

Humanitarian frontiering: Competition, markets, and governance in refugee cash assistance programs

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Abstract

Since 2014, humanitarian cash, vouchers, and digital transfers have grown from scattered pilot projects to a peak of 24% of all humanitarian aid distributed globally in 2022. Cash assistance programs require different and distinct relationships between aid and wider political economies than direct food aid: the removal of parallel markets for humanitarian food aid, imbrication of displaced people in local markets, negotiations and participation of financial service providers and central banks, and remote, app-based, and digitized transfer of aid. Based on digital ethnography and interviews with humanitarian organizations overseeing formal cash assistance programming and coordination 2021–2022, this article shows how market-oriented logics operate across different registers in humanitarian aid: evaluation of local markets as means for pricing basic needs and the distribution of the means of survival; a field of competition between organizations; the accumulation of expertise about cash assistance's specific requirements; the development of digital platforms; and the negotiation of refugee-specific banking and legal frameworks. Drawing together recent work on carceral economies of refugee governance and frontier imaginaries and logics, we develop the concept of *humanitarian frontiering* to capture how market-based interventions like cash assistance create opportunities to reconfigure financial, governmental, and socio-political relationships in refugee contexts. In particular, we show how humanitarian logics “salvage” market practices to distribute aid and, in turn, bring banks, financial service providers, a range of aid organizations, and refugees into context-specific assemblages. We thereby contribute novel analysis of humanitarianism's frontiering practices to research on extractive frontiers and refugee governance.

Keywords

refugee governance, extraction, humanitarian frontiering, cash assistance

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Introduction

Analyzing the dramatic expansion of market-based humanitarian cash assistance since 2016, this article analyses how humanitarian cash assistance has generated novel forms of frontiering. Since 2015, humanitarian response planning has shifted from a position of “why cash?” to “why not cash?”, establishing cash and voucher-based assistance as the preferred and default mode of emergency humanitarian assistance globally (ODI, 2015). Humanitarian cash, vouchers, and digital transfer values have vacillated from \$3.6 billion (14.8%) transferred to recipients in 2018 to a peak of \$8.4 billion (23.9%) in 2022, falling to \$6.6 billion in 2024 (ALNAP, 2025: 29). UN agencies jointly controlled 59%–63% during our study (2021–2022; see ALNAP, 2025: 30). As the volume of cash transfers has rapidly increased, distributing this volume of cash has also required the introduction of massive data collection and management; negotiations between national banks, financial service providers, and humanitarian organizations; new back-office functions enabling cash transfers and audits; and new technologies to manage both data and cash transfers (Obrecht et al., 2022). Crucially, the move to cash assistance is not just a shift from in-kind to cash aid, but has relied upon—and driven—the datafication of humanitarian response, digitalization of humanitarian ways of working, new partnerships between state, private, and third sector organizations, and the introduction of technical and logistical expertise new to the humanitarian sector. As we show below, cash assistance created two frontiers simultaneously: the race to provide digital infrastructure for cash assistance sector-wide and crisis-specific negotiations between international non-governmental organizations (INGOs), national governments, banks, financial service providers, communities, and, sometimes, displaced people themselves.

Hailed as offering “choice and dignity” (CALP Network, 2023) to recipients and supporting local economies, cash assistance is an inherently market-based approach to humanitarian aid, relying on existing availability of goods, logistical networks, and willing local communities. The 2016 Grand Bargain process institutionalized the sector’s preference for cash assistance, following a decade of evidence-gathering about its effectiveness and feasibility (ODI, 2015). Cash assistance’s rise comes, then, on the heels of more fundamental shifts in the international humanitarian sector: from autonomous, solidarity-based assistance to competitive, donor-funded aid (Barnett, 2011); the rise of audit culture (O’Connor et al., 2014; Strathern, 2000); the outsourcing of state welfare to international and non-governmental organizations (Duffield, 1997); the logistification of aid (Pascucci, 2021; Ziadah, 2019); and the creation of a project-based funding model and sector-wide marketplace (Krause, 2014). In this context, some early cash assistance programs utilized local organizations and actors, indicating potential for better “localization” of a highly centralized, UN-agency dominated landscape. Shifting to cash was therefore hailed as a potentially transformative moment, in which accountability to affected populations, localized and decentralized aid funding, and perhaps even decolonial approaches to humanitarian aid might be explored and realized (ODI, 2015). When we began the project in 2020, hopes for cash assistance—and a reckoning over humanitarian finance more broadly—ran high.

Instead, our research found that competition undermined collaboration and coordination, ultimately resulting in a consolidation of expertise, capacity, and funding in organizations who had invested in digital platforms and logistical expertise, rather than any radical decentralization. While our interlocutors explained this as the normal operation of the “humanitarian marketplace,” we argue that humanitarian cash assistance operated more as a frontiering operation, opening and creating humanitarian interventions in markets, rather than a regulated space of exchange and competition. To conceptualize humanitarian frontiering, we bring longstanding critiques of globalized resource frontiers (Gago and Mezzadra, 2017; Launius and Boyce, 2021; Tsing, 2003, 2005, 2015; Watts, 2017) into conversation with recent work on labor, value, and extraction in political economies of

refugee humanitarianism (Aradau and Tazzioli, 2020; Avgeri, 2025; Bhagat, 2024; Brankamp et al., 2023; Martin and Tazzioli, 2023; Morris, 2023, 2024). We conceptualize humanitarian frontiering as a process that continually creates zones of encounter between humanitarian and other economic regimes, negotiates cash assistance programs in this context, and valorizes and accumulates specific kinds of expertise. Following an aid modality between sites, we contribute a novel empirical analysis of how cash assistance, in particular, has enabled accelerated frontiering in digital platforms and extend recent work on political economies of humanitarian aid, refugee governance, and bordered mobilities.

