting equipment for their children. In this study, these types of interventions were linked with dignity, one of the emotional and spiritual needs seen to be 'often as important as people's physical needs, and closely interrelated' (Ringgaard and Ottosson, 2015: 7).

Based on the limited research that has been published, perceptions of dignity among men and women do not seem to differ dramatically in concept, even if they do so in practice. Indeed, the emphasis that the women in these surveys placed on the health and daily lives of themselves and their children speaks directly to their responsibility to provide for their families in the same way that men viewed dignity as something they possessed when they could provide for their families. Women did not use the language of dignity when discussing these interventions in the same way men did, and the surveys cited here did not follow up on this by asking women what dignity meant to them.

## 3.3 Similarities and differences in dignity between the old and the young

The Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), which came into effect in 1990, speaks specifically to children's rights and dignity, stating that 'the child should be fully prepared to live an individual life in society, and brought up in the spirit of the ideals proclaimed in the Charter of the United Nations, and in particular in the spirit of peace, dignity, tolerance, freedom, equality and solidarity'. Specifically with regard to reintegration after armed conflicts, this should be done 'in an environment which fosters the health, self-respect and dignity of the child' (UNGA, 1989). For the elderly, research on conceptualisations of dignity

has focused on the right to die, which is equated to ‘death with dignity’. Little to no research exists on how the young and old conceptualise dignity, and the intersectionality of age with geography and gender will likely result in various understandings of the concept.

## 3.4 Conclusion

While dignity has become ubiquitous in national constitutions and international human rights documents, it manifests differently in different cultural contexts. The available literature analysing the differences in how dignity is conceptualised globally, by gender and by age, is severely limited. Less is known about how men and women within a single culture conceptualise dignity, and even less about how it is understood by different generations. Thus, understanding how the variations of dignity across different languages and cultures are realised in different cultural – as well as humanitarian – contexts is one goal of the forthcoming fieldwork.

This chapter highlights several key research questions to be further explored in the fieldwork stage of this project:

- How is dignity conceptualised in different cultural contexts? What are the similarities, if any, across cultures? What are the differences?
- How do men and women within the same cultural context conceptualise dignity? How do men in different cultural contexts conceptualise dignity? How do women?
- How do different generations within the same cultural context conceptualise dignity? How do children/youth in different cultural contexts conceptualise dignity? How do the elderly?
- What is the intersectionality between geography, gender and age when it comes to conceptualising dignity?

The following two chapters will review how dignity has been operationalised in humanitarian practice, with a particular focus on programmes in displacement situations.





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# 4 Dignity in displacement

This chapter analyses dignity in humanitarian action in displacement situations. Specifically, it explores how dignity guides humanitarian programme design and implementation, and how it has been operationalised in displacement interventions. The chapter concludes with a discussion of humanitarian publicity and advocacy campaigns, which are often charged with undermining the dignity of the people they depict and describe.

## 4.1 Dignity in humanitarian standards and guidelines

A new generation of philosophers, influenced by Michel Foucault and Giorgio Agamben, have turned their attention to humanitarianism and dignity. Peter Redfield analyses the role of Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) through the lens of biopolitics, and argues that there is ‘an inherent tension within the value of “life” that humanitarians seek to defend, between the maintenance of physical existence, on the one hand, and the defence of human dignity, on the other hand’ (Redfield, 2005: 330). This tension, in Redfield’s opinion, exists when physical life is elevated above human dignity and at its expense. In an extreme emergency situation, for example, MSF often chooses to focus on the number of calories a person’s body needs in order to survive, rather than the expressed concerns and needs of affected communities. Survival, then, rather than dignity, has become the priority, and the humanitarian system, rather than focusing on dignity, focuses on saving people’s ‘minimal existence’ – what Agamben (1998) terms ‘bare life’ – and does not develop the capacity to help people achieve a ‘fully formed life’ with dignity.

For Hugo Slim, humanitarians employ the term dignity to ‘encapsulate the depth of personhood in human life’, or the idea that people have individuality, agency and authority over their own lives and communities, which should be respected (Slim, 2015: 48, 76). Slim labels the six additional principles of the IFRC and ICRC’s Code of Conduct (1994) – following the four fundamental principles of humanity, impartiality, neutrality and independence – the ‘dignity principles’.

The six are: respecting the culture of affected and host communities; building on local capacities; involving beneficiaries in programme design, implementation and management; reducing future vulnerabilities alongside meeting basic needs; being accountable to donors, partners and affected communities; and, finally, recognising affected populations in publicity and advertising as dignified human beings rather than hopeless objects. Dignified humanitarian action, then, connotes the idea of individuals affected by crises as subjects with autonomy over their own lives; indignity occurs when individuals are treated as mere objects of aid programmes.

While dignity plays a key conceptual role in many policies, standards and frameworks for humanitarian agencies and donor organisations, it is rarely defined in these documents, and is never quantified in terms that can be adequately measured or evaluated. One exception is the ActionAid Australia handbook *Safety with dignity: a field manual for integrating community-based protection across humanitarian programs*, which gives a detailed definition of dignity as: ‘The feeling of having decision-making power, freedom and autonomy over life choices, together with the feeling of self-worth and self-confidence, and feeling that one has the respect of others’ (Berry, 2009: 6). A less detailed definition of dignity is offered by WFP Myanmar (2017): ‘self-determination, respect for aspirations and wishes, self-worth’.

More often, however, dignity is regarded as a self-evident concept and a by-product of other positive aid outcomes, and is used to reinforce such results, rather than as a means to produce an intended effect. The Sphere Project (2011: 6), for example, promotes overall principles of ‘the right to life with dignity, the right to receive humanitarian assistance and the right to protection and security’ in the *Humanitarian Charter and Minimum Standards in Humanitarian Response*, and sets universal minimum standards – or ‘the articulation of what these principles and obligations mean in practice’ – in four core areas: water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH); food security and nutrition; shelter, settlement and non-food items; and, finally, health action. In establishing minimum

standards for a humanitarian response, the Sphere Project states that the right to life with dignity is the foundational standard from which all others are derived. The first core tenet of the Charter is that ‘those affected by disaster or conflict have a right to life with dignity and, therefore, a right to assistance’. Accordingly, ‘aid should be delivered in a compassionate manner that promotes dignity, enables self-efficacy through meaningful participation, respects the importance of religious and cultural practices and strengthens the ability of affected people to support holistic well-being’. These principles both enshrine many of the constitutive elements of the idea of dignity, and reflect the pertinent provisions of international law – adequate living standards, including adequate water, sanitation, food, nutrition, shelter and healthcare – and the consequent duty to provide life-saving assistance to those affected by disaster or conflict without discrimination. Accordingly, the handbook concludes that ‘dignity entails more than physical well-being; it demands respect for the whole person, including the values and beliefs of individuals and affected communities, and respect for their human rights, including liberty, freedom of conscience and religious observance’ (Sphere Project, 2011). As such, the Sphere Project treats dignity as a self-evident concept, and does not explain how it can or should be measured and evaluated in programmes.

Donor requirements reinforce the emphasis on dignity in humanitarian documents. Dignity is often included in calls for proposals, and thus in programme funding bids. The UK Department for International Development (DFID)’s Humanitarian Reform Policy pledges to ‘work with national and international partners to agree to a new Global Compact to share more fairly the responsibility of protecting refugees, providing them with the opportunities to live in dignity’ (DFID, 2017: 17). Canada’s Feminist International Assistance Policy (2017) cites ‘human dignity’ as its second action area, and equates it with access to good healthcare and nutrition, quality education and principled and timely humanitarian assistance that is both needs-based and gender-responsive. Sweden’s policy framework for development cooperation and humanitarian assistance declares that its ‘humanitarian assistance is to help to save lives, alleviate suffering and uphold human dignity’ (SIDA, 2016: 4). Similarly, the first core value of USAID’s mission statement (2014) is to ‘foster sustainable development and advance dignity

globally’. In a non-Western context, the King Salman Humanitarian Aid and Relief Centre’s Code of Ethics (2017: 10) commits to ‘promote, enrich and maintain human dignity, giving hope to humans around the world to minimize their pain and suffering’. Likewise, the current UAE Policy for Foreign Assistance (2017) states that it ‘provides humanitarian assistance to save lives, alleviate suffering and protect human dignity in crisis situations’. Although the requirement to uphold dignity leads humanitarian organisations to explicitly claim it as a key outcome of their programmes, neither donors nor humanitarian organisations clarify how dignity should be measured and evaluated.

