

Reforming Humanitarianism ‘from below’

Based on the article: “Humanitarian Observatories: insights for reforming humanitarianism from below”*

Keywords

Humanitarian Action; Humanitarian Governance; Humanitarian Observatories; Humanitarian Arena; reform; localization; accountability; advocacy; alternatives; living lab

Thea Hilhorst, Kaira Zoe Alburo-Cañete and Tom Ansell

November 2025

Key terms and concepts:

Humanitarian Arena

The ‘**Humanitarian Arena**’ is a theory of governance that presents a picture of humanitarian contexts as places where multiple actors all affect aid outcomes. This approach places international actors on the same footing as local, national, citizens groups, the private sector, etc. Each actors uses their own social agency to negotiate their way through the context: and so each actor, whether a local civil society organization, regional government, national agency, or international humanitarian organization, can impact upon aid outcomes.

Politics of knowledge

The ‘Politics of Knowledge’, is an ongoing discussion about the form, origin, and valuation of different knowledge systems. Within the humanitarian system, we can think of international “experts” using the same, technocratic, knowledge in two completely different contexts, despite a local/national partner having (in this example) more “valuable” or useful knowledge that is attuned to local realities.

Introduction

All around the world, initiatives evolve of people in crisis-affected areas to get together to engender 'humanitarian reform from below'. This research brief is about one such initiatives: the movement of humanitarian observatories that have been set up in now already 16 countries.

This research brief summarises the [article](#) 'Humanitarian Observatories: insights for reforming humanitarianism from below', published in the Journal of International Humanitarian Action in 2025. The article is a collaborative piece between several researchers that have, together, developed the first three [Humanitarian Observatories](#). The Observatories were created as part of the ERC-funded research project '[Humanitarian Governance: Accountability, Advocacy, and Alternatives](#)', led by Dorothea Hilhorst and Rodrigo Mena at [The Hague Humanitarian Studies Centre](#), part of the International Institute of Social Studies (Erasmus University Rotterdam).

The article includes a conceptual framework rooted in recent developments within the humanitarian sector: the first around equitability to local partners, as well as placing knowledge from people and organisations "on the ground" on a more equal footing to "international knowledge". This framework is then expanded upon through a dialogue between the researchers that have coordinated the first three Humanitarian Observatories.

Background: Trends in Humanitarian thinking since the 2016 World Humanitarian Summit (WHS)

- A move towards seeing Humanitarian action 'from below': recognizing the primacy of the role of national organisations and affected people in responding to crises in their own context(s), especially after the WHS in 2016
- Integration of local and national actors within decision-making structures, supported by pooled financing for use by local or national organisations, and a greater appreciation of non-international partners in general. This is based on two positions:
 - The legal thinking that national organisations have the first responsibility and lead role in crisis response
 - The ethical point that national and local organisations often take the biggest role in responding to crisis, but are almost always treated as the 'implementing partner'. National and local staff members are also almost always paid less than their international counterparts, too.

What are the Humanitarian Observatories?

The Humanitarian Observatories are an initiative that seeks to reveal the ways that local and national actors are able to work together, advocate for reform, develop knowledge and do research, both in their local context but also in the wider humanitarian system.

“Networks of diverse stakeholders (including but not restricted to the triangle of authorities, humanitarians, and affected communities) that seek to exchange knowledge, learn, and advocate to reform humanitarian policy and practice in their context” (p.5)

The first three Observatories were opened in 2023, based in:

- Addis Ababa, Ethiopia
- Bukavu, Democratic Republic of the Congo
- Bogota, Colombia (now regionally focusing on Latin America & the Caribbean)

The Observatories are self-organising and self-governing. Each is coordinated by a small team, and the Observatories Network provides support at request. Observatories are supported by a seed fund that is provided to assist with holding meetings, producing knowledge outputs, or creating and disseminating advocacy materials.

Observatory key qualities:

- Self-organising
- Contextually rooted
- Brings together multiple actors
- Self-governing
- Can focus on (any/all of) governance, advocacy, dialogue, discussion, research



How can all of this be applied in practice?

The design of the Observatories is grounded in three main assumptions:

- 1) Humanitarian action is contextual, and no two humanitarian responses look the same. Accordingly, there should be no standard format for humanitarian dialogue or conversation
- 2) Humanitarian action is shaped by practice (rather than by policy or 'head-office'), and so it should be reformed in practice

- 3) Humanitarian action requires a mosaic of actors working within the same 'arena', and so any change in the sector will require working with a similar mosaic of actors

The Humanitarian Observatories, then, are part 'living lab', part place for discussion and local governance, part space for dialogue and advocacy, and part research initiative. Together, in the Humanitarian Observatory Network, **they are a social movement**.