To accomplish this, the article first synthesizes recent work on digitalization, extraction, value, and labor in humanitarianism, focusing particularly on refugee and migration contexts. We then engage closely with recent conceptualizations of frontiers of extraction, asylum, encampment, and colonial displacement. Drawing on Anna Tsing's concept of salvage frontiers, we emphasize the improvisational, cobbled-together, pragmatic character of crisis response to conceptualize how existing frameworks are recombined, tweaked, or developed anew to enable cash assistance to refugees. We then show how humanitarian frontiering has operated through cash assistance programs, in particular. We argue that humanitarian salvage frontiers generate context-specific governmental assemblages that cannot be reduced to—nor entirely explained by—capitalist, neoliberal, or financialized logics. We close by discussing how humanitarian frontiering offers critical contributions to both political economies of refugee governance and economic geographies of resources frontiers.

From the humanitarian marketplace to the frontier

The Grand Bargain's institutionalization of cash assistance as a preferred mode of aid must be situated in a context of broader changes in the humanitarian sector, specifically concerns over inefficiency, lack of accountability, and short-term funding (High Level Panel on Humanitarian Financing, 2016). These critiques followed the sector's broader transformation in the 1990s, from NGOs providing wartime relief to providing welfare and development programs where state programs had contracted (often due to structural adjustment programs). Duffield (1997) places the emergence of this new paradigm of an "aid market" during this period, filling a vacuum formed by retreating state funding for social programs (structural adjustment policies and the collapse of the USSR) and a merging of development, security, and humanitarian relief.

Two shifts during this period further expand the role of humanitarian NGOs. First, governments began to contract with both NGOs and private contractors to provide essential services, both undermining indigenous capacity building and encouraging NGOs to develop strategic expertise; second, liberal international relations theory justified for military intervention for humanitarian purposes, blurring military, humanitarian, and development objectives in ways that would have far-reaching consequences (Duffield, 1997). The growing dominance of NGOs accompanied a projectification of humanitarian and development funding (Choudry and Kapoor, 2013) and the emergence of philanthro-capitalism, an alliance between neoliberal states and the private sector to address inequality produced by shrinking social programs (Burns, 2019; Mitchell and Pallister-Wilkins, 2023). As Krause (2014) has argued, the project itself has become the core commodity in the humanitarian marketplace, garnering both revenue and "symbolic capital" as trusted project providers. Competition over project provision has come to dominate politics, decision-making, and negotiations amongst INGOs (Weiss, 2013), often undermining cooperation and collaboration that would answer the neoliberal demands for efficiency and effectiveness (Midgley, 2024). Thus, the rise of competition *between* INGOs and the growth of private sector analysts has formed a core component of emerging conceptualization—and problematization—of the role of markets in humanitarianism.

Data, labor, and extraction

The direction and outcome of this intersection is not a given: critical economic geographers question how commodities and markets are defined and made to work, how normative values and economic valuation are negotiated, and what kinds of politics animate these decisions (Berndt and Boeckler, 2011, 2023; Martin, 2021; Midgley, 2024). If humanitarian government mobilizes moral sentiments of pity, compassion, and saviorism and reduces questions of inequality to survival (Fassin, 2011; Ticktin, 2006), how does this intersect with the generalization of extraction, dispossession, and displacement in operations of capital (Gago and Mezzadra, 2017)? Recent research on hidden and exploited labor, data extraction, and humanitarian innovation responds to these questions, offering nuanced analyses of specific humanitarian responses. For example, research on humanitarian innovation examines the political economies of data extraction undergirding techno-humanitarianism (Aradau, 2022; Burns, 2019; Madianou, 2021; Squire and Alozie, 2023; Tazzioli, 2022a), drawing on expanded theorizations of extractivism beyond mining and agriculture (Gago and Mezzadra, 2017; Mezzadra and Nielson, 2019). Monitoring and evaluation of humanitarian programs—including cash assistance—requires continual collection of questionnaires and personal information from displaced people (Tazzioli, 2022b). For displaced people served by multiple organizations, they may be asked for information multiple times per day, never knowing where the data goes or what comes of it (Squire and Alozie, 2023). This continual data extraction operates in addition to the digital storage and management of identity data and casework, offering a small glimpse of the vast amount of data collected about displaced people, informing decisions made on their behalf, and analyzed in undisclosed ways. For Madianou (2019), datafication and digitalization have contributed to humanitarianism’s “techno-colonialism,” an extension and entrenchment of colonial hierarchies of knowledge extraction and production. For Bhagat (2021), techno-humanitarianism creates an interface between capital and surplus populations, allowing displaced people to generate value while being held outside formal economies. As the European Union pursues an industrial strategy to build a regional security market rivaling the US-dominated one, states and funding agencies engage in what Lemberg-Pedersen (2024) calls “market crafting” of a border and surveillance market.

Thus, questions of value, labor, and marketization have become central to critical scholarship on refugee governance. By definition, categorizing people on the move sets them outside “normal” citizenship, differentiating mobile people, and making them available to a range of biopolitical technologies (Aradau and Tazzioli, 2020), destitution (Coddington et al., 2020), and operations of capital (Brankamp et al., 2023; Mezzadra and Nielson, 2019). In humanitarian protection, categories of more and less protected status proliferate: in Lebanon, people who registered with UNHCR before 2015 are refugees, those afterwards and merely “registered” (Janmyr and Mourad, 2018). Italy and other countries offer a form of humanitarian status that allows presence but does not offer the rights associated with asylum. Asylum-seekers are often prohibited from working while awaiting decisions on their claims, while those with refugee status face varying access to formal work. With respect to labor, these legal designations create surplus populations of workers more and less susceptible to exploitation (Bhagat, 2024; Lewis et al., 2015). Providing support in this void is a growing assemblage of private, non-governmental non-profit, and state agencies (Avgeri, 2024; Darling, 2022; Martin, 2024; Morris, 2023; Weiss, 2013; Williams, 2015) who engage refugee labor not through wage relations but “incentive payments” and other workarounds (Brankamp et al., 2023; Newhouse, 2025). Together, these processes work to set populations and spaces nominally outside of formal labor and social protection systems, generating adjacent and parallel economies premised on their destitution (Coddington et al., 2020). These designations contribute to spatial imaginaries of refugee camps as unproductive, inefficient, overly bureaucratic places held back by both idle refugee subjects and a lack of properly functioning markets (Brankamp et al., 2023). Refugeeness, as an exceptional legal category producing populations set outside “normal” everyday life, is particularly well-suited for incorporation into frontiering logics.

