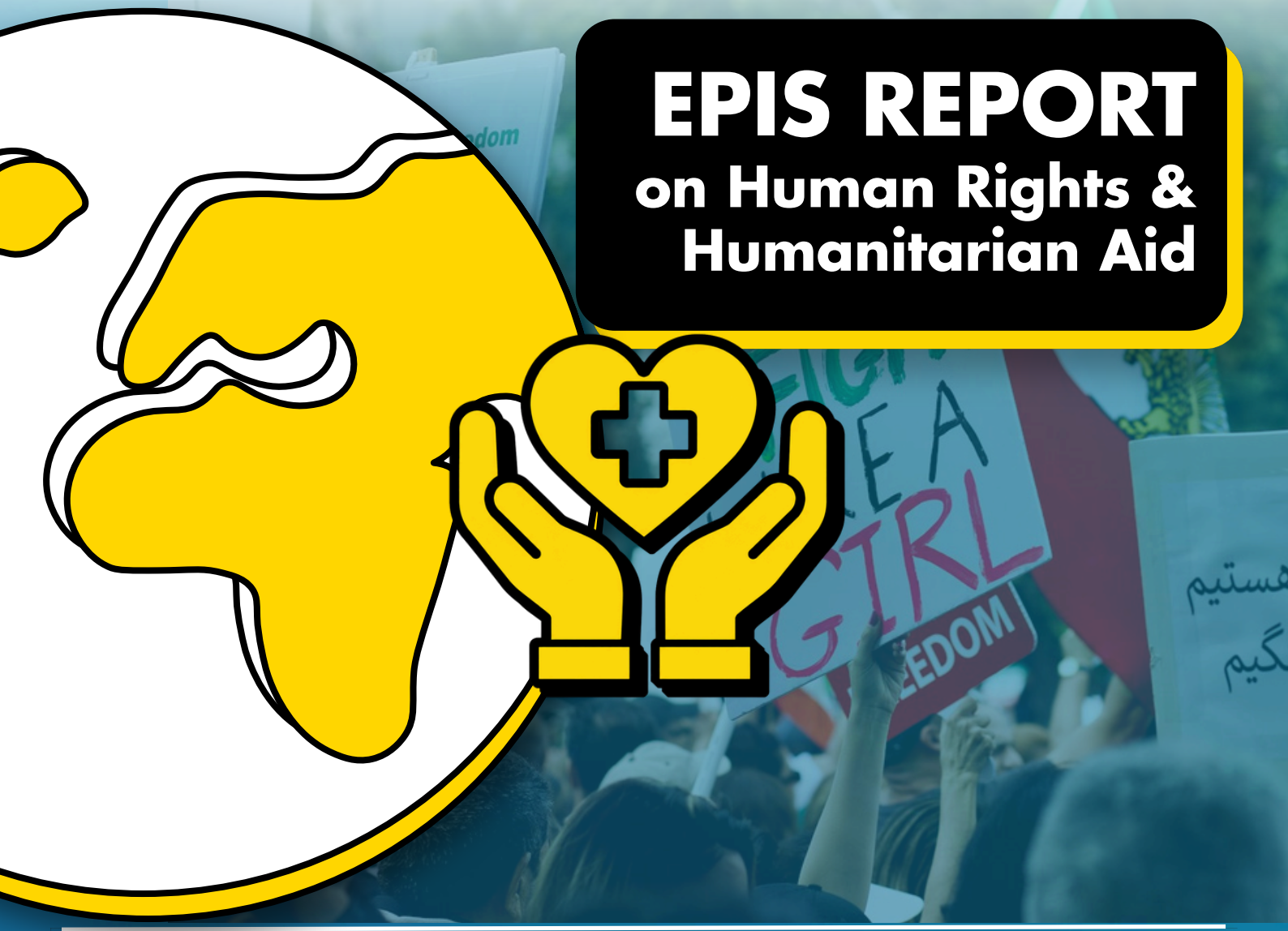
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EPIS REPORT on Human Rights & Humanitarian Aid



Iran Protests: Human Rights Violations, Repression and Global Response

How State Repression, Human Rights Violations and International Pressure Shape Iran's Protests

Linguistic Human Rights – A Form of Decolonial Resistance?

Exploring the nexus of language, decoloniality and human rights

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Editorial Team



Editor / Resort Leader

Sydney Armor leads the Thematic Report Groups of the EPIS Think Tank for Foreign Affairs & Security Policy. She holds a B.A. in International and Global Security Studies from Middlebury College and is a Fulbright Austria alumna: during her grant she taught English-language social and political topics at secondary schools in Graz and interned at Caritas on projects addressing gender-based violence. Based in Graz, she works as a Clinical Trial Associate, navigating international regulatory frameworks for global clinical trials.



Editor / Report Group Leader

Félix is a human rights advocate who holds a master in International Relations from the University of Bologna and a degree in Sociology from the Complutense University of Madrid. His research focuses on human rights, geopolitics, democracy and peacekeeping issues. He is currently writing articles for a blog and participating in advocacy projects. His main mission is to discover the dynamics embedded within international society.



Layout / Design Affairs

Abdullah Chaudhary is a Top Rated data engineer who builds industrial-grade web scraping, ETL pipelines, and automation systems that scale to millions of records. Over 3+ years, he has delivered 300+ custom solutions for startups and enterprises, maintaining a 100% Job Success Score.

Editors



Editor

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.



Editor

Hannah Rindermann holds a bachelor's degree in International Relations and Communication Science from the University of Erfurt. She will pursue her Master's degree in War and Conflict Studies at the University of Potsdam and hopes to contribute to German and European security policy research in the future. Her primary interest lies in disinformation narratives spread by Russia following its war against Ukraine which was the focus of her bachelor thesis.

Contributors



Angelina Schülke
Research Fellow



Jonas Pfeufer
Research Fellow



Burak Baran
Board of Directors



Celia Ball
Research Fellow



Bruno Almeida
Research Fellow



Félix Rodríguez Higley
Report Group Leader

Editorial



Editor / Report Group Leader

Félix Rodríguez Higley is a human rights advocate who holds a master in International Relations from the University of Bologna and a degree in Sociology from the Complutense University of Madrid. His research focuses on human rights, geopolitics, democracy and peacekeeping issues. He is currently writing articles for a blog and participating in advocacy projects. His main mission is to discover the dynamics embedded within international society.

EPIS Report on Human Rights & Humanitarian Aid

Dear reader,

Human rights are rarely lost in a single moment. They are eroded by repression in the streets, by the slow pressure of a changing climate, by policies that decide which languages count, by technologies that promise efficiency, and by social practices that leave the most vulnerable without protection.

This second issue of the EPIS Report on Human Rights & Humanitarian Aid brings together five contributions from our Think Tank for Foreign Affairs & Security Policy that approach this challenge from different angles.

Angelina Schülke opens the issue by asking whether linguistic human rights can serve as a form of decolonial resistance. She argues that protecting linguistic identities is a central part of contemporary human rights politics and can help dismantle the colonial hierarchies that persist in language policy.

Jonas Pfeufer examines the implications of climate change for human security – from humanitarian aid and food security to civil conflict, health and climate finance – and shows that climate change above all amplifies existing vulnerabilities.

Burak Baran and Celia Ball analyse the protests in Iran and the state's violent response. They assess the crackdown against international human rights standards and show how difficult it remains to secure accountability and an effective international response.

Bruno Almeida turns to humanitarian aid and artificial intelligence. He asks whether AI can help organisations stretch scarce resources and respond faster in conflict zones without undermining humanitarian principles and social justice.

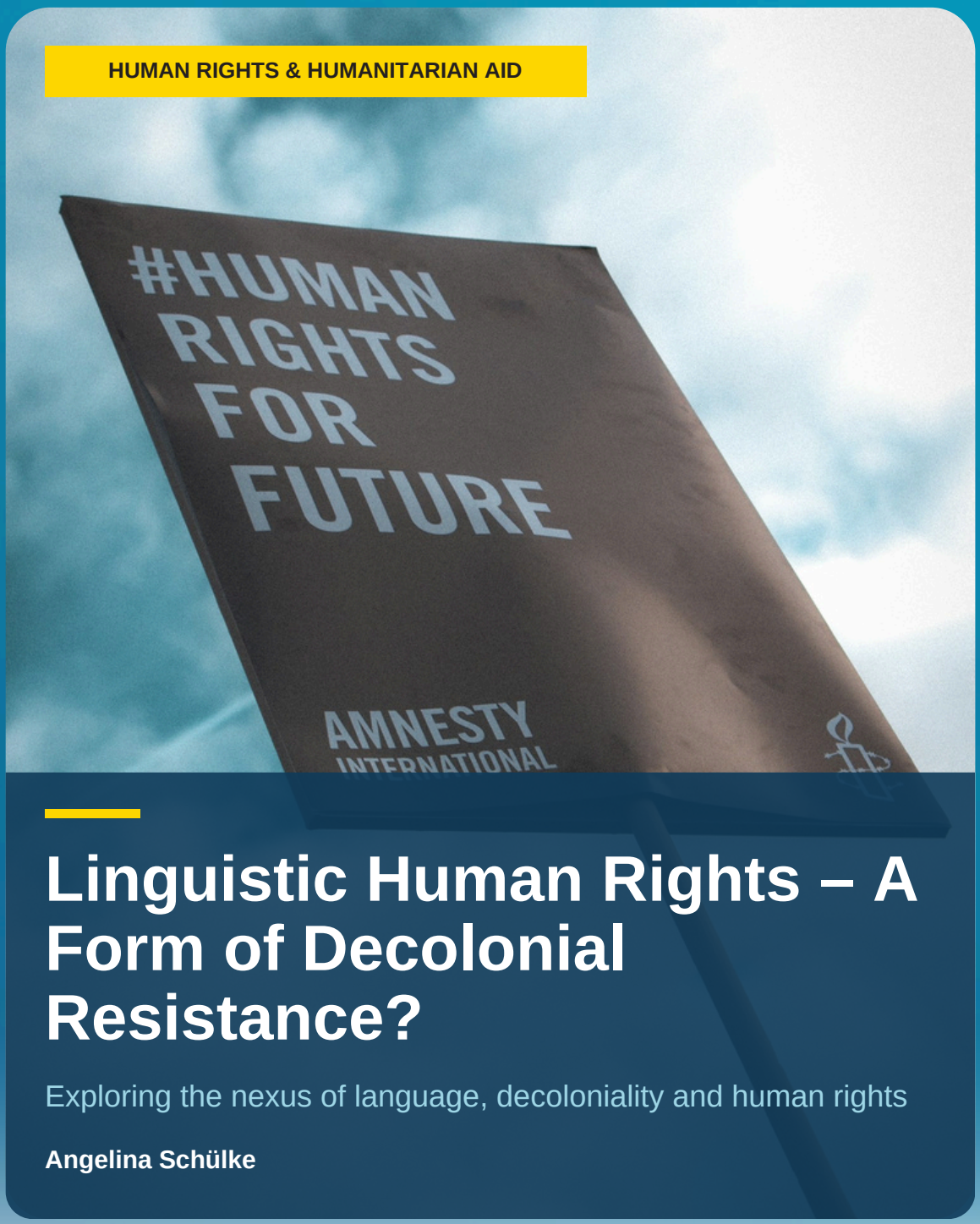
Finally, my own contribution looks at the talibé children who beg on the streets of Senegal, and at the religious, social and political dynamics that make forced child begging so hard to end.

What unites these contributions is the conviction that human rights are only as strong as our willingness to defend them in practice. I would like to thank all authors for their work, our editors Lovely Bernardo and Hannah Rindermann, Sydney Armor for coordinating our Thematic Report Groups, and Design Affairs for bringing this issue into its final form.

