

Research report

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Summary

For a long time, humanitarianism in the Latin American and the Caribbean (LAC) region was perceived as something created and needed elsewhere. More recently, the convergence of multiple humanitarian crises -and structural vulnerabilities- and the increasing realisation that better and coordinated responses are the key to improved governance, has put to the fore the discussion around who and how humanitarian crises are governed in the LAC region.

In this research report, the perspectives and opinions of experts shed light on key aspects of such governance, in terms of who responds, who makes the decisions and what is the role of affected populations within these processes.

Interestingly, humanitarian governance in LAC remains a diverse and contextual endeavour that involves a multiplicity of actors and local dynamics that illuminate the need to broaden our understanding of humanitarianism beyond traditional frameworks, standards and actors.

INTRODUCTION

Context of the research

This study is part of a larger research project on [Humanitarian Governance: accountability, advocacy alternatives](#) (Hum-Gov) funded by European Research Council advanced grant No. 884139. The research project is coordinated by Prof. Dr Dorothea Hilhorst and Dr Rodrigo Mena from the Hague Humanitarian Studies Centre based at the International Institute of Social Studies of the Erasmus University Rotterdam.

The overall objective of the Hum-Gov project is to “understand ongoing changes in humanitarian governance and explore and advance the spaces and strategies that have opened up for reform ‘from below.’” (International Institute of Social Studies, no date) At the same time, the project sheds light on “how civil society actors and crisis-affected people shape humanitarian governance by using accountability and advocacy.” (Ibid).

To achieve this objective, the Hum-Gov project is geographically delimited to three countries: Colombia, Democratic Republic of Congo, and Ethiopia.

Purpose of the research

The establishment of the Humanitarian Observatories has been key to the advancement of the Hum-Gov project in all three countries. Important to this research report is the launch of the [Latin America and the Caribbean Humanitarian Observatory](#) (LAC Humanitarian Observatory) in 2022. Based at the Universidad de Los Andes in Bogotá, Colombia, the Observatory has a regional outreach rather than national.

The LAC Humanitarian Observatory is a space for co-creation of knowledge, where its members bring in their multidisciplinary expertise, interests and knowledge around humanitarian action and related topics. Given the different understandings of humanitarianism and the governance of crises, this study seeks to unveil different perspectives and notions on the topic from the voices of experts and practitioners in the humanitarian field.

As a region, Latin America and the Caribbean is diverse and complex, where different crises converge: the impact of natural hazards, mixed migration flows and forced displacement prompted by armed violence. Conversely, humanitarian actions are present in one form or another throughout the region -from Haiti to Brazil- but the meaning of humanitarianism is still contested or scarcely problematised (Mena et al., 2022).

Therefore, the main objective of this study is to **understand the trends and processes of humanitarian governance in the Latin American and Caribbean region.**

Methodology

This study was conducted between 2022 and 2024 both online and in-person. The method for data collection was a Delphi interview process, which aims to obtain a group opinion or perspective by interviewing a panel of experts (Taghipoorreynah, 2023). The participation in the study included two in-depth interviews, with a view to laying the groundwork for further discussion.

The data collection process consisted of two rounds of interviews with a total of 9 experts. The first one was an in-depth interview to uncover the main notions and conceptualisations, while the second round delved into common opinions or significant disagreements between participants. Additionally, the second round sought to clarify some responses. **Table 1** presents an overview of participants and their affiliation:

