

Istanbul-Bergen Declaration on Humanitarian Justice

In the lead up to the International Humanitarian Studies Association conference of 2025 in Istanbul and Bergen, and during one of the most turbulent years in humanitarian history, [humanitarian observatories](#) in 8 crisis-affected areas: Central and Eastern Europe, Ethiopia, Democratic Republic of Congo, Latin America and the Caribbean, Libya, Namibia, the Philippines, and South Asia engaged in a process to develop a definition and agenda for *humanitarian justice*.

The Observatories held consultations with affected communities and other stakeholders. These resulted in area-specific reports, that were collectively developed into this declaration, launched in Istanbul on 16 October 2025.

Humanitarian Justice

Humanitarian Justice is a lived need of crisis-affected people for fair, transparent, inclusive and respectful humanitarian responses that are rooted in principles of dignity, solidarity, care and shared responsibility for people, nature and the planet, and that respect International Humanitarian Law and Human Rights. Humanitarian Justice is a practical moral framework that insists on humanitarian responses that address both immediate suffering and the deeper systemic injustices that disasters, climate-related crises, and conflicts expose.

Humanitarian Justice requires timeliness: recognizing that fairness, equity and accountability must apply across the entire spectrum of crisis engagement - from anticipation and immediate response, to long-term recovery and systemic change. Humanitarian Justice requires a transformative shift from short-term relief to peaceful, equitable and just development in harmony with nature and the needs of the planet, and that the voices and knowledges of affected communities are heard and respected. Humanitarian Justice requires that collective community action is recognized and supported and that affected communities are substantially included in decision-making.

Humanitarian Justice extends beyond immediate relief to address deeper wounds – social, psychological, and systemic – through a framework rooted in dignity, equity, and accountability. It is about transforming crises into times and places for healing, accountability, and systemic change. It requires that authorities, humanitarians and others with power acknowledge survivors not as broken but as bearers of wisdom, right-holders and agents of renewal.

We observe and experience that:

Dignity is often violated when humanitarian responses are not grounded in respect for people's rights, including the rights of refugees, internally displaced persons, and stateless persons, and when these rights are applied in a discriminatory way based on gender, race, ethnicity, age, religious identity, disability, or other grounds.

Protection of civilians in times of conflict and enabling their access to safe areas of assistance, including the protection of service providers and medical personnel, is neglected - often willfully - while crimes against people and service providers are committed with impunity.

Community knowledges, worldviews, cultures, and practices are often undervalued by those delivering aid, and affected communities are frequently excluded from decision-making processes regarding humanitarian response, despite their roles at the forefront of crisis response.

Systemic failures in the aid system, including corruption and favoritism lead to exclusion of vulnerable groups and create or exacerbate risks and vulnerabilities.

Current responses to crises often fail to acknowledge the injustices experienced by affected people or fail to commit to the necessary reparation and redress required for genuine Humanitarian Justice.

Failures of the humanitarian system are largely caused by donor priorities, (geo)-political interests and colonial histories, at the expense of voices and knowledges of local and indigenous communities.

Exit strategies of humanitarian organizations often fail to handle transitions responsibly and ethically, leading to abrupt aid cuts, gaps in services, and the undermining of community resilience. The poor implementation of these strategies leaves lasting negative effects that undermine the integrity of humanitarianism for affected communities.

We aspire for:

A jointly built global humanitarian community that advances the well-being, rights, and dignity of people affected by crises, especially those from historically marginalized groups.

An enabling political environment for humanitarian assistance according to the principles of International Humanitarian Law, where conflict parties and geo-political actors uphold their commitments to prevent and solve conflict and foster peace.

Models of assistance that nurture and recognize community leadership while demanding responsibility and accountability from governments, humanitarian organizations, for-profit companies, and others that hold power.

A broad, mutually reinforcing, and effectively coordinated collaboration between actors, which respects and recognizes community members as first and direct responders, and invests in locally grounded, equitable aid systems.

Humanitarian responses that are attuned to community needs, assets, resources and lived realities.

Structural approaches that prioritize prevention, peace building and risk reduction over ad-hoc responses to crises.

An Agenda for Humanitarian Justice:

Humanitarian action that starts from the notion of a shared humanity and is guided by principles and practices of care, empathy and respect for affected communities, that empowers local leadership and drives transformative change.

A world order that holds conflict parties to account for restraining violence, respecting the lives and needs of communities and enabling safe access to medical and humanitarian services.

Humanitarian responses that are fair, needs-driven, rights-based and free of corruption or favouritism.

Responsible and ethical transition and exit strategies that are collaboratively planned with local actors from the outset, and that prioritize sustainable and locally-led development. The withdrawal of international aid cannot compromise the long-term well-being and basic needs of affected populations.

Humanitarian action that centers on well-being in a broad sense, by combining material aid with a focus on losses that are not solely material (such as mental health, community culture and cohesion, relations with land and nature) by actively addressing needs for psychosocial support and fair compensation for such losses.

Responses that are embedded in the lived realities of disaster- and the cultural practices of conflict-affected communities.

Humanitarian responses that provide short-term relief while addressing the root causes of vulnerabilities and existing injustices that cause disasters and crises in the first place.

We call on all actors involved in the shaping of humanitarian action to join us in advancing this agenda for Humanitarian Justice. We recognize that we and all others working for Humanitarian Justice may also be part of the systems we seek to transform, and that this work comprises reflection on our own roles and responsibilities.

Our Commitment:

By signing this document, as an organization, individual or community, we declare to uphold and promote the vision described in this document, stand by affected communities and align our actions to their desires and demands.

All India Disaster Mitigation Institute (AIDMI)
Central and Eastern European (CEE) Humanitarian Observatory
Ethiopian Humanitarian Observatory
HOILY (Humanitarian Observatory Initiative Libya)
HOISA (Humanitarian Observatory Initiative South Asia)
Humanitarian Observatory for Policy and Education, Southeast Asia (HOPE SEA)
Humanitarian Observatory, The Netherlands
Humanitarian Observatory, Somalia
International Humanitarian Studies Association (IHSA)
Kenyan Humanitarian Observatory
L'Observatoire Humanitaire-RDC (Democratic Republic of the Congo)
Maraka Humanitarian Observatory, Pakistan
Myanmar Humanitarian Observatory
Namibian Humanitarian Observatory
Nigerian Humanitarian Observatory
Observatorio Humanitario de América Latina y el Caribe
Palestinian Humanitarian Observatory
The Hague Humanitarian Studies Centre
The Philippines Humanitarian Observatory

We invite organisations, communities, and individuals to co-sign this declaration. Please click here to add your voice.

[Sign up for this declaration](#)