I hope you enjoy reading it.

Yours sincerely,
Félix Rodríguez Higley
Report Group Leader, Human Rights & Humanitarian Aid

HUMAN RIGHTS & HUMANITARIAN AID



Linguistic Human Rights – A Form of Decolonial Resistance?

Exploring the nexus of language, decoloniality and human rights

Angelina Schülke

About the Article

Linguistic Human Rights should be recognised as a central component of contemporary human rights politics as they protect linguistic identities and help dismantle prevailing colonial hierarchies.

About the Author

Angelina Schülke is pursuing a bachelor's degree in International Relations and Governance at University College Freiburg, with studies abroad in Rotterdam, London and Helsinki. Before joining EPIS, she has worked with various youth organizations in the democratic and civic education sector, seeking to foster meaningful dialogue across disciplines and generations. In her research, she specializes in peace and conflict studies with a focus on South-South cooperation and human rights.

Within the discussion around human rights, one important aspect is usually missed: language rights. 2025 saw a surge in social unrest in over 70 countries that spilled over into 2026 with people protesting against socioeconomic inequalities, for more governmental accountability, and in solidarity with Ukraine and Gaza (Mantoiu, 2026). The violent crackdown on many of these protests was associated with serious human rights violations by the respective governments, aligning with the dire picture of fundamental rights that Human Rights Watch paints in its recently published annual World Report (Bolopion, 2025).

The report mainly warns about the threats to the international human rights architecture posed by China, Russia and the US, predominantly focusing on funding cuts to healthcare programmes, restricted media and obstructed abortion access (Bolopion, 2025). What has received much less attention, however, are the battles over language and identity in India's western state of Maharashtra in July 2025 and the hunger strikes in 2025 and 2026. These emerged in response to the national government's decision to make Hindi classes compulsory for state-run primary schools alongside English and Marathi (Mollan, 2025), reflecting a deep-seated fear of Hindi replacing the state's most dominant language Marathi.

The right to speak and maintain one's language without discrimination is recognised as part of the UN Declaration on the Rights of Persons Belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities (Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights [OHCHR], 1992). Nonetheless, there is often an epistemic and social hierarchy between officially recognised languages and those labelled as merely "local". Public spaces such as education, law and administration are reserved for the exclusive use of "official" languages, while local languages are relegated to informal contexts (Baronchelli et al., 2025). This is an issue because it limits access to public and social services to those who speak the official language and can cause misunderstandings or incommunicability, which is particularly dangerous in the healthcare sector (Krugman et al., 2024). Moreover, it critically endangers many local languages with traditionally small speaker communities.

Linguistic Human Rights refer to fundamental rights protecting language-related acts and values that are entrenched in domestic law and policies or in international treaties.

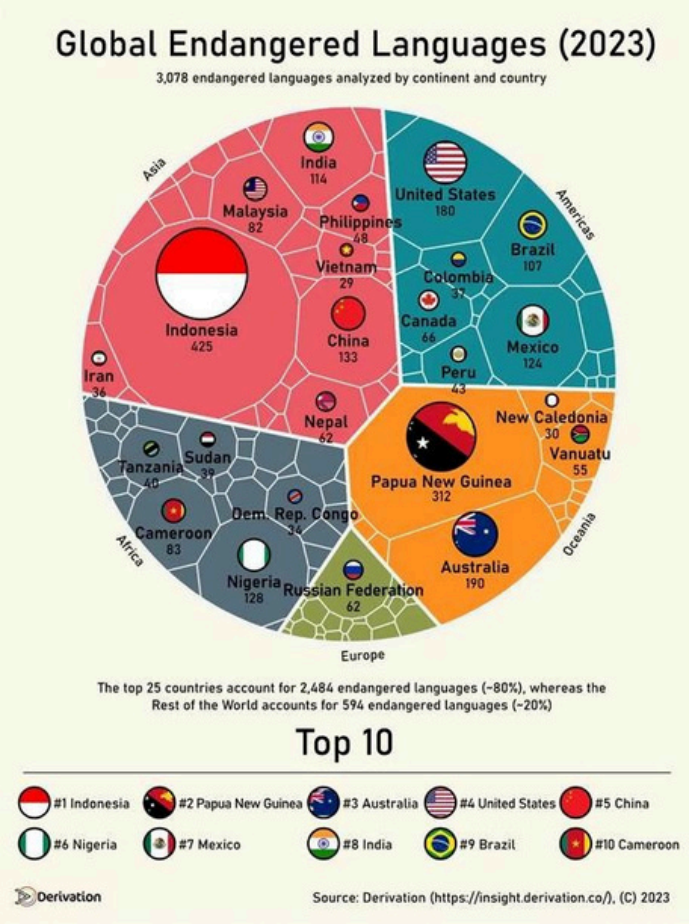


Fig. 1: Global Endangered Languages (Ethnologue, 2023).

The underlying issue here is a mismatch between the "one nation – one language" ideology of 18th-/19th-century Europe (Thiesse, 2021) and the reality of linguistic diversity on the ground. Under the pretext of 'broader communication' and 'civilisation', colonialism exported the ideal of linguistic homogeneity globally, leading to the imposition of Western European languages and/or the promotion of one "national" language at the expense of countless Indigenous languages, as in the case of Hindi and English in India. Such so-called "nation-state congruence" is achieved via legitimation and institutionalisation (May, 2025), rendering the standard language an "arm of the state" (Bourdieu, 1987, p. 27). The protests against Hindi in Maharashtra illustrate how these state-legitimated linguistic hierarchies persist until today and threaten to infringe on people's fundamental right to language (Kinnemann Arnold, 2023).

Against this background, this article investigates (1) how the official/unofficial language binary perpetuates colonial power hierarchies and (2) to what extent linguistic human rights (LHR) can be invoked as a form of decolonial resistance to those hierarchies. Hereby, I will draw on Spolsky's (2009) language policy model to examine the interplay of language beliefs, practices and management.

"Linguistic Human Rights should be recognised as a central component of contemporary human rights politics as they protect linguistic identities and help dismantle prevailing colonial hierarchies."

The article contends that Linguistic Human Rights should be recognised as a central component of contemporary human rights politics as they not only protect linguistic identities but also help dismantle prevailing colonial hierarchies in language policy and international human rights regimes as such.

The Coloniality of Power

Historical-ideological Roots

With Europeans' search for new trade routes in the 16th century began the global expansion of European domination and accompanying exploitation of land, resources and people in what is today often called the "Global South". Eurocentric ideas of modernity, progress, rationality and civilisation shaped and justified the imposition of European norms, which were

presented as superior to local cultures and epistemologies (Quijano, 2024). This sheds light on the enduring "dark side" of modernity, which Aníbal Quijano (2024) labels coloniality. According to him, modernity/coloniality are two sides of the same coin. They are inextricably connected, one presupposes the other, and their patterns persist in the economic structures, political elites, culture and mentality of a country long after its formal independence.

The dual nature of modernity/coloniality also reappears in the colonial logic structuring reality into mutually exclusive dichotomies of mind/body, rational/emotional, human/nature, war/peace etc. Inherent to these pairs is a normative hierarchy that privileges one part over the other, i.e. rational over emotional, and human over nature. The concept of othering describes this process of how the dominant in-group (the "official" language) constructs out-groups ("unofficial" languages) characterised by stigmatising difference (Staszak, 2020). The out-group or "other" is devalued by attributing relative inferiority to it (Brons, 2015). Inventing such opposites enables neat separation and organization, serving as a means of social control and justification for domination. The asymmetric power relations built into this system are reproduced on various scales and can be subsumed under Quijano's (2024) concept of the coloniality of power.

The same is true for languages. By promoting linguistic national homogeneity, languages are named and boxed into atomic entities that can be grouped, ranked and monitored. At the same time, the status of "official" / "unofficial" creates an in- and out-group dynamic within an inherent normative hierarchy. Depicting unofficial languages as "the other" and thus as inferior is a way of degrading and stripping them and their speakers of social status and prestige (May, 2025). Simultaneously, it protects the linguistic monopoly and control of the nation-state over communication, education, information flow and access.

Such artificial national linguistic homogeneity is usually achieved via processes of legitimation and institutionalisation (May, 2025). Legitimation means official recognition of a language through legal and state bodies, whereas institutionalisation leads to the broad acceptance of a language across a variety of cultural and social domains (May, 2025). Both processes are visible in postcolonial countries such as Kenya, Tanzania, Chile, Haiti and India, which experienced the imposition of a colonial language – i.e. English, French, Spanish. While these languages continue to exert hegemony after independence, they devalue local, Indigenous and contact languages like creole and pidgin (Heugh, 2022; Khan & Jayaraj, 2024).

In the case of India, Hindi filled a "linguistic power vacuum" after the end of the British Raj and the partition from Pakistan (Ellison, 2025 para. 1). Following independence, Hindi was promoted as the main official language of India and anchored in Article 343 of the 1950 Constitution, even though censuses only estimated 34-44% of the population to be Hindi speakers (Ellison, 2025 para. 1). The Eighth Schedule of the Indian Constitution has gradually recognised 21 other Indian languages as regional languages (Government of India, 2022), but the hierarchy between them and Hindi as the "official"

language remains, resulting in feelings of injustice and riots (Ellison, 2025).

Hindi experienced a massive boost under Narendra Modi's Hindu nationalism; since 2014, the budget of the Department of Official Language, charged with promoting Hindi, has tripled in size (Ellison, 2025). Against this background, making Hindi mandatory in the state of Maharashtra appears as another step in the hegemonic expansion of Hindi in India.

Language Rights & Decolonial Resistance

What are Linguistic Human Rights?

Linguistic Human Rights refer to "fundamental rights protecting language-related acts and values that are entrenched in domestic law and policies or in international treaties" (Ran, n.d.), such as the Universal Declaration of Linguistic Rights (UNESCO, 1996). LHR can be negative, i.e. forbidding discrimination, or affirmative, i.e. the obligation to grant minorities certain rights like the right to use their language (Skutnabb-Kangas, 2012). Linguistic rights are protected through binding treaties, domestic laws and non-binding declarations, such as Article 27 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (United Nations, 1966) and the 1992 UN Minorities Declaration (OHCHR, 1992).

Notably, many decolonial scholars have criticised LHR for their continued reference to the notion of human rights. This is because the conceptual origins of human rights are deeply entangled with colonial and racist ideology, as the status of "human" was originally invented to demarcate humans from animals and the divine (Maldonado-Torres, 2021), yet only included the white male elite and thus helped justify racial hierarchies. With decolonisation came critique of those historical roots, but the question of "who speaks for the 'human' in human rights?" persists (Mignolo, 2009; Stroud, 2001). Further criticism deals with the potentially discriminatory and socially divisive nature of the concepts if disadvantaged groups receive special treatment that creates the impression of unfairness (Stroud, 2001).

Nonetheless, LHR are a valuable concept because granting or not granting LHR can be seen as a strategy in language policy to "modify the linguistic environment" (Skutnabb-Kangas, 2012 p. 2). With reference to international law, LHR may be used to challenge normative standards or push for legal recognition. Understanding language rights as human rights endows them with further credibility and legitimacy because they are treated as fundamental to human identity and dignity (Skutnabb-Kangas & Phillipson, 2022).

As established above, the language policy in most modern states follows deeply-entrenched majority/minority or "official"/"unofficial" distinctions informed by colonial structures. According to Bernard Spolsky (2009), language policy comprises three components: practices, beliefs and management. Language practices are "the observable behaviours and choices" of people, whereas beliefs concern the values assigned to different linguistic varieties and features (Spolsky, 2009, p. 3). Finally, language management denotes "the explicit and observable effort by someone or some group that has or claims to have authority over the participants in the domain to modify their practices or beliefs" (Spolsky, 2009, p. 4). Based on that, I will analyse

the potential of LHR to influence language policy as a form of decolonial resistance.