## 4.2 Dignity in displacement interventions

Dignity is referred to in all phases of internal and external forced displacement – from living conditions in camps to resettlement and return operations. In the *Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement* (1999), for example, former UN SRSG Francis Deng stated that ‘displacement shall not be carried out in a manner that violates the rights to life, dignity, liberty and security of those affected’ (Principle 8), and that ‘competent authorities have the primary duty and responsibility to establish conditions, as well as provide the means, which allow internally displaced persons to return voluntarily in safety and with dignity’ (Principle 28) (Deng, 1999: 487, 493).

Further guidelines have been developed for assisting refugees in camps. In the toolkit for camp management produced by NRC and the Camp Management Project (2008), ensuring community participation and allowing space for refugees to voice their complaints are considered essential for developing the dignity of camp residents. The toolkit focuses on six broad themes (food and non-food items; water, sanitation and hygiene; shelter; livelihoods; education; and healthcare and health education), the first four of which explicitly use dignity as a conceptual underpinning. Likewise, recent guidance on non-camp alternatives from the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) also centres on the idea of dignity, although as in many policy documents the concept is largely undefined (UNHCR, 2014). Dignity is linked with reduced restrictions on movement and refugees’ ability to access employment, education and livelihoods. The policy applies to all

UNHCR operations for refugees and ‘in all phases of displacement from contingency planning and preparedness to emergency response to stable and protracted refugee situations and the pursuit of durable solutions’ (UNHCR, 2014: 3). With regard to repatriation, UNHCR’s *Handbook on voluntary repatriation: international protection*, while conceding that ‘the concept of dignity is less self-evident than that of safety’, asserts that repatriation should be voluntary, safe and dignified (UNHCR, 1996: 2.4).

## 4.3 Dignity in humanitarian publicity

Dignity is also central to humanitarian publicity, albeit in different ways than in programming. While the latter attempts to restore the dignity of beneficiaries, humanitarian publicity often relies on images of indignity to attract media attention and encourage donations. Calain (2013: 283) argues that ‘the risk of the objectification of victims is the most obvious ... and where ethical clarity is the most needed’. Photographs used in humanitarian campaigns are often carefully constructed to trigger an emotional response, particularly sympathy, empathy or outrage, in the hopes that those who see them will be motivated to act (see also Fehrenbach and Rodogno, 2015; De Laat and Gorin, 2016). As Kennedy (2009) argues, ‘when victims are stripped of context and reduced to the most basic of rights, to pure animal emotions, they become personless – they lose their human dignity’.

Demeaning humanitarian imagery has a long history. Private organisations and missionary societies used photographs in their newsletters and campaigns to publicise and challenge human suffering, including atrocities in the Congo Free State in the 1890s, the Boer War in South Africa and the Armenian genocide during the First World War (Fehrenbach and Rodogno, 2015). Until the second half of the twentieth century, humanitarian emergencies could only be funded through separate appeals, and financial success often depended on media attention, resulting in the marketing of refugee suffering (Harrell-Bond, 1985). Until the mid-1980s, almost all fundraising campaigns, particularly those devoted to disasters, represented humanitarianism as the act of Western ‘heroes’ saving passive, helpless and mostly African victims unable to feed themselves and, particularly, their starving babies (Bentham, 1993; Dogra, 2007). The

dignity of aid recipients was deliberately diminished to show extreme human suffering and starvation as a fundraising technique. Suffering was commodified, and the emotional force of human misery became the main fundraiser for humanitarian organisations (Kennedy, 2009). Calain (2013) approaches the ethics of humanitarian publicity from a medical perspective, where victims are portrayed as passive recipients of aid. His terminology of ‘suffering bodies’ as opposed to ‘suffering persons’ emphasises that these representations tend to be of anonymous, mute, ahistorical or generic stereotypes of victims, rather than actual people. Since their indignity heightened the chances of receiving humanitarian assistance, recipients learned to play the role expected of them, such as referring to an NGO in parental terms or presenting themselves as helpless victims, while aid workers simultaneously reinforced these tropes, representing the displaced as destitute, passive and lacking agency (Harrell-Bond, 1985; 2002; Armstrong, 2008).