Insights from a conversation between the coordinators

Dorothea Hilhorst: Professor of Humanitarian Studies, Director HSC

Kaira Zoe Albuero-Cañete: Senior Researcher in Humanitarian Studies, HSC (Member of the Observatory of the Philippines)

Patrick Milabyo Kyamusugulwa: Professor in Public Health, ISDR-Bukavu (Coordinator of the DRC Observatory)

Tadesse Kassa Woldetsadik: Associate Professor in Law, University of Addis Ababa (Coordinator of the Ethiopia Observatory)

Juan Ricardo Aparicio: Professor in Sociology, Universidad de Los Andes, Bogotá (Coordinator of the Latin American Observatory, based in Colombia)

“

"I expected to better understand how humanitarianism works in our country and through the humanitarian observatory, to contribute perspectives on how to improve it while delivering aid in humanitarian contexts."

- Patrick Milabyo Kyamusugulwa

"There must be a robust, fairly independent, and well-informed platform in Ethiopia – a country with a plethora of humanitarian actors, programs, and interventions." -Tadesse Kassa Woldetsadik

"For me, taking part in the Observatories is not only about making visible a 'new' research agenda. It is also about creating and promoting a different way of producing knowledge between academics working in the Global North and South... Normally this relation historically has meant that 'we' in the South produce 'facts' while 'theory' and 'research design' is produced in the North."

- Juan Ricardo Aparicio

"Another challenge is difficult collaboration with UNOCHA in Bukavu as at one time we were allowed to share a presentation of one of our findings in a UNOCHA meeting, later we noticed hesitance on that decision."

- Patrick Milabyo Kyamusugulwa

"This made me think how the approaches for establishing the Observatories are also contextual. For example, when I was facilitating the setup of the observatory in the Philippines, the group leading the initiative, Center for Disaster Preparedness, did not feel the need to put in place a separate entity for the observatory. For other observatories, there was a need to organize the network of actors and even formalize as a group such as the case of DRC."

- Kaira Alburo-Canete

From Observatory Network to Social Movement

"As with many social movements – and indeed, we see the network as comprising a movement for pursuing transformations in the humanitarian field – the workings of the humanitarian observatories are a mixture of organization and spontaneity" (p.11)

All of the coordinators agreed that they were surprised and pleased at the self-governing nature of their respective observatory, and that this self-governing nature has allowed the observatory to move in innovative ways and take new approaches. Some difficulties were observed, though, including the requirement for funding conditioned on deliverables, the HUM-GOV team have taken this as an opportunity to develop a co-creative approach to observatory deliverables. This means that the deliverables that are written into the (required) partnership agreement truly reflect the interests, capacities, and aspirations of the observatory itself. The theoretical and operational makeup of the Humanitarian Observatories, then, further advocates for acknowledging humanitarianism(s), highlighting the need to bring local and thus contextually-rooted knowledges and practices to the fore of humanitarian action, studies and research.

"Overall, the humanitarian observatories can be considered a work in process. Their development is non-linear, uneven, and iterative. They have shown innovation, creativity, and reflexivity, while navigating challenges that come with movement building." (p.12)

Further reading

- Hilhorst, D. J. M., & Jansen, B. J. (2010). Humanitarian Space as Arena: A Perspective on the Everyday Politics of Aid. *Development and Change*, 41(6), 1117–1139. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-7660.2010.01673.x>
- l'Anson, C., & Pfeifer, G. (2013). A critique of humanitarian reason: agency, power, and privilege. *Journal of Global Ethics*, 9(1), 49–63. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17449626.2012.756419>
- Lusambya, D. "Sexual Exploitation and Abuse: implication of humanitarian workers in the Democratic Republic of the Congo". *Humanitarian Alternatives* 26 (2024). Accessed via: <https://www.alternatives-humanitaires.org/en/2024/07/10/sexual-exploitation-and-abuse-implication-of-humanitarian-workers-in-the-democratic-republic-of-the-congo/>
- The Humanitarian Observatories [blog series](#)
- The Humanitarian Observatories initiative can be found on the [HSC website](#)



About the HSC

The Hague Humanitarian Studies Centre (HSC) is a hive of transformative initiatives around Humanitarian Studies aimed at academic and applied research; teaching and training; networking and impact. The HSC was established in August 2023 by Professor Thea Hilhorst, following her NWO Spinoza Prize award in 2022.



humanitarianstudiescentre.nl



[The Hague Humanitarian Studies Centre](#)



humanitarianstudiescentre@iss.nl

Visit us

The HSC is based at the International Institute of Social Studies
Kortenaerkade 12, 2518 AX The Hague, The Netherlands