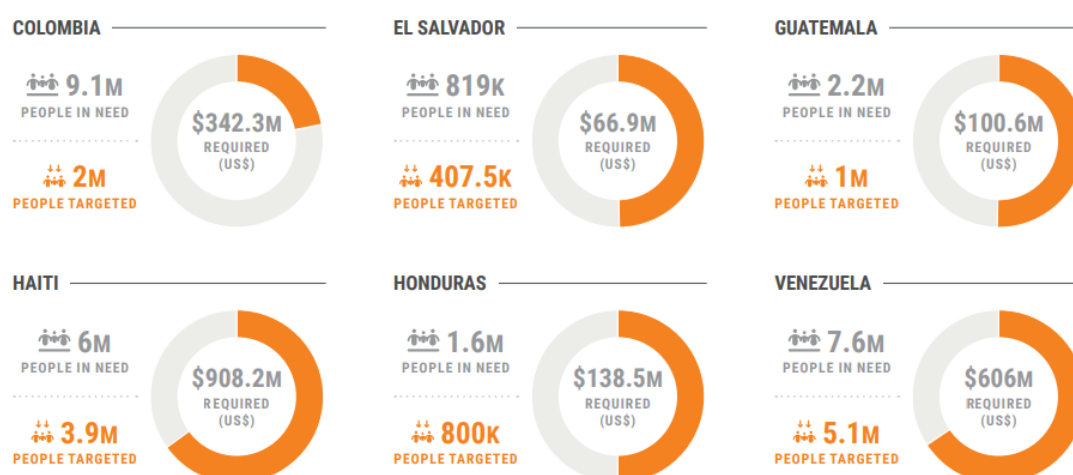
Table 1: List of research participants

Participant ID	Participant affiliation	Country*	Round 1	Round 2
Participant 1	Academia	Colombia, Brazil.	√	√
Participant 2	Humanitarian INGO	Colombia	√	
Participant 3	Academia and humanitarian public entity	Colombia	√	√
Participant 4	Humanitarian INGO	Colombia	√	√
Participant 5	Humanitarian INGO	Central America and the Caribbean	√	√
Participant 6	Humanitarian INGO	Venezuela, Colombia	√	√
Participant 7	Humanitarian NGO	Colombia	√	
Participant 8	Academia	Chile	√	√
Participant 9	Humanitarian INGO	México	√	√

*The country does not necessarily denote origin or nationality. Rather, it is the country (or countries) in which the participants relate to, work and/or have humanitarian knowledge about.

Important to this analysis is the humanitarian situation of countries in the region, which makes the selection of participants pertinent for this Delphi study. As shown in the previous table, participants related and/or were knowledgeable about countries (Colombia, El Salvador, Guatemala, Haiti, Honduras and Venezuela) that rank high in the Latin America and the Caribbean region for having significant numbers of people in need of some form of humanitarian assistance, as shown in the following figure elaborated by the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) in 2025:

Figure 1: Latin America and the Caribbean Humanitarian needs and response plans 2025 -OCHA



Source: UN OCHA 2025

Finally, the analysis of the data consisted of a thematic classification and analysis of interview transcripts with the aid of Atlas TI software. The main analytical themes related to humanitarian governance are *definition of humanitarian action in context; decision-making; actors; coordination; positive aspects; challenges; accountability; and the role of affected populations.*

KEY CONCEPTS

Humanitarian action

The term is broad and can be defined from different situated perspectives. Unlike the more limited or narrow conceptualisation of humanitarian aid, which usually is criticised for depicting a one-way endeavour to assist people in need, in this research humanitarian action “comprises assistance, protection and advocacy in response to humanitarian needs resulting from natural hazards, armed conflict or other causes, or emergency response preparedness.” (Inter-Agency Standing Committee, 2015, p. 8). The aim of preventing and reducing human suffering is at the core of this set of actions.

Humanitarian governance

Michael Barnett (2013, p. 379) defines humanitarian governance as “the increasingly organized and internationalized attempt to save the lives, enhance the welfare, and reduce the suffering of the world’s most vulnerable populations.” While this definition remains true to the practice of humanitarianism across the world, in this study the perspective of humanitarian governance is more complex and broader as it seeks to incorporate a diversity of actors besides international agencies and

organisations, as already proposed by Hilhorst and Jansen (2010) in their humanitarian arena perspective as an *interplay between humanitarian organisations, the government, affected communities and others*.

Accountability

Accountability has become a key concept and practice in humanitarian action, especially amidst concerns of misconduct and different forms of abuse in the sector. The issue of accountability has been developing in recent years, especially within the international decision-making spaces, whereby the importance of responsibility towards affected populations is called for. While there are different levels (upwards, downwards, sideways, etc.) and forms (formal, informal) of accountability, in this study it “concerns processes of holding actors responsible for actions.” (Hilhorst, Melis, et al., 2021, p. 366). Such process entails at least three components: take account, give account and responsibility and taking ownership for actions (Ibid).

Humanitarian advocacy

Advocacy is part of the core activities that humanitarian actors undertake in their work. Broadly speaking, humanitarian advocacy “refers to the various interventions made by organizations on behalf of a collective interest or a given group, in an attempt to better their situation by negotiating with or putting pressure on governments with regards to specific policies, practices, legislations and so on.” (Hilhorst, Hagan, et al., 2021, p. 126). This conceptualisation relates to the traditional ways in which humanitarian advocacy is operationalised by humanitarian organisations. However, in this research brief humanitarian advocacy also involves the initiatives by affected populations to advance their rights, needs and interests, as proposed by Hilhorst & van Wessel (2022).

