Interview – Kristina Roepstorff

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Kristina Roepstorff is a Senior Researcher at the Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO), where she works on a project that examines ethical dilemmas in humanitarian negotiations and mediation. She previously held positions at the Institute for International Law of Peace and Armed Conflict (IFHV) at the University of Bochum, the Center for Humanitarian Action (CHA), the University of Magdeburg, Humboldt Universität zu Berlin, the German Institute for International and Security Affairs (SWP), Simon Fraser University and the Willy Brandt School of Public Policy at Erfurt University. Since 2015 she is also an Associate Faculty member at the School of Humanitarian Studies, Royal Roads University, Canada. As a trained intercultural mediator, trainer and consultant, she seeks to bridge academic research and teaching with policy and practice. Kristina Roepstorff obtained her Habilitation in Political Science from the University of Magdeburg in 2023 and her Doctorate in Political Science from the Institute for Intercultural and International Studies at Bremen University in 2009. Her research fields are humanitarian action, peacebuilding and forced migration. Her research has been published as monographs, book chapters, journal articles and policy papers.

Where do you see the most exciting research/debates happening in your field?

My main areas of research and teaching are peace and conflict studies and humanitarian studies. While peace and conflict studies are a well-established research field, humanitarian studies are still an emerging area of research. We have seen the proliferation of specialised programmes and the formation of the International Humanitarian Studies Association in the last decade. Of course, both fields of research are intimately linked, though the debates seem to happen largely independent of each other.

In my view, one of the most important debates that is happening in both fields is linked to the decolonial movement and calls for addressing racism and discrimination not only in research and teaching, but also in professional practice. This raises important issues about persisting power imbalances in international aid, but also about how racism, classism or sexism lead to exclusion and domination in humanitarian action or peacebuilding. In research, it raises questions of epistemology and methodology and challenges standard ways of doing things. As both areas are predominantly linked to International Relations, these debates also link to current scholarship on decolonising International Relations by, among other things, introducing Southern perspectives.

How has the way you understand the world changed over time, and what (or who) prompted the most significant shifts in your thinking?

As a student of philosophy, I started my academic journey with a very universalist and theoretical outlook on the world. However, having always had a keen interest in other cultures and perspectives, I combined my philosophy major with a minor in socio-cultural anthropology. I have to say, this combination felt quite challenging at times – there were days in which I moved from one class in which moral theories with universal claims were being discussed, to a class in which cultural relativism was preached. Until today, I seek reconciling these different disciplinary outlooks. Recently, in a research project on ethical dilemmas in humanitarian negotiations and mediation, my colleagues and I approached the topic through a mix of case studies, consultations with practitioners and ethical theories.

Coming back to the question, for me, studying socio-cultural anthropology was eye-opening. It made me realise that

the ways I see and give meaning to the world were very much a product of my own socio-cultural upbringing, leading me to question the theories and methods I had been taught. Linked to this, and reflecting on it now, I would say that travelling and being exposed to different contexts has largely impacted the way I see the world and approach my research today. This may sound stereotypical, but my previously held assumptions that were informed by theoretical studies of war and peace, justice and human rights, were called into question when leaving the desk and being exposed to different contexts and situations. Seeing how the world can be perceived very differently made me move more towards qualitative research and a critical understanding of aid interventions. This made me interested in the lived experience of people affected by, or working for, peace and humanitarian action.

I wouldn't say that a particular event or scholar was influential in my academic journey so far, but rather the individual people I met and interacted with in different settings and while conducting qualitative research. Although of course, there were also writings that resonated with me and encouraged me to reflect critically on my own perceptions and approaches, from philosophical classics such as Aristotle, Kant, Schopenhauer, or Sartre to Giorgio Agamben, David Mosse, Michel Agier, Séverine Autessere, Meera Sabaratnam, Walter Mignolo, and Arturo Escobar, to name just a few.

Your educational background combines a variety of disciplines such as anthropology, religious and legal studies for example. How has this multidisciplinary background shaped your research in international peace and conflict?

A lot. I still don't like to be put into any of these boxes and be limited in terms of research questions that are considered relevant, authors to be studied or methods to be used. I like to think that I am interested in a specific phenomenon and use the theories and methods most applicable to answer my questions – and not being forced to use only certain approaches and methods due to disciplinary boundaries. For example, I use ethnographic methods in IR research.

This multidisciplinary background has helped me to see the phenomena that I am interested in from very different angles and perspectives. I am also glad that due to a Master's degree in legal studies I can follow and make sense of legal reasoning, something that has helped me a lot in my research on search and rescue (SAR) operations in the Central Mediterranean or in understanding the different legal regimes relevant for my area of research, such as International Humanitarian Law, Human Rights Law, Refugee Law and International Criminal Law.

You have research experience in many countries including India, Nepal, Bangladesh, Myanmar and Italy. What would you say is the most important quality to have when conducting international research?

Language skills are always good to have. However, I believe more important than that is the ability to really listen to the people you meet – including also non-verbal communication. Being curious and willing to have your own views and beliefs challenged is essential for learning from these encounters. That is how I like to see my research in different settings: as a reflective learning process. Thus, I think the most important qualities are curiosity, humility and being respectful. To avoid harmful effects, one has to constantly assess situations ethically, to be aware of privilege and of one's own positionality within the research context, and to think about how the findings will actually benefit and be made available to the research participants. You also have to be flexible and adapt your research questions and design along the way. Because the questions and theories that we come up with at home, at our desk, may not make any sense in the concrete research setting – so you have to be able to let go and be able to adjust your research.

