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Citizen Aid: grassroots interventions in development and humanitarianism

Over the last few years, forms of aid and development have become visible which are not orchestrated by large donors or aid agencies, but are initiated by ordinary citizens, from the Global North and South. Research on these practices, which we are calling ‘citizen aid’, is growing, but remains scattered across disciplines. The aims of this collection are therefore to take stock of this emerging area both empirically and theoretically; to flag shared themes arising from a number of different approaches, and to ask what significance citizen aid may have in the wider context of aid and development theory and practice. This introduction will start by mapping the field.

Citizen Aid as an ‘unstable category’

One reason why studies of these forms of aid are fragmented are the diverse terminologies which are deployed to describe them. Despite this, we propose that they share some distinctive features. Broadly defined, we take citizen aid to refer to projects instigated by individuals that are privately funded and aim to support others in need. The focus on ‘citizens’ emphasises the agency of ordinary people making ethical decisions about providing assistance to others. Such activities have variously been described as the ‘fourth pillar’ of development; citizen initiatives; private development initiatives or grassroots international NGOs, or being carried out by ‘independent development volunteers’. With a focus on humanitarianism, they have been labelled ‘demotic’, ‘grassroots humanitarians’ or ‘everyday humanitarianism’. McCabe and Phillimore flag their existence as ‘small-scale civil society actors’ who respond to local needs or shared interests rather than policy directives. Their ‘action below the radar’ thrives in the unregulated space that also characterizes citizen aid.

Our aim is not to establish a reified, distinct category of ‘citizen aid’, which certain practices are deemed to fall into (or not). Instead, rather than creating an object-category, citizen aid is more productively employed as a sideways lens, a perspective for recognising forms of intervention and resource distribution which often remain under the radar of established development research and practice. We take a cue here from Lewis and Schuller’s helpful notion of NGOs as a ‘productively unstable category’ that allows for charting similarities and differences across a field of action between aid and activism. While proposed in relation to understanding NGOs, we suggest that in capturing the diversity of activities, citizen aid as an
unstable category denotes a set of practices that are dynamic and often temporally limited. They are small-scale and usually operate on the margins of the formal aid and development sector. While some of these initiatives may, over time, incorporate themselves as NGOs, others stay small, downsize or cease to exist, and studying such processes of formalization or their absence can yield important insights into how citizen aid evolves. For us, citizen aid productively captures the focus on support that citizen extend to each other. Notably, the term ‘citizen’ does not denote formal national belonging here, but rather a ‘global citizenship,’ in reference to citizens of different nations acting for others, often across borders. These borders follow the changing geographies of development: while most (initial) studies of citizen aid focus on activities originating in the Global North and being implemented in the Global South, recent research is also examining South-South initiatives as well as responses to situations in the Global North. In sum, we adopt ‘citizen aid’ as a working definition for a diverse and shifting set of mutual support practices funded by private, as opposed to public, means. As evident in this collection, the contributors employ a multitude of terms, and our aim is not to reduce this variety, but to help counter fragmentation and the reduced theoretical visibility and impact that may result from it.

Anecdotal evidence of citizen aid in its current forms has been accruing more recently, though its recognition has not always been flattering, especially when referring to Northern initiatives in the Global South that arguably has been the mainstay of citizen aid. The journalist Linda Polman described such initiatives as ‘MONGOs’, short for ‘my own NGO’, referring to aid workers setting up their own projects. More enthusiastically, it was hailed as a ‘Do-It-Yourself-foreign aid revolution’ by the journalist Nikolas Kristof, focusing on North American college graduates setting up small-scale projects in countries of the Global South. Such promises have not gone unchallenged, partly with reference to being often led by non-development professionals who are initiating piecemeal and small-scale projects based on reactions to needs and situations they sometimes poorly understand. Such projects are not necessarily sustainable or scalable and can do more harm than good. While these critiques are undeniably important, in their wholesale dismissal they foreclose the opportunity to learn about citizen aid as an empirical trend, and where its relevance may lie. More nuanced studies have conceptualized a ‘fourth pillar’ of development that is sitting alongside, but distinctive from, the state, the market and the third sector. Its small-scale private aid initiatives have been studied from a wide range of disciplines, adopting multiple methodologies and regional foci. All of these approaches, in the first instance, aim to raise
visibility of such initiatives through establishing an empirical evidence base. Their theoretical contributions, however, do not coalesce into a unified debate. In the following, we map these approaches to move towards greater cohesion and dialogue.