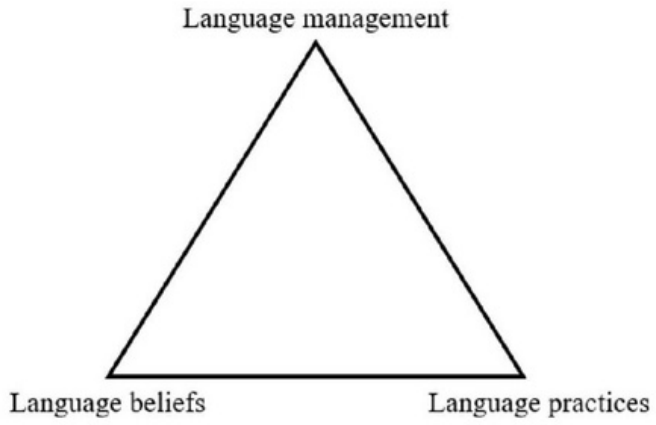


Fig. 2: Spolsky's Language Policy Model (Van Oss, 2023).

Language Beliefs

First and foremost, LHR challenge colonial power and epistemic hierarchies by rejecting the narrative that Western European languages are "civilised" and therefore the only legitimate languages for education, governance and scientific knowledge production. Instead, they recognise marginalised and Indigenous languages as equally valid and important means of communication and cultural transmission. Thereby, they do not only oppose and replace colonial dualism with decolonial pluralism but also transform the values attached to different linguistic varieties.

Māori language revitalisation programmes in New Zealand serve as a fitting example to illustrate this shift: They reject the colonial narrative that English is the only language of progress and centre much more around the knowledge, tradition and cultural significance and continuity expressed in Māori.

Similarly, the protests in Maharashtra against the expansion and privileging of Hindi (and English) in the Indian education system suggest growing disagreement with the status and prestige ascribed to them. Ironically, Modi's government and the Hindutva nationalist movement have frequently presented themselves as a force of decolonisation, yet this discursive appropriation only veils the structural violence against Muslims and Dalits as well as the reproduction of colonial stories about India's history (Dhingra, 2023; Jyoti Dutta, 2026). Defending Marathi as a legitimate language of education may therefore be seen as an exercise of linguistic human rights and a decolonial critique of Hindutva language policy.

Language Practices

Changes in language beliefs become particularly visible in daily usage and speaking choices. LHR aid in this process by paving legal pathways for enabling such daily practices to take place in a variety of domains.

The Māori revitalisation movement demonstrates this through initiatives like Kōhanga Reo (language nests) where children are immersed in the language from early childhood onwards (May & Hill, 2018). Beyond that, Māori has become significantly more prevalent in broadcasting, public ceremonies and everyday communication. Thus, every time someone chooses to use Māori rather than English in their daily life, this may be interpreted as an exercise of linguistic rights. In this sense, everyday language use itself becomes an act of decolonial resistance because it challenges the colonial expectation that English should dominate public and private life.

A similar dynamic can be observed in the case of Marathi. Since language continues to be closely associated with education, social

mobility, and political power in India, the use of Marathi in schools, local administration, public signage, literature, and everyday communication constitutes an important realisation of linguistic human rights. The widespread protests against the proposed expansion of compulsory Hindi instruction in 2025 reflected concerns that Marathi would gradually be displaced from these domains of everyday use (Mollan, 2025). Through the lens of Spolsky's (2009) language policy model, the controversy must therefore not just be understood as a case of educational policy but of protecting established language practices. Defending Marathi thus represents resistance to a perceived process of linguistic homogenisation, in which the expansion of a dominant language threatened the continued public use of a regional language. In this sense, demands for Marathi language rights can be understood as a form of decolonial resistance against the reproduction of hierarchical language relations, even where these are justified through nationalist rather than colonial discourse.

Language Management

To sustain certain language beliefs and practices, they need to be institutionalised through what Spolsky calls language management. In New Zealand, continuous advocacy for Māori revitalisation resulted in the Māori Language Act 2016 (Te Ture mō Te Reo Māori 2016) that replaced the Language Act of 1987 and not only affirmed Māori as an official language of New Zealand but created a "partnership between iwi and Māori and the Crown to promote the knowledge and use of te reo Māori" (New Zealand Government, 2024). This aligns with Spolsky's (2009) assertion that legal recognition represents the most obvious form of language management.

In the case of Marathi, such an institutionalisation has not fully taken place yet despite its inclusion into the Eighth Schedule of the Indian Constitution, as exemplified by the ongoing protests. Wales, however, offers another example that illustrates how linguistic rights can reshape relationships between minority communities and the state. Through legislation such as the Welsh Language Act (1993) and the Welsh Language (Wales) Measure 2011 nawm 1, Welsh acquired equal legal status with English in many areas of public administration. Combined with bilingual education and public media, these measures have substantially increased the institutional visibility of Welsh and strengthened obligations concerning Welsh-language public services. Their effect on everyday language use is more mixed, however, and recent census figures show that legal recognition alone does not guarantee continued growth in the number of speakers (Welsh Government, 2026).

These examples illustrate an important point: LHR extend beyond cultural preservation. They redistribute political power by challenging whose languages – and therefore whose knowledge and identities – are considered legitimate within state institutions. In doing so, they support what de Sousa Santos (2014) describes as an "ecology of knowledges", in which multiple epistemologies coexist rather than being subordinated to a single Western model of modernity. The examples from New Zealand and Wales also suggest that embracing LHR can even increase rather than undermine national stability by preventing protests motivated by a sense of linguistic injustice. This, however, hinges on a certain degree of political will and commitment to the decolonial movement from

the national government's side, without which the institutionalisation and protection of language rights remain weak and fragile, as demonstrated by the debate surrounding Marathi in Indian schools.

Taken together, these debates suggest that linguistic human rights should not be romanticised as a complete solution to colonial injustice. Legal recognition alone cannot dismantle centuries of structural inequality, nor can language policy substitute for broader reforms addressing economic, political, and racial inequalities. Nevertheless, it would be premature to dismiss LHR completely because they operate within international human rights law. Indeed, this would mean overlooking their practical and symbolic significance. Rather, they demonstrate that legal recognition must be accompanied by institutional reform, rendering them one important component of broader decolonisation processes.

Policy Recommendations

- Launch programmes dedicated to the revitalisation and recognition of non-dominant languages. These may include language training in schools, public language and art festivals, dedicated broadcasting programmes or celebrating the International Mother Language Day on 21 February, for example.

- Recognise and embrace regional linguistic rights movements as an expression of and opportunity for dismantling colonial structures that can stabilise rather than destabilise the public administration in the long term.

- Invest in strengthening linguistic diversity especially in crucial domains such as healthcare and law; hire staff who speak at least two of the most popular local languages to facilitate interactions with patients and clients.

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HUMAN RIGHTS & HUMANITARIAN AID



The Implications of Climate Change for Human Security

Examining the Intersections of Climate Change, Environmental Stress, and Global Stability

Jonas Pfeufer

About the Article

Climate change is the greatest challenge of our time.

About the Author

Jonas Pfeufer is pursuing an M.A. in Politics and Public Administration at the University of Konstanz (DE). His research focuses on Comparative Politics and Public Policy, German-European Foreign Policy, and Security Studies. He is currently involved in projects with the Young DGAP and Amnesty International.

Climate change is the greatest challenge of our time. Rising global temperatures and more frequent extreme weather events impact political stability and economic development. While climate change was once primarily discussed within the fields of environmental science and ecology, it has since become a central issue for policymakers, aid organisations and academics alike. Today, the concept of human security provides one of the most useful frameworks for understanding why climate change matters beyond its environmental consequences.

Algorithmic Bias: Systemic errors in a computer system that create unfair outcomes, such as privileging one arbitrary group of users over others due to flawed training data or design choices.

Traditional understandings of security focus on protecting states from external military threats. Human security, by contrast, shifts attention towards protecting individuals from threats to their lives, livelihoods, and dignity. Introduced in the United Nations Development Programme's (UNDP) 1994 Human Development Report, human security encompasses economic, food, health, environmental, personal, community, and political security.

Despite the growing academic literature on climate security, public discussion often remains limited to highly visible emerging problems like melting glaciers or rising sea levels and the accompanying extinction of biodiversity. Far less attention is given to the humanitarian and political aspects of climate change. Yet these are the mechanisms through which climate change affects millions of people's everyday lives.

This article explores the implications of climate change for human security by focusing on three interconnected areas: humanitarian aid, food security, and civil conflict. While climate change rarely acts as the sole cause of insecurity, it indirectly amplifies existing vulnerabilities and increases the likelihood of humanitarian emergencies and socioeconomic instability. Understanding these relationships is essential for developing effective responses to one of the greatest global challenges of our time.

1. Climate Change and Human Security

Climate change affects human security through a complex web of environmental stress and social processes. Rising temperatures, prolonged droughts, floods, wildfires, stronger storms, and sea-level rise directly threaten human lives and livelihoods. The most recent examples of these threats are the wildfire outbreaks in Spain and France, which have been devastating and uncontrollable. However, the security implications extend far beyond immediate physical destruction.

Extreme weather events, for example drought, reduce agricultural productivity, damage infrastructure, displace populations, and reduce trust in public institutions. These effects are particularly severe in countries with weak governance and limited state capacity, since these conditions affect responsiveness to disasters. Economic hardship and limited political marginalisation increase vulnerability to climatic shocks as well. In contexts such as

these, environmental shocks can overwhelm governments' ability to provide basic services, increasing dependence on humanitarian assistance and raising the risk of political instability.

Importantly, climate change should not be understood as a threat multiplier as often argued, but rather as a phenomenon whose impact largely depends on the contexts in which it occurs. Existing social, political, and economic vulnerabilities largely determine whether climate shocks lead to humanitarian crises or violent conflict; the effect is not universal. A drought occurring in a wealthy country with strong institutions may cause economic losses but remain manageable, and an increase in conflict risk is not observable and statistically insignificant. The same drought in a fragile state with pre-existing struggles like widespread poverty caused by economic struggles would likely trigger increased conflict risk and a high sense of insecurity and vulnerability.

The following sections examine three of the most important pathways linking climate change to human security.

2. Humanitarian Aid

One of the evident consequences of climate change is the growing demand for humanitarian assistance. Humanitarian organisations increasingly respond to disasters that are intensified by shifting climatic conditions, which include a wide variety of factors such as floods, tropical cyclones, droughts, heatwaves, and wildfires. This shift reflects a broader recognition that climate change is not creating isolated emergencies but rather a long-term transformation in global humanitarian needs.

Over recent decades, the number of people affected by climate-related disasters has risen substantially; the number will continue to rise substantially. Although improvements in early warning systems have reduced mortality from many natural hazards, the economic and humanitarian impacts continue to increase. More people now live in disaster-prone areas, while climate change makes many extreme weather events more intense and frequent.

The humanitarian consequences are immediate. Floods destroy homes and infrastructure, forcing communities to seek emergency shelter. Droughts lead to crop failures and livestock losses, increasing food insecurity and malnutrition. Heatwaves threaten public health, particularly among vulnerable populations such as children and the elderly. Rising sea levels gradually render coastal communities increasingly uninhabitable, creating slow-onset displacement that challenges existing humanitarian frameworks.

Climate-related displacement has become an increasingly important issue. Unlike refugees fleeing armed conflict, many people displaced by environmental factors remain within their own countries, making them internally displaced persons rather than international refugees. However, the distinction between environmental and conflict-related displacement is often blurred. Climate shocks can contribute to economic hardship, which in turn interacts with political instability and violence, creating multiple overlapping drivers of migration.