MAIN FINDINGS

I. Defining humanitarian action in the LAC region: from standard to contextual

“[humanitarian action] means alleviating human suffering, which is a classical definition. But in the context of Latin America, it is sometimes a bit of a thin line because it is alleviating human suffering due to a disaster, a conflict or to respond to a rupture in the normal functioning of society [...] in this region, I repeat, it is a complex crisis that lasts for years, the Venezuela crisis, the crisis in Colombia, the drought crisis in Central America are already prolonged things where humanitarian and development actions continue, so sometimes it is a little difficult to distinguish.”
(Participant 5, 2022)

From Mexico to Chile, the term “humanitarian” is employed with caution. Governments do not want to appear as if their capacities to respond to crises are inadequate (Mena et al., 2022). Humanitarian action in LAC has a significant political connotation, which also involves discussions around national sovereignty and intervention. In fact, for some people, a humanitarian crisis is something that occurs elsewhere -in other continents- or produced by external circumstances -such as the Venezuela mixed migration crises-, creating some forms of disconnections with the lived experiences of millions of people in LAC (ibid. 2022; Interviewees).

Nonetheless, participants agreed on one thing: the contextual dynamics of a country or a region are crucial in the definition of humanitarian action. This means that context matters when defining humanitarian action: a response to a hurricane in Mexico mostly involves the provision of material goods, shelter and basic health services, while humanitarian interventions in Haiti deal with protection and sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) issues. Such context is not only country-based but also locally diverse. A good example is Colombia, where a prolonged armed conflict and mixed migration flows create two different humanitarian crises that are perceived differently by the government, humanitarian organisations and individuals.

II. A wide range of humanitarian actors

The inclusion of a diversity of actors as humanitarians is supposedly a political act. In the opinion of participants, many actors can become humanitarians based on two main premises: the availability of funds to undertake humanitarian work and the legitimacy to do so by communities. Interestingly, aside from international organisations and agencies, participants signalled that the national and local governments have the main role during a crisis. However, different capacities and resources demand the complementary work by other actors, namely INGOs, NGOs, faith-based groups, academia, media, private sector, non-state armed groups and spontaneous grassroots groups.

Participants also highlighted the role of the international donor, mostly in terms of power and decision-making. Human mobility situations -e.g., people on the move from Central America to North America, mixed migrants from Venezuela, etc.- are perceived as a priority, whereas responses to disasters and internal conflict or turmoil seem to be underfunded.

In terms of relevance, participants pointed out to the lack of recognition and unjust competition that national and local NGOs face vis-à-vis international humanitarian actors:

I think local NGOs are underrepresented or undervalued and the problem with that is that they were there before all the rest of us got there and they will continue to be there [...] Beyond the discourse in which everyone says 'we have to support local NGOs', 'local capacity', 'grassroots organisations', this works well in the discourse, but in the end these organisations do not have, for example, clear mechanisms to access funding sources with donors. So, they have to compete with international organisations that have more structure. Participant 9, 2022)

However, they also highlighted their importance in a more sustained and collaborative work with affected communities:

"I think that civil society organisations and community-based organisations are the most important. They are the ones who know the most about the territory and the dynamics that occur in it. They are the ones who can really say what is happening, what is not happening, and they are a bridge of communication between people and organisations." (Participant 4, 2022)

A key realisation in the LAC context is the role of the state as a humanitarian actor, which in specific contexts is highly contested. To illustrate the latter, it is valid to reflect on the case of Colombia, since most of participants were knowledgeable about the country dynamics. Here, the state embodies the co-optation of the agendas, repertoires, legitimacy and financing of humanitarian action. This can be

further reflected in aspects like instrumentalisation or its role as the main gate keeper of humanitarian action. This significant role also implies that humanitarian practice at the grassroots level is sometimes thought of as parallel to the state. However, the state's significance does not always translate into a strong, rational or efficient state that crisis-affected populations continuously demand.

III. From the manual to the practice: coordinating the responses among many actors

"the humanitarian system does not work in an articulated way, where all the pieces fit together or where all actors seek the same objectives. I would say that there are contexts where things work very well because the responses are led and coordinated by the state - Costa Rica comes to mind. However, this is the exception, not the rule. In my opinion, humanitarian decisions continue to be taken far away from where the needs are, and the opinions of local actors or affected people are rarely taken into account, no matter how much they are put on the table for dialogue." (Participant 6, 2022).