The most substantial body of work on citizen aid so far has been undertaken with regard to what Clifford calls its ‘supply side’: that is, taking stock mostly of small-scale charitable initiatives in the Global North which are active in countries of the Global South. For the US, Schnable documents a rise from around 1,000 small-scale non-profit organizations registered in 1990, to over 11,000 ten years later. A similar trajectory is identified in the UK, drawing on records of the Charity Commission for England and Wales, which show that in the last ten years, the number of small charities has grown significantly more than that of large ones. While definition of ‘smallness’ vary, Clifford’s study covers those with an annual budget of less than £100,000, while in the US context, these are budgets of under $15,000. Studies focusing on continental Europe, examining private development initiatives in the Netherlands, define these as ‘small organisations, founded by non-development specialists, run by volunteers and funded by individuals, which are focused on the direct provision of goods or services to individuals and communities overseas.’ Estimates put the number of them between 6,000 and 15,000 in the Netherlands, with a pronounced period of growth between 1990 and 2009, when data was last collected. ‘Small’ is here defined as an organisation with 20 or fewer staff, with an average annual budget of around €50,000. Observations of a substantial growth of small international charities are thus corroborated by quantitative data based on national registers, including in Norway and Belgium.

Such a methodological approach that is based on data from sending countries and formal registers inevitably renders insights while also creating blindspots. The material it generates can be taken to indicate the decentralization or voluntarisation of international development, or alternatively its democratisation, making it accessible to non-specialists or ‘amateurs.’ Less evident from these ‘supply side’ studies is qualitative, in-depth data on how these organisations operate in implementation sites, what people are involved at locations of origin and destination, what relationships exist with local partners and aid recipients, and the nature of activities and their possible impact. To address these questions, some work, including studies in this issue, has begun to study destination sites. Nevertheless, a focus on organisations which are formally registered, often in the Global North, elides one key characteristic of citizen aid, namely its informal and private nature. This means often being
set up in an ad-hoc way and maintained and funded by small groups of individuals from the Global North and South. The quantitative approach also risks obscuring the role of communities at destination, and furthers an implicit assumption that citizens there are involved mainly as gatekeepers and beneficiaries. Studying destination sites, while offering limited quantitative material, therefore allows for a more nuanced, qualitative account of citizen aid where it is being implemented. This is the case, for example, with ‘independent development volunteers’ in Honduras, a network of mainly North Americans aiming to improve the wellbeing of disadvantaged Honduran citizens; work on brokerage in citizen aid in Cambodia, or the motivation of Norwegian founders who set up projects in The Gambia. This shows that the few designated studies to date that have explored long-term, long-distance transnational citizen aid from the perspectives of sites in the Global South have focused on originators in the Global North. Many citizen aid initiatives disrupt the traditional North-South divisions, however.

This becomes especially evident in studies of ‘grassroots humanitarianism,’ where a focus on the location where citizen aid is carried out is central. By definition, these initiatives revolve around sites of humanitarian emergency and natural disaster, such as the Tsunami in the Indian Ocean in 2004, Hurricane Katrina in the US or Typhoon Haiyan in the Philippines in 2013. While some critically observe a ‘competitive humanitarianism’ in their aftermath, others find them a groundswell of solidarity. They can also become sites of exclusion of local resident survivors by large agencies, who find themselves ignored in their role as first responders, or are subsequently employed as second-class aid workers, showing that citizen aid reproduces many of the conventional development power inequalities. The most recently significant, and indeed fertile ground for emergent practices of citizen aid and their analysis has been the migration ‘crisis’ from 2015, which saw increased numbers of refugees arriving in Southern Europe and beyond, fleeing war and violent conflict in the Middle East and Sub-Saharan Africa.

Citizen aid practices in the refugee context display particular characteristics, as well as producing different, but overlapping theoretical concerns and conclusions than the projects described above. The fact that these perceived humanitarian emergencies were unfolding within Europe facilitated people to become involved who might not otherwise have done so. Geographical proximity made this more likely, whether this meant travelling from the South of England to informal refugee camps in Calais, or further afield to Greek islands, and
allowed people to volunteer intermittently, sometimes alongside their paid work. Other factors shaping the popularity of these engagements were the extensive media coverage that framed these events as a historical moment of crisis. They share some key features of citizen aid, namely their often spontaneous inception; responding to needs as they arise, and their informal, makeshift nature, especially in the early stages. They were driven by ‘grassroots volunteers’ and typically operated on the margins of the established humanitarian system and separately from mainstream organisations, initially in the absence of formalized, state-sanctioned interventions.\textsuperscript{36}

