



An interactive platform to better understand humanitarian concepts and practices

RATIONALE

In order to respond timely and adequately to humanitarian needs, the humanitarian sector has the imperative to constantly evolve with agility and pertinence. And this in an environment of multiple tensions and pressures to deliver, to integrate a wider array of stakeholders and to address the issues and challenges. In order to evolve in this changing environment, it is important to be able to understand and properly formulate the main concepts developed in the humanitarian sector and analyse related operational issues.

However, the sector lacks a common reference framework, an intelligible and articulated scientific body of conceptual analyses. There is no common understanding, whether cultural or historical,

theoretical or practical, of central terms such as “humanitarianism”, “humanitarian action”, or even “humanitarian context and crisis”. The frontiers between humanitarian action and development remain blurred, arguably increasingly so. There are emerging concepts such as “resilience” that are frequently used but not properly analysed nor consensually understood. In exploratory interviews with more than 100 organizations, it was highlighted that conceptual confusions can negatively affect policies, practises and quality¹.

Aware of this gap and with a common willingness to respond to it, emerged the idea to collaboratively design a hub of knowledge co-creation and exchange with academia and humanitarian stakeholders: **The Humanitarian Encyclopedia.**

¹ A desk review of all documents in English and French that include definitions of humanitarian terms and concepts was carried out. None of the 28 documents identified, nor the sum of those, provided a comprehensive conceptual analysis that could inform the argumentation in debates, analyses and research in the humanitarian aid sector. This is a major gap for a sector in need of professionalization and whose constituency is expanding to include numerous new national and international actors.

APPROACH

Designed as a living process, the Encyclopedia will develop a **cross-cultural, transdisciplinary, multi-sectorial and non-prescriptive review of key humanitarian concepts**, combining theoretical and empirical analyses with field-based research.

Its online platform will be interactive and inclusive, inviting dialogue from anyone concerned with humanitarian aid into additional co-creation, attentive to include **national actors as well as international stakeholders**, and to **enhance localized knowledge**.

Engagements through collaborations and partnerships will be central, in particular with academia and think tanks, humanitarian organizations, humanitarian support groups, policy makers and technology support partners, as well as community leaders from affected populations. The mobilization of a wide community of stakeholders and end-users recognizes them as valid sources for knowledge production. Special attention will be given to **the existing initiatives in order to ensure complementarities and leverages, and to avoid overlap**.

The Encyclopedia will offer a critical perspective questioning the underlying truth-claims of the humanitarian concepts. It will strengthen the humanitarian community of practice, connecting "KnowledgePoints" within and between organizations.

The goal of the Humanitarian Encyclopedia is a more informed humanitarian community delivering quality programming thanks to shared and contextualized analyses as well as improved dialog among stakeholders.

ADDED VALUE

By 2020, the "living" Encyclopedia will engage a broad constituency of local, regional and global humanitarian actors, and bring about more reflective, effective and creative humanitarian decision making, while constituting a milestone in the scholarship of contemporary humanitarian action.

It will be:

- **An incubator** articulating past and current scientific and empirical knowledge. The Humanitarian Encyclopedia will explore the different ways key humanitarian concepts are understood across time, disciplines, cultures, contexts and organizations. It will not seek to create new norms but instead bring much needed clarity to the core concepts and constructs, through a cross cultural and multidisciplinary approach.
- **A bridge** between scholars and practitioners, populations and organizations, organizations and donors, humanitarian insiders and outsiders, from different historical experiences and cultural backgrounds.
- **Spaces to co-create**, acknowledging the knowledge heritage outside and within the sector, building from it and transforming it. Co-creation and crowdsourcing will be an integral part of developing the knowledge base and localizing it.

OBJECTIVES

- To improve the quality of humanitarian dialogues and debates
- To support innovation by a stronger knowledge-policy interface
- To contribute to the improvement of humanitarian strategies and policies
- To highlight operational challenges with regards to concepts
- To strengthen the localization process acknowledging the role of diverse stakeholders

A PROJECT BENEFITTING MANY STAKEHOLDERS

HUMANITARIAN SUPPORT GROUPS

Groups engaged in humanitarian standards setting, evaluation, training support, etc.