Humanitarian frontiering

Here we engage closely with recent work that mobilizes the frontier to conceptualize relationships between the differentiation and devaluation of displaced people, the intersection of racialized regimes of labor and refugee humanitarianism, and the role of extractive practices across these processes. This work draws broadly from recent work on resource frontiers (Tsing, 2005; Watts, 2017), which resonates with Gago and Mezzadra's (2017) and Mezzadra and Nielson's (2019) expansion of the concept of extraction as key operation of capital. Across this work, the concept of the frontier evokes both imagined spaces emptied of indigenous and non-human life *and* materially outside or newly available to mining or commodification. In other words, frontiering is at once imaginative, ideological projects; unruly, ungoverned spaces distant from central authorities; and practical projects of displacing people, privatizing spaces for extraction through legal and extra-legal means, and commodifying new objects (trees, minerals, or data). Both Watts (2017) and Tsing (2003, 2005) draw attention to the ambiguous legalities along resource frontiers, where different norms, agendas, and regimes come into conflict.

Frontier ideologies and territorialities have been integral to the occupation and dispossession of land and the displacement of indigenous people in settler colonial contexts, many of which have also generated humanitarian crises. In the United States, for example, a particular frontier ideology of white, native-born Anglo-Saxon supremacy justified displacement and dispossession of, first, Native peoples and subsequently Mexican-Americans living in the newly acquired Southwestern region (Launius and Boyce, 2021; Specht, 2019). The settler colonial history of the Mexico-US border thereby sought to create US territory as a cleansed white, Anglo-Saxon space, now "invaded" by migrants from the south, produced related but distinct settler colonial violence. Similarly, conceptualizing *urban frontiers* has provided fruitful vocabulary for understanding cycles of disinvestment and renewal, which also abandon and then displace working class and lower income residents (Smith, 2005). In many contexts, race, class, or caste provide a hierarchical social structure for these cycles, as racial projects devalue minoritized people and places through mutual association (Brankamp et al., 2023; Omi and Winant, 2015). Thus, *frontiering* relies upon various forms of territorialized racialization to displace and dispossess. Existing structures organize power in "the colonial present" (Gregory, 2004) in ways that enable devaluation of people and places, in turn enabling specific forms of investment, displacement, dispossession, and violence.

As Brankamp et al. (2023) argue, humanitarian spaces and practices are actively imaged as an "outside" of capitalism, characterized by problems that would be better solved through market-based programming, the development of a private sector and fostering of resilient, self-sufficient refugee subjects. In turn, the bounded, encamped spaces and subjects of Kenya's Kakuma camp was explicitly framed as a frontier ripe for market creation. On the one hand, "camps are folded into received wisdom about other 'unproductive' spaces though to lie outside the logics of capitalist markets," and on the other hand, refugees' informal markets formed through necessity offer nascent capitalist potential (Brankamp et al., 2023: 103843; see also Newhouse, 2015). Unpicking Kakuma's formation as a frontier, Brankamp et al. elaborate how the camp's role as "outside capitalism" enable specific practices of prospecting, speculation, and extraction to operate. These market-oriented camp reforms were proposed and implemented in the wake of Kenya's public divestment through structural adjustment programs, as well. Thus, they note how support for refugee entrepreneurialism resonated with the normalization of "hustle culture" more broadly, depicting refugees as idle, surplus, and without value and therefore "behind" in developmental terms. Crucially, the racialized, colonial imaginaries of the camp directly informed the market practices imposed there, a process which relies on both the exceptionality of refugee spaces and infrastructure, and the "fix" provided by market-based interventions to humanitarian problems.

Morris (2024) argues that these structures also condition mobility, asylum, and refugee governance, producing "asylum frontiers." Situated in often marginal places, like protected forests in Guatemala, Morris argues that asylum frontiers produce *multiple forms of value*: moral value generated through associations with refugee mobilities and globally constituted white saviorism; labor

value produced by refugee-specific labor regimes, like the UNHCR's "Green Jobs" program; political or geopolitical value from the Guatemalan state's cooperation with US demands for increased migration control in Central America; which in turn yields economic investment as development and migration management aid. While some of this value is rendered as profit or accumulated wealth, the asylum frontier circulates differentiated value forms in ways that further displace colonial inequalities between indigenous and *ladino* land holders. In addition to valuing refugeeness for a range of actors, asylum frontiers weave refugee regimes with regional labor regimes, developmentalism, and imperial geopolitics. As Avgeri (2024) has shown in the Greek context, humanitarian organizations operate specific labor regimes, relying on unpaid solidarity work, differentiated salary scales for international and local staff, and strategic use of Greece's broader financial crisis to recast Greek workers as "beneficiaries." Depending on the context, therefore, asylum frontiers both rely upon the differentiation of migrant/refugee, local, and INGO labor regimes and make them work together in place-specific ways.

