

A stylized map of the African continent is shown in yellow and white, with a thick black outline. To its right is a black silhouette of a balance scale with two pans, one of which is lower than the other. The background is a dark teal color.

EPIS REPORT ON HUMAN RIGHTS & HUMANITARIAN AID

The Failure of R2P's Third Pillar

What barriers are there to the adoption and enforcement of the Responsibility to Protect Doctrine? Through the case studies of Myanmar, Ukraine, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo, this article examines how strategic and economic interests serve as a barrier to R2P's implementation. Application of human rights law remains selective.

When Aid Becomes a Weapon:

Does the long-standing belief that independent, international agencies are best suited to deliver humanitarian assistance still hold today? The presence of a repressive military junta and numerous insurgency groups mean that traditional methods of aid distribution face many barriers to success. Aid operations in Myanmar should therefore emphasise locality rather than neutrality and take a humanitarian resistance.

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"They Call It Peace, But We Cannot Fish"

Does sustained, non-kinetic maritime coercion in the South China Sea generate legal obligations under international humanitarian and human rights law despite the absence of declared war? China's effective control over access to Scarborough Shoal reshapes Filipino fishermen's livelihoods, triggering protective duties under IHL, human rights law, and UNCLOS. Civilian harm exists below the threshold of armed conflict; peace without access, security, and dignity is not true peace.

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Use of Aid After the 2023 Turkey–Syria Quake

Was international aid provided after the Turkish–Syrian earthquake used appropriately? Despite substantial funding, centralised administration in Turkey and authoritarian control in Syria led to political interference, weak oversight, and selective allocation, limiting effective distribution of aid. Strengthened monitoring, local participation, and conditional donor coordination are crucial to preventing politicisation of aid and improve accountability in future disaster responses.

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How can humanitarian aid stay efficient while preventing corruption? Strong, system-wide accountability, coordination, and community feedback reduce corruption risks in crisis response. Accountability and rapid action are compatible; investing in adaptive oversight and participation protects aid integrity and ensures assistance reaches those in need.

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Why does corruption persist in global supply chains despite existing international standards and corporate compliance tools? Structural governance gaps, information asymmetries and fragmented regulation enable systemic, network-based corruption that escapes traditional controls. Only coherent frameworks combining transparency, risk-based due diligence and legal harmonisation can close these governance gaps.

Editorial Team



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Editorial



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Humanitarian and Human Rights Aid – First Edition

Dear Reader,

Humanitarian aid is often spoken of in the language of urgency and compassion. But behind every aid delivered, every legal doctrine invoked, and every protection mandate declared lies a deeper question: Who holds power, and who is held accountable?

In this first edition of our Humanitarian and Human Rights Aid magazine, we explore what happens when protection systems falter, when aid becomes politicised, and when human rights commitments remain more aspirational than enforceable.

Our contributors begin at the level of global responsibility. The Responsibility to Protect, once envisioned as a safeguard against atrocity crimes, reveals its fragility when geopolitical interests overshadow collective action. From Myanmar to Crimea to the Democratic Republic of Congo, selective enforcement exposes the limits of international resolve.

But these structural failures do not remain abstract. They travel downward, into the waters of the South China Sea, where Filipino fishermen navigate a “peace” defined by restriction and uncertainty. They surface in earthquake-stricken regions of Turkey and Syria, where transparency determines whether aid reaches those most in need. They persist in Myanmar, where humanitarian assistance risks being manipulated by a repressive junta, raising difficult questions about neutrality, resistance and justice.

Other contributions turn inward, examining corruption embedded in supply chains and the tension between rapid crisis response and accountability. Across these varied contexts, one thread connects every article: humanitarian action is not simply about delivery, it is about integrity, responsibility and the protection of human dignity.

Together, these analyses ask a shared question: Can humanitarian and human rights frameworks meaningfully protect civilians in a world where power often evades responsibility?

This edition does not claim to offer simple solutions. Instead, it offers critical reflection and constructive dialogue. If it challenges assumptions, sparks discussion, or encourages deeper scrutiny of how aid operates in practice, then it has fulfilled its purpose.

As our first publication under this thematic group, this magazine represents more than a collection of articles. It reflects collaboration, intellectual curiosity, and a shared commitment to doing this work carefully and responsibly. We hope it invites you to read not only with interest, but with intention.

Thank you for being part of this conversation.

Acknowledgements

This publication would not have been possible without the dedication and generosity of many individuals.

We extend our sincere gratitude to the organization’s Editorial Board for their guidance and continued support throughout this process.

Within our Humanitarian and Human Rights Aid team, I would especially like to thank our section editors for your rigorous fact-checking and for ensuring analytical coherence across all contributions. To our technical editors, your careful attention to language, citations and formatting strengthened the credibility and professionalism of every article.

Importantly, not every member of our team authored an article in this issue, but every single member contributed meaningfully. From early brainstorming sessions to structural feedback, from challenging ideas to refining clarity, no writer worked alone. The collaborative spirit of this team ensured that each piece benefited from shared insight and collective responsibility.

On a personal note, I am deeply grateful for how cooperative, thoughtful and committed this team has been. I admire the way you think, critically, creatively and with integrity and the way you show up for one another. This publication reflects not just individual scholarship, but genuine teamwork; a testament to what can be achieved when responsibility is shared and excellence is pursued together.

Thank you for your trust and your dedication.

With appreciation,

EPIS Report Groups

Lovely Bernardo

Sabriya Attia



The Failure of R2P's Third Pillar

Where interests precede intervention.

About the Article

What barriers are there to the adoption and enforcement of the Responsibility to Protect Doctrine? Through the case studies of Myanmar, Ukraine, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo, this article examines how strategic and economic interests serve as a barrier to R2P's implementation. Application of human rights law remains selective.

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1. Introduction

In 2005, one hundred seventy heads of state gathered at the World Summit at the United Nations Headquarters in New York City. By the close of the Summit, Member States had voted to adopt A/RES/60/1 (2005)—a foundational UN General Assembly resolution encouraging states to take direct action against human rights abuses.

A central component of A/RES/60/1 is the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) doctrine, which establishes three pillars for states to adhere to. The first pillar guides states to protect their populations from genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity. In accepting this first pillar, the second pillar holds that states should assist other states in meeting this responsibility through diplomatic and peaceful means. Finally, when a state manifestly fails to uphold the first two pillars and peaceful measures prove inadequate, the third pillar calls for the international community to intervene.

While this final pillar appears to provide a legal basis for intervention, A/RES/60/1 is non-binding due to its status as a United Nations General Assembly resolution. In contrast to treaties, resolutions serve as moral frameworks rather than legal obligations. States are therefore not legally bound by A/RES/60/1's provisions, even if they have formally accepted the resolution.

Moreover, states do not adopt resolutions in the same manner that they assume treaty obligations. States must both sign and ratify a treaty in order to accept it, which requires the consent of a state's domestic leadership. The treaty's provisions are hence absorbed into a state's domestic law and become binding. Resolutions, however, are merely adopted through a vote by a nation's delega-

te, meaning that the state's government has not formally taken on the responsibility of executing said resolution (United Nations Library, n.d).

While they lack the same legal commitment as treaties, resolutions are still considered legitimate pieces of international law. In fact, resolutions may serve as foundations from which treaties and customary international law emerge (Öberg, 2005). For example, United Nations General Assembly Resolution 96 (1946), which condemned genocide as a violation of international law, provided a seminal foundation for the Genocide Convention (1948) that declared the orchestration of and complicity in genocide illegal.

2. The Unique Appeal of R2P

As it stands, the enforcement of human rights standards remains limited due to the international court system's narrow jurisdiction. R2P provides an alternative avenue for holding human rights offenders accountable.

Customary Law: Binding international law formed tacitly through routine and tradition.



While there exists no true international human rights court, the Interna-

tional Criminal Court (ICC) has the ability to try perpetrators of war crimes, genocide, aggression and crimes against humanity—acts near-identical to those deterred by R2P's first pillar. However, the Court lacks the jurisdiction to try states (Rome Statute, 1998). The ICC may instead only try individuals who commit such acts, and therefore does not provide for direct state criminal responsibility. This restricts the Court's capability to try all those involved in human rights abuses, instead remaining limited to only a few individuals.

Conversely, the International Court of Justice (ICJ) is concerned with breaches of international organisation and

binding agreements between states. However, the provisions of most major human rights agreements tend to be vague and open to interpretation, and states' legal obligation to uphold such agreements is in dispute (Steinhart, 2024). The ICJ is hence limited in its jurisdiction over violations of human rights law.

Most states have also formally rejected the ICJ's jurisdiction over what a state claims to be domestic matters (Mingawa, 1979). As human rights abuses often occur within a nation, they tend to be categorised under this domestic matters exception, preventing them from being tried by the ICJ. By adopting R2P into binding law, which stipulates that states must protect their own populations from certain human rights violations, states form an international agreement that elevates such human rights abuses above the domestic level and the Court gains jurisdiction.

3. Selective Intervention

While R2P provides a moral framework for intervention in the face of human rights abuses, the international community frequently fails to intervene. Strategic and economic incentives make the codification of R2P into binding international law an improbable reality.

3.1. Myanmar

Following the military coup of 1962, the Burmese junta has systematically stripped away the rights of the Rohingya—a Muslim minority group from Myanmar's Rakhine state. The junta revoked citizenship for Rohingya, eventually launching Operation Clean and Beautiful Nation, which instructed the military to violently target Myanmar's Rohingya population.

By excluding the Rohingya from census data, prohibiting interfaith marriage, and denying Rohingya the right to vote or run for office, the junta's oppression of the Rohingya has culminated in a terror campaign that led to the murder

of thousands (Wilson, 2016). By 2021, after little intervention from international actors, the junta staged another coup and seized power from the newly-elected democratic leadership. The junta has since killed protesters, burned villages, cut off food and supplies, and bombed encampments in an attempt to consolidate their power. This has precipitated one of Southeast Asia's most severe refugee crises, expelling over a quarter of a million Burmese.

As of March 2022, the United States has condemned the junta for orchestrating a genocide (Blinken, 2022). Moreover, the High Commissioner for Human Rights, Zeid Ra'ad al-Hussein called the brutal campaign to drive the Rohingya from their home in Myanmar a "textbook example of ethnic cleansing," (United Nations News, 2017). Despite the international community's condemnation of this humanitarian crisis, Myanmar has seen a lack of decisive intervention. States have instead elected to place limited sanctions on military leaders (Wilson, 2016). In this instance, R2P's selective application stems from the absence of economic incentives for Western states.

Despite significant natural gas reserves (Sinha, 2009), Myanmar has little to offer other nations in trade due to the state's historically isolationist economy. Since the original 1962 coup, the junta has systematically restricted foreign aid, nationalised key industries and tightly controlled foreign trade, which has repelled foreign investments. The Burmese economy remained nationalised through the early 2010s, intensifying after the 2021 coup. Accordingly, very few nations have forged deep economic ties with Myanmar, discouraging states from intervention and contributing to the present humanitarian crisis.

3.2. Crimea

While the limited enforcement in Myanmar can be explained by a lack of an economic incentive, non-interference

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While the limited enforcement in Myanmar can be explained by a lack of an economic incentive, non-interference

in Ukraine's Crimean peninsula demonstrates how economic risk and great power politics can deter adherence to R2P's third pillar.