A turning point in humanitarian publicity came in the mid-1980s, when footage of the Ethiopian famine was broadcast on the nightly news. The subsequent Band Aid single ‘Do they know it’s Christmas?’ and Live Aid concert sparked a lengthy debate surrounding the use of images in humanitarian action, as well as how the prioritisation of negative images of Africa – since Ethiopia became synonymous with Africa – dominated in a way that de-historicised, depoliticised and trivialised the crisis (Lidchi, 2015). This debate culminated in a written code of conduct for humanitarian images, ratified by the General Assembly of European NGOs in 1989. The code outlined 12 practical guidelines for NGOs, including presenting people as human beings and providing context that preserves both their cultural identity and dignity (General Assembly of the Liaison Committee of Development NGOs to the European Communities, 1989). The code was updated in 2006 by CONCORD, the European NGO confederation for relief and development. Under the new code, images used by humanitarian organisations should be based on three principles: respect for the dignity of the people concerned; belief in the equality of all people and acceptance of the need to promote fairness; solidarity and justice.

Undignified images of children in humanitarian appeals have been particularly common and particularly problematic. Recent photos of Alan Kurdi, a three-year-old refugee fleeing the Syrian civil war,

which went viral in September 2015, are symptomatic of longer historical trends. Indeed, photos showing him dying alone, followed by a second showing him being ‘rescued’ by a Turkish police officer, ‘widely evoked century-old visual tropes in humanitarian photography’ (Fehrenbach and Rodogno, 2015: 1,126–1,127). These visual tropes – innocence, dependence and protection – are rooted in both development theory and colonial ideology. Because of their political innocence, children tend to be shown as worthy of saving and deserving of aid.

Despite the shift in how dignity is used in humanitarian funding appeals following the Ethiopian famine, debate surrounding the use of images in humanitarianism persists. For example, although Kennedy (2009) suggests that progress is being made, in that children are increasingly shown smiling and healthier than in previous decades, Manzo (2008) argues that this is also problematic as it does not show children in their natural context since they are aware of the camera. A happy child can also be interpreted as evidence of aid efficacy, and used to make donors feel their assistance is the reason for that child’s happiness, further reinforcing the trope of dependence.

These issues remain topics of discussion in formal channels, such as codes of conduct, and informal fora like blogs. In 2014, the Asia Pacific Refugee Rights Network (APRRN) published a code of good practice in which it listed dignity as a network principle and committed to ‘reflect in communication and fundraising materials the dignity, resilience and initiative of affected communities’. The following year, Diana Mason of ChildFund Australia blogged that ‘dignity is actually enabling people to tell their truth’, and by giving people space to tell their stories,

rather than tell stories about them, dignity can be restored (Mason, 2015). In 2017, NGO workers interviewed by Dencik and Allan explained that they had decided to exclude images of noticeable distress because they were concerned with the dignity of those involved (Dencik and Allan, 2017). Yet despite these discussions, some NGOs continue to use images that display refugees as passive, helpless and thus without dignity, and the ethical representation of suffering remains a concern for humanitarians (Manzo, 2008; De Laat and Gorin, 2016).

## 4.4 Conclusion

This chapter has analysed dignity in the context of humanitarianism during displacement, focusing on the use of dignity in humanitarian documents more broadly, in displacement interventions specifically and in humanitarian publicity. Based on this discussion, this chapter highlights several key research questions, some of which will be explored in the fieldwork stage of this project:

- How should dignity be measured and evaluated in humanitarian programmes?
- How is dignity upheld or diminished in displacement settings?
- How can humanitarian publicity ensure that the dignity of those being represented is maintained?

The next chapter provides a thematic look at how dignity has been used in various humanitarian programmes in displacement situations, such as food and cash-based aid, livelihood opportunities, education, health and hygiene, shelter, protection and repatriation.

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# 5 A thematic exploration of dignity in displacement interventions

While the previous chapter looked at how dignity has been explicitly used in humanitarian documents, displacement interventions and humanitarian publicity, this chapter explores seven thematic areas of humanitarian action, chosen because they often elicit the concept of dignity: food and cash-based aid; livelihood opportunities; education; health and hygiene; shelter; protection and psychosocial support; and repatriation.

## 5.1 From food aid to cash-based aid

Food aid, the epitome of humanitarian assistance throughout the twentieth century, has been linked with dignity by Kelman (1977: 532–33), who asserts that the ‘maximization of human dignity also calls for institutions designed to meet the population’s basic needs for food’, and Kleinig and Evans (2013: 563), who count food as necessary ‘if people are to develop and flourish as beings possessing dignity’. Humanitarian organisations have also taken this stance: according to WFP (2012: 7), ‘food assistance should contribute to the safety, dignity and integrity of vulnerable people’; APRRN (2014b) states that ‘all persons [should] have safe and adequate access to food ... in a way that promotes human dignity’. ALNAP claims that ‘food and safety, dignity and protection are integrally related as vital components of humanitarian action’ (Slim and Bonwick, 2005: 22). Similar statements have been made by ActionAid Australia, which views dignity as being respected only when there is a right to life’s necessities, including food (Berry, 2009).

Lately, however, cash-based aid has increasingly become a central element of humanitarian action due to its perceived advantages: cost-effectiveness, flexibility, positive effects on local economies, ability to provide immediate relief while addressing long-term underlying issues and presumed ability to

empower recipients and restore dignity by allowing aid recipients to prioritise their needs and choose how to address them. An ODI study on cash- and voucher-based aid concluding in 2007 found that ‘having the freedom to buy basic items in a shop was psychologically far preferable to queuing for food assistance’ (Harvey, 2007). A more recent study by the High Level Panel on Humanitarian Cash Transfers links cash and dignity multiple times: ‘cash will almost always ... provide greater choice and dignity’; ‘cash ... better respects the dignity of people’; ‘people often prefer receiving [cash transfers] because it gives them ... a greater sense of dignity’ (Barder et al., 2015: 14, 18). The current consensus is that cash is particularly useful in displacement settings because of its flexibility and ease of transport, especially across state boundaries (Gourlay, 2013).

DFID’s current Humanitarian Reform Strategy promotes cash-based aid in locations with functioning markets in part because it ‘preserves the dignity of affected populations’ (DFID, 2017: 20). In 2014, NRC moved to a cash and voucher approach in Jordan as a way to support ‘dignified choices’ and promote dignity. In 2016, the Border Consortium shifted its focus from food assistance to Karen refugees in refugee camps in Thailand to cash transfers to promote decision-making and dignity. The cash, provided on an electronic card, can only be used to purchase eligible food items from accredited vendors in the camps, but it still offers refugees a choice of items and some of the normalcy that has been lacking from their lives (Bovill and Silan, 2017). In September 2016, the European Commission’s Humanitarian Aid and Civil Protection department (ECHO), WFP, the Turkish Red Crescent and the government of Turkey created the Emergency Social Safety Net (ESSN) programme to provide more than 1 million of the most vulnerable refugees living outside camps in Turkey with a debit card charged with roughly €28 per month, to be used towards commodities such as food and clothes and to



pay rent and bills. An ESSN press release stated that ‘it will give families who have almost nothing a sense of normality, dignity, and a chance to get back on their feet’ (Hogg, 2017).

## 5.2 Livelihoods

While cash-based aid often comes to mind most quickly when thinking of how to provide dignified assistance, self-reliance is only available to those who have opportunities for job training and employment in displacement. As Edwards (2005: 320) argues, ‘The right to work is particularly important to refugees and asylum-seekers as a means of survival and as a contribution to their sense of dignity and self-worth’. Article 23 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights links employment to dignity: ‘Everyone who works has the right to just and favourable remuneration ... worthy of human dignity’. Article 17 of the 1951 UN Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees states that refugees should be given ‘the right to engage in wage-earning employment’, and Article 18 that refugees be given ‘the right to engage on [their] own account in agriculture, industry, handicrafts and commerce and to establish commercial and industrial companies’. During the drafting of these articles, one delegate is said to have proclaimed: ‘without the right to work, all other rights were meaningless’ (Morris and Voon, 2014: 11).

As many refugees are only all too aware, the rights to employment codified in the 1951 Convention are not guaranteed. Palestinians equated unemployment with loss of dignity, particularly in the Gaza Strip, where isolation has led to deep poverty (Eguiguren and Saadeh, 2014). The Jordan Compact seeks to provide Syrian refugees with formal labour market access through 200,000 work permits for specified sectors as well as vocational training opportunities and education, in exchange for improved access to European markets and support from the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF). The Compact is one of the ‘more holistic, effective and lasting protection and self-reliance strategies’, and has been lauded for providing displaced people ‘opportunities for a dignified life’ (European Commission, 2016: 7). It has, however, not integrated refugee perspectives from the beginning, critical sectors and opportunities for self-employment are closed to refugees and there have been tensions within the host community (Barbelet et al., 2018).

## 5.3 Education

Education is explicitly linked to dignity in key international documents. Article 13 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (1966) affirms the right to education for everyone; education ‘shall be directed to the full development of the human personality and the sense of its dignity’, and the Covenant upholds the principle of free and compulsory primary education. The Inter-Agency Network for Education in Emergencies (INEE) – a partnership between UNICEF and other NGOs – set a minimum standard for education in emergency situations that ‘ensures dignity and sustains life by offering safe spaces for learning ... [and] providing physical protection from the dangers and exploitation of a crisis environment’. Each of the 19 requirements in the INEE *Minimum Standards Handbook* are defined as the ‘minimum requirements for quality education and human dignity’ (INEE, 2010: 2, 17).

## 5.4 Health and hygiene

The health sector uses the term dignity extensively. Programmes on women’s health in particular have most explicitly and concretely incorporated the concept in the form of hygiene or dignity kits. In the past decade, many international relief agencies (ActionAid, Billion Women, Global One, IFRC, IRC, Lutheran World Federation, NRC, Plan, Solidarités International, UNFPA, UNHCR, UNICEF, UN Women) have distributed these kits to people displaced by disaster or conflict. Designed for women and girls of reproductive age and adapted according to the specific type of emergency, the kits provide items such as sanitary pads or reusable cloths, hand soap, toothbrushes and toothpaste and underwear. These items are selected in consultation with local communities, and are customised to meet both immediate hygiene needs, and to facilitate women’s mobility and participation in public life. Headscarves were included in dignity kits during the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami response, as the tsunami struck early in the morning when most women were at home without their heads covered. Receiving a headscarf allowed women to leave their homes and physically access other services (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh and Ager, 2013). In Mozambique, *capulanas* (wrap skirts) are included as women always carry one to cover their bodies, carry things and to use as a blanket. *Capulanas* and other culturally specific items speak more to

dignity than more generic items since, as one woman in Mozambique put it, *capulanas* are ‘part of being a woman’ (Abbott et al., 2011: 31).

## 5.5 Shelter

Shelter is also linked to dignity, both by humanitarian organisations and by refugees. In the *Handbook for the protection of internally displaced persons*, the Global Protection Cluster Working Group (2010: 236) states that, ‘when humanitarian organizations refer to shelter, they generally mean habitable, covered living space, providing a secure and healthy living environment with privacy and dignity’. Beyond these minimum standards, UNHCR (2014: 4) has linked alternatives to camps and tented settlements to the ‘possibility to live with greater dignity’, due to greater freedom of movement, wider choice in living arrangements, more opportunities for work or to cultivate land and better access to protection and services.

The Danish Refugee Council (DRC) (2017) dispenses shelter kits to people living in informal tented settlements, to help with weatherproofing and to maintain warmth and dignity. Refugee communities, particularly in protracted displacement situations, have repeatedly voiced concerns about cramped communal shelter arrangements, and have stressed the impact these conditions have on people’s dignity. In interviews to assess service provision and GBV in six camp locations, IRC (2017) found that women felt that sharing shelters with multiple families had a negative effect on their psychosocial wellbeing, and that the lack of private washing and changing space significantly affected privacy, dignity and safety.