Academic research on such volunteer humanitarians, alongside media attention, has been growing apace, to the extent that research on grassroots interventions with and for migrants and refugees is now constituting a veritable field in itself, despite its disciplinary diversity.\textsuperscript{37} Partly due to the political prominence of refugee issues in Europe as well as elsewhere, these grassroots interventions are being associated much more closely with pro-migrant activism and political campaigning.\textsuperscript{38} They also tend to be framed as forms of solidarity,\textsuperscript{39} more so than citizen aid channeled from the Global North to South. Some of these studies highlight an often-overlooked aspect, namely the grassroots activities of migrants themselves, and of the communities which (more or less) temporarily host them.\textsuperscript{40} Despite their evident differences, we argue that both long-distance citizen aid activities and more immediate grassroots humanitarianisms can, and indeed ought to be, considered as occupying places on a continuum of support activities. As contributions to this issue show, informal humanitarianisms may include Bangladeshi citizens intervening on behalf of Rohingya refugees, or survivors supporting each other in the aftermath of a typhoon, and are thus not restricted to a European context. These interventions trigger different theoretical claims, extending to solidarity, activism, governmentality and resistance, to more broadly conceived ideas of shared humanity and social justice. Viewing them in a shared framework of informality and horizontality should sharpen those debates, rather than blunt them.

As evident from even this cursory overview, small-scale private aid activities have grown substantially over the last decade, and have become more visible to the broader public, not least through their self-representation via digital media. The question arises, then, why citizen aid has remained comparatively obscure in academic and policy debates? One reason may be the geographical dispersal of these activities; their small scale, combined with their distributed transnational connections, may keep them out of sight of formal aid and
development institutions, and on the margins of its research. It is not coincidental that the most prominent studies cited above are based on charity registers, whereas there exist little reliable data on the number of small-scale aid activities worldwide outside of these. This is compounded by the difficulty of tracking the resource flows of citizen aid, including money, goods and labour, which are channeled by private donors through their networks. According to Hénon, ‘data is poor because of low reporting levels, a lack of accountability structures for private donors and an absence of established transparency standards.’

In addition to this relative elusiveness, many citizen aid initiatives are reluctant to interface with government apparatuses or formal development institutions and vice versa. While some large development actors have taken note of their existence, initiatives are often dismissed due to, in their view, amateurish nature, rendering them as not worthy of development studies’ attention. This collection is aiming to address this oversight by providing a more concerted theorization around a number of themes that emerge from this collection of papers.

**Themes and Contributions**

Citizen aid activities have thus not just been under-studied, but remain under-theorized. One challenge, we suggest, lies in analytically extracting them from lenses that are fixated on their status as NGOs, or involving volunteers. Research both on NGOs as organisational forms and on volunteering is extensive, but adopting these as sole frameworks risks missing what makes citizen aid distinctive. This is not to deny that many of those projects are registered as NGOs, or that people involved in them deliver voluntary work. Considering them simply as small NGOs, however, loses sight of the fact that they are funded through private donations, and are sustained by personal transnational networks, which channel resources in various forms.

Citizen aid initiatives tend to display features of small business start-ups, including an entrepreneurial sense of ownership, agency, and the ability to choose their issues, more than is often evident in the literature on NGOs. While citizen aid relies at least partly on unpaid labour, the notion of citizen aiders as ‘volunteers’ misrecognises its more complicated workings in practice. Many practitioners draw, at least initially, on their own funds, as well as on those of their social networks and other private donations; but they may also engage in paid work to maintain a livelihood, or operate income-generating projects which sustain their non-profit activities. Citizen aid is thus driven by a range of people, some of whom provide their skills and time for free; some are being paid, while founders often use their own resources to set up their projects. The theorisation of citizen aid is therefore not advanced by subsuming them under existing literature on NGOs or volunteers. Instead, the papers in this
collection suggest several analytical avenues. A first cluster focuses on their historical origins, the importance of connections, and motivations of the individuals involved. A second takes as a starting point their relationship to established actors such as governments, development institutions and civil society organizations, while a third considers the role of technology in transnational citizen aid networks.