Thus, this insightful work on camp, asylum, and settler colonial frontiers moves beyond observations of privatization, marketization, and neoliberalization of aid to displaced people. This literature reveals multiple, sometimes conflicting, sometimes mutually supporting intersections of humanitarianism and capitalism. In this article, we draw from Anna Tsing's work on "salvage frontiers" because it captures how humanitarian cash assistance forged encounters between humanitarian universalisms, financial regulations, technical infrastructure, and market logics, but without presuming the outcome of these encounters. Tracing the interface between forest conservation and logging, Tsing (2003, 2005, 2015) is interested in how movements formulated around a collective good can become intertwined with—but not completely absorbed by—speculative practices. As Mezzadra and Nielson (2019) point out, social solidarities and other social relations can be repurposed in these contexts, even if they persist. Salvage must be selected, repaired, perhaps reconstituted and then repurposed for use elsewhere, sometimes from previously salvaged components. For Tsing (2015), this recasting and recombination makes things anew: components do not carry their previous worlds with them and impose them whole cloth: once a commodity, *not* always and already a commodity and, therefore, not always purely capitalist. Salvage frontiers are, for Tsing, places where the terms are up for grabs, under negotiation, and under pressure for intense, rapid change, actively cobbling together operating frameworks and unwaged labor regimes. In this paper, we embrace Tsing's conceptualization of salvage as frontiering practice because it illuminates how a range of humanitarian frontiers operate through this kind of multiplicity: for example, how Morris' asylum frontiers bring multiple modes of valuation together in Guatemala; the coexistence of extraction and subtraction in European migration control (Aradau and Tazzioli, 2020); how the legacies of structural adjustment create cultural norms of marginalized self-sufficiency (Brankamp et al., 2023); an austerity-based merging of humanitarian worker and aid recipient in Greece (Avgeri, 2024); or the intersection of liberal norms of individual and market freedom with specific compliance requirements in humanitarian procurement (Midgley, 2024). While we certainly see evidence of market logics in humanitarian governance, our research and fieldwork also revealed enduring attachment to humanitarian principles, very unsettled relationships between for- and non-profit organizations and a central role for state governments that is often overlooked. Private sector actors are critical to humanitarian data analytics, for example, and cash assistance programs also increase state capacity to provide social welfare support and rely on state banks to move currency. Thus, even an explicitly market-based aid modality like cash assistance does not follow a linear path *from* aid *to* capital. We argue that while humanitarian interventions open and produce frontiers, the direction and conclusion of humanitarian frontiering cannot be assumed or foretold from the presence of private sector actors. Thus, humanitarian interventions open and produce frontiers, the direction and conclusion if humanitarian frontiering cannot be assumed or foretold from the presence of private actors. Humanitarian frontiering relies on salvage practices to provisionally bring together crisis framings, institutional responses, spaces, target populations, and humanitarian principles, thereby opening up encounters between capital logics, private sector actors, and humanitarian aid organizations.

Methodology: Multi-sighted research in a siteless field

Our project analyzed the narratives, norms, and debates surrounding humanitarian cash assistance in refugee contexts. We note that cash assistance is widely used in post-disaster contexts, poverty reduction, and other development and humanitarian programs, but our research questions emerged from previous research on changing migration, asylum, and refugee governance more broadly (BurrIDGE et al., 2017; Coddington et al., 2020; Garelli et al., 2018; Martin, 2021; Tazzioli and Garelli, 2020). Consultants circulating between organizations have been particularly important to building acceptance for cash assistance as a preferred mode of humanitarian aid. We came, therefore, to conceptualize our research as a “multi-sighted” analysis (Glick Schiller, 2023) of a “siteless field” (Rella, 2021) of transnational organizational networks, shared jargon, policy frameworks, and funding streams and a study of the circulation of site-based expertise. “Multi-sighted analysis . . . reveals how locally engaged actors participated as agents of globe-spanning processes” (Glick Schiller, 2023: 678); at the same time, remote and online working enables “workplaces” to become stretched and networked. Methodologically, focusing on global experts allowed us to identify and trace the tension between local, contextual knowledge production and global, scalable best practice, especially the role of highly mobile experts in creating global consensus for cash assistance leading up to and following from the Grand Bargain for Humanitarian Finance. Indeed, our interlocutors frequently referred to multiple, specific crises and places, both to highlight diverse approaches and to describe how learning in one context moved to another: between them, they were involved in cash programming in at least Georgia, Greece, India, Indonesia, Iraq, Jordan, Kosovo, Lebanon, Moldova, Niger, the Philippines, Poland, Sierra Leone, and Ukraine and had contributed multiple empirical studies, reports and guidance documents to global debate and consensus-building around cash assistance. Thus, our multisighted, but siteless fieldwork enriched our collaborative empirical research, but also produced novel insights and theoretical questions in their own right. Below, we analyze humanitarians’ ways of engaging with—and seeing like—markets, as part of a global transformation of humanitarian funding, innovation, and governance. Emphasizing humanitarian frontiering as an active, continual process, we argue that cash assistance works as a specific form of Tsing’s salvage frontier, in which humanitarian governmentalities both seek to colonize and incorporate market rationalities.

The authors were part of an Economic and Social Research Council (UK)-funded research team investigating how cash assistance and other digital innovations changed asylum and refugee governance (Cassani and Garelli, 2026; Spathopoulou and Tazzioli, 2021; Tazzioli, 2019, 2022a, 2022b; Tazzioli and Garelli, 2020). Between January 2021 and July 2022, the authors interviewed 34 people working with organizations including WFP and UNHCR, Mercy Corps, WorldVision, Save the Children, ICVA, A4EP, a technology advocacy organization, a biometric technology provider, independent consultants, and research institutes and think tanks working in the sector. All interlocutors have been anonymized and identifying information (such as information only the interlocutor would have) has not been included in this article. Between them, these organizations have managed most of the formal cash assistance distributed through the formal humanitarian sector since 2020 (see CALP Network, 2023). The timing of our interviews overlapped with Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in 2022 and the implementation of a new cash assistance coordination framework, allowing us to collect novel empirical data on cash assistance practice during an important moment of global debate (discussed in detail below). All interviews were conducted via video conference platforms, which had become our respondents’ normal way of working in 2021 and 2022, and lasted 30–90 minutes. Some people spoke to us as employees of a particular organization or network and confined their comments to that role. Others chose not to speak on behalf of their organizations, using annual leave or personal time to speak with us; this allowed them to draw from experience drawn across posts and roles to offer us a longer view of how cash assistance developed. We subsequently compared typed and written notes and analyzed them thematically. In addition to the interviews, Hanna Ruszczyk performed a digital ethnography, including 64 online events between June 2020 and December 2021 on humanitarian assistance, technology, data protection, digital connectivity, refugee, and migration governance. We also collected