After the illegal annexation of Crimea in 2014, Crimeans have faced systematic ethnic cleansing by the Russian government. Since the start of the occupation, Russia has seized 4,095 Ukrainian national and local monuments in Crimea in violation of international law. The damage includes the exportation of Crimean artefacts for display in Russia, unauthorised archaeological expeditions, demolition of Muslim burial sites and irreparable damage of Crimean Tatar cultural heritage sites (United States Embassy in Georgia, 2022). Russian military forces in Crimea have ethnically cleansed Ukrainians and Crimean Tatars through extrajudicial killings, abductions, arbitrary detentions, arrests and torture (NATO, 2019).

The UN has condemned Russia's annexation of Crimea, categorising it as a violation of Ukraine's sovereignty and calling for the land to be returned (United Nations Security Council, 2014). However, Russia has repeatedly vetoed United Nations Security Council resolutions calling the annexation illegal. Aside from these failed resolutions and sanctions imposing a negligible impact on Russia's economy, little action has been taken against the state (Ashford, 2016).

Unlike the 2022 invasion of eastern Ukraine, the 2014 Crimean invasion was far more isolated from Eastern Europe due to the region's position in the Black Sea. Russia's invasion of Crimea hence posed no impending conventional military threat to other Eastern European states. Moreover, as European states have a high reliance on Russia for gas—particularly those on the Eastern front—intervention poses an enormous economic risk.



Figure 1: <https://www.aljazeera.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/1-INTERACTIVE-DONBAS-AND-CRIMEA.png?w=770&quality=80>

Percent of World Cobalt Production in 2024

World Population Review, 2026

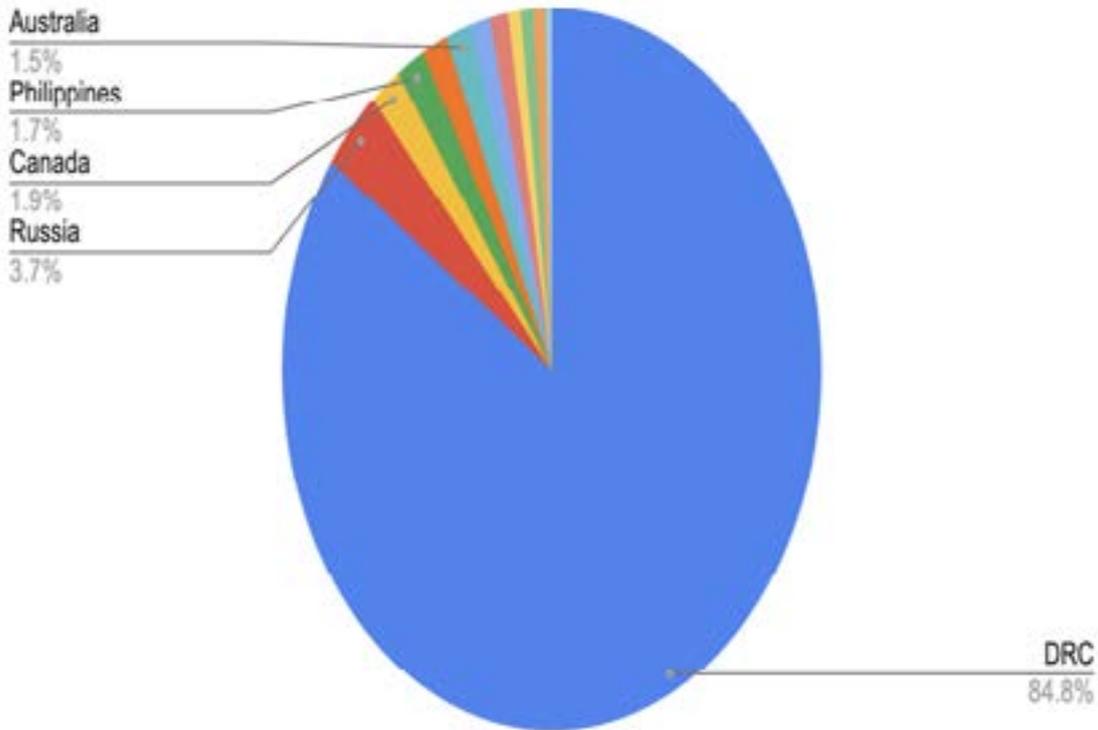


Figure 2: <https://worldpopulationreview.com/country-rankings/cobalt-production-by-country>

Additionally, as many of Ukraine's potential allies and Russia's enemies have joined NATO's collective defence agreement, direct involvement in a war carries the possibility of generating an escalated, multi-national conflict (Mearsheimer, 2022). For neighbouring states, it therefore best aligns with their strategic and economic interests not to adhere to R2P's third pillar encouraging action beyond peaceful and diplomatic means.

3.3. Democratic Republic of the Congo

The human rights crisis in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) has similarly spiralled without foreign intervention. As a centre of most of the world's cobalt production, the DRC is home to cobalt mines infamous for forced labour and child abuse (United States Department of Labor, 2023). Miners are paid no more than a few dollars a day, working with a substance toxic to touch and breathe. With no protective gear and limited tools, Congolese men, women and children are exposed to an abundance of the

toxic metal every day (Schleich, 2024).

Meanwhile, the DRC's government has established partnerships with foreign industries and revised their mining code to encourage domestic mining and processing (Verbruggen, Francq, & Cuvelier, 2011). The DRC's economy has become consumed by the cobalt industry, leaving few alternative jobs for the Congolese. Men, women and children are thus forced into toxic cobalt mines under conditions that many human rights experts characterise as modern slavery (Haider, 2017).

Despite the clear crimes against humanity exhibited in the DRC, the international community has failed to intervene. Instead, many states encourage the growth of the DRC's cobalt industry. As cobalt comprises a key ingredient in lithium-batteries, electric vehicles, cell phones and other electronics, large technology companies have a strong interest in maintaining access to low-cost supply chains. The combination of poor wages and abundant cobalt

supply makes the metal cheap to harvest and process, creating economic incentives for states to disregard R2P's calls for intervention rather than disrupt production.

4. Looking Forward

As the human rights abuses in Myanmar, Crimea and the DRC have illustrated, R2P's third pillar has served as a recommendation rather than a codified call to action. While states may attempt to limit human rights abuses through sanctions, condemnations and monitoring mechanisms, they are unlikely to directly intervene in other states' internal affairs unless provided with a tangible strategic or economic incentive. R2P's third pillar urging collective intervention thus collapses.

R2P's limited enforcement is not without broader ramifications. In Myanmar, the junta had further consolidated their power after decades of genocide against the Rohingya (Anom & Rum, 2025). Russia has advanced their invasion of Ukraine into a full-scale war on Ukraine's eastern front (Mearsheimer, 2022). And as the human rights condition in the DRC has only spiralled, the nation's Human Development Index has plummeted to the bottom ten percent of the world (United Nations Development Programme, 2025).

When the one hundred and seventy heads of state gathered at the 2005 World Summit, they shared a vision: a more just world. However, the doctrine's selective enforcement reveals inequity in international intervention. As always, human rights law remains more a moral ideal than a legal reality.

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Will Pujol

Angelina Schülke



When Aid Becomes a Weapon

The Impact of the 2021 Military Coup on Humanitarian Assistance in Myanmar

About the Article

Does the long-standing belief that independent, international agencies are best suited to deliver humanitarian assistance still hold today? The presence of a repressive military junta and numerous insurgency groups mean that traditional methods of aid distribution face many barriers to success. Aid operations in Myanmar should therefore emphasise locality rather than neutrality and take a humanitarian resistance.

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Will Pujol is a masters student at the University of Illinois studying urban planning and global studies. He holds a bachelors in international studies from Indiana University. His research focuses on genocide, particularly against the Rohingya of Myanmar. He currently writes for Illinois Global Review and is helping organize UIUC's first Global Policy Forum. He will be returning to Indiana University to pursue a masters in international studies and to continue his research on genocide.

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rants (IOM, 2025, p. 10). Crossborder and community-based initiatives like the Back Pack Health Worker Team have the advantage of better access and local expertise (Degterev, 2025). However, they are not uncontroversial as they are more likely to be involved in the ongoing conflict in Myanmar and thus breach international humanitarian principles of neutrality and impartiality (UNHCR, 2025).

This is a frequently debated tension in the literature and indeed, these principles have come under heightened scrutiny in recent years. Many local aid workers argue that neutrality is a luxury that can no longer be sustained in settings as heavily politicised and shaped by systemic injustice as Myanmar (Hou, 2024).

Against this background and in hopes for a democratic stabilisation, many Western donors had increasingly turned away from humanitarianism toward development before the coup, which would have entailed more rigid and institutionalised mechanisms for aid provision (Hou, 2024). However, the landscape has changed dramatically since the SAC rose to power, leading to a shift in the aid paradigm that will be outlined below.

3. Impact of the 2021 Coup on Aid Distribution in Myanmar

The 2021 coup has had drastic effects on humanitarian aid distribution in Myanmar. Even before the coup, access to certain parts of Myanmar was heavily restricted. For example, the UN Special Rapporteur for Myanmar Yanghee Lee was denied access to the country in 2017 by the government, likely as a result of her investigations into the wave of violence against the Rohingya in Rakhine State beginning in 2016 (UNHCR, 2017). The coup has only exacerbated these accessibility issues, with Progressive Voice Myanmar (2025) noting the use of the “four-cuts” strategy. Four cuts is a counter-insurgency strategy dating back to the 1960s designed to “cut rebel access to

food, funds, intelligence, and recruits” (Ware & Laoutides, 2018, p. 16), which has historically resulted in the collective punishment of entire villages through massacre, rape, and torture (Fishbein Lasan, 2021). Thus, the military’s attempt to prevent resources from reaching insurgency groups has negatively impacted Burmese civilians.

Four cuts is a counter-insurgency strategy dating back to the 1960s designed to “cut rebel access to food, funds, intelligence, and recruits” (Ware & Laoutides, 2018, p. 16)



Over the course of the civil war and

especially in the wake of the recent earthquake, several resistance groups and international medical staff have accused the SAC of blocking and misappropriating aid (Karen National Union, 2025; Lamb & Ratcliffe, 2025). The National Unity Government (2025) has alleged that the junta is exploiting aid for political and military advantages and to weaken the opposition, which amounts to a violation of international law (Guénaël, 2020).