ACADEMIA

Research centres, academic institutions and think tanks

POLICY STAKEHOLDERS

Policy makers, aid agencies, national and local authorities, donors

OTHER STAKEHOLDERS

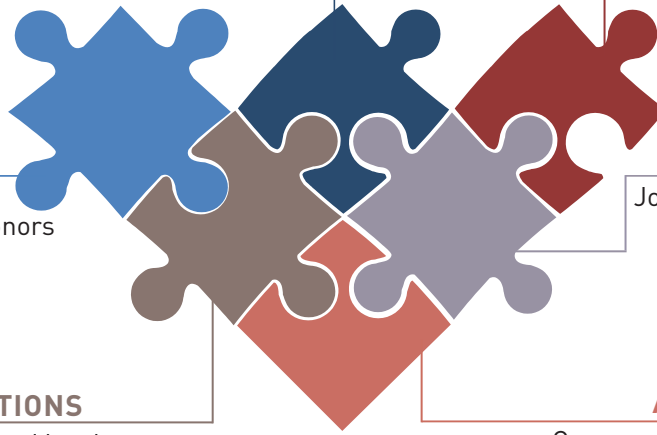
Journalists, civil society groups, private sector and the military

HUMANITARIAN ORGANIZATIONS

International, regional, national and local organizations providing humanitarian aid, as well as their consortia and alliances

AFFECTED POPULATIONS

Community leaders, local volunteers of humanitarian organizations, and other members of affected communities



The Humanitarian Encyclopedia will provide affected populations with a simplified conceptual framework empowering them in their interaction with aid workers, while contributing to the professionalization of the growing humanitarian sector and participating in the institutionalization of humanitarian studies.

COLLABORATIONS

The Encyclopedia is conceived as a collaborative project mobilizing humanitarian organizations, academic centres, think tanks and other actors involved in humanitarian action across the world, in addition to affected populations.

The Encyclopedia will strongly encourage engagement and **contribution of community leaders**, facilitated by civil society groups associated to the project. In field research cycles in particular, the perception of affected communities will help support a self-critical approach among humanitarian actors and be integral to the localization of knowledge.

Partnerships with **humanitarian organizations** will support co-creation in the field research cycle, tools development and the dissemination as well as the sustained crowdsourcing stages of the project.

Partnerships with **humanitarian support groups** will also support the collaborative review and help confront the conceptual research with field realities. More specifically, they will ensure that the project benefits from the established assets of these institutions (e.g. knowledge, networks) and that it fuels their own mission (e.g. standards setting, training, evaluation, leadership development).

Partnerships with **research centres** will bring more opportunities for knowledge-sharing and visibility of research particularly developed by actors in the South.

To deliver the necessary knowledge-sharing tools and a dynamic platform reaching constituent communities, further partnerships will be developed with **expert knowledge sharing technology** to deliver technological and knowledge management expertise as well as further collaborative dissemination.

GOVERNANCE

In order to guide the project development, an Advisory Board has been established including representatives from operational organizations and organizations supporting the reflection and quality process of the humanitarian sector. Members come from different parts of the world (Asia, Africa, MENA and Europe) with a diversity of approaches (providing direct assistance and/or protection activities, strengthening local, national or international stakeholders, evaluating, researching and/or counselling humanitarian stakeholders).

Next to the Advisory Board, the Scientific Committee comprises academic stakeholders, coming from various disciplines, academic or policy and research organizations, and countries. This ensures gender, cultural as well as generational balance among participants.

FUNDING

The first funding cycle is from January 2017 to December 2019, with the entire project from January 2017 to December 2021.

All funds received will be managed by the CERAH - Centre for Education and Research in Humanitarian Action - a joint centre of the University of Geneva and the Graduate Institute. The incubation stage was financed with the generous support of the Government of Switzerland.



GET INVOLVED

- **ACADEMIC SCHOLARS:** consider writing on a concept, based on your theoretical expertise and/or field research.
- **HUMANITARIAN PRACTITIONERS and LEADERS OF HUMANITARIAN ORGANIZATIONS** (international, national, local): join the discussion to challenge the conceptual analysis and confront it with your operational realities; inform the design of the project and plan with us how your teams may gain knowledge while adding value to the Encyclopedia.
- **DONORS:** consider supporting this innovative project financially. A full project proposal is available on request.

If you want to take part in the project or are interested in more information, please contact Prof Doris Schopper:

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