and analyzed over 75 related reports on humanitarian cash assistance, digital technology, and regional refugee responses in MENA and Europe. Our approach allowed us to trace the recitation, repetition, and reiteration (Bialasiewicz et al., 2007) of particular narratives about cash assistance (both for and against), as well as critiques and counter-claims. In doing so, we were able to trace the circulation of expertise that was obscured by focusing on a single program or place. As the first multi-sited study of refugee cash assistance in geography, this article grounds our theoretical argument on rigorous triangulation between sources and places. Here we turn to our analysis of humanitarian frontiering in organisations' decision-making and evaluation of local markets.

Cash flows in crisis zones

Opening humanitarian frontiers

When formulating a crisis response, our interlocutors referenced their organizations' needs and analysis tools for evaluating which aid modality is appropriate for a given context, but they follow similar processes. Since the expansion of cash assistance, this process now includes a market assessment, measuring whether enough food and goods are available to meet a displaced population's needs, whether shops and stalls will sell to displaced people, whether people and goods can get to markets safely, and whether social and economic stability will be undermined by an influx of cash (Interview 9 March, 2022; Interview 6 April, 2022). Cash and voucher assistance are fundamentally market-based aid modalities, relying upon vendors, traders, and supply chains to distribute goods to meet basic needs. INGOs have developed a range of toolkits to help humanitarians with this step: for example, Emergency Market Mapping and Analysis (EMMA; Albu, 2010); Rapid Assessment of Markets (RAM; Shrestha, 2023); and Catholic Relief Services Minimum Market Guidance (Elit and Quick, 2021). CaLP Network (previously the Cash Learning Partnership) has been instrumental in providing training, knowledge exchange, and case studies for cash assistance programming in various contexts, for different groups and in different formats (CaLP Network, n.d.). These trainings reference the aforementioned toolkits as well, creating a shared set of vocabulary, norms, and working practices. These shared resources in turn work to harmonize cash assistance processes across organizations and to make it more accessible to new organizations. Training and knowledge-sharing networks like CaLP and coordination networks like the Common Cash Delivery Network (CCDN) thereby seek to create a shared vocabulary, technical practices, and ways of working. While networks and consortia worked together over time, our interlocutors mentioned that different missions, interpretations of humanitarian principles, data management practices, and competition between organizations required ongoing negotiation.

Pricing basic needs

The level of aid is one such negotiation. Once an organization selects cash as its preferred aid modality, it must calculate the level of aid. Sometimes national social protection (welfare) programs calculate a "minimum expenditure basket" (MEB) based on cost of living (Interview 6 April, 2022; e.g. Moldova in Blin and Cahill Billings, 2022); in other places, INGOs must calculate their own (e.g. CaLP Network and OXFAM, 2025). These calculations include further market analysis of the price of basic food items, taking age, gender, disabilities, and access to cooking facilities into account. In other words, from the start, cash assistance officers calculate need in terms of the price of market goods. They also must evaluate whether their targeted beneficiaries can access fair market prices.

Who gets aid is another point of negotiation. If the level of aid does not fully cover the level of need, as is often the case, then an INGO must decide on eligibility criteria, or a "targeting" strategy. These decisions are very much context-dependent, as some groups are differentially affected by different disruptions. In refugee contexts in Greece, Jordan, and Lebanon, where our team focused fieldwork, targeting focused on those most vulnerable to extreme poverty or other categories of

vulnerability. In Greece, cash assistance was expanded to vulnerable people who registered with UNHCR, but when UNHCR handed the cash program over to the Greek government, cash assistance was tied to living in dedicated camps. Other cash programs made assistance conditional on participation in integration programs (Interview 30 March 2022; Spathopoulou and Tazzioli, 2021). In Lebanon, UNHCR employed a “desk formula,” an algorithmic ranking of vulnerability determining which displaced Syrians received cash assistance on an annual basis (Interview 25 November 2020; see also Firoz, 2024; Janmyr and Mourad, 2018). In Jordan, displaced Iraqis received cash assistance on prepaid cards from 2008 to 2012. Displaced Syrians living in camps have received vouchers to use at supermarkets within the camps, while those living outside of camps could withdraw cash at ATMs (Interview 9 May, 2023; UNHCR, 2025). In contrast, Cash Working Groups in the Ukraine response preferred blanket or universal coverage in Ukraine and Moldova and including Ukrainian refugees in existing social protection/welfare systems in EU countries (Blin and Cahill Billings, 2022). In each context, decisions about who gets how much aid are negotiated between organizations competing for funding. In turn, these negotiations both produce displaced people as a population of market consumers and connect those market consumers to global circuits of humanitarian aid funding and mandates. Humanitarian frontiering includes, then, work to produce humanitarian markets, refugee-consumers, and regulatory frameworks recognizing both.