While it is difficult to verify these claims as Myanmar’s humanitarian data are not publicly available for security reasons (ACAPS, 2025), the UN and Human Rights Watch (2021) have confirmed that “military forces have seized food deliveries en route to displacement sites and arrested people on suspicion of supporting aid efforts” (para. 18). These instances are nothing new as the Tatmadaw has a history of obstructing aid, especially from territories outside of its control (Lamb & Ratcliffe, 2025). As the military is increasingly losing its grip over substantial parts of Burmese territory (Pertiwi, 2025; Center for Preventative Action, 2025), their strategy of aid misappropriation may intensify further. Simultaneously, anti-junta factions like the Three Brotherhood Alliance have blocked and weaponised aid, too, illustrating how civil war enmities impede humanitarian operations (Degterev 2025). In this context, bypassing the Burmese state has become considerably more difficult, prompting many international aid organisations to face a humanitarian dilemma: to leave or to stay and collaborate with the military junta? On the one hand, leaving the country would mark a signal of protest against the junta but would also result in

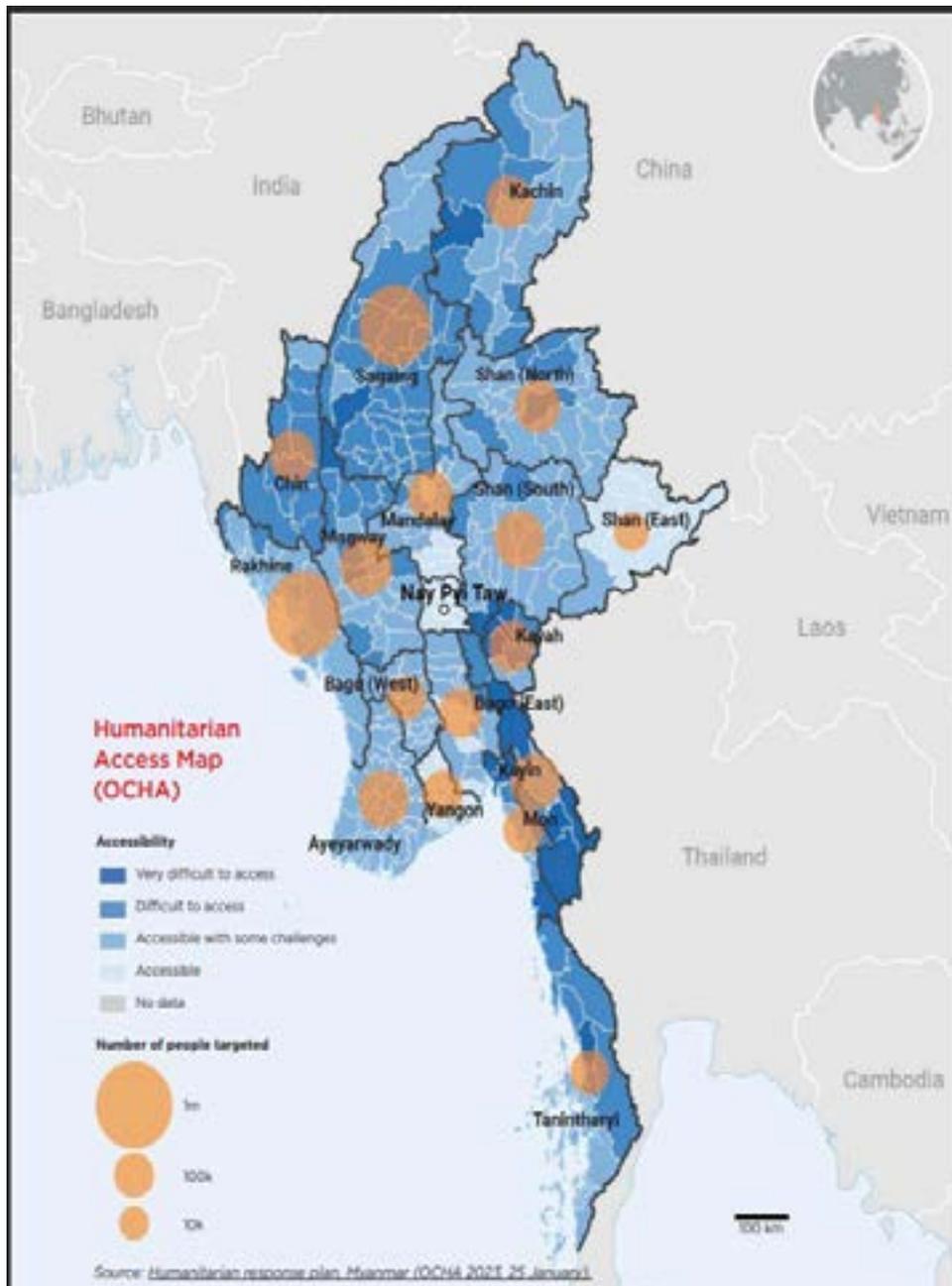


Fig. 3: OCHA. (25 Jan 2023). Humanitarian response plan, Myanmar [Map]. OCHA. <https://reliefweb.int/report/myanmar/myanmar-humanitarian-response-plan-2023-january-2023>. C00.

considerable loss of life-saving assistance on the ground. On the other hand, staying and cooperating with SAC-controlled institutions may “secure more funding and enable more effective aid, but it might also conflict with the broader expectations of the beneficiary public” who do not trust the junta (Hou, 2024, p. 5). Simultaneously, aid providers are faced with the trade-off between getting humanitarian access in the short term via collaboration with the regime, which is responsible for the current suffering, and securing human rights for the future (Nilsen, 2020). Some organisations like the UN have opted to conduct aid operations with the SAC’s permission (Root, 2023), but this also runs the risk of legitimising the junta,

which has not been internationally recognised as the Burmese government and is not in control of more than half of the country (Thiha, 2025).

Therefore, other aid agencies have refused to cooperate with the SAC, demonstrating their solidarity with community-based organisations inside Myanmar or at the border regions instead (Décobert, 2023). The SAC’s restrictions on foreign aid entering the country have forced international donors to rely more on local initiatives as well (Hou, 2024). However, despite their increased importance, local aid agencies are often stifled by unequal power dynamics and bureaucracy (Hou, 2024). Based

on these developments, Fumagalli (2022) declares a triple reverse shift in the aid paradigm: “from engagement [with international donors] to isolation, from development to humanitarian aid and from the state and government to non-state and informal institutions in the borderlands” (p. 5). The coup has thus shattered hopes for peaceful democratisation and dismantled Myanmar’s former status as “donor darling”. Instead, it renewed the country’s position as a pariah state since other nations fear their aid might be misused to fuel the conflict (Fumagalli, 2022).

4. Impact of Aid Cuts on the Situation in Myanmar

“There is nothing to live on. I don’t know anything anymore. I don’t see any pathway ahead. I can’t fathom anymore. I don’t know what to do anymore.”

Mahmud Karmar, Rohingya refugee in Thailand (Gelineau, 2025)

Mahmud Karmar fled to Thailand after his brother was murdered and has lived there since 2006.

Overnight funding cuts to international organisations such as USAID in January 2025 have severely impacted Burmese populations, both within and outside of Myanmar (Cabrallero, 2026). Before, USAID had played a key role in Myanmar’s democratic transition as well as food security and health. In 2020, the organisation provided about \$69 million in aid programmes (Tun, 2025). Now, however, medical services, both for physical and mental health and especially for non-emergency treatments, have seen a massive reduction, and the Rohingya are one of the most affected communities. Food rations almost saw a drastic reduction and were only narrowly saved after donor nations stepped up to fill the funding gap (Sullivan and Karim, 2025). Services for education and gender-based violence prevention were also heavily cut, indicating that the

damage will be both short- and long-term.

These cuts do not only affect the refugee populations, but the host governments and local populations. Tensions between Rohingya refugees and Bangladeshi residents of Cox’s Bazar were already high, with the latter citing difficulty finding employment and increased crime as impacts of the mass-influx of Rohingya refugees (VICE, 2020). While the recency of the aid cuts makes the impact on the host government uncertain, reduced resources will likely exacerbate these already-existing problems.

Among the primary reasons for the budget cuts of USAID are President Trump’s America First policies that endorse drastic funding cuts to public services in the name of increasing government efficiency and recipient nations’ self-reliance. Secretary of State Marco Rubio has announced that the US rejects the role of the world’s biggest foreign aid donor, encouraging other countries like China and India to step up and share the burden (Mbah et al., 2025; Psaledakis & Pamuk, 2025). Consequently, while other nations like South Korea, the Netherlands, and Japan have committed nearly 65 million dollars for Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh, the Trump administration has focused less on refugees in Myanmar, where the effects have

been most drastic (Kingston, 2025). The impact of this decision is

“In this context, many international aid organisations are facing a humanitarian dilemma: to leave or to stay and collaborate with the junta?”

already felt on the ground, with the US leaving behind a vacuum in an environment heavily dependent on foreign support. As such, the funding cuts reflect a prioritisation of domestic concerns, and broader strategic recalibrations, not just in the US but globally, with aid being increasingly weighed against national interest (Sinanoglu, 2025). Simultaneously, high-profile crises such as Ukraine, Gaza, and Sudan attract donor attention (Tun, 2025), illustrating how humanitarian funding is influenced by global visibility and embedded within the interplay between domestic politics and geopolitical rivalry.

5. Outlook and Recommendations

The presence of a repressive military junta and numerous armed insurgency groups in close proximity to civilian populations means that traditional methods of aid distribution face many barriers to success. Clarke (2019) notes that “[n]eutrality is not possible if a shared understanding of what constitutes neutrality is absent” (para 4). This is especially true in the Burmese context, where many armed insurgency groups are fighting the Tatmadaw for control in various regions of the violence-wracked country, meaning there is no clear neutral party to engage with.

Moreover, when the military actively engages in persecution of Burmese ethnic minorities like the Rohingya, they cannot be trusted with the humanitarian aid meant for those same groups. Thus, we recommend that a humanitarian resistance approach be taken. Humanitarian resistance is “specifically organised by individuals and groups who are politically opposed to the regime and support resistance against it because of their political commitments or personal conscience” (Slim, 2022). In other words, it advocates for a two-pronged approach, in which humanitarianism and justice work in concert with one another.

Additionally, humanitarian resistance supports a “locally led, horizontally constructed ecosystem” detached from the junta that would allow for unhindered aid to reach in-need populations. This approach would be applicable for both internally displaced persons and refugees residing outside of Myanmar. Crucially, a more localised approach can be more cost-effective than international organisations (Manis, 2018), which is underscored by Kamal’s (2023) observation that local actors utilise “their wealth of local knowledge and experience to facilitate and deliver assistance to people on both sides of the borders and deep inside the country” (p. 7). As such, the international community should consider funding this approach in the face of the repressive and illegitimate junta.

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“They Call It Peace, But We Cannot Fish”

Civilian Suffering in a War That Is Never Declared. IHL and IHRL in the South China Sea

About the Article

Does sustained, non-kinetic maritime coercion in the South China Sea generate legal obligations under international humanitarian and human rights law despite the absence of declared war? China’s effective control over access to Scarborough Shoal reshapes Filipino fishermen’s livelihoods, triggering protective duties under IHL, human rights law, and UNCLOS. Civilian harm exists below the threshold of armed conflict; peace without access, security, and dignity is not true peace.

About the Author

Lovely Bernardo holds a Juris Doctor degree and is pursuing postgraduate studies in International Humanitarian and Human Rights Law. She serves as a Senior Legal Researcher and works in legal communications with an international organisation advocating the prohibition of uranium weapons. Her research examines quantum sensing in the South China Sea and its implications for sovereignty and international law, and she is affiliated with a research group on military quantum technologies.

Author's Note

This

article is drawn from a larger LLM research project on maritime coercion in the South China Sea and its legal consequences. Much of the international discussion about these waters focuses on strategy, naval balance, deterrence and competing legal claims. Warships, diplomatic protests and arbitration awards dominate the narrative.

Beneath these high-level exchanges are quieter, deeply human stories. Before dawn, small wooden boats push off from Philippine shores.

Families wait throughout the day, hoping the catch will be enough to cover rice, fuel and school expenses. Fishing grounds that once felt like inherited space now feel distant, uncertain, and sometimes out of reach.

This article turns toward those stories. It examines how sustained, non-kinetic maritime coercion by China, through coast guard patrols, maritime militia presence, access restrictions and constant surveillance, reshapes the everyday lives of Filipino fishing communities. It argues that even without open warfare, the exercise of power at sea can erode livelihoods, heighten fear and undermine human dignity in ways that international humanitarian and human rights law are designed to address.

The absence of declared war does not mean the absence of civilian harm; hence they are still ought to be protected.