Humanitarian organisations face several challenges in responding to these growing needs. First, climate-related disasters are

becoming more frequent, leaving less time for recovery between successive crises. Communities that experience repeated floods or droughts often struggle to rebuild their livelihoods before the next disaster occurs.

Second, funding has decreased on a global level. Humanitarian needs are growing faster than available resources. International agencies such as the United Nations, the International Committee of the Red Cross, and numerous non-governmental organisations increasingly face difficult decisions regarding the allocation of limited funds across multiple simultaneous emergencies. The emerging multipolar world and the increasing focus on narrow national interests have led to the slashing of humanitarian assistance funding, most notably USAID in the US and German funding efforts.

"Climate change is the greatest challenge of our time."

Third, humanitarian responses themselves must adapt to changing climatic conditions. Rather than focusing exclusively on emergency relief, aid organisations increasingly invest in climate adaptation and resilience-building efforts. Examples include constructing flood-resistant infrastructure, supporting drought-resistant agriculture, and improving early warning systems. Further efforts emphasise the need to strengthen local disaster preparedness.

3. Food Security

Food security represents perhaps the most direct link between climate change and human well-being. According to the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), food security exists when all people have physical and economic access to sufficient, safe, and nutritious food at all times. Climate change threatens each of these dimensions simultaneously.

Agriculture is highly dependent on stable climatic conditions. Temperature increases, changing rainfall patterns, prolonged droughts, floods and more frequent extreme weather events reduce agricultural productivity across many regions. While some high-latitude countries may temporarily benefit from longer growing seasons, the overall global impact is expected to be negative, particularly in tropical and subtropical regions where many developing countries are located.

Crop yields for major staple foods like maize or rice are projected to decline under continued warming. Higher temperatures lead to accelerated evaporation and reduced plant growth. There is also some evidence that crops become less nutritious due to climate change. In many regions, rainfall has become more unpredictable, making agricultural planning increasingly difficult.

Livestock production is similarly affected. Heat stress reduces animal productivity, while changing disease patterns increase risks for both livestock and humans. Fisheries also face significant challenges due to warming oceans, coral bleaching, and changing marine ecosystems.

The consequences extend beyond food production itself. Reduced harvests contribute to rising food prices, which disproportionately affect poor households that spend a larger share of

their income on food. Even relatively small increases in food prices can significantly reduce food access among vulnerable populations.

Food insecurity also has important health implications. Undernutrition weakens immune systems, increases child mortality, and reduces cognitive development. Children experiencing chronic malnutrition often suffer lifelong consequences, including lower educational attainment and reduced economic productivity.

Climate change also increases the likelihood of simultaneous harvest failures across multiple regions. Historically, poor harvests in one country could often be offset through international trade. However, if several major agricultural producers experience climate-related production losses simultaneously, global food markets become more volatile, increasing the risk of widespread food price shocks.

Adaptation strategies offer opportunities to reduce these risks. Climate-smart agriculture seeks to improve productivity while increasing resilience to climate change. Examples include drought-resistant crop varieties, improved irrigation systems, precision agriculture, agroforestry, and better soil management practices. Technological innovation, combined with effective governance and investment in rural infrastructure, will play an important role in maintaining global food security under changing climatic conditions.

4. Civil Conflict

The relationship between climate change and violent conflict has generated considerable debate within political science and security studies. While early research sometimes portrayed climate change as a direct cause of war, more recent scholarship presents a more nuanced understanding. Climate change rarely produces violent conflict independently. Instead, it interacts with existing political, economic, and social vulnerabilities.

This perspective views climate change as a threat multiplier. Environmental shocks increase stress within societies, but whether that stress results in violence depends on institutional capacity, governance quality, inequality, and existing grievances. Several mechanisms help explain how climate change may contribute to civil conflict.

First, climate-related resource scarcity can increase competition over land, water, and grazing areas. In regions where livelihoods depend heavily on natural resources, prolonged droughts or declining agricultural productivity may intensify disputes between communities. Such conflicts are particularly likely where institutions responsible for resource management are weak or absent.

Second, climate change may contribute to economic shocks. Bad agricultural yields reduce household incomes and increase unemployment. Economic hardship can increase support for armed groups that offer financial benefits and protection. Research on armed group recruitment frequently highlights economic vulnerability as one important factor influencing individuals' decisions to participate in violence. Cross-national statistical studies generally find a relationship between climatic variability and certain interpersonal violence, often with a gendered effect.

One particularly important insight from recent research concerns individual vulnerability. Individuals experiencing environmental pressures can become more susceptible to recruitment by armed groups if participation in the group offers alternative sources of income or violent tendencies can be satisfied by joining. This micro-level perspective complements broader structural explanations by focusing on how environmental stress influences individual decision-making. Small arms are also relevant in this equation, as people have a need to defend themselves and their resources, which leads to them purchasing or manufacturing weapons.

At the same time, climate adaptation can also contribute to peacebuilding. Effective governance of natural resources, investment in climate-resilient infrastructure, inclusive development policies and improved disaster preparedness all reduce vulnerability and strengthen the kind of societal resilience that is necessary to address challenges caused by climate shocks. By addressing underlying inequalities and improving institutional quality, governments can reduce the likelihood that climate-related shocks escalate into violent conflict.

5. Health Security and Environmental Epidemics

Health security represents an integral yet frequently understated pillar of the human security framework originally conceptualized by the United Nations Development Programme. Climate change acts as a primary stressor on global public health infrastructure, directly altering disease transmission pathways, exacerbating environmental health hazards, and driving up global morbidity and mortality rates.

Rising mean global temperatures, fluctuating precipitation patterns, and altered humidity levels expand the geographic range and seasonal duration for vector-borne diseases. Mosquito species carrying malaria, dengue fever, yellow fever, and Zika virus thrive in warmer, wetter environments, exposing previously unexposed populations in higher altitudes and temperate zones to novel epidemiological threats.

Simultaneously, waterborne pathogens proliferate under conditions of extreme hydrological instability. Intense flooding events routinely contaminate municipal water supplies and rural wells with sewage and runoff, triggering widespread outbreaks of cholera, dysentery, and diarrheal illnesses that disproportionately afflict young children and immunocompromised individuals. Conversely, severe and prolonged droughts compel communities to rely on unsafe, stagnant water sources, severely degrading hygiene standards and escalating public health emergencies. Thermal stress further compounds these risks; extreme heatwaves elevate cardiovascular and respiratory mortality, particularly among vulnerable urban populations lacking adequate green space and cooling infrastructure.

The physical disruption of local healthcare systems during acute climate shocks creates a compounding health crisis. Floods, tropical storms, and uncontrollable wildfires routinely destroy clinical facilities, disrupt pharmaceutical supply chains, and displace medical personnel. This sudden collapse in healthcare delivery halts routine immunization programs, maternal care, and chronic disease management, rapidly converting acute environmental hazards into long-term public health disasters. Consequently,

climate-induced health crises strain state capacity, erode labor productivity, and heighten systemic individual vulnerability.

6. Institutional Governance and Climate Finance

Addressing the multidimensional security threats posed by climate change requires robust institutional governance frameworks and targeted climate finance mechanisms. However, a persistent gap remains between high-level international policy pledges and local implementation, particularly within fragile, low-income, and conflict-affected nations. Effective climate governance demands interdisciplinary cooperation across government ministries, breaking down institutional silos to integrate environmental management directly with national security, public health, social protection, and economic planning.

A central structural obstacle in global climate governance is the inequitable distribution and accessibility of climate finance. Although developing nations contribute the least to cumulative historical greenhouse gas emissions, they bear the overwhelming burden of climate-induced security risks, infrastructural damage, and socioeconomic dislocation. International financial mechanisms established under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC)—such as the Green Climate Fund and the Loss and Damage Fund—aim to redress this historical imbalance. Nevertheless, total financial disbursements remain far below required levels, and complex administrative bureaucracy frequently delays the flow of funds to vulnerable frontline communities.

Furthermore, international climate finance allocation remains heavily skewed toward mitigation projects—such as renewable energy transitions—rather than adaptation and resilience-building initiatives in vulnerable regions. Without dedicated adaptation funding for flood-resistant infrastructure, early warning systems, sustainable water management, and agricultural diversification, fragile states cannot build the institutional capacity required to absorb climate shocks. Strengthening climate governance therefore requires not only increasing total financial commitments from high-income economies but also streamlining direct access for local institutions and civil society organizations operating on the frontlines of climate insecurity.

7. Policy Imperatives for Integrated Human Security

To mitigate the interconnected risks outlined in this analysis, international actors and domestic governments must transition from reactive emergency response to proactive, integrated human security strategies. Security policies that rely exclusively on traditional military deterrence or border fortification are fundamentally ill-equipped to address the complex socioeconomic and environmental drivers of climate-induced instability. Instead, national governments, international organizations, and civil society actors must adopt a holistic human security approach that explicitly aligns climate adaptation, humanitarian assistance, peacebuilding, and sustainable economic development.

First, early warning systems must be systematically integrated into regional conflict prevention frameworks. Predictive risk modeling

that combines meteorological data, satellite imagery, agricultural forecasts, and local socioeconomic indicators can help policy analysts identify emerging hotspots of climate-induced resource scarcity before local competition escalates into violent conflict. Second, international aid organizations and donor agencies must bridge the longstanding divide between short-term emergency relief and long-term development by embedding climate resilience directly into disaster recovery programs.

Finally, policy design and implementation must prioritize the active inclusion of marginalized populations—including indigenous communities, women, and youth—who possess vital local ecological knowledge regarding natural resource management and community adaptation strategies. By reinforcing local democratic governance, ensuring equitable climate finance distribution, and safeguarding fundamental human rights, the international community can foster resilient societies capable of navigating the complex security landscape of a warming world.

8. Conclusion

Climate change has fundamentally altered the landscape of human security. Its consequences extend well beyond environmental degradation to affect humanitarian needs, food systems, economic livelihoods, migration and political stability. Rather than viewing climate change solely as an ecological challenge, it should increasingly be understood as a multidimensional security issue that affects individuals, communities, and states alike.

The evidence suggests that climate change does not directly cause humanitarian crises or civil wars. Instead, it amplifies existing vulnerabilities. Countries characterised by poverty, weak governance, inequality, and political instability are generally the most vulnerable to climate-related insecurity. Consequently, addressing climate change requires more than reducing greenhouse gas emissions. It also demands investments in governance, social protection, disaster preparedness, sustainable agriculture, and conflict prevention.

Humanitarian organisations must increasingly balance emergency response with long-term resilience-building. Food systems must become more adaptive to changing climatic conditions while ensuring equitable access to nutritious food. Governments must strengthen institutions capable of managing climate-related risks before they evolve into broader security challenges.

Ultimately, climate change represents one of the defining human security issues of the twenty-first century because it simultaneously affects multiple dimensions of human well-being. Addressing its consequences therefore requires integrated policies that combine climate mitigation, adaptation, development, and peacebuilding. Strengthening human security in a warming world is not only an environmental necessity but also a political, economic, and humanitarian imperative.

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The evidence suggests that climate change does not directly cause humanitarian crises or civil wars. Instead, it amplifies existing vulnerabilities.

— Jonas Pfeufer, The Implications of Climate Change for Human Security

HUMAN RIGHTS & HUMANITARIAN AID



Iran Protests: Human Rights Violations, Repression and Global Response

How State Repression, Human Rights Violations and International Pressure Shape Iran's Protests

Burak Baran and Celia Ball

About the Article

Iran's crackdown on protesters has exposed the challenges of protecting human rights, ensuring accountability, and securing an effective international response to state repression.

