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Introduction

Afghanistan is one of the most well-known countries benefiting from foreign assistance, and it has been for several years the top recipient country in the world in terms of Official Development Assistance. On the other hand, Afghanistan is also well-known for being one of the countries with the highest percentage of population living below the poverty line in the world. Massive aid inflows and persistent poverty seem to be a contradiction, if one thinks at how the Western media publicize the easiness with which a donation of just one euro can change the life of the most underprivileged. The foreign assistance is often perceived and shown in the media as an act of genuine altruism, as the expression of the noblest values of the donor societies, the fortunate, willing to help the poorest populations of the world. It evokes the aspiration for a better world and the possibility of development as the main answer to all the problems of the recipient societies. By giving material resources, the aim is to meet the immediate needs of a population fleeing war or suffering from a natural catastrophe and to respond to the need to improve the material conditions of people stuck in a “poverty trap”, due to conflict, climate-related issues, bad governance and other concerns. Humanitarian issues and development are often strictly interrelated in the Global South, and the debate on humanitarianism highlights the necessity to allocate the funds and orient the humanitarian practices in the proper way, in order to lead the recipient country to improve at best its general condition. Aid effectiveness is one of the most debated issues in Afghanistan. Despite being driven by an individual’s commitment, international cooperation and moral values supposedly universal, humanitarianism, most evidently since the Second World War, is revealed to be often interrelated with politics. It has been involved in political agendas for the control of territories and lives, for spreading a Western vision of a peaceful and democratic world and shaping international relations. In this sense, the humanitarian interventions constitute nowadays a non-declared means to impose a univocal model of humanity at a global level, defined according to the cultural models, moral values and economic standards of the neoliberal democracies. Once again, this is the case of the reconstruction efforts following 2001 in Afghanistan.

Humanitarianism is a matter of ethics, moral values and principles, unequal relations of power and political concerns, as will be seen in the first chapter of this dissertation. The first part gives an overview of the history of foreign assistance that can be helpful in understanding the origins

of the contemporary debate on the benefits and most of all on the shortcomings of this peculiar mode of intervention. The first chapter constitutes the theoretical base needed to understand the major concerns related to the humanitarian intervention in Afghanistan. Afghanistan, with its geostrategical position as the “crossroads” of Asia, is a country with a long history of foreign intervention. The second chapter focuses on this history, highlighting the attempts to modernize the country and its culture, whether they were driven from the inside or from the foreign powers occupying the country. Afghanistan came back into the public eye after 9/11, and the reconstruction period that followed the military intervention of the NATO coalition lead by the United States and still ongoing, will be discussed in this text as an example of the limits of an highly politicized humanitarian intervention. In the third chapter, I will make an overview of the humanitarian situation nowadays in Afghanistan, trying to give voice to the different points of view of the beneficiaries, humanitarian workers, institutional officers, political men and women, Afghan and international, that I had the chance to interview during my two-month period of research in Kabul. The last part is dedicated to a peculiar sector of the humanitarian assistance in the country, the internal displacement and the return of refugees hosted in Pakistan and Iran. In fact, the informal settlements on the outskirts of Kabul where displaced people live, their vulnerabilities and their stories and complaints about the way in which they are assisted, could be considered as a mirror of the more general humanitarian situation of Afghanistan and its lack of effectiveness.

During my field research in Kabul, I did several semi-structured and unstructured interviews in the offices, private houses and shelters of the people that agreed to spend one hour of their time with me. I met some representatives of national and international NGOs, UN officers, representatives of the Afghan government and political man and women, Afghan citizens and some *maleks*, *wakil* and inhabitants of a dozen of informal settlements around Kabul. I choose to interview these subjects because of their connection with the world of humanitarian aid and the foreign assistance, whether they were living it firsthand, as workers or as beneficiaries, or whether they coordinate it from their office in a compound or a ministerial palace. The choice to conduct my interviews in a semi-structured way was firstly aimed at letting my interlocutors decide what was the most important thing to say on the subject, without compromising or orienting the interview in any way. Moreover, my aim was to avoid the official pre-packaged

speeches for a more spontaneous dialogue that left space for the personal experiences and most of all to the honest critics of the system in place. It is important to highlight that I had to use different approaches when organizing the interview and interviewing an Afghan person or an international worker. To have an appointment with an “expat”, mainly for security reasons, it was mandatory to have a referral of someone of another international agency, and then specifying that I was an Italian student doing research for my master thesis, and I had access to their compound. Some of them, after the first official meeting, invited me to their houses or recreation places, so as I could have other points of view of their lives, where they felt more at ease to tell me other versions of their work. On the other hand, it was harder to interview the Afghan representatives and beneficiaries. Because of a widespread diffidence in regards to foreigners in the Afghan men and women, especially when dealing with the humanitarian world, my Afghan contacts in Kabul, themselves workers of an Afghan NGO, made all the appointments for me. Instead of sending an e-mail as I was used to do, they phoned directly to the person I selected for the interview, explaining that I was a colleague doing a research, but without specifying that it was an academic one: apparently, it would have put pressure on the selected person and discouraged them from talking honestly with me. Because of the informality required of me, the methodology of my research is not fully correct, and I couldn't propose to sign an “Informed Consent for Interviews” form to all the respondents, but everyone gave me orally his or her agreement to use the interview in the final text. Moreover, some foreign agencies' workers did not allow me to record their interviews when they were expressing their own opinion, and on three occasions my recorder was seized at the entrance of the US embassy compound for security reasons. So, the research limitations in Kabul were multiple, starting from my very basic knowledge of the languages of the country, Pashto and Dari, for what I had to ask for the help of a translator every time my interlocutor did not feel to make the interview in English. My research was limited to Kabul, mainly for security reasons, so it will give a partial view of the phenomenon of the humanitarian aid in Afghanistan, despite that many of my Afghan respondents had traveled to the provinces and could witness of the situation there. The security situation in Kabul and in the camps also sometimes constituted a limit for my field research, so I tried to adapt my interviews and works according to the needs and the contingencies of the capital of a country in war.