1. Life at Sea Under Pressure

For many coastal communities in the Philippines, the sea is not simply a resource. It is inheritance, memory and life. Knowledge of currents, reefs and seasonal fish patterns passes from parent to child as deeply as instinct itself. Places like Scarborough Shoal are not abstractions on a

map. They are woven into daily life, stories and identity to Filipinos.

Over the past decade, however, reaching these traditional fishing grounds has increasingly meant encountering Chinese coast guard vessels and maritime militia ships. These state-backed forces are larger, steel hulled and use their physical presence to exercise a form of power that is

sustained and unmistakably authoritative in practice (PCA, 2016).

Functional control is the sustained exercise of authority over access to essential maritime resources, where persistent enforcement reshapes civilian livelihoods and triggers legal protection duties



Filipino fishermen describe being shadowed for hours, cut off from entry points, or warned away through loudspeakers. Some report being allowed to fish only under the close watch of Chinese vessels. Others turn back immediately, fearing confrontation or damage to their boats. The imbalance of power is visible from a distance. Small wooden bancas face ships designed for law enforcement and strategic presence (Bernardo, 2025).

Each decision to sail becomes a calculation of risk. Should they try to reach familiar waters and risk being blocked or chased? Or should they remain closer to shore, where fish stocks are thinner and competition is greater?

These are not strategic decisions. They are survival choices shaped by the growing control China exercises over access to key fishing areas.

2. The Human Cost of “Non-Kinetic” Control

Because the pressure exerted by China at Scarborough Shoal does not usually involve gunfire or explosions, it is often described in technical language as grey zone acti-

vity or non-kinetic coercion. These actions are designed to operate in the “ambiguous no-man’s-land between peace and war”, allowing a state to achieve strategic objectives without triggering a conventional military response (Mazarr, 2015).

For fishing families, however, the experience feels neither abstract nor restrained.

A day without access to productive fishing grounds means less food and less income. Repeated days like this mean debt. Fuel must still be purchased. Nets must still be repaired. Children still need to be fed and sent to school. When boats return half-empty or empty, the loss ripples through entire households (ICESCR, 1966; FAO, 2015). The harm is cumulative. It settles slowly into daily life. Families reduce meals, borrow money at high interest, or postpone medical care. Some fishermen travel farther into deeper, rougher waters, risking storms and accidents. Others consider abandoning fishing altogether, even though it is the only livelihood they know (FAO, 2015).

Alongside economic strain is the quieter weight of fear. Encounters with Chinese vessels create psychological stress that lingers long after boats return to shore. Fishermen speak of anxiety before each trip, of scanning the horizon not for fish but for ships. The sea, once a place of

familiarity and skill, becomes a space of uncertainty and vulnerability (Bernardo, 2025).

This is not the spectacle of war. It is the slow compression of civilian life under sustained external maritime pressure.

3. International Humanitarian Law and Functional Control at Sea

International humanitarian law is typically associated with declared wars, armed clashes and occupation of territory by ground forces. At first glance, tense standoffs between fishing boats and coast guard vessels may seem far removed from its traditional domain.

The foundational concern of IHL is the protection of civilians when they come under the authority or effective control of a foreign power. While traditionally applied to land, the law of occupation provides a lens to analyse this maritime control. Under Article 42 of the 1907 Hague Regulations, a territory is considered occupied when it is placed under the authority of a hostile army (Hague Convention IV, 1907). Importantly, the form that control takes can evolve over time. Today, authority may be projected not only through physical presence on the land, but also through persistent maritime enforcement that effectively determines who may access essential resources and restricts the activities of local populations.



Based on author’s notes - prompt in Notebook AI

While some legal scholars argue that occupation requires physical presence on land, others contend that effective control exercised through persistent enforcement (ICJ, 2004), like in the case of Scarborough Shoal, fulfills the functional criteria of occupation under Article 42 of the Hague Regulations (Hague Convention IV, 1907). This doctrinal divergence underscores the need to prioritise civilian protection over rigid formalism (Bernardo, 2025).

The law of occupation offers a useful analytical lens. It focuses on effective control (ICJ, 2024) rather than formal declarations. Its purpose is to ensure that when a population is subject to foreign authority, its basic welfare and rights are not disregarded (Geneva Convention IV, 1949).

While Scarborough Shoal is not a populated town, it is a vital source of livelihood for coastal communities. Control over access to this space has direct consequences for civilian survival (FAO, 2015).

When Chinese vessels regulate entry, dictate conditions of fishing, and effectively limit the ability of Philippine authorities to exercise their own jurisdiction there, a form of functional control over access emerges. Whether this situation meets the strict legal definition of occupation

remains debated in doctrine. Still, the humanitarian logic underlying occupation law remains relevant (Bernardo, 2025). Civilians should not lose protection simply because control is exercised through patrols at sea rather than boots on land (Geneva Convention IV, 1949).

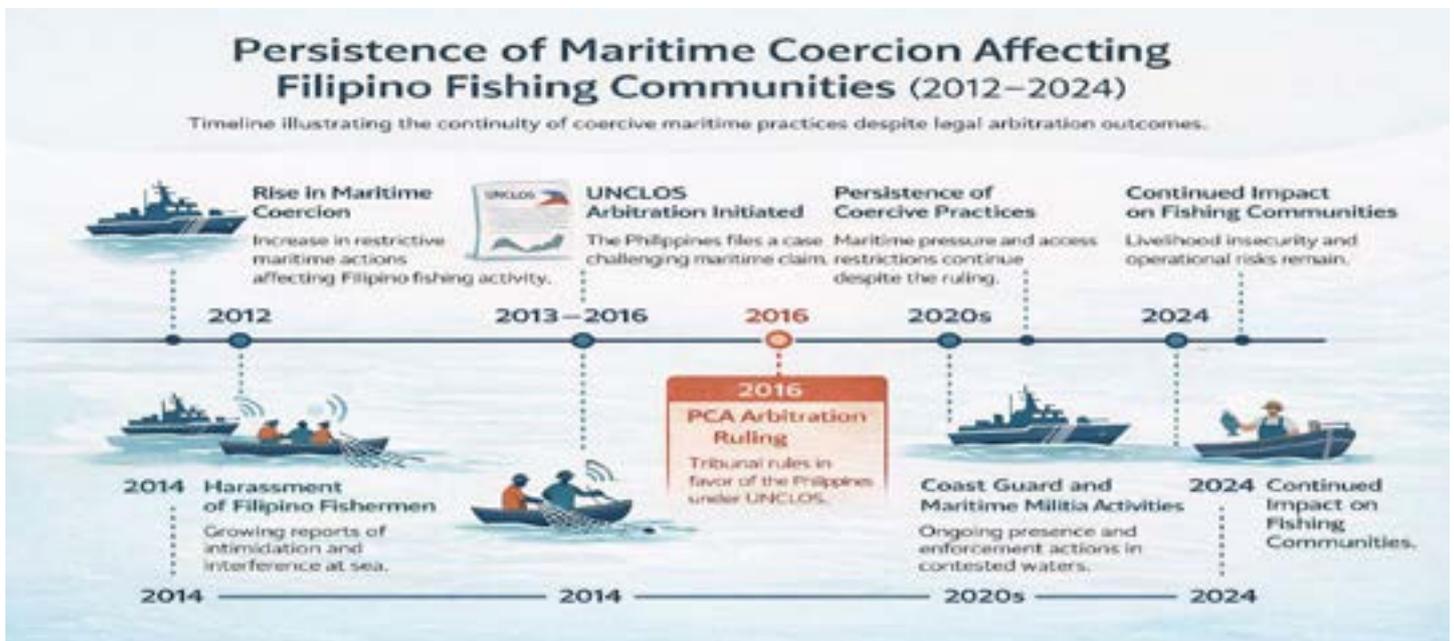
4. Human Rights Law and Extraterritorial Responsibility

International human rights law provides a complementary and often clearer framework. Human rights obligations do not stop at a state's territorial borders when that state exercises power or effective control over individuals or

over access to essential areas abroad. Where state agents shape the lives and options of people beyond

national territory, legal responsibilities may follow (Al-Skeni v United Kingdom, 2011).

“ Non-kinetic maritime coercion is the sustained use of patrols, surveillance, and access restrictions to exercise authority at sea without open warfare, yet with direct civilian consequences. ”



Based on author's notes - prompt in ChatGPT AI

For Filipino fishermen at Scarborough Shoal, China's maritime forces are not distant actors. They are, in practice, the determining authority over whether boats may reach certain fishing grounds, how long they may remain, and under what conditions they must leave. These decisions directly affect access to food and income. The right to an adequate standard of living, including food (ICESCR, 1966; CESCR, 1999), is central here. Fishing is not a discretionary activity for many coastal families. It is the foundation of household survival. When access to traditional fishing grounds becomes restricted or unpredictable due to sustained Chinese maritime presence, the impact on food security and livelihood is immediate and profound (FAO, 2015).

There are also implications for personal security and dignity. Being pursued, surrounded, or warned away at sea creates fear and humiliation that law cannot ignore (Human Rights Committee, 2018). Human rights protections extend beyond protection from physical violence. They address sustained patterns of control that erode the ability of individuals to live with security and self-respect. The psychological burden of constant uncertainty, never knowing whether one will be able to work in familiar waters, is part of the human impact of maritime coercion.

5. The Law of the Sea and the Human Dimension

The United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea is often described as a technical framework governing maritime zones and navigation. Yet, its allocation of rights over marine resources has a deeply human purpose. By granting coastal states sovereign rights in their exclusive economic zones, UNCLOS supports food security, economic development and social stability for coastal populations (United Nations, 1982; FAO, 2015).

The 2016 South China Sea Arbitration award clarified that Scarborough Shoal lies within an area where the Philippines enjoys resource-related rights and that China's expansive maritime claims lack legal foundation (PCA, 2016). This clarification reinforced a framework designed

to ensure that marine resources sustain coastal communities rather than become instruments of geopolitical pressure. When Chinese vessels continue to interfere with Filipino fishing activities despite this ruling, the consequences extend beyond legal disagreement. The disruption of access to resources undermines the very human interests that UNCLOS seeks to protect.

Seen this way, the law of the sea forms part of a broader protective system. It helps define who has authority over resources and, by implication, who bears responsibility for ensuring those resources sustain human life rather than become tools of coercion (United Nations, 1982; PCA, 2016).

6. Slow Harm and the Problem of Visibility

One reason the situation at Scarborough Shoal receives limited humanitarian attention is that its harm unfolds gradually. There are no sudden waves of displaced people and no single catastrophic event. Instead, vulnerability accumulates through smaller catches, empty plates and deepening insecurity.

This gradual erosion of resilience is harder to capture in headlines and policy briefings. Yet, from a protection perspective, it is no less serious. Communities exposed to sustained external maritime pressure face long-term decline that can be as devastating as more visible crises. Humanitarian and human rights systems are not always well adapted to respond to this kind of grey zone harm. Mandates often hinge on armed conflict or clear jurisdictional triggers (Mazarr, 2015). Maritime spaces that fall between war and peace can slip through institutional gaps, even as civilians continue to bear the burden. Recognising these situations as protection concerns is a crucial first step. Monitoring incidents at sea, documenting impacts on livelihoods and integrating maritime coercion into human rights analysis can help ensure that affected communities are not left in legal and practical limbo.

Scarborough Shoal is often framed in the language of strategy, deterrence and maritime power. But beneath

these abstractions are fathers returning home with empty nets, mothers stretching meals to last another day and children growing up in households shaped by uncertainty at sea.

China's sustained, non-kinetic maritime coercion in these waters may fall below the legal threshold of armed conflict, but it does not fall below the threshold of human consequence. International humanitarian and human rights law exist to restrain how power is exercised over people, especially when they are vulnerable and far from decision-making centres.