About the Authors

Burak Baran studies Political Science at Leiden University Campus The Hague. As a member of the EPIS Board of Directors, he is responsible for social media and the Human Rights & Humanitarian Aid Report Group. His research focuses on the Middle East and human rights.

Through her ISPP studies, Celia Ball has gained a strong understanding of social, political and economic issues. She is interested in global inequalities, migration debates and how world economies are being shaped, with a passion for building sustainable societies.

Background to the Protests

Key causes: political, social, economic factors

The current wave of Iranian protests is best grasped as the culmination of years of political, economic, and social frustration. Previous major protest cycles included the 2009 Green Movement (disputed election), the 2017–18 demonstrations (economic grievances), and the 2019 fuel-price protests, all of which were met with heavy repression (Ziabari, 2022).

The most significant recent uprising began in September 2022 after the death of Mahsa Amini while in the custody of Iran's morality police, known as Gasht-e Ershad (Mahdavi, 2026). Initial protests focused on compulsory hijab laws and women's rights but rapidly broadened into a nationwide movement challenging the political system itself under the slogan "Woman, Life, Freedom." Women, students, and young people played a leading role, and demonstrations spread across much of the country.

Key triggers that repeatedly reignited protests included funerals and 40-day memorials for those killed, reports of government crackdowns, executions of protesters, and broader grievances over economic hardship, corruption, and political repression. The state responded with arrests, internet restrictions, and force, reducing the protests by 2023, but the movement remains an important symbol of opposition and demands for social and political change (Wintour, 2022).

The reformist politician Mohammad-Javad Haghshenas accepted the groups of young people were sometimes small, but said the protests were "like an iceberg in the Arctic Ocean, 10% of which is visible, but the bulk of it, which forms its core, is underwater.

"Iranians have learned that protests should not be concentrated in a specific place or limited to a specific class. All academic levels and cultural, sports, artistic elites, celebrities, join this movement," he said. "This process is irreversible. The issue of morality police, guidance patrol and some taboos has practically collapsed. If the government does not want to understand these realities, it will deal a serious blow to the country, to itself, to the people, and to the future of Iran." (Wintour, 2022).

State repression: The use of government power or force to suppress dissent, protests, opposition, and fundamental rights and freedoms.

Notable triggering events

Official state news agencies focused on an unrelated protest that left as many as 15 people dead and 30 injured after three extremists fired at pilgrims inside the Shah Cheragh, or Emperor of the Night shrine, in Shiraz.

Protesters appeared to have taken control on Thursday of Mahabad, a heavily Kurdish city of about 200,000 people close to the border with Iraq.

The unrest boiled over when a 35-year-old Kurdish man named as Ismaeli Maludi was shot dead on Wednesday, reportedly by direct fire from government forces, according to Hengaw, a Norway-based group that monitors rights violations in Iran's Kurdish regions. Another protester was shot in nearby Sanandaj (Wintour, 2022). Following the shooting, reports state anti-dictator crowds attacked a police station, chanting 'death to the dictator'.

Reported Deaths and Use of Force

Statistics on deaths and injuries

The latest wave of protests in Iran began on 28 December 2025, initially among merchants in Tehran's markets who closed their businesses in protest against rising inflation and the continuing decline of the Iranian rial.

The demonstrations quickly evolved into a broader anti-government movement, spreading across all 31 provinces and more than 200 towns and cities. Protesters reportedly chanted slogans against the Iranian regime and the Supreme Leader, with unrest reaching its peak on 8 January 2026. The scale of the protests made them the largest nationwide demonstrations in Iran since 1979.

On 8 January 2026, the Iranian authorities imposed a near-total communications blackout, blocking internet access and telephone services and significantly restricting the flow of information both within Iran and internationally. Information about events during this period has largely been obtained through limited communications via Starlink satellite equipment, outbound telephone calls that resumed from 13 January 2026, and accounts from individuals who subsequently left the country.

Even though there are substantive claims regarding Iran's violation of international human rights, documenting such claims have been difficult due to government restrictions on information. Iranian authorities have limited internet, blocked social media applications and imposed a ban on foreign and domestic media coverage. Such measures make it harder for journalists and NGOs to verify information from affected regions. Lack of independent access to sites of protests led to numerous reports relying on eyewitness testimonies, videos and images circulation online, and information gathered by local activists. Organisations like Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch use various verification techniques to confirm evidence gathered, however due to the restrictions access to complete and accurate data remains a challenge. As a result, actual numbers of deaths, injuries and arrests could vary and be higher than estimates. Journalists, activists and human rights defenders face personal threats when trying to report about the ongoing events, such as arrests, detentions, intimidation or prosecution for performing duties granted to them under the international law. Such responses by the Iranian government create an environment of fear that discourages people from documenting or speaking publicly about abuses. These challenges combined reduce transparency and make it harder for the international community to assess the full extent of situations and hold perpetrators accountable.

The authorities responded with a severe crackdown. Verified footage reportedly showed security forces using batons and firearms

against protesters. Following this response, protest activity declined sharply, with substantially fewer demonstrations recorded between 11 and 13 January and only isolated incidents reported thereafter.

Casualty estimates vary considerably. By mid-January 2026, reported deaths ranged from approximately 12,000 to 20,000, the majority being protesters. One human rights organisation reported that, as of 28 January 2026, there had been 6,221 confirmed deaths, including 5,858 protesters, with a further 17,091 deaths under investigation and more than 11,000 people seriously injured.

"Iran's crackdown on protesters has exposed the challenges of protecting human rights, ensuring accountability, and securing an effective international response to state repression."

The same organisation reported 42,324 arrests, 261 cases of televised forced confessions, and 11,026 summonses to security institutions as of 28 January 2026. It further stated that the authorities were conducting a large-scale arrest campaign in the aftermath of the protests.

Reports also indicated that more than 800 protesters were sentenced to death, although these executions were reportedly halted following threats of intervention by the United States. It remains unclear whether the Iranian authorities intend to carry out these sentences.

In addition to demonstrations within Iran, several anti-regime protests took place in the United Kingdom between 3 and 17 January 2026, attracting crowds ranging from approximately 100 to 1,000 participants.

As with all protection claims, each case must be assessed on its individual facts, and the burden remains on the individual to establish a well-founded fear of persecution or a real risk of serious harm (GOV.UK, 2026).

Relevant Human Rights Framework

Right to Life

The right to life is one of the most fundamental human rights and is protected under Article 6 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) (United Nations, 1966). This right requires states not only to refrain from the arbitrary deprivation of life but also to take positive measures to protect individuals from unlawful killings. The use of lethal force by state authorities is permitted only in exceptional circumstances where it is strictly necessary and proportionate.

In the context of the Iranian protests, allegations of deaths resulting from the actions of security forces raise serious concerns regarding compliance with the right to life. Reports of protesters being killed during demonstrations have prompted scrutiny from international human rights organisations and United Nations mechanisms. Where state agents are implicated in deaths, international human rights law requires prompt, independent, and effective investigations to establish accountability.

Freedom of Expression

Freedom of expression is protected by Article 19 of the ICCPR and encompasses the right to seek, receive, and impart information and ideas

through any media. This right is essential for democratic participation and enables individuals to voice political opinions, criticise government policies, and advocate for social change (United Nations, 1966).

The Iranian protests were characterised by public criticism of government policies and political leadership. Measures reportedly taken by the authorities, including internet shutdowns, restrictions on communications, censorship, and the arrest of journalists and activists, have raised concerns regarding restrictions on freedom of expression. While states may impose certain limitations on this right, such restrictions must be lawful, necessary, and proportionate to a legitimate objective under international law.

Freedom of Peaceful Assembly

Furthermore, in United Nations (1966), the right to peaceful assembly is protected under Article 21 of the ICCPR and allows individuals to gather collectively to express opinions, advocate for causes, or protest government actions. Peaceful protests are widely recognised as a legitimate exercise of civil and political rights.

The demonstrations that occurred across Iran represented the exercise of this right by large numbers of individuals expressing economic, social, and political grievances. International human rights standards require states to facilitate peaceful assemblies and protect participants from violence. Any restrictions imposed on assemblies must be necessary and proportionate. Allegations of excessive force, mass arrests, and the suppression of demonstrations have therefore generated concerns regarding the protection of this right during the protests.

International Human Rights Agreements

Iran is a State Party to ICCPR, which imposes legally binding obligations to respect and protect rights including the right to life, freedom of expression, freedom of assembly, freedom of association, and protection from arbitrary detention. Iran is also a party to other international human rights treaties, including the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR).

These treaties provide the primary legal framework through which the actions of states are assessed by the international community. Allegations of excessive use of force, arbitrary arrests, restrictions on communication, and limitations on civil liberties during the protests are therefore frequently evaluated against Iran's obligations under these international agreements

Role of the United Nations Human Rights Council

The United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) plays a central role in monitoring and addressing human rights concerns worldwide. The Council can hold special sessions, adopt resolutions, mandate fact-finding missions, and appoint independent experts to investigate alleged human rights violations.

In response to developments in Iran, United Nations bodies and independent experts have repeatedly expressed concern regarding allegations of unlawful killings, arbitrary detention, restrictions on fundamental freedoms, and the treatment of protesters. Through investigations, reporting mechanisms, and international scrutiny, the Human Rights Council seeks to promote accountability and encourage states to comply with their international human

rights obligations. Although the Council does not possess direct enforcement powers, its findings can influence international diplomatic responses, sanctions policies, and broader efforts to promote human rights protections.

Why These Actions May Violate Human Rights

Use of Excessive Force – International Human Rights Law allows states to use force only when necessary and proportionate towards a legitimate objective. Under Article 6 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), individuals have the inherent right to life; therefore, states have the duty to protect their citizens against arbitrary deprivation of life. In addition, the UN Basic Principles on the Use of Force and Firearms by Law Enforcement Officials state that law enforcement officers should only use lethal force to protect life. Therefore, allegations about the unlawfulness behind state personnel using lethal force against unarmed protesters and, hence, reports of Iranian security forces using live ammunition against protestors have raised serious questions regarding Iran's commitment to these treaties.

Targeting of unarmed civilians – Given that civilians are exercising their right to peacefully demonstrate, the use of lethal force may violate protections given under the ICCPR, particularly Article 6 – right to live – and Article 21 – Right of Peaceful Assembly -. Human Rights organisations, NGOs and media agencies documented many cases regarding women, students and minors among those who have been killed or injured by the Iranian state officials (BBC, 2026; Iran International, 2026; Amnesty International, 2026). Iran is also a party state of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, which gives the state a legal duty to provide special protection to minors, ensuring their survival and development. Given that Iranian citizens and minors have been targeted for participating under peaceful demonstrations, a right that they have, such actions could result in serious breaches of international human rights law.

Suppression of Dissent – Restrictions imposed on protestors, journalists and activists also raised questions about several international instruments. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights protects freedom of opinion (Art. 19) and freedom to assemble peacefully (Art. 20). These legal protection mechanisms are reinforced and supported through the ICCPR and widely regarded as fundamental principles of democratic participation by many.

Restrictions such as but not limited to internet shutdowns, censorship measures and restrictions on communications have been criticised by numerous international organisations. Access to information is viewed as essential tools to ensure freedom of expression, affirmed by the UN Human Rights Council.

Lack of Due Process and Accountability – States are required to investigate alleged unlawful killings and provide remedies to victims per international law. These obligations drive both from the ICCPR and Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Furthermore, allegations of mistreatment of detainees raise concerns under the Convention Against Torture. Although Iran hadn't ratified the convention, the prohibition of torture and cruel, degrading behaviour toward detainees are an accepted principle of customary international law, meaning it applies

regardless of ratification. The absence of transparent investigations into reports has led many observers to argue that international standards regarding justice, protection of human rights and accountability may not have been respected and met in Iran.