Negotiating humanitarian frontiers

Once cash has been agreed as the modality, we asked our participants how they go about arranging and coordinating cash assistance programs. While the process varied depending on the organization and context, between them they shared a complex negotiation process (1) between national governments and INGOs to determine the regulatory framework, Know Your Customer (KYC) identity verification regulations, and permission to operate in a given context; (2) negotiation with banks and financial service providers (FSPs) on currency exchange rates, transaction fees, risk-sharing, security challenges, data sharing, identity verification, and platforms; (3) between INGOs and local NGOs on who delivers what, where, how, how much, and when. KYC regulations require that account holders verify their identity in specific ways and national banking rules regulate who can and cannot hold an account. In many places, refugees cannot hold a bank account and are not able to verify their identities according to KYC rules. For example, KYC rules may allow use of a state ID and proof of address, but refugees may not be allowed state IDs in another country nor have adequate proof of address as they may not have a permanent or recognized dwelling. Moving frequently to set up new cash programs, our participants were involved in these negotiations in Georgia, Greece, India, Indonesia, Iraq, Jordan, Kosovo, Lebanon, Moldova, Niger, the Philippines, Poland, Sierra Leone, and Ukraine. Strikingly, they were consistent between organizations and experience: each program began as a “blank slate,” with bank, FSP, and INGO arrangements tailored to each context. In many ways, the particularities of national banking and currency regulations produce this situation; our interviewees in UNHCR and WFP shared that they are now working to sign Memoranda of Understanding with governments *in preparation* for crises, so that any regulatory changes, data-sharing agreements, and operating procedures can be in place (Interviews 7 March, 2022; 27 October, 2021; 1 July, 2022) rather than negotiated during a disaster or crisis response. Thus, cash assistance requires specific regulatory frameworks for currency transfers, data collection, and sharing and regulations.

Humanitarian cash assistance also requires that INGOs comply with funders’ anti-money laundering and anti-terrorism finance rules, in addition to KYC regulations discussed above. Where these are implemented in ways that disallow humanitarian cash aid, cash assistance becomes a vehicle for generating new regulatory frameworks. In particular, cash assistance opens space for generating new economic and political relationships between FSPs, international and local NGOs, and the state. For example, GIZ, the German humanitarian aid agency, worked directly with Jordan’s Central

Bank and the private sector to introduce e-wallets to facilitate remittances, cash assistance to displaced Syrians and financial inclusion, including piloting the regulatory framework (GIZ, 2023). It is one of a growing number of e-wallet platforms used to disburse cash to refugees in Jordan (Cassani and Garelli, 2026). In short, cash assistance as a preferred aid modality generates a frontier, in and through humanitarian principles and governance norms. They also produce new frontiers for humanitarian accountability and good governance norms. As O'Connor et al. (2014) have shown in the case of Haiti, disasters and humanitarian interventions have been key moments and avenues for harmonizing state practice with international audit culture to help “failing” states implement good governance. Our point here is that humanitarian frontiers *both* occupy spectacular sites and moments of crisis *and* produce legal, technical, and governmental changes that make lasting changes to regulatory frameworks.

Frontier governance

While cash assistance embeds markets in aid distribution and humanitarian organizations in markets, cash flows in crisis situations raise a series of questions for states and national banks, as well. In refugee situations, our interviewees' shared that Know Your Customer (KYC) and banking regulations were a common challenge. In Greece, Jordan, and Lebanon, refugees were not allowed to open and hold bank accounts to receive humanitarian aid. In the UK, the same is true for asylum-seekers. In these cases, INGOs and states must find alternatives for disbursing funds to recipients, usually drawing in private sector FSPs, such as gift voucher and debit card service providers. In Greece, UNHCR, then Catholic Relief Services, then the Greek Government used Mastercard debit cards to distribute funds, with point-of-sale transactions managed by a credit card transaction service provider (Tazzioli, 2019). In Jordan, Syrian refugees accessed cash held in accounts by the UNHCR by scanning their iris at ATMs and, more recently, e-wallets on mobile devices. In Lebanon, cash assistance was provided on debit cards which were then cashed out at ATMs. Yet in other places, UN agencies and INGOs have made agreements with local money changers or distributed cash in envelopes, especially in contexts where digital banking and identity verification are not in place (Interview 7 March 2022). In these contexts, further challenges arise around personal security, both to aid recipients and to financial service providers who may hold more currency than normal (Interview 6 April 2022).

Undergirding these programs are (1) the initial designations of a crisis zone and a recipient population; (2) the arrangement of an exceptional monetary framework for these people and places; and (3) the imbrication of people, places, commodities, and aid organizations through the circulation of money, mediated by the exceptional situation. Through bespoke arrangements, each cash program works through humanitarian frontiers, the context-specific arrangement of legal, political, economic, and social relations. In refugee contexts, in particular, these conditions are defined by international human rights definitions; UNHCR procedures for registering and/or recognizing refugees and “persons of concern”; and the government of camps and refugee spaces. Crucially, refugees are often excluded from formal participation in local economies or labor markets as such, but may be included as entrepreneurs (Turner, 2020), undocumented, volunteer, or informal workers (Martin and Tazzioli, 2023), producing value as othered laboring subjects (Brankamp et al., 2023; Morris, 2024). Humanitarian frontiers share, therefore, many characteristics of resource and extractive frontiers, but we wish to emphasize their juridico-legal and, crucially, spatial and territorial differences, as these constitute the very conditions for novel frontier arrangements.

Platform humanitarianism

To this point, we have focused on the point-of-disbursal to highlight that humanitarians engage with markets in a range of ways. We wish to make two points here: first, cash assistance requires particular

kinds of basic commodity circulation, secure access to shops and points of sale, and local willingness to sell things at a fair price to displaced people. There is, we argue, a humanitarian way of seeing the market, not as a site for the accumulation of money as capital or social obligation, but as a mode of distribution of the conditions of survival. Rapid market analyses evaluate whether local vendors can meet those needs, as well as other risks: in other words, humanitarian market assessments evaluate the efficiency of logistical and distributive capacities of existing markets.