The challenge is to recognise that suffering does not have

to be explosive to be real. Slow, quiet control over access to essential resources can wound just as deeply. For the fishermen of the South China Sea, the issue is not whether their situation looks dramatic enough to qualify as a crisis. It is whether the law, and the international community, are willing to see that peace without security, access and dignity is not truly peace at all.

“True peace is not merely the absence of tension; it is the presence of justice.”

—Martin Luther King, *Stride Toward Freedom* (1958)

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Burak Baran



Use of Aid After the 2023 Turkey–Syria Quake

When Humanitarian Aid Intersects Political Power Structures

About the Article

Was international aid provided after the Turkish–Syrian earthquake used appropriately? Despite substantial funding, centralised administration in Turkey and authoritarian control in Syria led to political interference, weak oversight, and selective allocation, limiting effective distribution of aid. Strengthened monitoring, local participation, and conditional donor coordination are crucial to preventing politicisation of aid and improve accountability in future disaster responses.

About the Author

Burak Baran is studying Political Science specialising in International Relations and Organisations at Leiden University Campus The Hague. He is a member of the Board of Directors responsible for social media and Human Rights and Humanitarian Aid Report Group at EPIS Think Tank. He used to be a regular contributor at the European Relations Association. He also worked for UNICEF Team at Leiden, fundraising for the Madagascar Project. His research focuses on Middle Eastern region and human rights.

1. Introduction

On 6th of February 2023 at 04:17AM, earthquakes with a registered magnitude of 7.7 and 7.6 hit the southern part of Turkey and northern Syria (British Red Cross, 2023). The epicenter of the disaster was based in Turkey, but it had devastating effects on Syria as well. The earthquake resulted in over 59,000 confirmed casualties, millions being displaced, widespread destruction and a humanitarian crisis. Unconfirmed reports claim that the death toll may be higher than official figures give—however reliable estimates vary.

Due to the scale of destruction, an unprecedented flow of international humanitarian assistance fled to Turkey and Syria. Governments, the EU, international institutions and UN agencies mobilised billions in pledges and appeals in emergency aid, funding for reconstruction and humanitarian relief (European Commission, 2023; OCHA, 2023). The EU, USA and international financial institutions announced assistance packages while the UN organisations and NGOs mobilised ground operations

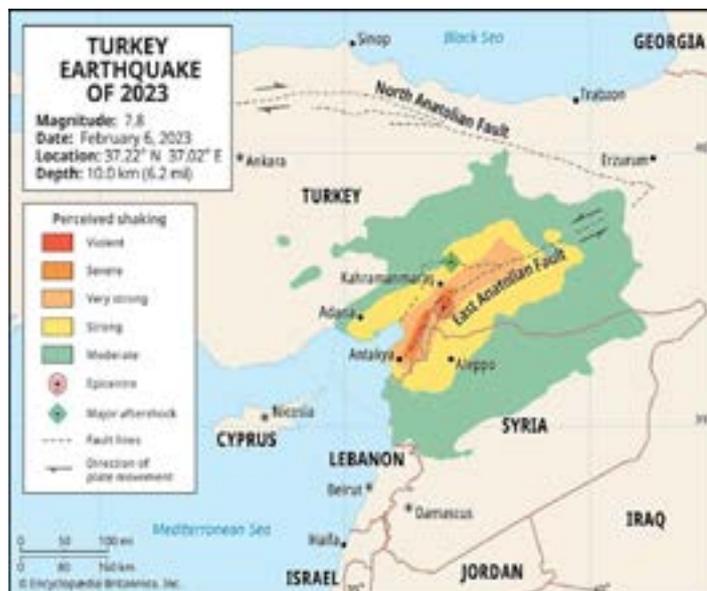


Fig. 1: Overview of affected regions in 2023 Turkish & Syrian Earthquake <https://www.britannica.com/event/2023-Turkey-Syria-earthquake>

Despite such a ‘coordinated’ global response, there is plenty of evidence suggesting that a significant part of the aid intended for victims in Turkey and Syria was delayed or misappropriated (ALNAP, 2025; Amnesty International, 2023). Weaknesses in aid distribution systems, political interference, corruption and flaws of oversight mechanisms undermined the effectiveness of pledged aid. This paper will argue that, even though international aid was substantial, the institutional and systemic failures in Turkey and Syria limited the appropriate use of post-earthquake aid.

2. Overview of Aid Flow and Mechanisms

2.1. Turkey

In Turkey, the central authority in aid coordination is assumed by the Disaster and Emergency Management Presidency, also known as AFAD, working together with the Ministry of Interior and governors of local authorities. While AFAD has substantial experience in disaster response, it has a high level of political centralisation. They are directly subordinate to the executive, the Presidency of the Republic of Turkey. This subordination increases concerns and questions regarding transparency and impartiality of AFAD. Distribution decisions were top-down, with limited involvement of independent NGOs. Numerous independent reports have claimed uneven aid allocation in Turkey, with some receiving rapid aid while others, particularly opposition-led municipalities, reporting shortages of necessities required to survive such as tents, food and medical supplies during the early aftermath of the earthquake (Amnesty International, 2023; Human Rights Watch, 2023).

2.2. Syria

Due to the then ongoing civil war in Syria, distribution of aid was even further constrained (OCHA, 2023). In

regions controlled by the Assad regime, assistance was delivered and coordinated through state institutions. Opposition-led northwestern Syria heavily depended on aid authorised by the UNSC, which was implemented through NGOs (OCHA, 2023; Human Rights Watch, 2023). Fragmentation of control, political interference and security risks in the region led to bottlenecks. Such structural vulnerabilities made it easier to divert and politicise humanitarian aid.



Fig. 2: Political Map of Syria at the time of the 2023 earthquake <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-64544478>

3. Instances of Misuse and Disappearance of Aid

Multiple credible reports indicated that aid was diverted, politicised or distributed ineffectively in Turkey and Syria. These did not take place as a single and centralised event, but rather as a result of patterns, selective allocations and weak accountability. All such factors together undermined the humanitarian response (ALNAP, 2025)

3.1. Turkey

According to the Turkish media, the lack of transparent reporting on donations and expenditures led to much difficult tracing of usage of billions of Turkish liras in domes-

tic and international aid (Turkish Minute, 2024). Large amounts of donations, especially collected through national fundraising efforts, were transferred to state-controlled funds without independent audits or parliamentary oversight. 115.000.000.000 Turkish Liras (6.1 billion USD in 2023) was raised by the Turkish public and business community overnight. It has been claimed by experts that the raised money was not used for the earthquake (Cumhuriyet, 2023)

It was claimed by the Inter-Agency Humanitarian Evaluation Steering Group that there were documented complaints from earthquake survivors stating that access to assistance including housing, compensations or relocation support were not even, and sometimes politically conditioned (IAHE SG, 2025). Opposition-led municipalities claimed delays and insufficient delivery of tents, containers and basic supplies despite nationwide support and national assurances that enough resources were available. Omran Alswed and his family in Southern Turkey had not received a tent for almost three weeks after the disaster, despite repeatedly applying to official channels (Reuters, 2023)

3.2. Syria

Unlike Turkey, aid misuse was much more systematic and structurally embedded within the system —reflecting the political economy of humanitarian assistance in an authoritarian context (Hilhurst et al., 2021). According to the Syrian Network for Human Rights, humanitarian aid was delivered to regime controlled areas and was distributed through organs linked to political elites or security services (Syrian Network for Human Rights, 2023; Human Rights Watch, 2023). This increased concerns regarding preferential treatment for regime affiliated regions while opposition supporters faced exclusion from basic humanitarian aid. Affected families that spoke to the media expressed that they had felt forgotten, emphasising on lack of aid – including tents – and how it affected the families (Welt Hunger Life, 2024). It was also reported that the first official aid convoy sent by the UN containing me-

dicine, blankets and tents could cross the Bab al-Hawa border 3 days after the earthquake hit, because of the instability of the region and the Syrian government (AP News, 2023).

Due to national rules, international NGOs and UN agencies were required to work with government approved partners. Multiple watchdog reports claimed that aid supplies were diverted willingly to local markets, withheld or redistributed to reward political loyalty of individuals to the regime. In northwest Syria, led by the opposition, risks of diversions were claimed to be lower even though aid was delayed as a result of the political blockages and access restriction (Syrian Network for Human Rights, 2023). This produced de facto aid denial during the early periods of the earthquake, the most critical hours after a disaster.

Aid politicisation is the use or allocation of humanitarian aid based on loyalty or strategic interests rather than objective humanitarian necessities



4. Causes Behind the Misuse of Aid

4.1. Political Interference and Centralisation

In both Turkey and Syria, political control over aid distribution was the leading cause of the aid misuse. In Turkey, a centralised governance structure led to the executive holding the decision-making power —hence limiting the role of institutions, municipalities, NGOs and civil society. Such power held by the executive led to selective use of aid and reduced transparency and accountability: allocations intersected with electoral politics. Just five months after the earthquake, Turkey held the 2023 presidential elections, where Erdogan was ahead in eight out of the eleven municipalities within the earthquake-affected regions (Euronews, 2023). In Syria, political interference was more explicit compared to Turkey. The Assad regime has treated humanitarian aid as a resource, using it as a tool to reward loyal communities and punish opposition.

The aftermath of the earthquake also followed this pattern, where aid went mostly to Assad-led communities while opposition-controlled regions received less or late support. The strategy of the Assad regime reinforced a system of control over humanitarian principles of neutrality and impartiality.

4.2. Weak Oversight and Accountability Mechanisms

In Turkey, already weak accountability mechanisms were significantly weaker in the aftermath of the disaster. Emergency legislation regarding disaster support reduced opportunities for the parliament to interact, consolidating the power at the executive branch of the government—even though practically impossible due to the government holding a majority. The Government had complete and full

power over aid allocation and expenditure. At the same time, civil

society organisations faced legal and administrative barriers that limited their ability to monitor aid, provide independent assessments, or publicly report misuse of aid. The lack of independent oversight and publicly accessible reporting tools made it more difficult for NGOs to trace aid and assistance that were never used. Lack of civilian oversight and accountability mechanisms increased the risk of misuse without detection. In Syria, oversight was much weaker due to structural and security related constraints. Lack of access to humanitarian organisations, ongoing insecurity inside the country, and the legal doctrine of forcing international NGOs and other UN agencies to operate through intermediaries approved by the Syrian Government damaged and limited independent monitoring of the aftermath of the earthquake alongside other violations of international law inside Syria. These limitations and practices resulted in humanitarian actors being unable to verify beneficiary lists, delivery routes or distribution outcomes. Direct access to the affected population was limited. This reduced donor oversight capacity and

made it possible for aid to be diverted and distributed selectively easier. As a result, weak oversight mechanisms and accountability are not isolated incidents, they are systematically and structurally enabled by the Syrian governments.

4.3. Logistical, Legal and Security Constraints

Damaged infrastructure combined with disrupted supply chains and harsh winter conditions in Eastern Turkey and Western Syria led to aid loss and delay (ALNAP, 2025). In Syria, additional international sanctions, border restrictions and political deadlock in the UNSC further limited cross-border operations (OCHA, 2023). Such factors do not necessarily justify the misuse of aid, but they did increase the dependency on local and national authorities to deliver aid, raising diversion risks (Hilhorst et al., 2021).

“Centralised governance structures in Turkey and authoritarian control in Syria led to political interference that undermined distribution of earthquake aid objectively.”