## 5.6 Protection and psychosocial support

Protection is particularly important in shaping the context in which refugees live, whether in or outside of camps. The third edition of the ICRC *Professional standards for protection work* suggests that protection encompasses humanity, non-discrimination and impartiality, human dignity, the duty to do no harm and the need to ensure the active participation of affected people. Under standard 1.6, ‘Protection work must be carried out with due respect for the dignity of individuals’, the guide equates respecting the dignity

of affected people with ‘taking the time and having the empathy to listen to, and interact with, individuals and communities’, and ‘engaging with them in a respectful manner ... facilitating their access to accurate and reliable information, ensuring their inclusion and meaningful participation in decision-making processes that affect them, and supporting their independent capacities, notably those of making free and informed choices, and of asserting their rights’ (2018: 28). Similarly, an ALNAP guide to protection for humanitarian agencies suggests that protection encompasses safety, personal dignity, integrity and empowerment (Slim and Bonwick, 2005). Based on this definition, ActionAid Australia has linked dignity and protection in its field manual *Safety with dignity*. This details how safety and dignity are the key pillars of protection, enshrined in human rights, humanitarian and refugee law, and that ‘the process of individuals achieving these rights must be safe and dignified, without insecurity or discrimination’. To this end, the manual lays out 22 tools that NGOs can use to develop community-based approaches to protection programmes (Berry, 2009: 15).

Dignity is often evoked in support of psychosocial programming, often included as a subsection of protection programmes. The Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC), the primary mechanism for the coordination of humanitarian assistance among UN agencies and international NGOs and a policy-setting body for the humanitarian system, notes in its *Guidelines on mental health and psychosocial support in emergency settings* (2007: 64) that ‘safety, dignity and integrity are fundamental concepts to both international humanitarian/human rights law and to a psychosocial approach to humanitarian action’. The Sphere Project (2011: 17) also links psychosocial support and dignity, stressing the need to limit the psychosocial impact through delivering aid in a way that ‘promotes dignity, enables self-efficacy through meaningful participation, respects the importance of religious and cultural practices and strengthens the ability of affected people to support holistic well-being’.

## 5.7 Repatriation

Dignity became a key component of repatriation in the late 1980s. Between 1986 and 1989, roughly 67% of all speeches delivered by the High Commissioner for Refugees, Jean-Pierre Hocké, linked repatriation with dignity (Bradley, 2009). The International Conference

on Central American Refugees in 1989 was the first to use this connection in a major declaration (the Declaration and Concerted Plan of Action in favour of Central American Refugees, Returnees and Displaced Persons), affirming that voluntary return would be ‘under conditions of personal security and dignity that would allow them to resume a normal life’. In 1993, the Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action argued for ‘the preferred solution of dignified and safe voluntary repatriation’. The same pairing of ‘in safety and with dignity’ also appears in Principle 28 of the Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement (Deng, 1999). Yet few of these documents lays out concretely what repatriation with dignity means in practice, and those that do often disagree on the extent of assistance that should be offered in a dignified return.

UNHCR (1996) interprets repatriation with dignity as refugees not being manhandled; that they can return unconditionally and at their own pace; that they are not separated from their families; and that they are treated with respect and receive the full restoration of their rights upon return. In practice, UNHCR often promotes and even facilitates return through coordinating transport and documentation for returning refugees and directly encouraging return through negotiating agreements with the states of origin and host states, as well as offering assistance programmes and local reintegration initiatives to refugees who are willing to return (Bradley, 2008). These programmes are in line with UNHCR’s updated handbook, published in 2004, which advocates for the ‘4 Rs’ – (voluntary) repatriation, reintegration, rehabilitation and reconstruction. These guidelines go beyond the 1996 handbook’s guidelines to include not only the restoration of rights upon return, but also reconciliation between displaced people and local residents; legal, political, economic and social reintegration; the restoration of social and economic infrastructure and the re-establishment of political order, institutions and the capacity for sustainable development (UNHCR, 2004). Bradley (2009: 377), however, argues that both handbooks are ‘overly prone to treating dignity as an item on a checklist for

repatriation planning rather than as an overarching, multi-faceted concept to guide the return process’.

Instead, Bradley (2008: 286) argues that dignified repatriation is about more than returning to one’s home country or village, but also about putting ‘returnees back on an equal footing with their non-displaced co-nationals by restoring a normal relationship of rights and duties between the state and its returning citizens’. In her opinion, dignified repatriation hinges on its being voluntary, on the ability of refugees to choose when and how they wish to return, on the full restoration of their rights upon return and on the recognition of serious injustices and inequalities and the attempt to rectify them through reparations (e.g. trials, claims commissions, property restitution) when appropriate.