**Origins and Motivations**

As suggested above, citizen aid and grassroots humanitarianism are not new phenomena. While Schwittay charts the historic rise of everyday humanitarian sentiments, Taithe presents the trajectory of one such grassroots organization in the North of England, Hudfam, and its proponent Elisabeth Wilson. These activities were already characterized by transnational connections, even though at the time, it was goods rather than people moving between continents. Recipients of these goods were never just that, but collaborators in what frequently turned into long-term relationships. As Fechter argues in her paper, personal relations and connections often provide the motivation and backbone of citizen aid activities. Fylkesnes, in her study on Norwegian founders of aid initiatives in The Gambia, describes how their individual motivations can be seen as a strength of this type of development, as it allows for a sense of ownership, as well as accountability towards beneficiary communities. At the same time, founders’ attitudes displayed disinterest in interacting more systematically with larger-scale aid agencies. Appe and Schnable’s paper picks up on this evident lack of ‘professionalising’, and ask what the causes and consequences are for grassroots international NGOs. Such insistence on autonomy and ostensible ‘amateurism’ can also account for their at times uneasy interactions with other aid actors.

**Relationships to established actors**

At their sites of implementation, citizen aid initiatives often relate in ambiguous ways to formal institutions, be they civil society organizations, local government units or professional development actors. With regard to the first, Lewis shows how the personal response of many Bangladeshi citizens to the influx of Rohingya refugees needs to be situated within the country’s history, and particularly the 1971 Liberation War, and the ensuing forms of civil society. The paper also illuminates how initial everyday humanitarian responses are becoming formalized and solidified as formal humanitarian organisations and the
Bangladeshi government moved to action. This process is not without frictions, partly caused by the apparent amateurish nature of citizens’ responses discussed above.

The sometimes deliberate avoidance of ‘professionalisation’ also results in complex relationships with development professionals in mainstream organisations, which Haaland and Wallevik analyse through the lens of resistance.\textsuperscript{49} The two citizen aid organisations they studied on the Greek island of Lesbos, in the context of the 2015 refugee arrivals, took activist approaches in resisting the establishment’s framing of the influx as a short-term crisis. Through an insistence on environmental issues and the responsibility of governments and through collaborating with national and international advocacy networks, both showed the limits of the humanitarian aid apparatus on Lesvos. Their decision to remain on the margins of this apparatus can be understood as a form of resistance to dominant humanitarian interpretations, narratives and practices. This includes a refusal of bureaucratization that is often also the main reason for keeping local government actors at arm’s length, as shown in Kinsbergen’s paper.\textsuperscript{50} The Dutch citizen aid organizations she studied in Kenya inform local officials of their presence, but do not wish to collaborate with them. The officials themselves, in contrast, argued for a closer and more coordinated relationship, also to avoid the duplication and fragmentation of development efforts. In the Philippine case studied by McKay and Perez,\textsuperscript{51} a more distant relationship was desired by both sides. This can lead to a lack of understanding and acknowledgement by local government officials and a conscious effort not to compete with their relief efforts by the citizen aid provider. The latter paper also shows the increasing importance of digital technologies for citizen aid activities.

**The Role of technologies**

Digital technologies are enabling such activities in various ways, by making their work and needs visible to potential supporters, collaborators (and academic researchers). Social media channels coordinate transnational networks of resources, while crowdsourcing platforms aggregate the actions of geographically dispersed individuals to work together on enacting a form of virtual care. In this way, technologies help to build and sustain the connections that are so vital to citizen aid, and shape their work in particular mediated ways. In this sense, they resemble forms of citizen science, which is partly sustained through crowdsourced data, gathered by engaged citizens to contribute to larger projects. As the papers by McKay and Perez and Schwittay show, ‘digital humanitarianism’ does not eliminate the need for brokers altogether, but it changes who can become involved in development and how. In McKay and
Perez’s case, focusing on Typhoon Haiyan in the Philippines, the circulation of images, which acted as virtual brokers, enabled a varied set of local and international actors to direct resources to where they were needed. Their analysis draws attention to the work of curating images around particular fundraising appeals and related processes of accountability. Schwittay’s paper shows how crowdfunding platforms, such as Kiva.org, aggregate micro-financial contributions from tens of thousands of individuals and mediate their connection to specific causes, organisations and recipients in technological, financial and spatial ways. There are also crisis mapping platforms that came to prominence after the Haiti earthquake, incorporating potentially incommensurate elements of disaster response, building resilience, and witnessing, and platforms such as DFID’s Amplify program that ask individuals to contribute ideas towards finding new solutions to development problems.