5. Consequences of Aid Mismanagement

5.1. Humanitarian Consequences

Human suffering was exacerbated when aid was diverted or delayed. Delays in shelters such as tents and containers left thousands exposed to harsh winter and unsanitary conditions. This increased the risk of diseases and mortality for the survivors. Due to the unequal distribution of aid, some communities received overlapping assistance while others received shortages of food, healthcare and shelter. In Syria, displaced populations faced pre-existing vulnerabilities. This reinforced the patterns of exclusion applied prior to the disaster. The failure of the Syrian government to reach vulnerable citizens undermined the humanitarian objective of saving lives and reducing suffering. The disaster left 1.5 million people homeless according to the UN, requiring hundreds of thousands of new housing units—which is near impossible to achieve

due to lack of outreach in Syria (UN, 2023). An article on an earthquake’s impact on health has claimed that people in inadequate shelter conditions with worsened access to clean water and sanitation (WASH) increases the risk of disease transmission both in Turkey and Syria—this also had implications for a possible national health emergency (Ahmed, S. K., et al., 2023)

5.2. Political and Economic Consequences

In Turkey, frustration from the public on how the government handled the disaster response and distribution of aid led to declining trust in state institutions and intensified the already-intense political polarisation in Turkey between the government and opposition supporters (Bellini & Sauter, 2025). Distorted reconstruction priorities in the disaster zone risked inefficiencies and corruption, and resulted

in slower long-term recovery (Transparency In-

ternational, 2023; U4 Anti-Corruption Resources Center, 2025). In Syria, misuse of aid strengthened authoritarian control mechanisms and weakened inclusive recovery, where opposition communities were excluded. By relying on and empowering patronage networks in Syria, humanitarian aid contributed to the political status quo rather than fostering resilience or social cohesion.

5.3. Damage to International Credibility

Aid mismanagement damaged the credibility of international humanitarian actors. Donors, such as states and NGOs, faced criticism for not monitoring and overrelying on authoritarian, politically compromised partners. Such damage risks reducing the confidence of donors and public support for humanitarian operations locally and globally that may be required in the future.



6. Improving Accountability and Transparency

6.1. Strengthening Monitoring and Oversight

Lack of accountability following the earthquake was linked to the lack of independent and continuous monitoring systems. In both Turkey and Syria aid flow was opaque with limited public data. Emergency procedures and rules decreased the transparency even further, restricting information. International organisations, NGOs and donors should implement an independent monitoring mechanism consisting with third-party audits, verification of beneficiaries and monitoring the real-time flow of aid. Reporting platforms should be publicly accessible. This will enhance transparency and allow civil society and media to critically evaluate aid use. In the long-term, this might increase humanitarian aid received by a country due to transparency and accountability. Monitoring mechanisms should be re-designed to a way that it automatically triggers corrective actions. Independent bodies should be granted authority under law to flag irregularities and control aid flow. Emergency legal frameworks should have sunset clauses and a set minimum transparency requirements to prevent erosion of oversight. Together, these measures would highly increase monitoring and oversight in a humanitarian perspective.

6.2. Empowering Local Communities and Civil Society

Local communities and NGOs must be involved in assessment of needs, distribution and monitoring of aid. NGOs, civil society and local governments are generally the first point of contact for locals and know the requirements of the community more than the central government does. Community-based feedback can help identify gaps in aid, detect diversion and ensure aid is sent to communities who are in need and not as a result of political priorities and loyalty. Accountability can be increased if community participation is institutionalised, rather than relying on ad hoc consultations. Formal feedback mechanisms should be integrated into the system. Civil society actors and independent media outlets should be protected with the fullest extent of the law, and should be allowed to report without restrictions. The media's ability to report away from political pressure is essential to report irregularities. The national governments should involve local governments and NGOs when aid is getting allocated—subnational actors are better positioned to understand and identify underserved groups in communities. This increases legitimacy and reduces risks of political aid allocation as well.

6.3. Conditionality and International Coordination

International donors should apply transparency and accountability conditions on funding and supplying aid. This should be done while avoiding measures that can punish civilians collectively. In Turkey, decentralising a disaster government and restoring oversight of the Parliament and Judiciary; in Syria, expanding the cross border access and reducing reliance on regime-supporting intermediaries would make this possible. International donors should coordinate enforcement and strengthen leverage by aligning conditionality standards on aid.

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Celia Ball

A portrait of Celia Ball, a woman with long brown hair, wearing a white shirt and a dark blue blazer. She is smiling slightly and looking towards the camera. The background is a blurred indoor setting.

Accountability and Corruption in Humanitarian Aid

System-wide accountability can reduce corruption in rapid humanitarian response without slowing aid

About the Article

How can humanitarian aid stay efficient while preventing corruption? Strong, system-wide accountability, coordination, and community feedback reduce corruption risks in crisis response. Accountability and rapid action are compatible; investing in adaptive oversight and participation protects aid integrity and ensures assistance reaches those in need.

About the Author

Celia Ball. By studying ISPP, I've acquired a strong understanding of social, political, and economic issues. Engaging in both the Social Policy and Criminology Societies at university, I discovered a passion for enriching my perspective on current world affairs. I have gained an interest in global inequalities, ongoing migration debates and current political affairs, with my current focus on how world economies are being shaped. My passion lies with establishing a sustainable future for societies.

1. Introduction

Humanitarian aid plays a vital role in crisis contexts such as armed conflict, natural disasters, and pandemics. In these situations, humanitarian actors are tasked with delivering lifesaving assistance under conditions of extreme urgency, insecurity, and uncertainty. While the moral imperative to save lives has long been the defining principle of humanitarian action, increasing attention has been paid to how aid is delivered, monitored, and held accountable. Accountability in humanitarian action presents itself as a glaring issue, as it appears within sector reform agendas, underpins programme-level improvements, and is central to debates about the meaning and performance of humanitarianism. Only after the adoption of the Code of Conduct for humanitarian agencies in 1994 did accountability begin to receive systematic attention. This essay argues that effective accountability mechanisms, particularly those that operate at a system-wide level, are essential to mitigating corruption in rapid-response humanitarian operations, without undermining the imperative to act quickly.

“Sphere Project”: An international framework setting minimum standards for aid quality and accountability to protect life and dignity in humanitarian crises



underdeveloped. Acknowledging this distinction helps avoid overgeneralisation and highlights how prevailing accountability practices prioritised financial and reporting compliance over responsiveness to those receiving aid.

Humanitarian crises create what can be described as “high-risk environments” for corruption. Urgency, chaos, and weakened oversight structures reduce the ability of organisations to perform thorough checks and controls.

The pressure to respond rapidly can result in fewer verifications and a slackening of standard procedures. There are

high levels of risk that community members, authorities, and aid staff collude to exploit known weaknesses within individual organisations, and the humanitarian system overall (Henze, Grunewald and Parmer, 2020). These dynamics are particularly pronounced in large-scale emergencies where multiple actors operate simultaneously with limited coordination.

Common channels of corruption in crisis response include procurement fraud, favouritism in aid distribution, ghost beneficiaries, misuse of funds, and local elite capture (Mabece et al, 2022). The risk of misappropriation of aid during implementation is a highly considered concern. Practices such as distributing aid to non-eligible recipients, withholding assistance, or reducing distribution quantities while pocketing the difference are widespread. These practices are facilitated through the manipulation of registration processes, insertion of non-existing beneficiaries, or interference during distribution. Registered recipients may receive less aid than intended, no aid at all, or be forced to pay bribes. Pressure to include non-eligible individuals can come from local authorities, armed groups, host community members, or aid staff themselves, often involving collaboration among multiple stakeholders to conceal wrongdoing (Henze, Grunewald and Parmer,

2. The Anatomy of Corruption in Crisis Response

Corruption in humanitarian contexts can be understood across financial, political, and operational dimensions. It includes the misappropriation of funds, manipulation of beneficiary selection, abuse of power, and collusion between aid actors and local elites or authorities. As Hilhorst et al. (2021) argue, accountability was historically neglected, particularly in relation to affected populations; while upward accountability to donors and headquarters structures was well established, downward accountability to crisis-affected communities remained weak and

2020).

3. Dissecting Accountability in Humanitarian Aid Corruption

3.1. History of Accountability

Since the 1990s, accountability in humanitarian aid has featured prominently on policy agendas. Despite this attention, for a prolonged period accountability remained largely limited to single-agency frameworks, with minimal emphasis on systemic or collective accountability. More recently, there has been a rhetorical shift towards recognising the importance of systemic accountability. However, this shift has not yet translated into widespread or consistent practice.

3.2. Gaps in Accountability

Despite widespread recognition of these risks, accountability mechanisms in humanitarian action often fail. As Hilhorst et al (2021) asserts, humanitarian organisations must be accountable and transparent to credibly uphold the principles of humanity, impartiality, neutrality, and independence. Yet accountability gaps persist at multiple levels. Beyond local dynamics, corrupt practices are also rooted in systemic conditions that underpin humanitarian aid delivery. There are continuous examples of government interference in the everyday realities of aid, mostly in displacement contexts, shortening humanitarian space. This is through withholding permissions and other means. Within this space, humanitarian operations are frequently shaped by pre-designed response plans, short funding cycles, and an overarching emphasis on rapid delivery. While these characteristics are intended to facilitate swift assistance to those in need, they can also compromise the quality of aid provided. The prioritisation of speed may result in reduced scrutiny and limited oversight, making it easier for corrupt practices to emerge unnoticed. Short funding cycles often lead to pressure for quick disbursement and implementation, which in turn diminishes the opportunity for thorough checks and balances. This environment fosters conditions where collusion can occur along the entire aid value chain, involving actors at mul-

iple levels. This spans from procurement and logistics to local distribution. The combination of rigid, pre-designed plans and the drive to act quickly not only undermines delivery standards but also enables corruption schemes that exploit the vulnerabilities inherent in humanitarian response systems.

3.3. The Sphere Project

The Sphere Project, formally established in 1997, aimed to improve the quality of humanitarian assistance by defining a set of universal minimum standards (De Grasse, 2025). The aims of the Sphere Project are based on two integral views (Reed, 2017). Such beliefs include “those affected by disaster or conflict have a right to life and dignity and, therefore a right to assistance; and all possible steps should be taken to alleviate human suffering arising out of disaster or conflict” (Reed, 2017, pg.5). These standards have provided an important foundation for accountability and have significantly influenced how humanitarian aid is planned and delivered. By setting shared benchmarks, Sphere contributed to greater clarity around expectations of performance and responsibility within humanitarian action.

3.4. Inter-agency Coordination and Systemic Accountability

Systemic accountability refers to humanitarian actors holding one another to account through formal and informal mechanisms, including inter-agency collaboration to provide communities with shared complaints and feedback systems. Its importance lies in the interconnected nature of humanitarian interventions, which rely on complex organisational structures, extended implementation chains, and are experienced by affected communities collectively rather than in isolation. While partial initiatives exist, such as inter-agency feedback mechanisms and pooled funding arrangements, these efforts remain insufficient to ensure robust systemic accountability. As Hilhorst et al. (2021) note, the reputation or failure of a single agency can undermine the credibility of the entire humanitarian sector. Nevertheless, progress remains slow, largely due

to weak inter-agency coordination and the persistence of fragmented accountability practices.

