

The background of the entire image is a photograph of a concrete staircase, viewed from a low angle looking up. The concrete is a light grey color, and the steps are illuminated by bright light, creating strong shadows. A yellow filter is applied to the entire image. Overlaid on the image is the text "DECOLONIZING HUMANITARIAN ACTION" in a purple, serif font, oriented diagonally from the bottom left towards the top right.

DECOLONIZING HUMANITARIAN ACTION

EARLY CAREER  
RESEARCHERS WORKSHOP

MALTA, 15 SEPTEMBER 2020

CONVENOR: [JANINE.BRESSMER@GRADUATEINSTITUTE.CH](mailto:JANINE.BRESSMER@GRADUATEINSTITUTE.CH)

## ***Call for Papers***

### ***Firefighters and Arsonists: Decolonizing Epistemologies, Methodologies and Practice in Humanitarian Action***

*Early Career Researchers Workshop (ECW), Malta  
15 September 2020*

*Convenor: [Janine Bressmer](#), Graduate Institute*

Shortcomings in aid delivery and development work are often ascribed to implementational, technical or procedural faults in the system of ‘doing good’. Olivia Rutazibwa, however, reminds us that the (western) systems we have inherited and continue to practice globally act both as firefighter and arsonist. Her argument stands strong against the long and troubled history of aid, where links between civil wars, conflict, disasters, or droughts and neo-liberal agendas are too often brushed aside or ignored entirely. In associating large-scale humanitarian needs and population displacements with climate change-induced droughts and flooding, on-going wars with foreign interests and colonial legacies, or the lack of affordable medicine with exorbitant and unjustified pricing by big pharma, we start to see unsettling connections between neo-liberal world orders and their often brutal manifestations. It is a reminder for both scholars and practitioners of humanitarian action to historicize suffering around the world and address aid not as a way of mitigating these realities but as part and parcel of the ways that international politics marginalize, suppress and even ignore this ‘systematic fragmentation of reality’. If humanitarian action has been cut and detached from the very forms of global violence whose affects are then used to justify the “need” to intervene, it is imperative to reassemble these severed parts.

Looking at the aid machine today, donors and NGOs alike are mobilizing resources to address various contemporary dilemmas, such as the ethical treatment of biometric data, the ‘urbanization’ of warfare, the ‘localization’ approach, the criminalization of aid provision, and the perpetuation of sexual violence against both ‘beneficiaries’ and staff. At the same time, the system continuously employs and perpetuates crippling binaries of us/them and aid worker/beneficiary which reproduce modernity as a (neo)colonial logic in humanitarian theorizing and practice. Against this, a decolonial and deliberately anti-fragmented approach to the study of such contemporary issues allows us to trace and understand the origin of such binaries and thus attempt to move towards finding alternative ways in which the humanitarian endeavour unfolds in the future. To be clear, the intention here is not to use a decolonial approach to humanitarian action as some sort of end point, but rather the device through which both humanitarian knowledge production and aid practices may reconcile troubled histories with alternative (critical, feminist, ethical) practices and theorizing of aid delivery.

Understanding, then, humanitarian action as an ethos and practice, this workshop seeks to engage early career scholars in reimagining, revaluating and historically situating the humanitarian endeavour (as discourse and practice) as an extension of (unequal) power dynamics in global politics. We aim to inquire the dangers of perpetuating hierarchies in the system to generate productive, localized and historicized critiques to investigate both the humanitarian fire(wo)men and arsonists. As scholars, we must also inquire about the politics of knowledge production and the methods we employ with regard to their potential to discipline or encourage critical thinking on humanitarian action. In spaces where our work may perpetuate various forms of racial, gendered and elitist power imbalances, a decolonial approach combined with a concerted reflection on ethical research practices pushes us to investigate our own methods and methodologies with the hope of exploring novel ways to address the *study and practice* of aid delivery.

Overarching questions for the workshop:

- **Methods and Research Ethics:** What inter-disciplinary, critical and creative methods can we employ to study humanitarian action as practice and humanitarianism as doctrine? How might they attend to existing ethical concerns?
- **Spaces and Scales:** How could a focus on the micro, on the individual, and on localized spaces in aid delivery lead to other ways of producing knowledge on humanitarian action? How can this be applied in practice?
- **Motivations and Alternatives:** What can a decolonial approach to humanitarian action help us see about the normative motivations and practical application of the humanitarian system and what alternatives can this produce?

**Submission:** Doctoral students and junior postdoctoral researchers (less than 3 years after PhD completion) are invited to send their abstract (250 words) and a short bio by 31 March 2020 to [janine.bressmer@graduateinstitute.ch](mailto:janine.bressmer@graduateinstitute.ch). Workshop participants will then be asked to submit a draft document by 1 September 2020 to be circulated amongst the group. **Important** - The EISA stipulates that all ECW participants must register for the EISA 2020 conference taking place immediately after the workshop in the same venue.

**Funding:** The EISA is sponsoring partial travel cost coverage (up to 200€ per participant) and accommodation costs for two nights in so far as the costs cannot be covered by the host institution. Please make a note in your application if you'd like to be considered for reimbursement.