Despite record funding and organizations dedicated to humanitarian assistance, the prevailing narrative in our field is of a ‘humanitarianism in crisis’ - we are responding to an overwhelming number of acute crises with complex social, political and ideological challenges unprecedented in the history of humanitarian action. An examination of the true history of humanitarian action however reveals that many struggles confronting us today are neither entirely novel nor unique.

This course is premised on the belief that humanitarians rarely understand the full nature of the previous crises that have challenged our field and argues that only by better understanding these historical events can we improve our response to future crises. This class is a critical examination of these events and an exploration of the oft-repeated themes that continue to challenge humanitarian assistance to this day. Through thoughtful reflection and interactive discussion we will explore the progress we’ve made as a field and why lessons identified so often fail to become lessons learned.

We will start by exploring the humanitarian system’s origins in the Enlightenment principles of Western Europe and the transition from ‘humanitarianism’ as an abstraction to the concrete operational imperative that exists today. Each subsequent class will focus on a separate seminal event in public health and humanitarian assistance, namely - the Nigerian Civil War; the Ethiopian Famine; the West Africa Ebola epidemic; the Haiti earthquake; and the ongoing conflict in Syria. We will examine the history of the event itself as well as the role played by the humanitarian community – in their response, challenges, and lessons learned. Throughout the course, we will identify the recurring themes across crises and critically debate what impact these historical precedents have on the current and future humanitarian sector.

It is my hope that students will recognize that the lack of historical, operational, and institutional memory is a significant problem that challenges our field, and that by better understanding the underlying pillars and the historical events that have shaped the current humanitarian sector will we be better prepared to respond to future humanitarian crises.

This course is being offered as an elective with a target audience of graduate students in Forced Migration and Health in the Department of Population and Family Health.

Credits: 1.5
Usual pre-requisites: 1.5
Usual required permissions: None
Certificate requirement for:
Certificate elective for: