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Background Guide

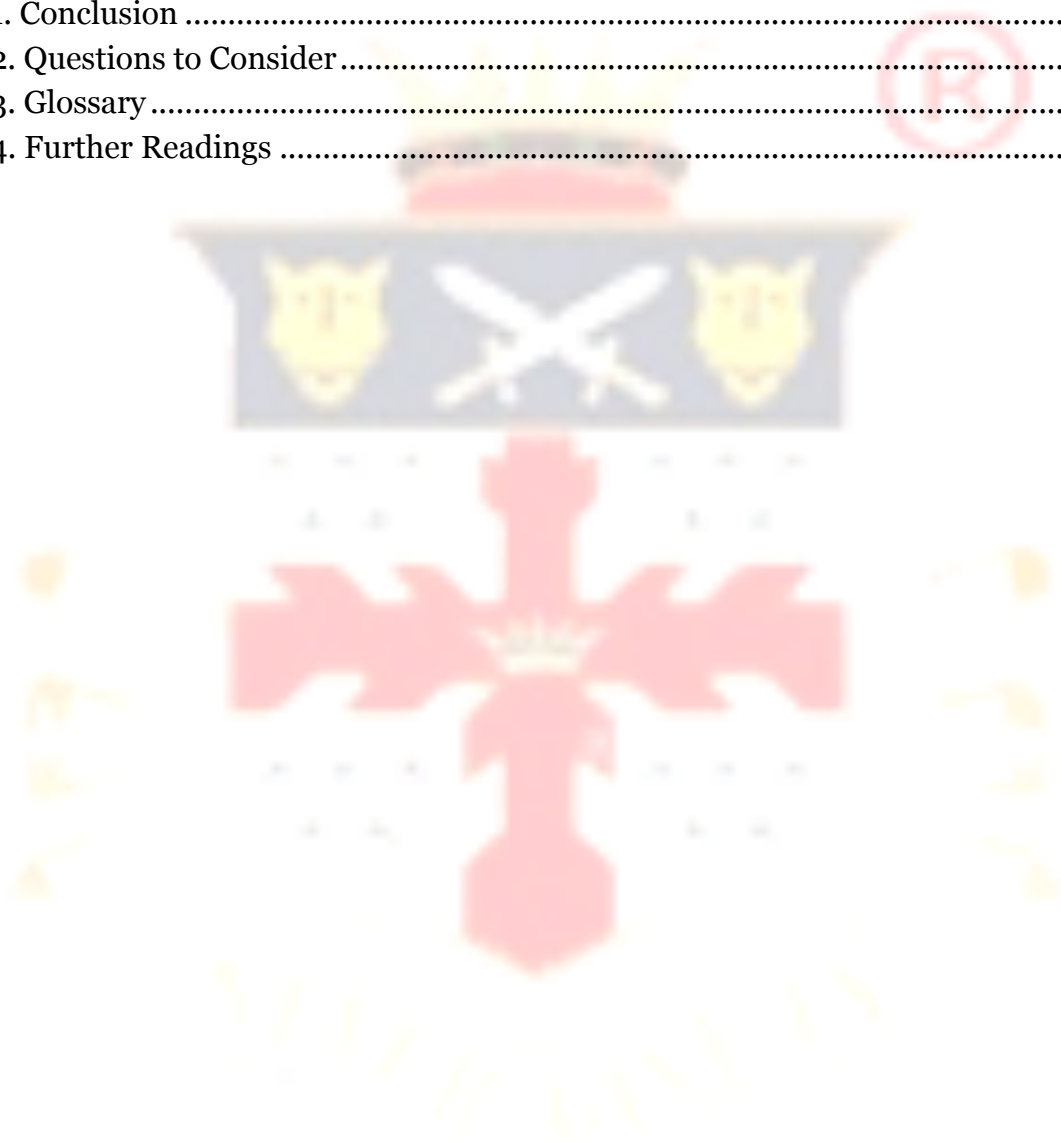
Economic and Social Council

Agenda: Addressing the humanitarian consequences of armed conflict on civilian populations and essential social systems

Table of Contents

Background Guide	0
Economic and Social Council.....	0
Agenda: Addressing the humanitarian consequences of armed conflict on civilian populations and essential social systems.....	0
Table of Contents.....	1
Letter from the Executive Board.....	4
1. Committee Overview.....	6
1.1 Mandate and Scope.....	6
1.2 Relevance to the Agenda	6
1.3 Powers and Limitations.....	7
2. Introduction to the Agenda	7
2.1 Importance of the Issue.....	7
2.2 Conceptual Framing.....	8
2.3 Nature of the Problem.....	8
3. Substantive Issue Analysis	9
3.1 How the Issue Works.....	9
3.2 Structural Factors	9
3.3 Evolution of the Issue	10
4. Geopolitical / Stakeholder Context	10
5. Legal / Policy Framework.....	12
5.1 Core Principles.....	12
5.2 Doctrines and Policy Approaches	12
5.3 Existing Frameworks	13
5.4 Gaps and Limitations.....	13
6. Role of International / Institutional Actors	14
7. Impact Analysis.....	15
7.1 Social Impact	15
7.2 Economic Impact	16
7.3 Institutional / Political Impact	16
7.4 Distributional Effects	17
8. Case Studies.....	18
8.1 Syria: Protracted Urban Warfare and the Weaponization of Public Services..	18
8.2 Sudan: Complex Emergencies, Mass Displacement, and Institutional Collapse	19
8.3 Ukraine: Kinetic and Cyber Warfare on Dual-Use Grid Infrastructure	20
8.4 Myanmar: Asymmetric Insurgency and the Fragmentation of Social Delivery	21
8.5 Empirical Structural Data Across Conflict Settings	22

9. Challenges to Cooperation.....	22
10. Key Policy / Strategic Dilemmas	23
10.1 Dilemma 1: Short-Term Emergency Relief vs. Long-Term Development (The Funding Paradox)	23
10.2 Dilemma 2: Sovereign Integrity vs. Unhindered Humanitarian Access (The Sovereignty Paradox)	24
10.3 Dilemma 3: Operational Neutrality vs. Human Rights Advocacy (The Principles Paradox).....	25
10.4 Strategic Debate Insight: Decoupling Operations from Advocacy	25
11. Conclusion	25
12. Questions to Consider.....	26
13. Glossary	27
14. Further Readings	30



Letter from the Executive Board

Distinguished Delegates,

It is our distinct privilege to welcome you to the Economic and Social Council for this simulation. As we convene to address the humanitarian consequences of armed conflict on civilian populations and essential social systems, we find ourselves at a critical juncture in the history of multilateral diplomacy. The contemporary global landscape is characterized by conflicts that are increasingly protracted, highly urbanized, and technologically complex. These dynamics have fundamentally shifted the burden of warfare onto civilian populations, transforming the destruction of social delivery systems into a structural feature of modern combat. Our task in this committee is to transcend surface-level discussions of emergency relief and instead engage in a rigorous, systemic analysis of how armed conflict dismantles the social and economic foundations of societies. As the principal organ responsible for coordinating the economic, social, and environmental work of the United Nations, this committee is uniquely positioned to bridge the gap between immediate life-saving intervention and long-term developmental resilience. We must confront the uncomfortable realities of systemic funding deficits, the erosion of compliance with international legal frameworks, and the profound political divisions that frequently paralyze international cooperation.

This background guide has been prepared to provide you with an exhaustive, academically rigorous foundation for your research. It is designed to move beyond basic definitions and explore the structural mechanisms, historical evolutions, and strategic dilemmas that define this agenda. We expect you to approach this topic with the analytical depth of senior scholars and the pragmatic negotiation skills of seasoned diplomats. Your task is to draft comprehensive, innovative, and operationally viable resolutions that respect the delicate balance between national sovereignty and the collective moral imperative to protect human dignity.

We urge you to read this guide closely, pay meticulous attention to the systems-level interdependencies analyzed herein, and come prepared to engage in a highly sophisticated, collaborative, and intellectually challenging debate.

Sincerely,

The Executive Board of the Economic and Social Council

1. Committee Overview

1.1 Mandate and Scope

The Economic and Social Council is established under Chapter IX and Chapter X of the Charter of the United Nations as one of the six principal organs of the global body, tasked with the coordination of international economic and social cooperation. Within this framework, the council is responsible for overseeing the programmatic direction of humanitarian assistance aimed at supporting vulnerable populations affected by natural disasters and conflicts. The broad scope of the council encompasses a wide array of functional commissions, specialized agencies, and regional bodies, through which it seeks to promote sustainable development, eradicate poverty, and foster structural resilience in states transitioning from crises to peace.

The coordinate authority of the council allows it to supervise the operational activities of key United Nations funds and programs. This extensive mandate ensures that the council does not merely react to isolated crises, but instead establishes macro-level policies that address the systemic root causes of socio-economic fragility. The scope of its policy-making power extends to the formulation of international development goals, the promotion of gender equality, the integration of human rights into economic policies, and the coordination of specialized health, educational, and environmental interventions across the globe.

1.2 Relevance to the Agenda

While the maintenance of military security falls under the primary purview of the Security Council, the Economic and Social Council is the designated organ for managing the long-term, structural consequences of conflicts on the social fabric of states. Armed conflicts do not merely cause physical destruction, they dismantle public administration, disrupt local markets, and cause the systemic collapse of essential utilities. The annual Humanitarian Affairs Segment of the council serves as the essential global platform for discussing the coordination and effectiveness of emergency humanitarian efforts, establishing normative standards to protect civilians and preserve municipal services. The council is uniquely relevant to this agenda due to its ability to operate at the intersection of immediate emergency relief and long-term socio-economic development. By managing the transition from humanitarian aid to structural rehabilitation, the council seeks to prevent states from sliding back into cyclical violence. Its focus on building institutional capacity, restoring basic utilities, and maintaining educational and medical systems ensures that the international response to conflicts addresses the total

environment of civilian survival, rather than focusing solely on physical security.

1.3 Powers and Limitations

The powers of the council are primarily coordinate, normative, and recommendatory. Under the Charter of the United Nations, the council is empowered to make or initiate studies, draft resolutions, and prepare reports on international economic, social, cultural, educational, and health matters. It can convene international conferences, draft conventions for submission to the General Assembly, and coordinate the activities of specialized agencies through formal consultations and joint programs. These coordinate mechanisms are critical for harmonizing the disparate activities of operational actors in complex crisis settings.

Despite these significant coordination powers, the council is bound by major structural and legal limitations. Unlike the Security Council, this committee cannot adopt legally binding resolutions, authorize military interventions, or impose coercive economic sanctions. Its decisions rely entirely on the voluntary compliance, political cooperation, and financial contributions of Member States. Furthermore, the operational implementation of its policies is frequently challenged by the principle of national sovereignty, which requires the explicit consent of the host state before any international humanitarian or developmental intervention can be executed within its sovereign territory.

2. Introduction to the Agenda

2.1 Importance of the Issue

The contemporary global security environment is defined by an alarming proliferation of protracted, high-intensity conflicts that exact an unprecedented toll on populations and the physical systems that sustain them. In modern theatres of war, the deliberate or incidental destruction of civilian infrastructure has shifted from an occasional byproduct of kinetic military operations to a systemic, calculated method of warfare. This trend has resulted in a landscape where civilians account for approximately ninety percent of total conflict-related casualties, a statistic driven not only by direct kinetic impacts but by the slow, cascading failure of essential services such as water, sanitation, and healthcare. The consequences of this systemic targeting are reflected in the dramatic escalation of forced migration. The global number of internally displaced persons has surpassed historical

records, reflecting a profound crisis of protection within sovereign borders. Simultaneously, millions of refugees have crossed international borders, placing severe socio-economic strains on the hosting capacity of neighboring states. These massive demographic shifts are directly linked to the collapse of local social systems, as families are forced to flee not only active violence but the absolute absence of water, medical care, and schools.

2.2 Conceptual Framing

To analyze the socio-economic and institutional impacts of conflict, delegates must utilize a dual conceptual framework. The first element is the absolute legal boundary established by international humanitarian law, which seeks to inject a measure of humanity into warfare by regulating the conduct of hostilities and protecting non-combatants. This body of law establishes clear, non-negotiable boundaries regarding the protection of civilians and the preservation of objects indispensable to their survival. The second element is the humanitarian-development-peace nexus, an integrated policy approach that challenges the traditional, sequential delivery of aid. Historically, international actors delivered short-term humanitarian relief during a conflict, transitioned to developmental aid in the post-conflict phase, and implemented peacebuilding measures independently. The contemporary consensus recognizes that in protracted conflicts, these three interventions must be executed simultaneously to build local systemic resilience and address the structural inequalities that fuel ongoing violence.

2.3 Nature of the Problem

The nature of the contemporary humanitarian crisis is structurally linked to the asymmetric design of modern warfare. Conflicts are increasingly intra-state, characterized by hostilities between formal state forces and fragmented non-state armed groups operating in densely populated urban zones. In these settings, military forces routinely integrate themselves into civilian populations, utilizing schools, residential areas, and medical clinics as cover, which leads to the rapid erosion of compliance with international legal norms. Furthermore, the physical centralization of modern public utilities has introduced severe vulnerabilities into the environment of civilian survival. In highly urbanized societies, essential services are deeply interdependent. A kinetic strike on an electrical grid does not merely shut off domestic lighting, it immediately disables water purification plants, disrupts hospital operations, halts sewage treatment systems, and deactivates cold-chain storage for critical medical supplies. This interdependence creates a cascading failure across multiple sectors, transforming localized tactical military

engagements into systemic regional humanitarian crises.

3. Substantive Issue Analysis

3.1 How the Issue Works

The disruption of public utilities in conflict settings operates through a cascade of physical and operational failures. While the immediate kinetic impact of bombardment on a utility station is easily observed, the major humanitarian devastation is driven by reverberating effects that ripple through interconnected service systems.

This cascading failure demonstrates that the destruction of a single node in an energy network can lead to systemic collapse across public health, sanitation, and municipal governance, illustrating that social services cannot be protected or repaired as isolated sectors.

3.2 Structural Factors

Several structural factors predetermine the vulnerability of modern social systems to conflict-induced collapse. The rapid pace of global urbanization has concentrated vast populations in dense metropolitan areas that are entirely dependent on centralized, highly integrated utility networks. Unlike rural communities, which may possess access to decentralized water tables and local subsistence agriculture, urban populations are completely reliant on centralized municipal grids, making them exceptionally vulnerable to single points of failure.

Another major structural barrier is the implementation of unilateral coercive measures and broad sanctions regimes. While these measures often contain formal clauses exempting humanitarian goods, the operational reality is characterized by over-compliance by international commercial actors. Financial institutions, shipping companies, and manufacturing corporations routinely block the sale and transport of dual-use spare parts, water treatment chemicals, and electrical components to conflict-affected regions to avoid legal liability. This structural paralysis prevents local municipal authorities from executing routine maintenance, leading to the slow, irreversible decay of public utility networks independent of direct military action.

3.3 Evolution of the Issue

The historical evolution of warfare has dramatically increased the exposure of civilian populations to systematic infrastructure collapse. Throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, military engagements were primarily characterized by state-on-state kinetic combat waged on clearly demarcated frontlines by standing national armies. The total mobilization of societies during the global conflicts of the twentieth century introduced the doctrine of strategic targeting of industrial assets, yet these remained distinct from the day-to-day administrative services accessed by civilian non-combatants.

In the contemporary era, the boundaries of warfare have expanded both physically and technologically. Hostilities are increasingly waged within dense urban settings, bringing military engagements into direct contact with hospitals, school networks, and water installations. Simultaneously, the digitization of public services has introduced cyber operations as a core method of warfare. This technological transition allows state and non-state actors to infiltrate and disable supervisory control and data acquisition networks, shutting down power plants and water systems remotely, presenting the international legal system with an unprecedented challenge regarding the attribution and regulation of non-kinetic warfare.

4. Geopolitical / Stakeholder Context

The execution of social recovery frameworks in active conflict zones is shaped by intense geopolitical tensions. This divide is structured around the conceptual cleavage between the preservation of national sovereignty and the collective moral obligation to ensure rapid, unhindered humanitarian access to populations in need. To navigate this cleavage, international actors engage in humanitarian diplomacy, utilizing negotiating and communication strategies to establish secure operational spaces, negotiate local ceasefires, and guarantee the safety of relief workers.

The major Western donor nations, which provide the vast majority of the voluntary financial contributions that sustain international relief efforts, actively champion a human-rights-centric approach to humanitarian diplomacy. These stakeholders emphasize the absolute necessity of independent international monitoring, direct access to affected populations, and the strict enforcement of accountability mechanisms to punish violations of international humanitarian law. They favor channeling funds through multilateral United Nations agencies and international non-governmental

organizations, often conditioning developmental assistance on governance reforms and human rights compliance by the host state.

Conversely, the Group of 77 and China, representing a broad coalition of developing nations, prioritize the principle of non-interference in the internal affairs of states, as codified in Article 2(7) of the Charter of the United Nations. These stakeholders argue that the primary responsibility for coordinating, delivering, and monitoring humanitarian assistance lies with the host state. They are highly skeptical of international monitoring mechanisms, which they fear can be instrumentalized for political purposes or regime change. This coalition consistently advocates for the redirection of international resources away from short-term, donor-directed relief toward long-term, unconditional state-centric developmental aid.

Sovereign governments experiencing active, protracted internal conflicts present a highly complex set of stakeholder priorities. These regimes are often forced to manage severe domestic security threats alongside economic collapse and massive humanitarian needs. While they require international financial and technical assistance to maintain public utilities, they are highly sensitive to foreign intervention. They frequently impose administrative and bureaucratic barriers, such as visa delays and restrictive registration laws, to control the distribution of aid, seeking to centralize all relief efforts through state-approved channels to reinforce their domestic legitimacy and deprive opposition-held territories of essential services.

Regional organizations, such as the African Union, the Arab League, and the European Union, play a critical role in translating global humanitarian norms into context-specific regional policies. The African Union, for example, has developed advanced legal frameworks to address internal displacement, such as the Kampala Convention, which places a legal obligation on member states to protect the social and economic rights of internally displaced persons. The European Union, as a major donor of both humanitarian and developmental assistance, actively utilizes its financial leverage to promote the operational integration of the Triple Nexus, encouraging closer strategic cooperation between relief and developmental actors in crisis-affected regions.

5. Legal / Policy Framework

5.1 Core Principles

The legal framework governing the protection of civilian populations and essential social systems during armed conflict is rooted in international humanitarian law, also known as the law of armed conflict. The primary purpose of this body of law is to limit the effects of armed conflict for humanitarian reasons, balancing military necessity with the demands of humanity. There are four core principles of international humanitarian law that dictate the conduct of hostilities and provide the legal foundation for the protection of civilian infrastructure. The first is distinction, which requires all parties to a conflict to differentiate at all times between combatants and civilians, directing attacks only against legitimate military targets. The second is proportionality, which prohibits any attack expected to cause incidental loss of civilian life, injury, or damage to civilian objects that would be excessive in relation to the concrete and direct military advantage anticipated. The third is precaution, which obligates military planners to take constant care to spare the civilian population, verifying targets and utilizing means that minimize incidental harm. The fourth is humanity, which forbids the infliction of suffering, injury, or destruction not necessary for the accomplishment of legitimate military purposes.

[Legal Architecture of International Humanitarian Law]

5.2 Doctrines and Policy Approaches

Over the past two decades, several progressive doctrines and policy approaches have emerged to address the gaps in the traditional application of international humanitarian law. The most prominent of these is the Responsibility to Protect doctrine, adopted unanimously at the 2005 United Nations World Summit. This doctrine asserts that sovereign states have the primary responsibility to protect their populations from genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing, and crimes against humanity. If a state is manifestly unable or unwilling to protect its population, the responsibility shifts to the international community, which must take appropriate collective action through the United Nations Charter.

In response to the limitations of traditional top-down aid models, the international community has embraced localization, a strategic approach designed to empower, fund, and reinforce local municipal authorities, utility cooperatives, and national civil society organizations. Localization recognizes that local actors are the first responders in any crisis, possessing the context-specific knowledge and access required to perform rapid repairs on damaged infrastructure, maintain educational continuity, and operate community-level health services during active hostilities. By shifting financial resources and decision-making power to local structures, the international community seeks to build sustainable, domestic social delivery systems.

5.3 Existing Frameworks

The legal protection of civilian infrastructure is formally codified in several key international treaties, primarily the four Geneva Conventions of 1949 and their Additional Protocols of 1977. Specifically, the Fourth Geneva Convention relative to the Protection of Civilian Persons in Time of War provides extensive protections for civilians in the power of a party to the conflict or in occupied territories. Article 54 of Additional Protocol I and Article 14 of Additional Protocol II explicitly prohibit the starvation of civilians as a method of warfare, banning attacks on, or the destruction, removal, or rendering useless of, objects indispensable to the survival of the civilian population, such as foodstuffs, agricultural areas, crops, livestock, drinking water installations, and irrigation works.

A major advancement in the normative framework is the criminalization of starvation as a method of warfare. This prohibition is reinforced by United Nations Security Council Resolution 2417, which recognizes the direct, causal link between armed conflict, food insecurity, and the threat of famine. The resolution strongly condemns the use of starvation as a method of warfare and the unlawful denial of humanitarian access, recalling that such acts may constitute war crimes. Furthermore, Security Council Resolution 2573 unanimously condemns attacks directed against civilian infrastructure indispensable to the survival of the civilian population, demanding that all parties to conflict comply with their obligations to protect medical facilities, water networks, and electrical grids. Furthermore, the Safe Schools Declaration, opened for endorsement in 2015, represents a significant political commitment by states to protect educational institutions during armed conflict. By endorsing the declaration, states commit to implementing the Guidelines for Protecting Schools and Universities from Military Use during Armed Conflict, which seek to deter armed forces and non-state armed groups from using academic facilities for military purposes, such as barracks, weapon depots, or observation posts. As of 2026, over one hundred and twenty states have endorsed the declaration, establishing a powerful global norm that safeguards the right to education in conflict zones.

5.4 Gaps and Limitations

Despite the existence of a robust international legal framework, severe gaps and limitations remain in its practical implementation and enforcement. The most critical gap is the pervasive culture of impunity that characterizes contemporary conflicts. While the violation of international humanitarian law rules is formally recognized as war crimes under the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court, the court suffers from severe jurisdictional limitations, political interference, and a lack of universal ratification, particularly among major military powers. This lack of enforcement means that warring

parties often perform calculated risk assessments, concluding that the military utility of destroying critical infrastructure outweighs the minimal likelihood of international prosecution.

Another significant gap is the legal ambiguity surrounding the status of digital data and cyber operations under international humanitarian law. Traditional treaty law defines civilian objects as physical, tangible property. It remains a subject of intense legal debate whether digital data, such as municipal utility operating software, medical registries, or financial data, qualifies as a civilian object protected from cyber attack. This legal vacuum allows states to conduct disruptive cyber operations against the digital systems that run critical infrastructure, causing severe humanitarian consequences while exploiting the lack of clear international legal consensus to avoid accountability.

6. Role of International / Institutional Actors

The global response to conflict-induced social collapse is coordinated by a complex ecosystem of multilateral agencies operating under the mandate of the United Nations. Central to this architecture is the principle of accountability to affected people, which seeks to ensure that humanitarian operations are responsive to the specific needs and feedback of crisis-affected populations. This principle requires agencies to actively engage local communities in the design, execution, and evaluation of relief and recovery programs, transforming aid recipients from passive beneficiaries to active stakeholders in their own social recovery. To operationalize this coordinating mandate during complex emergencies, OCHA utilizes the Cluster Approach to group humanitarian and developmental actors into thematic sectors. This approach is designed to eliminate duplication, close operational gaps, and improve the overall efficiency of relief efforts by assigning a lead agency to coordinate each sector, such as the Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene cluster led by UNICEF, and the Health cluster led by the WHO. OCHA is also responsible for mobilizing resources through the preparation of the annual Global Humanitarian Overview, the world's most comprehensive assessment of global humanitarian needs.

The WHO holds the primary mandate for maintaining global public health security during crises, working directly with national health ministries to rebuild healthcare systems, deliver pharmaceutical supplies, and manage disease outbreaks. This monitoring is complemented by the WHO's Surveillance System for Attacks on Health Care, which collects, verifies, and disseminates standardized data regarding violence directed against medical services. By establishing a rigorous, evidence-based record of attacks, this surveillance system provides the international community with the empirical data required to conduct public advocacy and facilitate human rights accountability.

UNICEF focuses on the protection and developmental rights of children, executing extensive programs in water sanitation, nutrition, and child protection during armed conflicts. A major component of its mandate is the provision of Education in Emergencies, an operational framework designed to restore learning opportunities for children affected by crises. UNICEF works on the frontlines to establish temporary learning spaces, supply educational materials, train local teachers, and provide psychosocial support to help children process the trauma of displacement and violence, actively advocating against the military occupation of schools.

The UNHCR is tasked with the protection and assistance of refugees, asylum-seekers, internally displaced persons, and stateless individuals worldwide. Through its annual Global Trends report, the agency tracks demographic shifts, movement patterns, and long-term search for durable solutions of displaced populations. UNHCR works to ensure that displaced persons have access to basic social services in both camp settings and host communities, advocating against the forced repatriation of refugees to unsafe environments and promoting their socio-economic integration into local municipal structures.

Operating as an independent, neutral, and impartial intermediary, the ICRC holds a unique, treaty-mandated role under the Geneva Conventions to protect the victims of armed conflict. The ICRC conducts confidential, bilateral dialogues with both state forces and non-state armed groups to secure access to detention facilities, monitor compliance with international humanitarian law, and deliver emergency relief. Its specialized engineering teams work directly across active frontlines to repair damaged water, sanitation, and electrical infrastructure, demonstrating that neutral, non-political engagement is critical for maintaining essential utilities in active combat zones.

7. Impact Analysis

7.1 Social Impact

The social consequences of armed conflict on civilian populations are profound and multi-dimensional, extending far beyond the immediate loss of life and physical injury. One of the most devastating social impacts is the complete disruption of public health systems. In conflict zones, the destruction of medical facilities and the flight of healthcare professionals lead to a complete collapse of preventative medicine, immunization programs, and maternal care. This institutional failure causes spikes in preventable infectious diseases, chronic illnesses, and maternal and infant mortality rates, which often dwarf the number of direct kinetic casualties.

Moreover, the systematic destruction of educational social infrastructure inflicts severe,

long-term social damage on societies. When schools are damaged, occupied by military forces, or closed due to insecurity, children are deprived of their fundamental right to education. This disruption is not merely an academic loss, it strips children of the safe spaces and psychosocial support networks that are vital for coping with the trauma of war. Out-of-school children are exposed to heightened risks of abuse, sexual violence, exploitation, and forced recruitment by non-state armed groups, contributing to a lost generation of youth who lack the cognitive, social, and economic skills necessary to rebuild their countries in the post-conflict era.

7.2 Economic Impact

Armed conflict operates as a catastrophic shock to both microeconomic livelihoods and macroeconomic stability. At the local level, conflict decimates community economic systems by destroying marketplaces, agricultural fields, and commercial transport routes. Farmers are unable to cultivate crops due to landmine contamination or active hostilities, while urban merchants are cut off from essential supply chains. This disruption leads to a collapse in household incomes, skyrocketing food prices, and acute food insecurity, forcing families to adopt negative coping strategies, such as selling productive assets, taking on unsustainable debt, or withdrawing children from school to work. At the macroeconomic level, the physical destruction of productive capital, such as industrial factories, communication networks, and transport infrastructure, causes a severe contraction in gross domestic product and a collapse in government tax revenues. This fiscal crisis forces the state to suspend the provision of public services, default on public sector salaries, and redirect all remaining national resources toward military expenditures. The resulting economic vacuum is often characterized by hyperinflation, severe currency devaluation, and the rise of informal, unregulated, or highly predatory war economies, which further impoverishes the general population while enriching armed actors.

7.3 Institutional / Political Impact

The institutional and political consequences of armed conflict are characterized by the rapid erosion of governance capacity, the decay of rule of law, and the fragmentation of state authority. As the state loses its ability to deliver basic social services, such as public safety, healthcare, and education, its domestic political legitimacy completely collapses. This governance vacuum is rapidly filled by non-state armed groups, local warlords, or informal authority structures, leading to a profound fragmentation of the national territory and the emergence of competing, parallel systems of local administration and taxation.

Furthermore, the destruction of institutional structures undermines the rule of law and

fosters systemic corruption. In the absence of functional judicial systems, law enforcement, and regulatory oversight, illegal activity flourishes, including the trafficking of small arms, the smuggling of natural resources, and the systemic diversion of humanitarian aid. This institutional decay creates a state of systemic fragility that outlasts the active phase of hostilities. The collapse of formal administrative capacity makes the eventual implementation of peace agreements, the rehabilitation of state structures, and the restoration of civic trust exceptionally difficult, locking the society into a self-perpetuating cycle of institutional weakness and political instability.

7.4 Distributional Effects

The impacts of armed conflict are not distributed equally across societies, they fall disproportionately on vulnerable and marginalized populations, exacerbating existing structural inequalities. Women and girls face unique, acute vulnerabilities during conflicts. The collapse of public safety and the rule of law exposes them to heightened risks of gender-based violence, sexual exploitation, and human trafficking. Additionally, when health systems collapse, the lack of reproductive healthcare and obstetric services directly threatens the lives of pregnant women. The destruction of educational infrastructure also disproportionately impacts girls, who are often the first to be kept out of school to perform unpaid domestic labor or forced into child marriage to relieve household economic pressures.

Other marginalized groups, including children, older persons, and persons with disabilities, suffer from severe distributional inequities during crises. Children are highly vulnerable to acute malnutrition, infectious diseases, and psychological trauma, which can permanently stunt their physical and cognitive development. Older persons and persons with disabilities are frequently left behind during mass displacement events due to mobility limitations and the lack of specialized assistive devices, medical care, and social support structures. Displaced populations, including internally displaced persons and refugees, face severe legal and socio-economic discrimination in host communities, often lacking access to formal labor markets, legal identification, and basic public services, which traps them in a state of chronic, generational poverty.

8. Case Studies

8.1 Syria: Protracted Urban Warfare and the Weaponization of Public Services

The Syrian conflict represents one of the most devastating examples of protracted urban warfare in modern history, characterized by the systematic dismantling and deliberate weaponization of essential social systems. Cities such as Aleppo, Homs, and the suburbs

of Damascus have been transformed into major battlefields, experiencing high-intensity kinetic bombardment that has decimated civilian infrastructure. The conflict has seen the widespread use of explosive weapons with a wide impact area in densely populated urban settings, resulting in the direct destruction of housing, schools, and hospitals. A defining feature of the Syrian crisis is the systematic destruction of the national healthcare system, a phenomenon that public health experts have termed the weaponization of healthcare. Hospitals and medical facilities have been subjected to repeated, targeted airstrikes and artillery bombardments, designed to deprive local populations of lifesaving medical care and force the surrender of opposition-controlled areas. This strategy has resulted in the collapse of health service delivery, the resurgence of eradicated infectious diseases such as polio, and a catastrophic brain drain, as over seventy percent of the country's professional medical personnel have been forced to flee.

Furthermore, the delivery of basic utilities, such as water and electricity, has been repeatedly weaponized by various parties to the conflict. Centralized water pumping stations, such as the Al-Khafsah water station in Aleppo and the Alouk water station in Hasakah, have been deliberately shut down, contaminated, or had their power supply served to exert political and military pressure on civilian populations. These actions have forced millions of civilians to rely on untreated water from shallow wells or expensive, unregulated commercial water trucking, leading to widespread outbreaks of waterborne diseases and compounding the humanitarian catastrophe.

The operational response in Syria has been severely hampered by intense geopolitical divisions over the coordination of humanitarian assistance. The delivery of aid has been split between cross-line operations, which originate from government-controlled Damascus, and cross-border operations, which deliver aid directly from neighboring Turkey and Jordan into opposition-held territories without the formal consent of the central Syrian government. This cross-border mechanism, mandated by a series of contentious UN Security Council resolutions, has been a major point of geopolitical friction, with sovereign actors arguing that it violates the state's territorial integrity and opposition actors insisting that it represents the only viable lifeline for millions of vulnerable civilians.

8.2 Sudan: Complex Emergencies, Mass Displacement, and Institutional Collapse

The outbreak of violent conflict between the Sudanese Armed Forces and the Rapid Support Forces has plunged Sudan into an acute, complex humanitarian emergency, characterized by the rapid collapse of state institutions, mass internal and cross-border displacement, and the unfolding of dual famines. The fighting, which has concentrated in

the capital city of Khartoum and the Darfur region, has physically devastated the country's administrative, economic, and social infrastructure. The conflict has dismantled the federal ministries and municipal agencies that previously maintained the nation's social safety nets.

The institutional collapse is most visible in the complete breakdown of the national healthcare and pharmaceutical supply systems. In Khartoum, over eighty percent of hospitals and clinics have been forced to close due to direct kinetic damage, military occupation, or the lack of fuel, electricity, and essential medical supplies. The national medical procurement agency, responsible for distributing life-saving drugs across the country, has been looted and deactivated, resulting in chronic shortages of insulin, renal dialysis chemicals, and maternal health supplies. This systemic failure has transformed manageable medical conditions into immediate death sentences for thousands of civilians.

The scale of forced displacement in Sudan has reached staggering proportions, transforming the country into the largest internal displacement crisis in the world. Millions of people have been forced to flee their homes, with a significant majority remaining internally displaced in highly overcrowded temporary camps and host communities, and over two million crossing borders into neighboring Chad, Egypt, and South Sudan. These mass movements have placed severe, unsustainable strains on the fragile social systems of both transit and host regions, which were already struggling with chronic poverty, climate change, and resource scarcity.

This mass displacement, combined with the deliberate destruction of agricultural systems and the systematic obstruction of humanitarian access, has triggered dual famines in parts of North Darfur and the Zamzam internally displaced persons camp. Warring parties have targeted food production, looted agricultural warehouses, and restricted the transport of commercial goods and humanitarian aid across active frontlines, violating the principles of Security Council Resolution 2417. The international response has been severely constrained by a combination of administrative barriers, visa denials for aid workers, and an unprecedented funding deficit in the global humanitarian appeal, forcing operational agencies to make agonizing decisions to cut food rations and suspend basic health and nutrition programs.

8.3 Ukraine: Kinetic and Cyber Warfare on Dual-Use Grid Infrastructure

The conflict in Ukraine presents a novel, highly sophisticated case of contemporary warfare characterized by the integration of high-intensity kinetic bombardment with cyber operations, directed systematically against the country's national electrical grid.

This strategy has exposed the profound vulnerability of modern, centralized, and technology-dependent social systems, demonstrating how the destruction of an energy network immediately triggers a cascade of failures across all essential civilian services.

The Ukrainian energy infrastructure, consisting of interconnected thermal power plants, hydroelectric dams, and high-voltage transmission substations, has been subjected to repeated waves of missile and drone strikes. These strikes have been paired with sophisticated cyber operations targeting the SCADA systems that run the grid, allowing attackers to remotely disable transmission lines and manipulate electrical processes. This integrated warfare has succeeded in destroying or severely damaging over fifty percent of the country's power generation capacity, forcing the implementation of widespread, rolling blackouts and leaving millions of civilians without reliable heating, water, and light during freezing winter temperatures.

The humanitarian consequences of this grid collapse have cascaded rapidly through other essential social systems. The loss of electrical power immediately halts the operation of municipal water pumping stations and wastewater treatment facilities, forcing municipal authorities to discharge untreated sewage into local rivers and cutting off the supply of safe drinking water to urban populations. Hospitals and medical clinics, while equipped with emergency diesel generators, have struggled to maintain the continuous electrical supply required to run life-support systems, surgical theaters, and vaccine cold-chain storage, severely degrading the quality and availability of healthcare.

This case study highlights the critical legal and operational debate surrounding the concept of dual-use objects under international humanitarian law. The attacking forces have justified their systematic campaign against the electrical grid by claiming that the energy infrastructure is a legitimate military objective because it powers military installations, troop barracks, and military transport systems. However, international humanitarian law experts and United Nations officials have argued that because the electrical grid is a highly integrated system, the military utility of these attacks is vastly outweighed by the catastrophic, disproportionate, and predictable indirect harm inflicted on the civilian population, violating the core principle of proportionality.

8.4 Myanmar: Asymmetric Insurgency and the Fragmentation of Social Delivery

The conflict in Myanmar, following the military takeover, represents a complex, highly asymmetric civil war characterized by the fragmentation of governance, severe administrative restrictions on humanitarian access, and the collapse of formal social

delivery systems. The country has been fractured into multiple zones of control, split between the central military government, various ethnic armed organizations, and newly formed local people's defense forces. This fragmentation has transformed the delivery of basic services into a highly politicized and dangerous operational challenge.

The primary education system has been a major target and casualty of this conflict. Schools, universities, and academic personnel have been systematically targeted by both state forces and opposition groups, violating the principles of the Safe Schools Declaration. State forces have routinely occupied primary schools for use as military barracks and observation posts, while opposition forces have targeted academic buildings and teachers who participate in the state-controlled civil service system. This militarization of education has forced millions of children out of the formal school system, driving them into unregulated, informal, or localized ethnic-led educational networks that lack standardized curricula, professional certification, and adequate learning resources.

Furthermore, the central government has implemented severe, systematic administrative and legal barriers to restrict the delivery of international humanitarian assistance. The military authorities have passed highly restrictive civil society registration laws, blocked the issuance of travel authorizations for international aid workers, and imposed tight controls on the import of medical and humanitarian supplies. These measures have been used as a deliberate policy of isolation and containment, particularly in regions where opposition forces are active, effectively starving vulnerable populations of lifesaving medicine, food, and basic social support.

This case study also highlights the ongoing, acute humanitarian crisis facing the stateless Rohingya population in Rakhine State. Cut off from formal citizenship, freedom of movement, and access to basic state services, the Rohingya are entirely dependent on highly fragmented international humanitarian aid. The ongoing conflict has further isolated this population, leading to severe shortages of clean water, medical care, and nutrition services, and driving thousands to embark on high-risk sea crossings in search of safety. This situation underscores the profound vulnerability of populations that lack formal legal status and are trapped in a fragmented, conflict-torn governance landscape.

8.5 Empirical Structural Data Across Conflict Settings

The following structured datasets, verified through international monitoring systems, demonstrate the catastrophic empirical trends across the case study regions, highlighting the physical and institutional destruction of essential social systems.

This quantitative comparison reveals that while kinetic attacks on healthcare facilities

occur across all theatres of war, the specific patterns of violence, physical targeting, and demographic displacement are shaped by the distinct strategic landscapes of each conflict.

The high rates of health worker detentions and transport destruction in certain areas demonstrate the targeted, systemic operational containment strategies employed by warring factions, contrasting with the primarily infrastructure-focused destruction patterns observed in conventional kinetic settings.

9. Challenges to Cooperation

The international community faces profound, systemic challenges in coordinating and executing a cohesive response to the humanitarian consequences of armed conflict on civilian populations and social systems. These bottlenecks are not merely technical or logistical, they are deeply rooted in the political structure of the international system, the erosion of global legal norms, and the severe fiscal constraints of contemporary multilateral architecture.

The first and most visible challenge is the political instrumentalization of humanitarian aid and the paralyzing division within the United Nations Security Council. The use of the veto power by permanent members has repeatedly blocked decisive diplomatic action, independent monitoring missions, and accountability mechanisms in active conflict zones. This polarization has turned humanitarian assistance into a geopolitical weapon, where states align their aid allocations, cross-border access mandates, and sanctions exemptions with their strategic geopolitical alliances rather than objective, needs-based assessments. This politicization severely compromises the core humanitarian principles of neutrality and impartiality, making it exceptionally difficult to secure the trust and cooperation of all warring parties. Another significant challenge is the administrative and bureaucratic obstruction of humanitarian access by sovereign states. Citing national security and the defense of territorial integrity, host governments frequently implement highly restrictive policies designed to control, delay, or block the delivery of aid to populations trapped behind opposition lines. These barriers include the denial of visas for specialized international personnel, the deliberate stalling of travel authorizations, the imposition of arbitrary customs duties on life-saving medical supplies, and the passing of restrictive non-governmental organization registration laws that criminalize independent humanitarian action. These administrative measures effectively starve vulnerable populations of assistance while allowing host states to maintain a thin veneer of compliance with international norms.

Furthermore, the international community is experiencing a disturbing erosion of the global consensus on international humanitarian law. The systematic targeting of

healthcare facilities, the military occupation of schools, the use of starvation as a method of warfare, and the destruction of critical civilian infrastructure have become increasingly normalized in contemporary conflicts. This erosion is driven by a pervasive culture of impunity, where perpetrators of war crimes face zero legal or political consequences for their actions. This lack of accountability undermines the deterrent effect of international treaties, encouraging warring parties to treat the rules of war as optional guidelines rather than binding legal obligations.

Finally, the international humanitarian system is facing a catastrophic, unprecedented funding crisis. As protracted conflicts proliferate and climate-related disasters compound humanitarian needs, the financial requirements of global response plans have skyrocketed. At the same time, major donor countries are experiencing donor fatigue, economic stagnation, and a political shift toward domestic priorities, leading to significant cuts in voluntary contributions to the United Nations. This widening gap between global appeals and actual funding has forced operational agencies to make agonizing, life-threatening cuts to their programs, shuttering health clinics, reducing food rations, and suspending clean water deliveries for millions of vulnerable people caught in active conflict zones.

10. Key Policy / Strategic Dilemmas

To draft highly sophisticated, operationally viable resolutions, delegates must confront and resolve several fundamental policy and strategic dilemmas that characterize the contemporary humanitarian landscape. These dilemmas are characterized by deep structural trade-offs, where the pursuit of one desirable policy objective directly compromises another. Navigating these tensions requires a high degree of diplomatic pragmatism, analytical rigor, and creative policy design.

10.1 Dilemma 1: Short-Term Emergency Relief vs. Long-Term Development (The Funding Paradox)

The first dilemma centers on the allocation of limited financial and human resources between short-term emergency relief and long-term developmental transition. In active, protracted conflicts, the immediate priority of humanitarian agencies is to save lives by delivering emergency commodities, such as bottled water, high-energy biscuits, and temporary medical tents. However, this focus on immediate survival often consumes the vast majority of available funding, leaving zero resources for the maintenance, repair, and rehabilitation of the domestic social systems that must sustain the population over the long term.

Continuing to fund short-term commodities creates a cycle of aid dependency, where local communities remain completely reliant on external aid while their domestic infrastructure, such as water purification plants and regional power grids, undergoes irreversible decay. Conversely, redirecting funding toward long-term systemic rehabilitation requires a significant shift of resources away from immediate lifesaving programs, potentially resulting in increased mortality rates in the short term. Delegates must design policy frameworks that operationalize the Triple Nexus, establishing clear funding mechanisms that transition from commodity delivery to infrastructure maintenance from the earliest phases of a crisis.

10.2 Dilemma 2: Sovereign Integrity vs. Unhindered Humanitarian Access (The Sovereignty Paradox)

The second dilemma involves the fundamental constitutional tension between the preservation of national sovereignty and the collective moral imperative to deliver lifesaving humanitarian assistance to vulnerable populations. Under the Charter of the United Nations, the principle of state sovereignty dictates that all international interventions, including the delivery of aid, must be conducted with the consent and coordination of the host government. However, in contemporary internal conflicts, the state is often an active combatant, and may deliberately use the denial of humanitarian access as a method of warfare to subjugate opposition-controlled territories.

This scenario presents the international community with an agonizing choice. Respecting the host state's sovereignty means complying with its administrative restrictions and bureaucratic blockages, which effectively cuts off millions of civilians from lifesaving aid and violates the international obligation to protect human life. Conversely, bypassing the central government to deliver aid directly across borders, as seen in Syria, preserves human life but directly violates the principle of national sovereignty, risking a complete breakdown of diplomatic relations, the expulsion of international agencies, and a dangerous escalation of geopolitical tensions. Delegates must formulate innovative legal-operational definitions of consent, establishing objective international criteria that prevent the arbitrary withholding of consent for political purposes while respecting the foundational principles of the state system.

10.3 Dilemma 3: Operational Neutrality vs. Human Rights Advocacy (The Principles Paradox)

The third dilemma focuses on the operational tension between the need to maintain neutrality to secure humanitarian access and the moral imperative to document, condemn, and seek accountability for violations of international humanitarian law and human rights. To deliver aid to populations trapped in active conflict zones, humanitarian

agencies must build trust and maintain a continuous dialogue with all warring parties, including brutal non-state armed groups and repressive state forces. This operational access requires strict compliance with the principle of neutrality, meaning that agencies must remain silent regarding the atrocities they witness.

However, this silence can make humanitarian actors complicit in ongoing war crimes, as they serve as silent witnesses to systemic violations. Conversely, if an agency chooses to publicly document and condemn attacks on civilians, target health facilities, or use starvation as a weapon, it satisfies the moral demand for advocacy and accountability but risks immediate retaliation. This retaliation often takes the form of the expulsion of the agency, the cancellation of travel authorizations, and the physical targeting of aid workers, leaving the vulnerable population entirely devoid of both protection and assistance. Delegates must design sophisticated information-sharing mechanisms that decouple immediate operational delivery from long-term human rights reporting, utilizing independent third-party monitoring bodies to gather evidence of war crimes without compromising the neutral status of frontline humanitarian organizations.

10.4 Strategic Debate Insight: Decoupling Operations from Advocacy

Delegates can resolve the Principles Paradox by proposing the establishment of a blind-data reporting mechanism. Under this framework, frontline humanitarian agencies would collect objective, empirical data on attacks affecting civilian infrastructure, medical facilities, and schools, and submit this information anonymously to a centralized, independent data repository managed directly by ECOSOC or the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights. This blind reporting protects the operational neutrality and physical safety of the frontline organizations while ensuring that a robust, legally viable evidence base of war crimes is systematically compiled for future international prosecution and accountability.

11. Conclusion

The humanitarian consequences of armed conflict on civilian populations and essential social systems represent one of the most critical, complex, and urgent challenges confronting the contemporary multilateral system. The structural transition of warfare into densely populated urban settings, the integrated use of kinetic and cyber operations, and the deliberate weaponization of critical infrastructure have transformed the collapse of social delivery networks into a defining feature of modern combat. This systemic degradation of healthcare, education, water, sanitation, and electrical power grids has shifted the overwhelming burden of warfare onto the shoulders of innocent civilians, causing unprecedented levels of physical suffering, mass displacement, and institutional decay.

As the principal organ responsible for coordinating the developmental and social work of the United Nations, ECOSOC holds a unique and indispensable mandate to address this crisis. The council is uniquely positioned to bridge the gap between immediate lifesaving relief and long-term systemic resilience, driving the operational integration of the Triple Nexus. To succeed in this mission, the international community must transcend surface-level, transactional approaches to aid and instead commit to the systemic preservation, maintenance, and rehabilitation of local social delivery networks. This requires a profound shift of priorities, a renewed commitment to the core principles of international humanitarian law, and the mobilization of innovative, sustainable financing mechanisms.