International Response

Statements and Measures by Governments – The killing of protesters led to widespread international criticism. Multiple governments including the US, Canada, the UK, and EU member states have condemned use of force by Iranian authorities against demonstrators. States have argued that Iran has the duty to respect its obligations under the international human rights law, especially those regarding ICCPR. Several states have imposed sanctions on the Iranian regime, security forces and institutions that are believed to be involved in suppression of protestors. Sanctions increase asset freezes, travel bans, etc. The EU, the US, the UK and Canada introduced measures against key Iranian officials. However, effectiveness of sanctions is being debated. Supporters argue sanctions create political pressure and help with accountability, whereas critiques claim sanctions have limited impact if Iranian authorities don't change their behaviour.

Statements and Measures by International Organisations – United Nations Officials and independent experts have called Iran to stop using violence against protestors, and release individuals detained for protesting as well as respecting rights regarding to life, freedom of expression and peaceful assembly. The UNHRC established an international fact-finding mission on Iran in November 2022. Their mandate was to investigate alleged human rights violations, examined reported abuses, collecting evidence and identifying patterns of violation.

Challenges in Verification and Reporting

Even though there are substantive claims regarding Iran's violation of international human rights, documenting such claims have been difficult due to government restrictions on information. Iranian authorities have limited internet, blocked social media applications and imposed a ban on foreign and domestic media coverage. Such measures make it harder for journalists and NGOs to verify information from affected regions.

Lack of independent access to sites of protests led to numerous reports relying on eyewitness testimonies, videos and images circulation online, and information gathered by local activists. Organisations like Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch use various verification techniques to confirm evidence gathered, however due to the restrictions access to complete and accurate data remains a challenge. As a result, actual numbers of deaths, injuries and arrests could vary and be higher than estimates.

Journalists, activists and human rights defenders face personal threats when trying to report about the ongoing events, such as arrests, detentions, intimidation or prosecution for performing duties granted to them under the international law. Such responses by the Iranian government create an environment of fear that discourages people from documenting or speaking publicly about abuses. These challenges combined reduce transparency and make it harder for the international community to assess the full extent of situations and hold perpetrators accountable.

Conclusion

Killings of peaceful protestors demonstrate a serious human rights concern, setting a precedent of non-compliance even for jus cogens norms. Reports regarding use of force, arbitrary arrests and restrictions on fundamental rights of expression suggests violation of various principles of human rights. This situation underlines the significance of protecting human rights especially during authoritarian turns, political unrest and public dissent.

Accountability and transparency are crucial in order to ensure justice for victims and preventing future abuses. Independence of investigations, having access to reliable information, and the ability to cooperate with international human rights mechanisms and institutions are necessary in order to start establishing the true facts and identifying the responsible. Without meaningful and functioning accountability mechanisms, there are serious concerns regarding impunity, and continued violations are likely to keep going on.

Looking forward, the international community can keep monitoring developments of events in Iran through mechanisms like UNHRC, rapporteurs and international organisations specialising in human rights. Continued diplomatic pressures, pushing for independent international investigations, and advocating for protection of liberties may play an important role, however lack of non-binding mechanisms with enforcement power makes room for development less likely.

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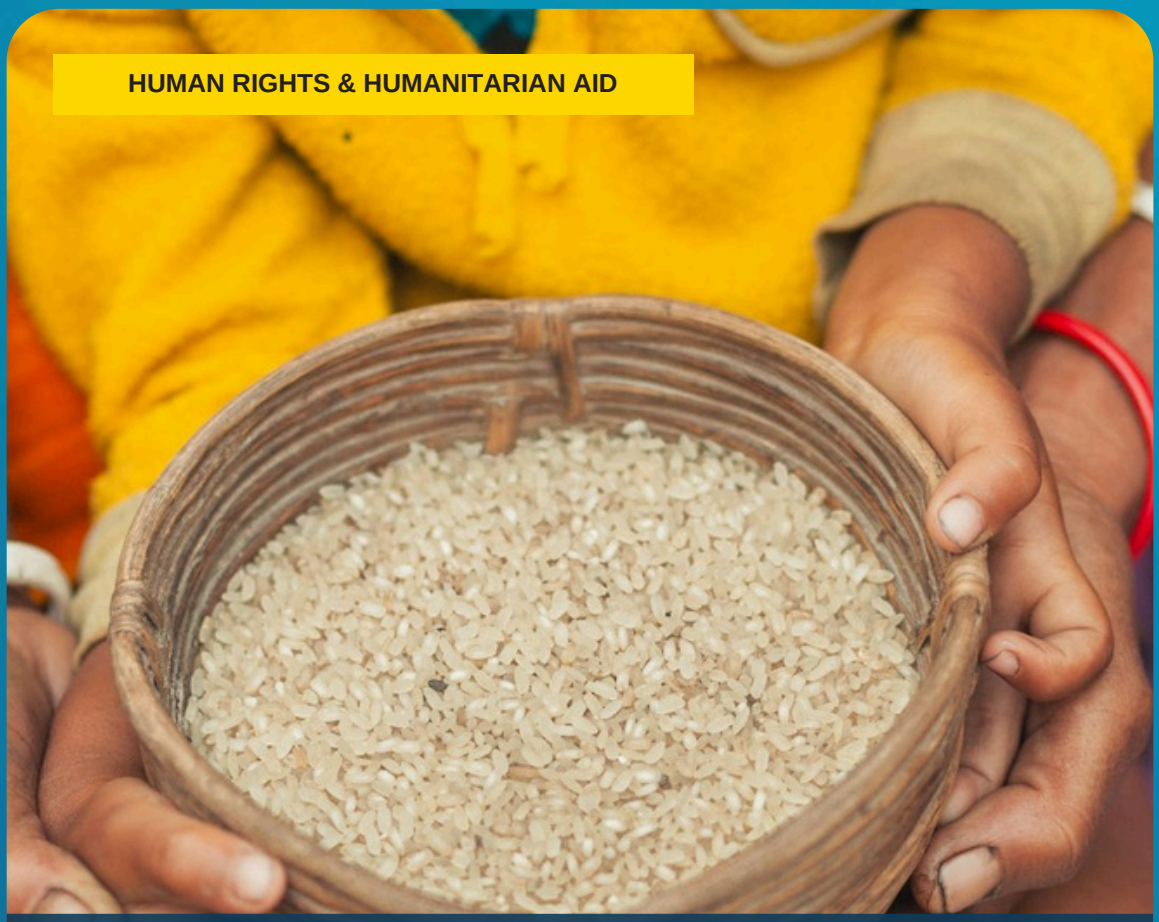


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Humanitarian Aid and Artificial Intelligence: Where is Social Justice?

Humanitarian Aid and AI

Bruno Almeida

About the Article

Artificial intelligence has entered this picture as a tool for coping with that complexity: a way to stretch scarce resources further and respond faster in conflict zones.

About the Author

Bruno Almeida is an EPIS Research Fellow pursuing a PhD in Global Studies. He holds a master's degree from the Faculty of Economics of the University of Coimbra, Portugal.

1. Introduction

Something has shifted in how humanitarian aid reports talk about their own field: political and security concerns now sit at the centre of decisions that used to be framed almost purely around need. International organisations look more bureaucratic and more politicised than they did a decade ago, and that shift makes it harder for them to deal with the structural roots of conflict rather than just its symptoms (Harvard Humanitarian Initiative, 2026).

Part of the problem is sheer numbers. More actors are involved than ever, needs keep rising, and the money never quite keeps pace – a combination that quietly erodes how effective any single response can be. This challenge is also closely related to the growing scale and complexity of humanitarian crises. The number of people requiring assistance continues to increase, while humanitarian operations involve an expanding range of international organisations, governments, local actors and other stakeholders. Despite this growing demand, available financial resources remain limited. The gap between needs and funding places considerable pressure on humanitarian organisations and can affect their ability to provide assistance in a timely and equitable manner. As a result, humanitarian action increasingly depends on decisions about how limited resources should be distributed, which populations should be prioritised, and where interventions are likely to have the greatest impact.

Artificial intelligence has entered this picture as a tool for coping with that complexity: a way to stretch scarce resources further and respond faster in conflict zones where older operational models keep falling short. It can genuinely help on the efficiency side. But efficiency isn't the same as fairness, and AI tools raise serious ethical questions. Thus, aid organizations/the international community/whoever should consider issues of inequality, aid selection, and human rights violations in their pursuit of optimisation. (Global Humanitarian Overview 2026: A Collective Push to Protect Millions of Lives, 2026).

Artificial intelligence (AI) is increasingly presented as a technology that can help organizations do more with less and manage available resources more intelligently.

Ultimately, the value of AI in humanitarian contexts should not be measured only by how much time or money it can save. Its contribution should also be assessed in terms of whether it strengthens equitable access to assistance, protects the rights and dignity of affected populations and supports rather than replaces human judgment. In conflict zones, where humanitarian decisions can directly affect people's safety and survival, technological efficiency must therefore remain subordinate to humanitarian principles.

2. Bureaucratisation and the limits of humanitarian aid

As the international humanitarian system has grown, so has the machinery around it. Coordination has improved, but so has the paperwork.

Professionalising humanitarian organisations has given them more capacity to act, but it has also tied them more tightly to bureaucratic procedures, to accountability regimes, and to the priorities of whoever is funding them. That dependency puts real pressure on the principles of neutrality and independence that are supposed to define the sector.

The growing diversity of participants on the global stage, from classical international organisations and NGOs to private foundations and corporations, makes for a highly fragmented setting which generates structural friction and inefficient work on the ground. Due to the lack of coordination of numerous players operating in the same fields, there is always some overlap of initiatives and money wasted, which leads to the imposition of various bureaucratic procedures on the local population. On the other hand, with the arrival of new players who have financial means to back their operations, the competition for resources gets stronger, and the emphasis shifts from the effectiveness of actions to the visibility and speedy raising of funds. Furthermore, all this is aggravated by the fragmentation of technology, with more and more incompatible systems emerging and keeping information locked up inside corporate and institutional fences and thus preventing the formulation of any coherent strategy. The absence of proper governance structures that could incorporate all these operational methods into a single one causes international response to be highly fragmented (Parsa et al., 2026).

It is in this crowded and complex landscape that artificial intelligence (AI) is increasingly presented as a technology that can help organisations do more with less and manage available resources more intelligently. AI provides tools for analysing information, forecasting events, supporting decision-making, and improving the way tasks are carried out. Within the field of humanitarian action, these capabilities can help organisations operate more efficiently and effectively throughout the different phases of a crisis (Lythreatis et al., 2026).

"Artificial intelligence has entered this picture as a tool for coping with that complexity: a way to stretch scarce resources further and respond faster in conflict zones."

Overall, AI offers clear possibilities for improving the way humanitarian organisations manage information and resources. As Lythreatis et al. (2026) demonstrate, its ability to support forecasting, analysis, and decision-making can be useful across different stages of a crisis. Nevertheless, the effectiveness of these technologies depends on the organisational context in which they are introduced. AI may help organisations do more with limited resources, but it does not by itself resolve the deeper issues of bureaucracy, dependence on donors, fragmentation, or coordination that characterise the international humanitarian system. Its contribution therefore needs to be considered as part of a broader discussion about

how humanitarian organisations can use new technologies while maintaining their responsibilities towards the populations they are intended to assist.

At the same time, the argument that AI can help organisations "do more with less" should be considered carefully. Greater efficiency does not necessarily mean that humanitarian needs will be addressed more fairly or that organisational problems will disappear. AI depends on the quality of the information available to it and on the way organisations choose to use its outputs. Nevertheless, as Lythreatis et al. (2026) demonstrate, AI has the potential to become an important support tool for humanitarian organisations, particularly when they have to manage large amounts of information and make decisions under considerable time and resource constraints.