**Conclusion**

In a recent overview, Miriam Ticktin argued that ‘anthropologists and others have critiqued humanitarianism for depoliticizing structural problems of inequality and domination. Yet, if humanitarianism can be read as an ethico-political project, what might other competing political spaces and movements look like?’ We suggest that the contributions in this volume offer an answer of sorts to this question. One of our aims is to document that citizen aid and grassroots humanitarian activities constitute a growing phenomenon deserving of greater empirical and theoretical scrutiny. At the same time, while embracing humanitarian imperatives, they cannot straightforwardly be categorised as political movements - one reason why they may have escaped the attention of Ticktin and others. Our hope is that this volume goes some way to address this, and its contributions outline some of citizen aid’s key features.

If, however, we consider both citizen aid and grassroots humanitarianism as ‘ethico-political projects’, we can ask in what ways these sets of practices are political, and indeed what we mean by ‘political’. The case of grassroots humanitarianism in the context of the European refugee ‘crisis’ is particularly pertinent here, as it presents a compelling case of support acts extended to migrants, which can be subjected to attempts of governmentality by the state(s) where they take place. Humanitarian efforts can become acts of protest and resistance. Activism and advocacy are more obviously live issues among these initiatives than other forms of grassroots humanitarianism. At the same time, to dismiss long-distance citizen aid as merely individualistic and inherently apolitical ignores their potential to disrupt established
development practices by making the latter more accessible to a more diverse range of people, both in the Global North and South, outside of policy directives. That does not mean that these initiatives avoid the entrenched hierarchies and inequalities of power, for which formal development has long been criticised. Future research must remain alert to these in any configurations of support. It opens up a perspective on aid that recognises a multitude of informal, supportive interactions between citizens, and in that sense forms of more ‘horizontal philanthropy’.

One question animating this collection was in what ways citizen aid and everyday humanitarianism may be considered development futures. Rather than replacing the established aid apparatus, these informal practices have come to occupy part of the overall ecosystem of aid, albeit at its margins, and often operate independently of its institutions. The contributions in this volume broaden our conceptions of contemporary forms of aid and development, by taking its informal manifestations seriously. While they may be part of a loosely conceived division of labour, which includes citizens from the Global North and South, their significance lies in encouraging us to recognise the support extended between citizens, beyond and outside of the institutionalized systems which have come to embody ‘aid’.

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\[1\] We use these terms not as a geographical marker but to signal a location of marginality vis-à-vis larger economic and political structures.

\[2\] Develtere and de Bruyn, ‘The Emergence of’

\[3\] Schulpen and Huyse, ‘Citizen Initiatives for Global Solidarity.’

\[4\] Kinsbergen and Schulpen, *The Anatomy of the Private Initiative."

\[5\] Schnable, ‘The Era of Do-It-Yourself Aid.’

\[6\] McLennan, ‘Passion, paternalism, and politics.’

\[7\] Taithe, this volume.

\[8\] Sandri, ‘Volunteer Humanitarianism.’

\[9\] Schwittay, *New Media and International Development."

\[10\] McCabe and Phillimore, ‘Below the Radar’ Activities.’

\[11\] Appe and Telch, ‘Grassroots International NGOs.’

\[12\] Lewis and Schuller, ‘Engagements with a productively unstable category.’

\[13\] Baillie Smith and Laurie, ‘International volunteering and development.’

\[14\] Isin, *Citizens Without Frontiers."


\[16\] Kristof, “The DIY Foreign Aid revolution.”

\[17\] Algoso, ‘Don’t Try This Abroad.’

\[18\] Develtere and de Bruyn, ‘The Emergence of’

\[19\] Clifford, ‘International Charitable Connections.’


\[21\] Clifford, ‘International Charitable Connections.’

\[22\] Kinsbergen and Schulpen, *The Anatomy of the Private Initiative"*

\[23\] Kinsbergen, Behind the pictures, 58.

\[24\] Haaland and Wallevik, ‘Citizens as Actors in the Development Field,’ Pollet et al, The *Accidental Aid Worker."

\[25\] Schnable, ‘The Era of Do-It-Yourself Aid.’

\[26\] Kinsbergen, ‘Behind the Pictures’.
Kinsbergen, Schulpen and Ruehrd, "Understanding the Sustainability," Haaland and Wallevik, "Citizens as Actors in the Development Field."

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see e.g. Brown and Prince, 2016, and Ho, 2016.

Michel, "Personal Responsibility and Volunteering."

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Appe and Schnable, 'Don’t reinvent the wheel'

Lewis, 'Humanitarianism, civil society, and the Rohingya'

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