

Explaining Variation in UN Humanitarian Intervention

Martin Binder

Social Science Research Center Berlin (WZB)

<mbinder@wzb.eu>

Abstract

Over the past two decades the United Nations has imposed economic sanctions, deployed peacekeeping operations, or even conducted (or authorized) military interventions to address a number of humanitarian crises. At the same time, nothing of this sort happened in other similar cases. What accounts for this variation? Because the patterns in UN activity cannot be easily accounted for by any single theory of international relations (IR), this paper draws from different theoretical traditions to identify a number of plausible explanatory variables. These variables are tested through a comparison of 44 instances of humanitarian crises using fuzzy-set analysis. The analysis indicates that a large extent of human suffering and substantial previous involvement in a crisis by international institutions are the key determinants for coercive UN action, but only when combined with either low capabilities of the target state or with negative spillover effects to neighboring regions. Conversely, limited UN response can best be explained by strong countervailing power of the target state and lack of previous institutional involvement, so long as a number of scope conditions are fulfilled.

The full paper is available upon request. Please contact the author (mbinder@wzb.eu)