



The Encyclopedia of Humanitarian Action is a new project offering a conceptual framework for humanitarian action, and providing a dynamic platform for national and international practitioners, community leaders, policy makers and academics to reflect on humanitarian concepts and practice for the 21st century.

By supporting a wide range of stakeholders and leveraging partnerships, the project will:

- contribute to improve the quality of humanitarian policies and operational responses;
- inspire innovation by strengthening the knowledge-policy interface and engaging academics;
- foster change in ways of working with national actors; and
- empower a broader, more informed and more cohesive humanitarian movement.

A timely initiative to strengthen knowledge and dialogue

The pressures of an ever-expanding humanitarian burden, including of increasingly protracted crises of a massive scale, have fuelled tremendous growth in the humanitarian sector as well as a process of professionalization aiming for efficiency and accountability. The humanitarian system is also expected to embrace a shift towards building capacity for local disaster preparedness, recovery and general resilience, as well as stronger national civil society engagement with the participation of – and enhanced accountability to – affected populations.

These shifts and ambitions are very significant for the humanitarian community at large. Yet, to undertake these transformations, the sector still lacks a common reference framework, including an intelligible and articulated scientific body of conceptual analyses. This impedes the development of a clear and coherent professional sector and of a cohesive global community. The dearth of intercultural as well as historical analyses of core concepts and a tendency to disconnect theory from practice, lead to practical consequences on the ground in terms of effectiveness, collaboration and coordination.

In response to this gap, the **Encyclopedia of Humanitarian Action** aims to develop a conceptual framework and a dynamic platform for practitioners, affected community leaders, policy makers and academics to reflect on humanitarian concepts and practice for the 21st century.

The development of this project coincides with the first-ever World Humanitarian Summit (WHS), a time of intense reflection, discussion and strategic planning within and around the humanitarian sector. In this defining moment, it seems crucial to interrogate how humanitarian concepts are used, to support the reflective involvement of an expanding range of stakeholders, and to ensure we can build on the most relevant experiences.

A valuable contribution to the humanitarian sector

By assessing different meanings and perceptions, institutional uses, and applications of key concepts, by engaging humanitarian stakeholders in reflecting on these, and by developing an innovative knowledge-sharing platform, the Encyclopedia will:

- Help individuals and institutions to better analyse their operational environment;
- Support individuals and institutions to take relevant and informed decisions;
- Provide affected populations with a simplified conceptual framework empowering them in their interaction with aid workers;
- Ensure the necessary conditions for effective dialogue, collaboration and partnership;
- Contribute to the professionalization of the growing humanitarian sector;
- Participate in the institutionalization of humanitarian studies;
- Encourage the development of discussions, debates, and critical analyses of the current use of humanitarian concepts.

Partnerships as “DNA” of the project

The Encyclopedia is conceived as **a partnership project** mobilizing humanitarian organisations, academic centres, and other actors involved in humanitarian action as well as affected communities.

- Partnerships with academia and with humanitarian stakeholders will underpin the collaborative effort to assess past and current humanitarian realities at international and national level, and to deliver a dynamic process of reflection on the conceptual framework with experts, practitioners and other stakeholders, including discussions of contested and problematic aspects of key notions. To deliver the necessary knowledge-sharing tools and a dynamic platform reaching constituent communities, further partnerships will deliver technological and knowledge management expertise.

An interdisciplinary, multicultural, and multi-sectoral approach

An interdisciplinary, multicultural, multi-sectoral and multi-thematic approach will be used to do justice to the complexity of humanitarian action. The research process will combine theory and practice, research and action, and precludes dogmatic or normative visions.

- Concepts to be included in the Encyclopedia are selected through a two stage selection method starting with a quantitative content analysis of relevant documents followed by a qualitative evaluation process involving academics and humanitarian professionals.
- The project then investigates where the concepts come from, how they are understood across time and culture, and how they are operationalized by different stakeholders in different contexts.
- The project then confronts the academic perspective with the realities on the ground, in operational practice and in perception by affected communities.
- In addition to all the concept centred products developed (see below), specific tools or additional research projects may be developed. Such tools will aim at ensuring full ownership of the substance by the variety of stakeholders.

Key features

As a repository of humanitarian knowledge, the Encyclopedia of Humanitarian Action will provide **a collaborative space for reflection, theorisation and modelisation**. Through action research, it will conceptualize the main operational components of humanitarian action and confront concepts with practice.

The Encyclopedia will be **a free, open-access online platform** dedicated to these key concepts. It will offer various entries that will include among others:

- A scientific article taking stock of the situation of the concept, its definition, history, tensions and challenges
- A shorter operational synthesis dedicated to practitioners in the field
- A critical analysis of the main operational issues of the concept through empirical studies
- A discussion paper involving scholars and practitioners about the main operational challenges posed by the concept
- A forum to engage discussion on the conceptual analysis and operational issues
- Additional products, such as e-learning capsules, interviews of key stakeholders, recordings and reports on workshop and conferences, and links to other resources

An innovative support to a wide range of stakeholders

Designed as a living process, the Encyclopedia will offer up-to-date information and will be interactive, inviting dialogue from everyone concerned with humanitarian aid. With an improved mutual understanding, stakeholders in humanitarian settings will benefit from enhanced dialogue and collaboration. In addition, affected populations themselves will benefit from more coherent and relevant humanitarian processes and be strengthened as first responders to humanitarian needs.

- As such, the project will provide material for policy dialogue, institutional positioning and operational choices. It will support a variety of stakeholders in their reflection, strategic orientation and implementation of humanitarian responses.
- The Encyclopedia will also be a much-needed bridge between academia and humanitarian actors. It is expected to constitute a milestone in the scholarship of contemporary humanitarian action. In addition to its impact at the policy and operational level, the project will also substantially contribute to the emerging academic discipline of Humanitarian Studies.

If you want to take part in the project or are interested in more information, please contact Prof Doris Schopper – encyclopedia@unige.ch and visit <http://www.cerahgeneve.ch/research/res/>