3. Artificial Intelligence in humanitarian aid

AI's footprint in humanitarian operations has grown fast. Satellite imagery analysis, predictive modelling, early warning systems, algorithms that route resources, and tools that process information automatically: all of it now feeds into decisions that used to rest entirely on human judgment, often in real time (Lythreatis et al., 2026; Efe, 2022).

These systems can sharpen disaster forecasting, flag which populations are most at risk, tighten up logistics chains, and support recovery work on the ground (Lythreatis et al., 2026; Omidiji et al., 2026). None of that guarantees social justice, though. A system can be technically excellent and still get the ethics wrong.

That gap is exactly why leaning so heavily on algorithms to make decisions that affect the lives of millions of vulnerable people deserves serious scrutiny (Coppi et al., 2021).

At least, the growing presence of AI in humanitarian operations presents both opportunities and challenges. The work discussed by Lythreatis et al. (2026) and Efe (2022) suggests that AI can make certain humanitarian activities faster and more efficient. However, the concerns raised by Coppi et al. (2021) and Omidiji et al. (2026) show that efficiency alone is not enough. The use of AI needs to be accompanied by transparency, human oversight, and careful consideration of the limitations of the data and models being used. In humanitarian contexts, where decisions can have significant consequences for people's lives, technological efficiency should therefore remain connected to human responsibility and judgement.

AI can help in speeding up humanitarian aid delivery and being more reactive by forecasting humanitarian crisis situations and allocating the required resources to where they are most needed. However, using AI is not without dangers, including wrong data input, discriminatory algorithms, and invasion of privacy. This is why we need responsible use of AI, ensuring human rights are respected and the "do no harm" principle is adhered to. The literature neither suggests that the use of AI should be unconditional nor that AI must be shunned from every aspect of society. The key idea is that the value of AI is determined by its design and implementation (Beduschi, 2022).

AI may contribute to the prediction of a crisis, resource allocation, mapping, and even communication with those who have been affected. At the same time, bad data, biases, and lack of protection of privacy may lead to these technologies becoming tools of exclusion, discrimination, or even harm.Consequently, responsible AI implementation means the consideration of risks, data protection, transparency, accountability, and community concerns (Beduschi, 2022).

The use of AI cannot be governed merely by efficiency and technological advancement, but also by the consequences of decisions made through these tools. Data and algorithms used for decision-making processes need to be evaluated according to the circumstances in which they operate, the rights of those who may be impacted, and any possible risks of damage that might occur even when the decisions are complex and hard to contest. This means that it is crucial to facilitate transparency, data protection, accountability, and community involvement in the design of such technologies. In conclusion, both articles state that AI can play an important role in humanitarian intervention, but only under the condition that its application is based on ethical standards and safeguards (Coppi et al., 2021; Beduschi, 2022).

3.1 Ethics of Artificial Intelligence and social justice in humanitarian contexts

Using AI in humanitarian work forces us to confront questions about transparency, equity, and human rights that the sector has not fully worked out yet (Coppi et al., 2021).

Algorithms are often opaque, and that opacity cuts against basic humanitarian principles. Coppi et al. (2021) argue for explainability as the answer to a mix of transparency, interpretability, and accountability that lets people actually understand and challenge the decisions a system makes about them.

Bias is another big concern. AI systems learn from historical data, and historical data carries historical inequality with it. Left unchecked, these systems can discriminate against certain groups or quietly exclude the people who most need help.

There is also the data question. Mass data collection, biometric tools, and partnerships between humanitarian organisations and big tech firms risk turning aid recipients into data sources and test subjects, creating new dependencies and inequalities on top of those aid is supposed to address.

None of the above is to say that artificial intelligence should be denied use in humanitarian activities. Rather, the deployment of AI should be strategic and done through safeguards such as mechanisms that ensure transparency, reduction of bias, proper human oversight, and privacy (Omidiji et al., 2026).

The adoption of AI should not occur in a vacuum, isolated from social realities and local power dynamics. As Kumar and Vidolov (2016) argue, humanitarian effectiveness is intrinsically linked to the quality of community engagement. If the introduction of new technologies is not accompanied by an ethical re-evaluation of how we interact with affected communities, it risks replacing human dialogue with distant algorithmic models. The danger lies not merely in the technology itself, but in the possibility that

the pursuit of "technological efficiency" might silence local agency and overlook the cultural nuances that only direct engagement can capture.

Nonetheless, in all this change, social justice has to be a principle at the heart of things. Artificial intelligence can assist humanitarian decision-making, but it should not undermine the reasoning and judgment of human beings.

AI in humanitarian action should only be developed and used in a manner consistent with humanitarian principles, ensuring that decisions can be understood, evaluated, and challenged, and that harm to vulnerable populations is prevented. The adoption of automated systems requires transparency, explainability, auditability, and accountability. The literature argues that humanitarian principles should guide not only human decisions but also the development and use of technologies (Coppi et al., 2021).

3.2 Institutional readiness, local agency, and the digital divide

Beyond abstract ethical principles, the practical implementation of artificial intelligence in humanitarian aid encounters formidable structural barriers related to institutional readiness and the global digital divide. While major international non-governmental organizations and United Nations entities possess the financial capital and technical infrastructure required to experiment with predictive analytics, machine learning, and not to forget satellite mapping, and local front-line responders who, to stress this point overwhelmingly execute operational delivery on the ground are frequently excluded from this digital transformation process (Kumar & Vidolov, 2016). This pronounced technical asymmetry risks deepening existing power imbalances between the Global North, where the vast majority of humanitarian algorithms are engineered, and the Global South, where these automated systems are actively deployed (Coppi et al., 2021).

When algorithmic architectures are developed in isolation from local knowledge, they regularly fail to account for informal protection networks, cultural nuances, and community-level coping mechanisms. For instance, a purely data-driven model might classify a contested border area as entirely inaccessible based on historical conflict metrics, thereby recommending the suspension of relief distributions. However, local civil society actors on the ground often possess the historical trust, diplomatic rapport, and contextual awareness necessary to navigate those exact spaces safely and deliver critical assistance. Consequently, uncritical reliance on automated decision-making can inadvertently disenfranchise local leadership, silence community voices, and actively undermine the broader "localization agenda" aimed at transferring operational autonomy and funding directly to local organizations (Global Humanitarian Overview, 2026).

Furthermore, the physical and digital infrastructure needed to maintain advanced AI models—such as high-speed connectivity, secure cloud servers, and uninterrupted power supplies—is precisely what is most fragile or absent in acute conflict settings. Expecting humanitarian operations to depend on high-tech computational models in resource-scarce environments introduces severe operational vulnerabilities (Omidiji et al., 2026). If an aid

agency becomes overly reliant on automated resource allocation platforms, any technical malfunction, cyber security breach, or telecommunications blackout risks paralyzing emergency relief efforts at the exact moment populations face catastrophic danger.

To overcome these structural pitfalls, the integration of AI must prioritize institutional capacity building for local organizations, incorporating co-design methodologies, open-source software frameworks, and shared technical governance (Beduschi, 2022; Lythreatis et al., 2026). Rather than imposing top-down technological fixes that reinforce donor dependency, the international community must ensure that digital innovation directly supports community-led resilience and preserves local agency.

4. Conclusion

AI gives humanitarian organisations a real chance to respond faster and more effectively to crises that keep getting more complicated (Lythreatis et al., 2026; Efe, 2022).

That opportunity only holds up if it comes with serious governance: ethical oversight, transparency, accountability, and humans who stay in the loop (Coppi et al., 2021; Omidiji et al., 2026). The use of artificial intelligence in humanitarian crises can improve efficiency, but these benefits depend on how the technology is governed. Coppi et al. (2021) highlight the importance of explainability when AI is used in humanitarian settings. People affected by humanitarian decisions, as well as field workers, should have a reasonable understanding of why an algorithm reaches a particular decision. This is especially important in situations involving the distribution of resources or the identification of populations at risk. When these decisions cannot be adequately explained, it becomes more difficult to hold the system and those responsible for it accountable, which can also affect trust in humanitarian organisations.

Omidiji et al. (2026) further emphasise that the effectiveness of an AI system should not be assessed only through its technical performance. Human oversight remains important, particularly when algorithms produce biased results or fail to account for local circumstances. In practice, human-in-the-loop approaches can provide an opportunity to review and question algorithmic decisions before they have serious consequences. Human judgement is therefore still necessary, as it can take into account factors that may not be represented in the available data. In humanitarian contexts, where decisions can directly affect people's lives, this human oversight is an important safeguard against the limitations of automated systems.

No efficiency gain is worth trading away humanity, impartiality, neutrality, and independence – principles the whole system is built on.

Kumar and Vidolov (2016) argue that humanitarian effectiveness lies not merely in the technical precision of the systems adopted, but in the depth of interaction with local populations. The danger of an overly technology-centric or "technicist" approach is the reification of affected communities; they cease to be viewed as active partners and are instead treated as mere data points or passive recipients of interventions. When technology replaces direct dialogue, the opportunity to integrate local knowledge and

cultural nuances, elements essential for any intervention to be truly relevant, is lost.

However, the growing use of AI should also be understood in relation to the institutional problems that already exist within humanitarian action. If humanitarian organisations are already dealing with complex bureaucratic structures, funding pressures, and difficulties in coordinating different actors, introducing AI does not automatically remove these problems. In some cases, it may even add another layer of complexity. Organisations need to decide which systems to use, what data should be collected, who should have access to them, and how decisions supported by AI should be evaluated. Lythreatis et al. (2026) therefore provide an important starting point for understanding AI as a tool that can improve efficiency, while also requiring organisations to consider how it fits within the wider structure of humanitarian action.

So the real question is no longer whether AI belongs in humanitarian aid. It is whether its development and use actually push toward social justice, cut inequality, and protect the rights and dignity of the people who need protecting most.

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September 2026

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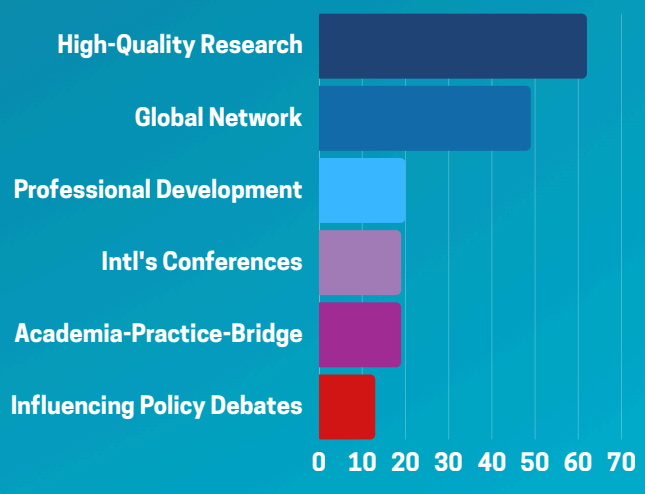


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Question of the Month

What should EPIS be known for in five years?



HUMAN RIGHTS & HUMANITARIAN AID



The Real Street Law: Child Beggars, Daras, and Politics in Senegal

Analising Children's Rights in West Africa

Félix Rodríguez Higley

About the Article

The government is pressured both internally and externally, rendering itself to passing laws that appease local religious leaders and tackle international criticism.

About the Author

Félix is a human rights advocate who holds a master in International Relations from the University of Bologna and a degree in Sociology from the Complutense University of Madrid. His research focuses on human rights, geopolitics, democracy and peacekeeping issues. He is currently writing articles for a blog and participating in advocacy projects. His main mission is to discover the dynamics embedded within international society.