In an article you wrote in 2019, you speak of the "shrinking humanitarian space in Europe" as it relates to migration. How do you assess the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on this trend over the past couple of years?

This is a very interesting question, which I may only partially be able to answer. I haven't conducted research on this, but there are numerous studies out or under way on this. I guess the long-term effects are still to be seen. Of course, the COVID-19 pandemic has had a huge impact on the humanitarian sector. As I have argued in another article, the humanitarian sector was not spared by travel restrictions and the drastic measures put in place globally to fight the

pandemic. The COVID-19 pandemic exposed how restrictive measures can impact the humanitarian space.

We saw how big international non-governmental organisations evacuated their staff and resorted to remotely managing their humanitarian response. Some believed this to be a chance for a more locally-led response in line with the sector's localization agenda. Yet, remote management is not to be confounded with delegating decision-making powers to local partner organisations, which I assume has rarely happened. What it actually meant was that risks were transferred to local partner organisations – and that in the context of unjust global vaccination distribution and weak health systems.

Obviously, these actors' space for action was also limited by the prevention and control measures put in place during the pandemic. To give some examples from my area of research: in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh, where it was feared that the pandemic would spread in the congested Rohingya camps, access to the camps was highly restricted even for local partner organisations and limited to the most basic services. The restrictions, especially lockdowns and quarantine measures, also slowed down the humanitarian response in other countries, as for instance when Cyclone Harold hit four Pacific Island Nations in April 2020. In the same month, the Italian government announced that the country's ports could no longer be considered safe and closed them to civilian SAR ships for the duration of the COVID-19 national emergency.

So, yes, restrictive laws and regulations do impact on the humanitarian space – not only in the context of COVID-19. Counterterrorism laws or restrictive national migration and asylum policies that are justified on the basis of security concerns have led to the criminalization of aid in many parts of the world. Thereby, smaller, local NGOs are far more affected than the large international organisations who often pass responsibility onto their local partner organisations and local staff via flow-down clauses in contracts and partnership agreements.

Your recent work has focused on the 'localisation' of humanitarian action. How would you define 'true' localisation, and what are the steps towards reaching this objective?

Again, a very good question, but difficult to answer. What do you mean by 'true'? According to whom? If you think about the promise and aspiration of localisation, it would mean shifting the power to local humanitarian actors and the affected population, letting them lead the response, with international actors only supporting and facilitating their activities. However, apart from a few exceptions, localisation is not really happening. There are some good attempts and the ongoing debate on best practices is surely valuable. In my recent thinking on the topic, two issues have emerged: first, it seems to me that for localisation to happen, we need to decolonise humanitarian action and humanitarianism first. Changes need to be more fundamental in order to shift the power. Localisation has become a buzzword, a process that is still top-down in the sense that powerful actors dictate its meaning and ways of implementation.

Secondly, I increasingly feel a discomfort with the notion itself. The term localisation suggests that something needs to be localised, as if it wasn't there already. Pointing out this problematic connotation of the term, Boateng proposes the term (and process) of restoration instead, to recognise the history of erosion of what he calls homegrown structures. Slim, on the other hand, has argued that localisation should be understood as the political right to self-determination. Referring to locally-led humanitarian action might thus already be a better term than localisation.

This, however, raises the question of what or where the 'local' is. In my research, I have argued against the use of simple binaries of the 'international' and 'local' – a dichotomy that runs the risk of reiterating colonial thought patterns. This all points towards a critical reading of the localisation agenda and the way it is currently interpreted and implemented. Maybe what we need is to decolonise localisation, as localisation itself fails to address underlying structural problems like structural racism, that have given rise to the imbalance of power in the first place.

What is your take on the evolution of the dialogue between academics and policy-makers in humanitarian action?

I don't have an opinion of the evolution of the dialogue between academics and policy-makers in humanitarian action.

But I do think it is important to have a dialogue and to translate scholarly research so that the general public and policy makers can access it. I also think that policies should be based on evidence and insights from academic discourse. I personally like to work at the intersection of research, policy and practice and to stay in a dialogue, as I want to believe that my research may be useful for people actually implementing things.

However, truth be told: it is not always easy to enter a dialogue. Sometimes it feels like being from different planets and we surely do speak different languages. I feel that buzzwords are being used – like localisation or decoloniality – without engaging in a critical reflection of the terms. And without asking the uncomfortable questions that might shake things up or lead to proper change. On the other hand, I feel academia (and I include myself) is really good at deconstruction. But we often don't offer alternatives, identifying possible courses of action. Understandably, this can be frustrating for policy-makers and practitioners that have to take decisions or act quickly in the midst of an ongoing humanitarian situation. I guess what is needed is a good understanding of the different roles we all play, combined with an honest interest in what the other person brings to the table – be it theoretical insights and reflections or years of practical experience – and the will to learn from each other.

What is the most important advice you could give to young scholars of International Relations?

Don't let yourself be limited by disciplinary boundaries and trendy topics. Follow your passion and interests and expect (and embrace) a life-long learning process!