The task before the delegates in this committee is intellectually demanding and diplomatically complex. It requires the rejection of simplistic slogans and the embrace of rigorous systems-level analysis. Delegates must navigate the deep-seated tensions between national sovereignty and humanitarian access, balance the competing demands of emergency relief and developmental transition, and design operational frameworks that protect both human lives and human dignity. The decisions made in this committee, the resolutions drafted, and the consensus built will not only shape the future of multilateral diplomacy but will directly influence the survival capacity and long-term well-being of millions of people caught in the crucible of armed conflict.

12. Questions to Consider

- How can the Economic and Social Council effectively coordinate the specialized agencies of the United Nations to transition from short-term emergency commodity delivery to the long-term maintenance and rehabilitation of local social delivery systems in active conflict zones?
- What specific policy and legal frameworks can be established to prevent the weaponization of dual-use infrastructure, such as national electrical grids and municipal water networks, during high-intensity urban conflicts?
- How can the international community resolve the sovereignty paradox, designing operational mechanisms that ensure rapid, unimpeded humanitarian access to vulnerable populations trapped behind frontlines without violating the foundational principles of territorial integrity and sovereign consent?
- What innovative financial instruments and public-private partnerships can be mobilized to address the catastrophic funding deficit in the global humanitarian appeal, and how can these resources be protected from political instrumentalization?

- How can international humanitarian law be updated or interpreted to effectively regulate cyber operations targeting digitized civilian infrastructure and the digital data systems that run essential social services?
- In what ways can regional organizations, such as the African Union and the European Union, be better integrated into ECOSOC's coordination structures to translate global humanitarian norms into context-specific regional policies?
- How can the collection and verification of data on attacks affecting health care and education, such as through the WHO's surveillance system, be strengthened to facilitate human rights accountability without compromising the operational neutrality of frontline humanitarian actors?
- What concrete measures can be implemented to protect local social service personnel, such as municipal water engineers and electrical grid technicians, and treat them as protected humanitarian actors under all circumstances?
- How can the Triple Nexus approach be operationalized in highly fragmented, fragile, or corrupt governance landscapes where the central state lacks political legitimacy or is an active combatant in the conflict?
- What specific strategies can be developed to mitigate the disproportionate, distributional impacts of conflict-induced social collapse on vulnerable populations, including women, children, internally displaced persons, and persons with disabilities?

13. Glossary

This glossary contains detailed, academically rigorous definitions of key terms utilized within the background guide. Each term is italicized at its first occurrence in the main text of the guide.

- **Accountability to affected people:** An active commitment by humanitarian actors to use power responsibly by taking account of, giving account to, and being held to account by the people they seek to assist.
- **Civilian infrastructure:** The physical installations, networks, utilities, and services essential for the daily survival, health, and well-being of the civilian population, including water treatment plants, electrical power grids, sanitation facilities, hospitals, and educational institutions.
- **Complex emergencies:** A major humanitarian crisis characterized by a

combination of conflict, displacement, economic collapse, and institutional breakdown, requiring a multi-faceted, coordinated international response.

- **Distinction:** A foundational principle of international humanitarian law that obligates parties to a conflict to differentiate at all times between combatants and civilians, and between military objectives and civilian objects.
- **Dual-use objects:** Objects normally dedicated to civilian purposes, such as power plants, bridges, and communications networks, which can also make an effective contribution to military action, thereby exposing them to potential targeting under strict legal parameters.
- **Humanitarian access:** The ability of humanitarian actors to reach populations in need and the ability of affected populations to access assistance and services, characterized by rapid, safe, and unimpeded movement across frontlines.
- **Humanitarian assistance:** Financial, material, and operational aid delivered to alleviate suffering and save lives in the immediate aftermath of emergencies, guided by the core principles of humanity, neutrality, impartiality, and independence.
- **Humanitarian diplomacy:** The systematic negotiation, advocacy, and communication conducted by international actors to secure humanitarian space, protect vulnerable populations, and facilitate the delivery of aid in crisis zones.
- **Humanitarian-development-peace nexus:** An operational paradigm (the Triple Nexus) asserting that humanitarian relief, developmental assistance, and peacebuilding efforts must be executed in parallel rather than sequentially to build long-term systemic resilience.
- **Internally displaced persons:** Persons who have been forced to flee their homes as a result of armed conflict, violence, or human rights violations, but who remain within the borders of their own country.
- **International humanitarian law:** A body of international law, consisting of treaty and customary rules, that seeks to limit the effects of armed conflict for humanitarian reasons, protecting non-combatants and restricting the means and methods of warfare.
- **Localization:** The strategic shift in humanitarian action toward empowering, funding, and reinforcing local and national organizations to lead emergency response efforts.

- **Non-state armed groups:** Organized armed actors that operate independently of formal state control and are active participants in armed conflicts, challenging state authority or competing for territorial control.
- **Precaution:** An international humanitarian law principle requiring warring parties to take constant care to minimize civilian harm when planning and executing military operations, including target verification and advance warnings.
- **Proportionality:** An international humanitarian law principle prohibiting attacks where the anticipated civilian harm is excessive relative to the concrete, direct military advantage expected to be gained.
- **Refugees:** Persons who have fled their country of origin due to a well-founded fear of persecution, conflict, or violence, and are protected under international legal frameworks.
- **Reverberating effects:** The indirect, cascading consequences of military operations that propagate through interconnected social and physical systems, causing long-term harm to civilians.
- **Safe Schools Declaration:** A political commitment by states to better protect students, teachers, and educational facilities from the effects of armed conflict, and to prevent the military use of schools.
- **Starvation as a method of warfare:** The deliberate destruction, removal, or rendering useless of objects indispensable to the survival of the civilian population with the specific intent to deny sustenance and force capitulation.
- **Surveillance System for Attacks on Health Care:** A standardized global data-collection mechanism managed by the World Health Organization to systematically track, verify, and report attacks on medical systems in complex emergencies.

14. Further Readings

- (<https://www.unocha.org/ecosoc-2024>)
- [Global Humanitarian Overview 2026 | OCHA](#)
- (<https://www.icrc.org/en/document/wars-cities-protection-civilians-urban-settings>)
- (<https://www.unhcr.org/global-trends>)

- (<https://www.who.int/emergencies/surveillance>)
- [Education Under Attack](#)
- [Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack](#)
- (<https://ihl-databases.icrc.org/en/ihl-treaties/gci-1949>)
- (<https://www.globalr2p.org/resources/resolution-2417-protection-of-civilians-s-res-2417/>)
- (<https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/international-review-of-the-red-cross/article/strengthening-the-protection-of-civilian-infrastructure-in-armed-conflict-practical-measures-to-operationalize-ihl-and-reduce-civilian-harm/B302AE3A10980FE4DA0D6E423D98889C>)
- (<https://www.humanitariancoalition.ca/from-humanitarian-to-development-aid>)