## 5.8 Conclusion

Dignity, while a loosely defined concept, has been used in many aspects of humanitarian action, notably food and cash-based aid, livelihood opportunities, education, health and hygiene, shelter, protection and repatriation. This chapter highlights several key research questions, some of which will be further explored in the fieldwork stage of this project:

- To what extent, and for which groups of people, does the assumption that cash-based aid promotes dignity more than handouts of goods-in-kind hold true?
- When asked about dignity in displacement, which types of programmes listed in this chapter are mentioned by the refugees interviewed during the study? Do the links made in the literature between these areas and dignity exist in the minds of the aid recipients?
- To what extent do dignity kits promote dignity, from the perspective of those who receive them?
- What would a dignified repatriation process look like? Are there any similarities in this process between refugee populations? Are there any differences based on specific cultures and contexts?

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# 6 Conclusion

Humanitarian actors employ dignity frequently, but rarely define its meaning explicitly. This is not unique to the idea of dignity, but applies equally to many complex concepts in the social sciences. As Carozza (2008: 932) contends, dignity is not the only concept that is used liberally and without adequate definition or conceptualisation; equality, justice, peace and ‘the common good’ also have ‘a multiplicity of possible valences and implications which can diverge significantly in context, and their underdetermined meanings make them susceptible to the risks of substantial manipulation’. The present exploration of the concept of dignity does not seek to claim that these challenges mean dignity as a concept should be discarded or avoided in humanitarian programming. Rather, it shows the need to further explore the concept of dignity and what it means in practice in particular locations and crises. Precisely because dignity is used pervasively in legal, medical and humanitarian discourses, more research is needed to see how the concept differs across genders, ages and cultures.

The report also identified a growing need to engage affected populations and to better listen to their views. Recent focus groups of Middle Eastern refugees answered the question of whether they were treated with respect and dignity by aid agencies with a mere 3.5 out of 10, showing the sector has much work to do in this area (Cairns, 2015). Thus, following on from this report, the fieldwork stage of this project will aim to remove the preconceptions so often found in the humanitarian sector and go back to the basics, asking not ‘does receiving food or cash bring you more dignity?’, but rather ‘what does dignity mean to you?’

In summary, the key research questions that emerge from this report, some of which will guide the fieldwork phase of this project, are as follows:

- How do different groups of people – from different regions, speaking different languages, practicing different religions – conceptualise dignity? What are the similarities, if any, across cultures? What are the differences?
- Are some regions more likely to see dignity as individual, and others more as social?

- How do men and women within the same cultural context conceptualise dignity? How do men in different cultural contexts conceptualise dignity? How do women?
- How do different generations within the same cultural context conceptualise dignity? How do children/youth in different cultural contexts conceptualise dignity? How do the elderly?
- What is the intersectionality between geography, gender and age when it comes to conceptualising dignity?
- How is dignity upheld or diminished in displacement settings?
- To what extent, and for which groups of people, does the assumption that cash-based aid promotes dignity more than handouts of goods in-kind hold true?
- When asked about dignity in displacement, which types of programmes listed in chapter 5 are mentioned by the interviewed refugees? Do the links made in the literature between these areas and dignity exist in the minds of aid recipients?
- To what extent do dignity kits promote dignity, from the perspective of those who receive them?
- What would a dignified repatriation process look like? Are there any similarities in this process between refugee populations? Are there any differences based on specific cultures and contexts?
- How does the humanitarian sector view dignity? What does the tension between individual and social dignities mean for how humanitarians uphold the dignity of people affected by crisis?
- How should dignity be measured and evaluated in humanitarian programmes?
- How can humanitarian publicity ensure that the dignity of those represented is maintained?

Finally, although it is not clear in the existing literature, there is a growing assumption that local humanitarian actors are inherently better at knowing what local communities need and want, and thus local actors are better equipped to provide a more dignified response than international actors. This assumption builds on the increasingly prevalent theme of localisation in humanitarian action over the past decade and, more specifically, the Secretary-General’s report at the 2016 WHS and the resulting Grand Bargain, that call for

responses that are ‘as local as possible, as international as necessary’. To this end, the fieldwork stage of this project will also test that assumption and address the following research questions:

- Do local and international aid providers have different understandings of dignity in a given context?
- Are aid recipients’ understandings of dignity more closely related to how local or international responders understand dignity?
- Do aid recipients perceive local or international organisations as better at upholding their dignity? In what ways?



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