4. Mechanisms for Integrity and Oversight

4.1. The Problem

This accountability challenge is closely linked to a persistent paradox in humanitarian action. The paradox entails that intended lifesaving aid can also create opportunities for corruption. Early warning systems, alerts, and needs assessments are exposed to medium to high levels of corruption risk. The provision of false or manipulated information is facilitated by inadequate triangulation, incomplete assessments, and insufficient coordination among humanitarian actors. Such weaknesses can distort decision-making at the earliest stages of response, shaping entire interventions

around inaccurate or deliberately falsified data

(Henze, Grunewald and Parmer, 2020). Donor fragmentation, weak monitoring systems, lack of transparency, and heavy reliance on implementing partners further complicate accountability. Trust deficits between aid organisations, communities, and authorities are both a cause and consequence of corruption. Moreover, programme relevance plays a crucial role, when assistance is perceived as inappropriate or irrelevant, communities may be more inclined to engage in or tolerate corrupt practices. Henze, Grunewald and Parmer (2020) highlight that corruption risks increase when time constraints reduce the ability to conduct due diligence and implement anti-fraud mechanisms, particularly in emergency aid contexts.

The tension between speed and scrutiny is therefore central. Fraudulent systems often embed themselves throughout the project cycle, demonstrating that corruption is not incidental but systemic. Addressing it requires sustained and creative approaches rather than isolated controls.

4.2. A New Hope?

Despite these challenges, several accountability mechanisms have shown promise. Third-party monitoring can enhance independence and credibility by providing external oversight, particularly in high-risk or inaccessible contexts, although its effectiveness may be limited by access constraints and reliance on donor-defined indicators. Digital tracking of funds and supplies improves traceability and reduces opportunities for diversion, yet it depends heavily on technological infrastructure and can exclude low-connectivity settings. Beneficiary feedback loops strengthen downward accountability by enabling affected communities to report concerns and influence programming, but they are often undermined by power asymmetries, fear of retaliation, or weak follow-up by agencies. Whistleblower protections can deter corruption and abuse by

encouraging internal reporting, though their impact is constrained when organisational cultures do not genuinely support transpa-

rency. Finally, open data initiatives promote transparency and collective learning by making information publicly accessible, but they remain limited by inconsistent data quality, lack of standardisation, and low uptake by practitioners (Tsutsui, 2025).

However, their effectiveness depends on contextual adaptation. Organisational policies and training often address corruption in general terms but fail to reflect local realities. Audits alone are insufficient, especially in complex environments where corrupt practices are sophisticated and deeply embedded. According to Henze, Grunewald, and Parmer, (2020), organisations that invest in dedicated, context-driven anti-fraud and risk management mechanisms have improved detection and response.

Local actors and affected populations play a critical role in ensuring accountability. Accountability and participation are closely related practices, as seen in participatory evaluations (Hilhorst et al, 2021). Yet accountability is often framed as a “gift” provided by agencies rather

“Systemic accountability is the practice of humanitarian actors holding each other to shared oversight through coordination, joint feedback systems, and collective responsibility to reduce corruption.”

than as a right of affected people. Deeper accountability would acknowledge communities' right to influence decisions and shape assistance. At the same time, it would be cautionary that accountability technologies can also be used to control and discipline recipients, enhancing governmentality rather than empowering agency (Hilhorst et al, 2021). Participatory mechanisms can strengthen community control, but they are also vulnerable to manipulation by elites or facilitators, requiring careful design and oversight. Adaptive accountability frameworks are therefore essential. These frameworks must balance flexibility with control, allowing rapid response while maintaining integrity and participation.

5. Policy Implications and Recommendations

To address corruption effectively, both organisational and systemic reforms are required. While individual organisations play a critical role in managing integrity risks and are increasingly aware of these challenges, strategic change and collective action are necessary to achieve lasting systemic impact. Key policy reforms should include coordinated donor transparency platforms, shared risk analysis, and harmonised reporting mechanisms to reduce fragmentation and improve oversight across the humanitarian system.

Investing in accountability capacity before humanitarian crises occur is particularly important given the current global political climate and the evolving nature of humanitarian emergencies. Humanitarian space is increasingly shrinking as governments impose tighter controls on civil society organisations, restrict access to affected populations, and criminalise certain forms of humanitarian engagement (Mishra, 2025). At the same time, rising authoritarianism in many crisis-affected contexts reduces transparency and increases the risk of corruption, while also limiting avenues for redress for affected communities.

These pressures are compounded by donor fatigue, driven by protracted crises, overlapping emergencies, and competing global priorities. As funding becomes more

constrained and politically conditional, humanitarian actors face stronger incentives to demonstrate effectiveness, integrity, and value for money. Without pre-existing accountability systems and capacities, organisations are more likely to rely on ad hoc or reactive measures during crises, which are often insufficient to prevent or address corruption and abuse.

Pre-crisis investment in accountability capacity, including staff training, inter-agency coordination mechanisms, and community-based feedback systems, enables humanitarian actors to respond more credibly and consistently when crises erupt. It also helps safeguard trust with affected populations and donors alike in environments where scrutiny is intensifying and tolerance for failure is diminishing. In this context, accountability should be understood not as a technical add-on, but as a core component of humanitarian preparedness and resilience.

Context-sensitive compliance models, longer and more flexible funding cycles, and incentives for inter-agency collaboration can strengthen oversight without undermining the speed of response (De Grasse, 2025). Ethical and operational imperatives must be aligned, recognising that integrity is not merely a compliance requirement but a core humanitarian principle. This requires continuous adaptation of control measures, routine information sharing, comparative analysis across organisations, and adequate resourcing to ensure these efforts are sustainable.

Overall, policy reforms should prioritise system-wide accountability while preserving the rapid response capacity essential to humanitarian action. Accountability mechanisms must be embedded throughout the project cycle, adequately resourced, and tailored to context, with investments made proactively rather than reactively (HADRI, 2025). Meaningful participation of affected communities should be recognised as a right, supported through trusted local feedback and reporting mechanisms. Strengthening integrity in this way is essential to maintaining trust, protecting vulnerable populations, and ensuring that humanitarian assistance reaches those it is intended to serve.

6. Conclusion

Accountability and rapid response are not mutually exclusive. On the contrary, accountability is crucial for the legitimacy and effectiveness of humanitarian service provision (Hilhorst et al, 2021). Without it, humanitarian action risks losing the trust of affected populations and failing in its core mission. Effectively tackling corruption calls for adopting a comprehensive, integrity-driven approach to humanitarian practice that acknowledges the interconnected roles of all stakeholders, values the contributions of local communities, and upholds the ethical principles underlying humanitarian work. Therefore, only through such systemic change can humanitarian aid fulfil its promise of saving lives without causing harm.

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Garance Charles-Gardeur

Hidden Corruption in Supply Chains

Structural Governance Gaps, Due Diligence Failures and International Legal Responses

About the Article

Why does corruption persist in global supply chains despite existing international standards and corporate compliance tools? Structural governance gaps, information asymmetries and fragmented regulation enable systemic, network-based corruption that escapes traditional controls. Only coherent frameworks combining transparency, risk-based due diligence and legal harmonisation can close these governance gaps.

About the Author

Garance Charles-Gardeur studied at Lycée Henri IV (European section) and is fluent in French, German, and English. She trained in theatre for six years at Cours Florent and spent six months in Germany on exchange. Garance completed internships at IHEMI (economic intelligence) and Consors Intelligence. She has engaged with NGOs focused on human rights, the topic of her Bachelor's thesis. Additionally, she interned at the DRPJ, gaining experience with an Anti-Crime Brigade and a fire station, and worked in logistics at La Grande Épicerie Générale de Nancy.

1. Introduction

Corruption in global supply chains remains a significant cross-sector issue. It occurs at every stage, from raw-material procurement to final distribution (Demeshko et al., 2024). It often appears as bribery (Alqudah et al., 2025), facilitation payments, secret agreements, or manipulation of audits (Nicolás-Carlock & Luna-Pla, 2024). These practices are frequently normalised within commercial relationships (Basnyat et al., 2023).

This corruption is primarily systemic (Nicolás-Carlock & Luna-Pla, 2024). Embedded in complex intermediary networks, it obscures who controls and benefits from it. Researchers using network and complexity analysis have demonstrated that economic crime leaves ‘hidden traces’ in dense corporate and transactional networks (Kertész & Wachs, 2020). Those are extremely difficult to detect with traditional, firm-by-firm approaches (Kertész & Wachs, 2020).

The issue is not merely moral, in the sense of individual ethical failure, but also structural and institutional. Governance arrangements and power imbalances create a propitious environment for misconduct to thrive. Empirical evidence has linked corrupt practices to reduced firm productivity, distorted investment decisions and weakened institutional quality (La Rocca et al., 2023). This shows that corruption reflects and reinforces broader inefficiencies in economic organisation (De Rosa et al., 2010).

Such abuses stem not from a regulatory vacuum but from gaps between international norms and their national implementation (Demeshko et al., 2024). International standards on business and human rights, as well as on responsible supply chains, establish explicit expectations (Hofmann et al., 2018). However, the impact of these standards depends on the manner in which states transpose and enforce them, as well as on the extent to which companies integrate them into governance and contractual frameworks (Lebaron & Lister, 2015). Corruption in

supply chains often facilitates violations of workers’ rights, including wage theft, forced overtime, exposure to hazardous environments, and suppression of union activities. For instance, corrupt practices may allow factories to bypass safety regulations or ignore minimum wage laws, directly harming vulnerable workers (Ahmed et al., 2025; Demeshko et al., 2024). To understand why corruption remains possible, it is necessary to consider why global supply chains are particularly vulnerable, how corrupt practices operate and adapt, and what concrete impact they have on economies and societies (UNODC, 2025). Only then can transparency tools, due diligence and legal harmonisation be assessed as means to close the governance gaps that currently allow such practices to persist and mutate (Treleven et al., 2021).

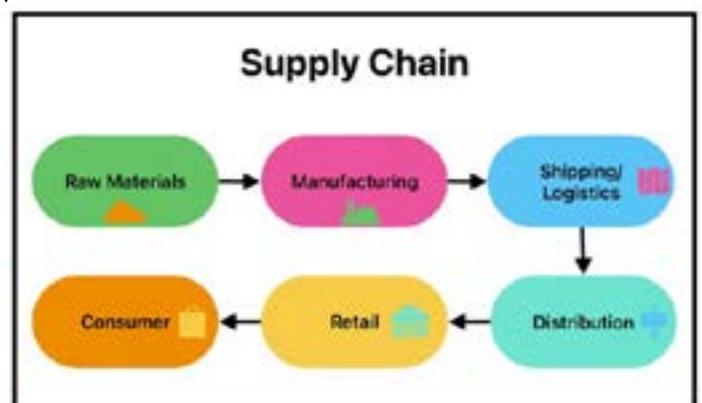


Fig. 1: general model of a supply chain

2. Vulnerabilities Fuelling Supply Chain Corruption

The complex nature of global supply chains involves multiple actors including lead firms, tiers of suppliers, subcontractors, logistics providers and public authorities (Lebaron & Lister, 2015). This complexity heightens corruption risks (UNODC, 2025). The multiplication of actors in such contexts has been demonstrated to increase the number of potential points at which bribes, kickbacks or collusive arrangements can occur (Nicolás-Carlock & Luna-Pla, 2024). Furthermore, this increase in complexity disperses responsibility; which, in turn, makes it difficult to assign

liability to any single entity (Hofmann et al., 2018).

Subcontracting is a central feature of many industries, particularly in sectors such as garments, electronics and food. There, production is often outsourced to low-cost suppliers in different jurisdictions (Ahmed et al., 2025). Each subcontracting

layer increases the

distance between brands and on-the-ground operations (Demeshko et al., 2024). This can enable local elites, brokers or criminal groups to exercise informal control through the implementation of corrupt practices (Hofmann et al., 2018).