Secondly, humanitarian organizations operate as entrepreneurial, opportunistic actors amongst themselves, seeing more like a startup. As one UN agency staff member explained to us, crises are always opportunities: donations directed at a specific crisis (such as Ukraine during our study period) create capacity and resources, allowing a critical mass of consensus and expertise to emerge (Interview 14 March 2022). As Klein (2008) argues, seeing crises as opportunities is endemic to contemporary capitalism, as well, a characteristic that has also been normalized and professionalized through philanthro-capitalist partnerships (Burns, 2019). According to our interlocutors, this critical mass then becomes a driver for implementing change beyond that particular context. Some major international organizations have developed platforms for distributing cash assistance, sometimes in collaboration with other organizations and/or the private sector. Examples include RedRose (redrose.io), KoboToolbox, and WFP's blockchain-based Building Blocks (wfp.org/building-blocks). Most cash assistance is distributed digitally and so digital infrastructure for tracking beneficiaries, transfers, and outcomes became important for organizations seeking to establish credibility as trustworthy cash assistance providers. These digital platforms in turn required new ways of working for on-the-ground humanitarians.¹ Where beneficiary information might previously have been held locally, perhaps on paper or perhaps in spreadsheets, the new platforms required data entry and maintenance. They require internet connections both for data maintenance and for point-of-sale and identity verification. Back-office roles involved in the actual disbursal of money became incredibly important, particularly in establishing the infrastructure for performing massive currency transfers across international borders. Thus, the spatiotemporalities of crisis zones provide moments of fast-paced change, where ideas can be tested and scaled up, accumulating experience and technical expertise in particular organizations.

These interfaces came to serve as central coordination platforms for multiple organizations working in a particular crisis zone. Building and providing the preferred, shared interface became a way of securing involvement—and funding, signaling a growing importance of platforms capture to organizations leading in cash assistance programming, which has emerged alongside the explosion of apps, hackathons, crowd-sourced mapping, and other digital approaches to humanitarian action (Aradau and Blanke, 2022; Burns, 2019; Cheesman, 2022; Tazzioli, 2022a). We asked all interlocutors to contemplate the future of cash assistance, the localization agenda, and humanitarian funding and many predicted a consolidation of cash assistance programming in the WFP, in particular, and other large INGOs such as WorldVision. Perhaps unsurprisingly, operating at scale, with technical and administrative capacity to develop new digital interfaces (or to commission them from others), privileged large, global organizations over smaller, national, and local NGOs. It was precisely these issues driving NGOs networks' advocacy within strategic decision-making, as the consolidation of cash programming amongst fewer global organizations threatened to alienate those programs from local organizations, knowledge, and accountability to beneficiaries (Interviews 7 July 2022; 8 July 2022). These tensions became acute with the growing acceptance of “multi-purpose cash” or cash assistance that is aimed at overall livelihood rather than a specific programmatic aim or focus. Prior to this, cash assistance was organized through traditional sectors, like WASH, housing, gender-based violence, childhood nutrition, education, etc. In working across sectors, multi-purpose cash posed systemic challenges to the humanitarian architecture because organizations had to forego ownership of specific programs and populations and then to coordinate, potentially collaborate, with competing organizations to implement cash assistance.

Humanitarian frontiering at work

According to one of our interlocutors, competition between INGOs was the key factor undermining coordination between organizations in cash assistance (Interview 11 October 2021). Here, cash assistance's frontiering capacities comes to the fore: in addition to imbricating banking, FSPs, INGOs, and states, it also forced new governmental arrangements between humanitarian organizations accustomed to competing. During our project, the coordination problem became so acute that 95 non-UN, non-governmental organizations signed a letter to the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) of the Grand Bargain calling for high-level discussions of the global cash coordination infrastructure. Frustrated with chaotic and unclear coordination processes, the Grand Bargain's Eminent Person² Jan Egeland convened a series of technical and policy-oriented panels. The final outcome resulted in a Cash Working Group model, with bespoke CWGs established for each MPC cash assistance program, led by national organizations and proactively involving local and national NGOs alongside international NGOs (Inter Agency Standing Committee, 2022). This model was immediately tested in the response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine and nearby countries' response to refugee arrival.

Agreed in February 2022, the same month Russia invaded Ukraine, the IASC model served as guidance for UNHCR's and partners' coordinated response efforts in Ukraine, Poland, Moldova, Romania, and other countries in the region. Roughly half of our interviews occurred during March–July 2022, and some of our interlocutors were directly involved in the regional response to Ukraine. We were able to follow the roll-out of multi-purpose cash programming in real time, which we have also followed through UNHCR weekly newsletters, CWG meeting minutes, evaluations, and reports. Poland and Moldova, in particular, offer contrasting examples of different humanitarian cash assistance frontiers, especially the role of states in shaping the distribution of cash. In the 2 months following Russia's invasion, 30% of Ukraine's population was displaced, rising to 6.863 million Ukrainian refugees globally as of February 2025, with 6.3 million residing in Europe (UNHCR, 2025). Moldova immediately asked UNHCR to take a prominent role in shaping their response and their Cash Working Group has been co-led by the Ministry of Labour and Social Protection and UNHCR. It came to be the fastest and largest cash program expansion in history (Key Aid Consulting, 2023a). Moldova is not a member of the European Union and did not have a history of receiving refugees. Its banking sector, social protection (welfare) systems, and economy were fragile compared to Poland, with regional political differences further destabilizing the government's ability to organize a response to arriving Ukrainians (Interview 1 July 2022). Refugees did not have access to the national social protection system and the system itself was under-resourced (Blin and Cahill Billings, 2022). The Moldovan banking system did not allow for voucher-style debit cards and individual bank account holders could not hold more than 10 debit or credit cards. Thus, the Moldovan government had to quickly create regulations to enable UNHCR to distribute humanitarian cash to displaced Ukrainians. UNHCR became the primary banking customer, with subaccounts created for displaced Ukrainians (eventually reaching 59k people in February 2025). UNHCR agreed, in addition, to support vulnerable Moldovans both to alleviate pressures on local services and housing and to avert potential conflict created by an influx of refugees with cash (Key Aid Consulting, 2023a). As of February 2025, Moldova continues to host 140,000 Ukrainian refugees and to provide MPC to 59,000 of them (UNHCR, 2025).