International humanitarian actors promote reform agendas aimed at making a more coordinated and localised humanitarian system (e.g., Grand Bargain). However, participants' opinions denote the persistence of power imbalances, especially in terms of decision-making processes. In this regard, one of the participants suggested there is distance between the "manual" and how things happen in everyday humanitarian practice. In theory, the decisions concerning humanitarian action are the responsibility of the states, but participants suggested that this is not always the case and that context and donor agendas shape humanitarian agendas.

From the perspective of humanitarian practitioners, the existence of the national *Humanitarian Architecture* has significant implications for coordination. In their view, the cluster structure alongside the decentralisation via local humanitarian teams creates spaces for participation, dialogue and better coordination. However, in Colombia for example, this structure seems more demanding for local humanitarian NGOs, which face more challenges to prove their neutrality, their capacity and their ability to respond to humanitarian emergencies, as one of the participants indicated.

IV. Progress in how crises are governed but challenges remain

Participants shared a common perspective regarding the positive aspects of humanitarian governance in the countries they work in and, more generally, in the LAC region. First, the visibility of crises in the public agendas and discussions is now central for better governance. For instance, migration crises throughout the region receive much mediatic attention, and, in the opinion of one of the participants, this puts more pressure on the governments and humanitarian actors to be responsive and responsible for such dynamics; *"actually, during political campaigns [...] all the candidates had to say something about migration, which is something that wasn't done before [...] the candidates are forced to state their position and how they will manage the crisis"* (Participant 9, 2024).

Second, research participants recognised progress in how humanitarian action is conceived throughout the region. They coincided in the fact that aid, in the form of kits, food donations or blankets, is not anymore, the dominant form of humanitarian action in LAC. As a result, humanitarian actors develop a more comprehensive response to the needs of populations, including aspects, like legal orientation,

protection, cash transfers and psychosocial support. This comes along with a shifting perspective of affected populations that supersedes the simplistic notion of “recipients” and “victims”.

Third, participants -though not unanimously- highlighted that the coordination of humanitarian responses amongst different humanitarian actors is a positive improvement. Significantly, the spaces created for communication, articulation and distribution of responsibilities are the best way to avoid duplication and ineffective responses, as participants in Colombia and Mexico referred from their own experiences in sector. In a way, the progress is an outcome of stronger states and institutions, which seek to keep control of how and where humanitarian actions take place.

However, it is misleading to suggest that all the countries in the region are the same. Here, the issue of capacity and competence becomes relevant. Participants questioned that some countries have the capacities to respond to humanitarian crises but not the competence. However, the capacities of a country like Haiti vis-à-vis those of Chile are quite different and asymmetrical.

Hence, a series of challenges in the governance of humanitarian crises remains. While some of the challenges raised by research participants were very contextual and shaped by the type of crisis they were familiar with, the majority pointed out corruption as a problem that exists at all levels. Corruption is not only harmful but deteriorates the trust in the humanitarian system:

Corruption harms relationships and trust, I think it is the worst enemy we have in development, in risk reduction, and probably in humanitarian as well, because it erodes trust, and trust is extremely important in all these sectors (Participant 8, 2022).

International agencies have a lot of conflicts of interest and contribute to local corruption. (Participant 1, 2024)

Capacity is when you have the resources, the skills and the competence, when you know how to use all that. So, if you don't use it, it's because of political interest, corruption. (Participant 6, 2024)

Similarly, participants argued that humanitarian actors are responsible for the instrumentalisation and politicisation of humanitarian action, especially in contexts of armed violence or political fragility. In her experience as an INGO humanitarian worker, one participant said, *“the use of the humanitarian discourse by different actors -for example, some local state actors or armed groups- is instrumentalised, to get votes, to gather information from the population [...] There is an erosion of humanitarianism in Colombia.” (Participant 2, 2022).*

V. Accountability: ticking the box or responsible practice?

We, for example, apply it. Before, this issue of accountability was towards the donors. We had to be accountable only to the donor, or to the state for how the money was spent, for how we intervened, and the communities were never taken into account. Lately I have seen that accountability should also be to the community. (Participant 4, 2022)

Starting from the translation of the term accountability into Spanish, participants’ opinions regarding accountability differed. Most of the participants understood the term in English, but in each context the word can be translated as *rendición de cuentas* or *responsabilidad* (responsibility). The first one

is commonly associated with annual reports delivered by public entities or intergovernmental agencies. In broader terms, this form of reporting is mainly financial and serves as a checks and balances for said institutions. It is usually one-way, and no feedback is expected. *Responsabilidad* is more organic as it means performing a good work and be responsible for making a good use of resources and people's wellbeing.