Moreover, cross-border operations complicate oversight because supply chains often traverse countries with very divergent legal standards, enforcement capacities and levels of corruption risk (La Rocca et al., 2023). Companies may exploit regulatory diversity through jurisdictional arbitrage (De Rosa et al., 2010). And the absence of effective oversight in certain locations may result in the proliferation of illicit payments and opaque financial arrangements, which would be difficult to detect (Hofmann et al., 2018).

Information asymmetry conceals corruption, as lead firms know less about distant production sites, compared to local intermediaries (Kohler & Wright, 2020). This asymmetry enables agents on the ground to manipulate information regarding costs, compliance or local dealings (Demeshko et al., 2024). This can be achieved by concealing corrupt transactions behind ostensibly legitimate documentation or audit reports (Lebaron & Lister, 2015).

Risk is systematically externalised down the chain, because lead firms often shift operational and compliance responsibilities to suppliers and agents without providing equivalent support, oversight or incentives (De Rosa et al., 2010). When pressure to reduce costs and meet strict deadlines is communicated from head management to

suppliers, a risk arises that those suppliers may resort to bribery or non-compliance to survive economically (La Rocca et al., 2023). In the meantime, the reputational and legal risk remains diffuse (Lebaron & Lister, 2015).

In addition, the efficacy of upstream control is often called into question (Demeshko et al., 2024). Social audits fre-

quently encom- pass mere-

A supply chain is the network of organisations, people, activities and resources involved in producing a good or service and delivering it from raw materials to end consumers.



ly a fraction of facilities, which are often announced in advance, and tend to miss the parts of the chain where abuse is most probable (Ahmed et al., 2025). Research conducted on the 'ethical audit' regime has shown that reliance on standardised checklists and private monitoring can create an illusion of control (Lebaron & Lister, 2015). In practice, this illusion conceals labour exploitation, environmental damage and corrupt practices.

These vulnerabilities are compounded by enforcement challenges across different legal jurisdictions, where limited coordination, evidentiary barriers and uneven regulatory capacity reduce the likelihood of effective accountability. (Casino et al., 2022). Furthermore, corporate governance structures frequently prioritise cost efficiency over compliance. This is due to incentives that are misaligned and a fragmented internal oversight system, which allows risks to be externalised onto suppliers. (Schembera et al., 2023). Collectively, these elements facilitate the conversion of regulatory lacunae into entrenched and pervasive forms of corruption within supply chains. (Treleaven et al., 2021).

Consequently, the perpetuation of corruption in supply chains is not attributable to an absence of norms (Hofmann et al., 2018). It is rather due to governance and enforcement gaps arising from complex structures, conflicting incentives and insufficient oversight (Lebaron & Lister, 2015). These gaps enable formal compliance with high-level standards to exist alongside deeply rooted informal practices that systematically undermine those same standards in practice (Demeshko et al., 2024).

3. Mechanisms And Enablers Of Embedded Corruption

The use of intermediaries, such as agents, brokers, shell companies or consultancies, within supply chains has been identified as a significant facilitator of corruption (Kuhn, 2019). These entities function as conduits for the transmission of illicit payments, thereby contributing to a system that is susceptible to abuse (Kertész & Wachs, 2020). These intermediaries frequently occupy positions of opacity between formal corporate structures and local authorities. This renders the tracing of the flow of money and the proving of the intention of a payment as a bribe difficult (Nicolás-Carlock & Luna-Pla, 2024).

Furthermore, the utilisation of shell companies in procurement networks shows the intricate web of legal entities that can be employed to disguise ownership and orchestrate illicit activities such as bid-rigging or the exchange of kickbacks (Kertész & Wachs, 2020). Analyses of such networks demonstrate the presence of dense clusters of related suppliers that appear to be independent, yet are controlled by the same actors (La Rocca et al., 2023). This enables the extraction of public funds and manipulation of competition.

Local political influence is another crucial enabler, as

business actors may rely on

“Corruption in supply chains evolves by adapting to regulatory and market changes, moving into new sectors and exploiting fresh forms of complexity and opacity”

politically connected figures or criminal groups to secure access to land, licences or labour (Ahmed et al., 2025). These regimes involve the concurrent utilisation of violence, intimidation and corruption, with the primary objective being the maintenance of order and the suppression of workers’ rights, while ensuring the uninterrupted flow of production (Demeshko et al., 2024).

Weak governance zones, including regions with limited state capacity, high levels of poverty or ongoing conflict,

offer particular opportunities for corruption related to natural resources and raw materials (Kertész & Wachs, 2020). Research on conflict minerals has shown how armed groups, local elites and complicit officials are able to capture parts of the supply chain using extortion and illegal taxation (Kertész & Wachs, 2020). These actors are then able to feed into global markets through intermediaries (Hofmann et al., 2018).

The fragmentation of legal frameworks across different jurisdictions has been shown to create a multitude of loopholes and inconsistencies that are able to be exploited by those with corrupt intent, particularly in cases where enforcement is inconsistent or sanctions are deemed insufficient (Treleaven et al., 2021). National incoherence is also a contributing factor (Kohler & Wright, 2020). This is due to domestic regulations on procurement, corporate liability and transparency which may be poorly coordinated or undermined by political interference (Kohler & Wright, 2020). In some settings, regulatory capture enables powerful economic interests to influence enforcement priorities or to block reforms that would strengthen oversight and accountability (De Rosa et al., 2010). The term ‘regulatory capture’ is used to denote the corruption of authority that occurs when a political entity, legislator, or regulatory body is co-opted to serve the commercial, ideological, or political interests of a member (La Rocca

et al., 2023). It is important to note that processes designated as deregulation have the potential to generate further spaces for bypassing when they result in the reduction of obligations or the weakening of supervisory mechanisms without the provision of alternative safeguards (Treleaven et al., 2021). For instance, efforts to simplify procedures or reduce ‘red tape’ may unintentionally lower transparency and reporting requirements, making it easier for corrupt transactions to flourish undetected (Treleaven et al., 2021).

In addition, digitalisation and emerging technologies offer both risks and tools. While platforms and e-procurement systems can be susceptible to manipulation for fraudulent activities, their very design can also enhance traceability and detection if executed effectively (Bandara et al., 2025). In the field of data science, there has been a recent proposal of a new approach to reduce discretion, create immutable records and identify suspicious patterns across large datasets (Treleaven et al. 2021). This approach involves using blockchain, open data catalogues and advanced analytics (Treleaven et al., 2021). However, the impact of these factors is contingent upon the corporate governance and internal compliance cultures of the respective organisations. Absent independent oversight and authentic integration into decision-making processes, such tools may be relegated to mere symbolism, failing to meaningfully mitigate corruption risks (Schembera et al., 2023)

Overall, corruption in supply chains evolves by adapting to regulatory and market changes, moving into new sectors and exploiting fresh forms of complexity and opacity (Demeshko et al., 2024). The dynamic quality of this phenomenon is indicative of the limitations of traditional, transaction-focused controls, thus rendering them often insufficient. This is also indicative of the increasing promotion of systemic, risk-based approaches to governance in policy and academic debates (Hofmann et al., 2018).



Fig. 2: infographic : UNIDOC Reaserch

4. Consequences And Emerging Remedies

Corruption missallocates resources, raises transaction costs and reduces productivity at firm and sector levels (De Rosa et al., 2010). Research into companies' behaviour has indicated that informal payments can be considered a form of 'bribe tax', reduces output and discourages investment, particularly in environments where companies face both heavy bureaucracy and high levels of corruption (La Rocca et al., 2023). Corruption also distorts competition by favouring firms that engage in illicit practices over those that respect the rules. This, in turn, undermines market efficiency and innovation (De Rosa et al., 2010). When contracts are awarded or maintained on the basis of bribes rather than quality or price, efficient firms may be excluded and long-term development prospects may be harmed (Nicolás-Carlock & Luna-Pla, 2024).

At a societal level, corruption has been shown to erode trust in public institutions, private companies and certification schemes. And this can weaken social cohesion and democratic accountability (Lebaron & Lister, 2015). In sectors such as food and health, the presence of corrupt practices may directly threaten public welfare by compromising safety standards, precipitating shortages or diverting essential goods from vulnerable populations (Kohler & Wright, 2020). The correlation between corruption and human rights abuses is an increasingly recognised phenomenon, as illicit practices often go hand in hand with labour exploitation, unsafe conditions and environmental harm (Demeshko et al., 2024). In global food systems and manufacturing, research highlights that marginalised workers are the most affected by the aforementioned combined pressures, experiencing wage theft, violence and exposure to hazardous environments (Ahmed et al., 2025).

Greater transparency in supply chains is frequently proposed as a core part of the solution, through measures such as public beneficial-ownership registers, open procurement data and mandatory reporting by companies

(Kohler & Wright, 2020). Evidence from procurement and digital-governance experiments suggests that transparent, standardised data can facilitate external scrutiny, crowd-based monitoring and data-driven oversight (Bandara et al., 2025). In this regard, a due-diligence-based approach, under which companies must identify, prevent and mitigate adverse impacts within their supply chains, is increasingly promoted in both soft law and binding legislation (Ivanhoe, 2016). Research conducted on conflict-mineral regimes and sector-specific initiatives has shown that due diligence can shift in corporate behaviour, particularly when coupled with clear expectations, stakeholder engagement, and credible enforcement mechanisms (Demeshko et al., 2024).

International legal and policy harmonisation is crucial to avoid regulatory arbitrage and to create a more level playing field for businesses that are committed to integrity (Treleaven et al., 2021). Convergence between anti-corruption, human-rights and sustainability standards can help align incentives and reduce confusion for companies operating in multiple jurisdictions (Robin-Olivier, 2025). Existing frameworks, including the OECD Guidelines for Multinational Enterprises, provide a structured reference point for responsible business conduct. The Guidelines set out due-diligence expectations covering human rights, labour standards, environmental protection and anti-corruption (OECD, 2023). Their implementation is supported by National Contact Points (NCPs), which can receive complaints and facilitate mediation. However, the absence of binding enforcement mechanisms limits their deterrent capacity, as outcomes largely depend on reputational pressure rather than legal sanctions (Hofmann et al., 2018; OECD, 2023). In a similar manner, the UN Global Compact encourages companies to integrate ten principles relating to human rights, labour, environmental sustainability and anti-corruption into their strategic frameworks. Participation in this initiative remains voluntary and is primarily based on self-reporting through annual “Communication on Progress” disclosures. Whilst the initiative is effective in promoting awareness and normative alignment, concerns have been raised regarding its re-

liance on voluntary compliance, which may result in selective engagement and superficial adherence (Ascencio, 2025).

These instruments promote coherence but depend on domestic implementation, corporate commitment and civil-society oversight (Hofmann et al., 2018). When combined with robust enforcement, meaningful stakeholder participation and technological tools for monitoring, they can contribute to closing the gaps that currently allow corruption to remain hidden in supply chains (Bandara et al., 2025).

5. Conclusion

Corruption in supply chains persists because of structural governance gaps, information asymmetries and fragmented regulation. These factors combine to create an environment conducive to the proliferation of illicit practices which are then masked by a veneer of compliance (Lebaron & Lister, 2015). Addressing this issue not only needs moral condemnation but also the establishment of a coherent framework centred on transparency, risk-based due diligence and international legal harmonisation. This framework must be capable of transforming the organisation and supervision of global production (Treleaven et al., 2021).

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