Poland, in contrast, is a European Union member state and has a well-established, well-resourced social protection system in place, as well as asylum and refugee procedures (Key Aid Consulting, 2023b). The EU's Temporary Protection Directive included a range of guarantees for Ukrainians arriving in EU countries including access to social protection and means of subsistence (European Commission, n.d.). Where Moldova's government worked in partnership with UNHCR to enable a parallel cash assistance program, Poland's government required assistance to flow through existing

structures and NGOs (Interview 1 July 2022). As of February 2025, MPC is provided to approximately 35,000 people of nearly 1 million Ukrainian refugees remaining in Poland (UNHCR, 2025). Poland's CWG has been co-chaired by national organizations Polish Humanitarian Action (March 2022–July 2023) and the Polish Center for International Aid (from August 2023; Key Aid Consulting, 2023b). Poland's national government and vibrant civil society organizations resisted international organizations' arrival and impulse to develop parallel systems, instead insisting that Polish organizations lead the response. Thus, international humanitarian actors found themselves developing coordination frameworks within an existing structure, rather than implementing one themselves as in Moldova. Here, Polish organizations and government explicitly critiqued and challenged INGOs' humanitarian fronting and limited their scope for configuring the legal, regulatory, and institutional terrains of humanitarian cash assistance.

By recomposing legal and financial norms to enable cash flows, humanitarian organizations engage in salvage practices; moreover, humanitarian governmentalities and reputational legitimacy help to make these arrangements possible. Humanitarian cash assistance is made possible through the arrangement of financial service providers, existing or novel regulatory and legal frameworks, UN or INGO-backed trust, and, crucially, state agreement to ancillary or parallel cash systems serving a defined (sometimes confined) population within the territory. Humanitarian fronting relies upon capitalist markets and supply chains, to be sure, but also operates precisely because refugees cannot be fully incorporated into national economies as refugees. The humanitarian sector's mobilization of protection mandates, human rights discourses, and ethical principles temper and shape fronting practices, giving these emerging markets distinct dynamics that deserve further research.

Conclusion

We have argued that cash assistance in refugee contexts exemplifies a specifically humanitarian form of fronting work. Our article makes four empirical and theoretical contributions to recent work on political economies of refugee governance. First, Brankamp et al. (2023), Morris (2024), and Avgeri (2024) above reveal how frontier logics become embodied through humanitarian labor regimes and territorialized through selective bordering of encampments. This article has analyzed an aid modality—cash assistance—rather than a site, providing fresh insights into how market-based humanitarian interventions do specific kinds of fronting work, drawing from fintech, platform, and digital innovation. Cash flows, in particular, include both de- and reterritorializing processes, and this research enables fresh analysis of these dynamics beyond specific encampments and sites. Second, this wider literature identifies argues that forms of value (Morris, 2024), spatial imaginaries (Brankamp et al., 2023), and racialized differentiation (Launius and Boyce, 2021) bring frontier imaginaries and material practices of displacement together. This article adds a novel empirical analysis of multiple registers of market-thinking: competition for funding between INGOs and local market assessments. Further, we engage Tsing's conceptualization of salvage frontiers to capture the multiple, distinct forms of market thinking. Third, by focusing on how cash assistance has traveled rather than a specific site, we show how states are very much involved in fronting work rather than replaced by marketization, especially negotiating new legal frameworks that enable refugees to receive cash. Humanitarian aid is by nature continually creating frontiers of intervention. Fourth, we revealed how cooperation and coordination have themselves become frontiers within the sector, as platform and dashboard development have become a strategic way to ensure funding through cash assistance programs. Humanitarian fronting operates, we argue, by strategically creating spaces for new configurations of legal frameworks, banks, financial service providers, NGOs, and UN agencies; in turn, platform provision and expertise in this cash assistance-specific fronting accumulates in organizations with sufficient scale and resource. As the US' withdrawal of aid funding in 2025 spectacularly and tragically demonstrated, humanitarian work does not operate in an expanding global market nor

does it accumulate capital or commodities in a traditional sense, but depends on a constrained, confined context defined primarily by donors, crises, and local conditions.

Research on territorial and extractive frontiers has much to learn, therefore, from refugee and migration control contexts, places where sovereign borders, national legal frameworks, universal human rights, and markets intersect. While we have argued that humanitarian cash assistance exemplifies the generative and improvisational character of frontiers, refugee mobilities dramatically impact traditional urban, economic, and regional studies sites and in ways that fundamentally change everyday life. Displacement for many is protracted and therefore refugee response is increasingly addressed as a problem for labor markets, livelihoods, and development (e.g. the World Bank's Private Sector for Refugees program). Whether housed in camps or private accommodation, displaced people broadly and refugees in particular affect urban housing markets (Sanyal, 2012) and contribute to city-making (Çağlar and Glick Schiller, 2021; Darling, 2021). As the UNHCR (n.d.) experiments with carbon credits, as well, displacement and migration will continue to create grounds for humanitarian frontiers.

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Notes

1. However, it is worth noting that two interlocutors asserted that cash-in-envelopes works best in some areas and worried that the *digital* infrastructures driving cash assistance would disincentivize cash assistance in places without sophisticated banking systems, leaving places with high need behind (Interview 7 March 2022; 1 July 2022).
2. The Grand Bargain's Eminent Person is a key leadership role "responsible for promoting and championing the Grand Bargain's commitments, specifically working to ensure that more resources end up with affected people by improving the effectiveness and efficiency of humanitarian assistance." They work with the Facilitation Group "to strategically advance the agenda, raise awareness of certain issues, and address challenges" (Inter Agency Standing Committee, 2021). Jan Egeland held the role 2021–2023 and simultaneously held a role at the Norwegian Refugee Council.

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