In terms of accountability mechanisms in humanitarian practice, some of the participants were convinced that strong mechanisms exist, especially towards donors. They pointed out to the significant improvement of accountability systems within the humanitarian sector, whereby more instruments and guidelines are put in place for better outcomes. Other participants questioned the existence of accountability mechanisms in the sector, which often are a requirement from the governments or donors. However, in practice, they fail to hold humanitarian actors accountable for misconduct or misuse of resources.

Importantly, participants suggested that accountability mechanisms need to be attuned to the context and the needs of the population. On one hand, the excessive amount of reporting implies that humanitarian workers -especially those in the field- have to deal with complicated formats and requirements, aspect that takes time away from other relevant tasks. On the other hand, existing mechanisms are barely accessible or known by affected populations (e.g., digital complaint forms).

Mechanisms do exist. Within humanitarian agencies, accountability sometimes becomes untenable and immobilising, like a straitjacket. It becomes challenging for humanitarian staff/humanitarian workers to have to work on a myriad of reports, indicators, and most of their work time has to be devoted to meeting those requirements and standards. (Participant 3, 2022)

VI. Social mobilisation is strong in the region and translates to humanitarian contexts

As stated before, one of the improvements of humanitarian governance in the region is a different perspective on crisis affected populations, whereby their agency and active role during humanitarian crises is acknowledged and valued. Research participants recognised that communities have learned to navigate humanitarian structures to demand their needs. This is particularly visible in communities that have been long exposed to vulnerability, for example, armed conflict. Conversely, for other populations, like transit migrants, forms or organisation are limited and difficult due to constant mobility, as evidenced in the migration from Central America to North America.

Nonetheless, the LAC region has an advantage, which relates to the long tradition of social organisation and social movements, which is why affected communities organically consider advocacy and incidence as ways to defend their rights and raise their needs during crises. Though, participants disagreed in the ways to name this type of activities. For one of the university professors there is a significant number of experiences of social mobilisation in the LAC countries; however, he argued against labelling those within the framework of humanitarianism.

CONCLUSIONS

- Diverse understandings of humanitarianism and humanitarian action relate to the contextual practices of actors on the ground. While the obligation to prevent and alleviate human suffering is present in each context, the ways in which such actions are labelled and carried out differ.
- A significant contribution of the LAC region to broadening our understanding of humanitarian governance is the multiple actors involved in humanitarian action. Again, the use of certain labels and categories (who is a humanitarian) depends on which type of crises and in which region the events take place. However, from the experiences of research participants, the responsibility to act amidst crises is a call that involves a diversity of actors, besides the traditional participants of the international humanitarian system (e.g., religious leaders or private actors).
- Positive improvements in the governance of humanitarian crises relate to better coordination and communication mechanisms amongst the actors involved. At different levels, the governments in the LAC region have institutional capacities and response systems put in place to the management of crises, in which external actors are considered complementary humanitarian actors. Moreover, in terms of international humanitarian systems, better coordination is mainly possible due to the creation of formal -and informal- spaces for dialogue and coordinated actions. However, most of the times, these spaces remain internationally-led, creating the need for local and national actors to constantly prove their legitimacy and capacity.
- Accountability in a wider sense of responsibility is an unfinished task in the humanitarian sector -either led by the government, national or international organisations-. While accountability mechanisms are part of the practice of humanitarian systems, many questions remain about the actual use of data collected and the ways in which affected populations or local actors can make of those mechanisms to demand better and timely humanitarian responses.
- Affected populations in LAC have a better understanding of their rights and entitlements due to the strong trajectories of social mobilisation in the region for many decades. Certainly, there are differences across geographies and different types of crises, however, affected populations, especially those exposed to long-term vulnerable conditions, exercise their rights to demand and advocate for the improvement of their livelihoods.
- This research is limited and contextual to the opinions and perceptions of the participants, which is the main objective of the Delphi method. However, more encompassing studies of this nature will require additional data collection tools and other sources to enrich the analysis. Future research in this topic will benefit from comparative perspectives, especially amongst countries exposed to long-term humanitarian crises.

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