White buckets, ragged clothing, and bare feet. This is one of the first things that you will notice in the streets of Dakar if you have never been there before. They come up to you and mumble something you probably will not understand unless you speak Wolof, Mandinka, Fula, or another West African language. But it is easy to understand what is happening: they are begging for money.

These are the Talibé children, and what they endure every day under the sunlight is a distinct social, religious and cultural phenomenon. While this analysis is not intended to speak in the name of all Talibés, as many of them live a very different life, it will expose and deconstruct Senegalese politics as well as the religious and cultural meanings of begging, and historical attempts to tackle this issue throughout the years.

NGO-isation refers to the professionalisation, bureaucratisation and institutionalisation of social movements.

1. Understanding basic concepts

Talibés, which means disciples in Wolof, are predominantly male students between the ages of 4 and 18 who have been enrolled by their parents at Quranic schools called daraas. Talibé children can be found in urban and rural settings in countries including Senegal, Guinea-Bissau, Mali, Ghana, etc (MacLeod, 2023). In these daraas, they learn the Quran under the tutelage of a marabout, or sëriñ daraas, a religious or spiritual leader. However, children in daraas are forced to work and beg for several hours on a daily basis. While their functioning has always rested on the shoulders of the children, it has evolved over time.



Quranic teaching to children is not new; it has existed for centuries (Perry, 2004). But in the late nineteenth century, Quranic schools proliferated, especially in rural areas. Children recited all day long, but also worked the land during the rainy season and begged for food in the towns they resided in to sustain the daraa by stocking food. At this time, marabouts were not paid and largely depended on the askaka of neighbours, that is, the charity Muslims are expected to bestow on the needy (ibid.). For many families, sending their children to daraas meant an opportunity to become somebody and get closer to Allah. However, many of these children received physical punishment if they did not recite the Quran properly. In fact, many tried to run away, but when arriving at their homes, parents would threaten them as they had not fulfilled their religious duties, considering them a dishonour to the family (Lahti, 2019).

Postcolonial dynamics fundamentally changed the situation of traditional daraas, as rapid urban migration began to increase and Quranic schools were excluded from state funding since Senegal had adopted a secular education system (Ndiaye, 2015). This broader social,

political and economic post-independence shift forced many Quranic schools to relocate to urban areas, and since there was no agricultural land to work, most of the time Talibés started to spend more time begging on city streets for daily food and money (Perry, 2004). This changed the overall demographics of Talibés too, with most children now sent from impoverished rural settings and an increase in the number of vulnerable children arriving from neighbouring countries. While there are currently no official government statistics, Amnesty International (2022) reported that there were 200,000 Talibés in Dakar, out of which 25% were active street beggars.

2. Reporting violations

The Talibé phenomenon, and particularly the practice of begging, gained international attention in the 90s (Perry, 2004; Lahti, 2019; MacLeod, 2022). Narratives from international NGOs, such as Amnesty International (AI) and Human Rights Watch (HRW) (Lahti, 2019), linked child begging with abuse, exploitation and human trafficking. The spread of images of children under inhuman conditions of life started to concern the Global North's child activists and advocacy groups as well as the public eye (ibid). Since then, many projects and initiatives have attempted to eradicate child begging by framing it differently.

As explained before, Talibés can be found in both rural and urban settings. However, as the number of child beggars is currently higher in urban settings, we will focus on them. Both local and international NGOs have reported that many Talibés are constantly mistreated by their marabouts through beatings, confinement, enchainment, malnourishment or starvation if they do not meet the pre-established daily quota when begging or do not recite the Quran properly (Ouedrago, 2021; Centre for Human Rights (University of Pretoria) & La Rencontre Africaine pour la Défense des Droits de l'Homme, 2014). In January 2022, a 10-year-old Talibé died from injuries caused by a beating from his teachers for not learning the day's lesson (AI, 2022). Cases of sexual abuse have also been reported, usually from older Talibés (HRW, 2010).

"The government is pressured both internally and externally, rendering itself to passing laws that appease local religious leaders and tackle international criticism."

This adds to the unsanitary conditions of many daraas, which in many cases lack adequate toilets, roofing, beds, clothing and food (AI, 2022). Moreover, as many Talibés spend most of their day begging barefoot in the streets surrounded by scabies, rats, cockroaches, stranded animals and trash, the chances of encountering severe health issues and catching diseases, including malaria, skin infections, dengue and oral issues, are very high (Perry, 2004). Many of these children do not have access to medical treatments and/or are not adequately treated. As they are also left to beg in the streets unattended, Talibés are highly exposed to other dangers (HRW, 2010)

3. Failed attempts to end child begging

Economic exploitation through forced street begging, physical and psychological abuse, cross-border trafficking of children, denial of education or extreme neglect are all violations of child's rights under international law, including the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), the International Labour Organisation's Worst Forms of Child Labour Convention (1999), the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (1990), and the Palermo Protocol (2000). Senegal has ratified all of these treaties, and therefore is under the obligation to take all necessary steps to ensure all children in Senegal enjoy their rights (Carr, 2012). Nevertheless, Senegal must yet become a contracting party and ratify the Hague Convention on the Protection of the Child (1996).

A law was passed in 2005 with the goal of combating human trafficking, especially Talibés coming to Senegalese daraas from neighbouring countries. The "Loi No. 2005-06 relatif à la lutte contre la traite des personnes et les pratiques assimilées" states that "anyone who organises begging of others with a view to profiting therefrom (…) shall be punished by imprisonment of 2 to 5 years". However, this law was not implemented until 2010, after the United States threatened with aid cuts if efforts to end child begging in the country were not put in place (Boiro & Einarsdottir, 2024). Despite this, there has been little enforcement, and few marabouts have been imprisoned under this law (AI, 2022; HRW, 2010).

Since then, there has been an attempt to introduce a national framework to regulate daraas —Decree No. 2024-957—, which would include them in the education system, enable them to receive state funds, tackle infrastructure issues and limit certain practices against children (Parisella, 2025). Both initiatives remain blocked in Parliament as religious leaders lobby against the latter by framing it as an anti-Islamic attack (AI, 2022).



Nevertheless, between 2016 and 2018, the government under Macky Sall's presidency launched the two-phase "Retrait des enfants de la rue", which aimed to reduce the number of child beggars from the streets but also modernise daraas and introduce them into the education system through a hybrid model (MacLeod, 2023). In the first phase, children were picked up from the streets and sent back to their daraas. The government faced criticism from advocacy groups as they had not been consulted for the development of the initiative, had not allocated enough resources, and had actually rewarded marabouts by sending Talibés back to their marabout.

After its failure, the government decided that, in the second phase, children would be picked up, Talibés would be separated, and they would be sent to daraas previously preapproved by the state. This phase also had a low impact and was highly critiqued because marabouts had not yet

been persecuted. In fact, in this last phase, marabouts were differentiated as either good or bad religious leaders, and based on that, some daraas were deemed as positive (MacLeod, 2023).

Overall, the project had little effect on ending child begging. The lack of interministerial coordination, the exclusion of NGO expertise, the lack of allocated resources, and a conflicting view on daraas themselves set the stage for a large failure that, to today has not countered the increasing number of Talibes in the streets (MacLeod, 2023). This failure leads us to ask ourselves: why send children to daraas in the first place, and what is the social significance of daraas?

4. Begging as a custom

While many think poverty would be the main reason for parents to enrol their children in daraas and avoid feeding an extra mouth, this is an oversimplification of reality. While some theories have resorted to demographic and economic reasons, such as waiting for children to become adults and therefore becoming the workforce, these have been largely refuted (Boiro & Einarsdottir, 2016), and the focus has been put on the role of religion and culture. It is paramount to understand how religion interacts with other cultural factors to avoid falling into simplistic views of begging as pure parental negligence.

Begging or almsgiving has been a part of West African culture for a long time. Anthropologists and researchers have explained how parents believe sending their children to daraas is beneficial to the family, as they seek to establish a connection with a powerful brotherhood under an instrumentalist perspective, but also to the child itself, as learning the Quran means acquiring a certain degree of social status and prestige, even if it entails begging to learn the values of humility and gratitude (Perry, 2004). Nonetheless, this interpretation of the metaphor of slavery, which is central to the Muslim conception of the relationship between individuals and god, is more cultural than religious, and is deeply embedded in West African institutions —this phenomenon does not happen in Arab countries— (ibid). However, many parents do not approve of Talibé treatment and are aware of the mistreatment they endure. Indeed, many report that some marabouts do not care about children and only search for their economic benefit through child exploitation (Boiro & Einarsdottir, 2024).

This double view on Talibés has led to a division within the public discourse, one that criticises marabouts as human traffickers, and parents as abettors, especially when it is cross-border, while others defend the tradition and state that not all marabouts are evil child exploiters and focus on regulating and modernising daraas so children are better provided for (Lahti, 2019). These competing narratives and discourses have impregnated the public sphere, both at a national and international level. International and some local organisations put pressure on the government for tangible actions, while internal religious groups curb any state-level full intervention from happening (Parisella, 2025). To further understand why governmental action has been limited, we must grasp how religion interacts with politics.

5. Religious influence in politics

In many West African societies, including Senegal, state laws coexist with custom and religious laws, such as Sufism in the case of Senegal (Parisella, 2025; Kuenzi, 2019). Customs do not necessarily have a purely Islamic origin; they also stem from traditions prior to Islamisation, and interact with both Islamic and state laws. However, state laws clash with certain traditions and create a confusing state of affairs.



As Parisella (2025:21) states, Sufi groups hold such great social and political power in Senegal, having the ability to mobilise masses in the name of faith, that hierarchy between state and religious authorities is ambiguous. State authorities tend to seek religious support, especially ahead of elections, and refrain from challenging religious leaders, especially on this matter (ibid). When two marabouts were arrested in 2010 after Act 2005-06 was passed, public outcry managed to liberate them from prison (MacLeod, 2023). Not only are they able to escape judicial proceedings, but they are also capable of controlling public attention and diverting the public eye from economic issues, such as corruption or economic stagnation, to other social issues, such as homosexuality.

It is in this context that the often-used argument of Westernisation is utilised to counter social movements such as the fight for women's rights and child rights. Attempts to end Talibés are considered by many religious leaders as an international interference, and they use this against opposition groups, such as activists or political parties (Coudou, 2008). By weaponising religion and faith, marabouts lobby against laws of their interest by framing them as anti-Islamic —even if the Quran prohibits such practices. Thus, the government is pressured both internally and externally, leading it to pass laws that appease local religious leaders and tackle international criticism (Boiro & Einarsottir, 2024; Parisella, 2025).

6. The eternal dilemma

How can child begging be reduced? Is religion the problem or are initiatives not accounting for key social factors? One of the issues of child rights activism in Senegal can be explained with the concept of "NGOisation", which refers to the professionalisation and bureaucratisation of grassroots organisations (Lang, 2012). NGOs have been largely criticised for the questionable benefits for those who are allegedly rescued. They have secured generous grants to cover operating costs, organised forums and have launched nationwide campaigns, but children continue to beg. (Lahti, 2019)

Another issue is the mix of approaches that both NGOs and the government have utilised to frame and tackle child begging. One criminalises religious leaders and frames them as child traffickers, ignoring the social significance daraas have in Senegalese society, and the other one emphasises socioeconomic factors and calls for modernising daraas (Lahti, 2019).

This dancing between discourses is visible in both state actions, such as not prosecuting marabouts, and NGOs, who recognise that not all marabouts are child exploiters or traffickers, economically depend on child begging, and that criminalising them would worsen the problem.

Both frameworks have failed to tackle child begging, even if their goal is the same. The issue is when both NGOs and the government attempt to implement initiatives only halfway, both due to operational costs but also religious lobbying. If marabouts are criminalised, daraas would have to close since they are economically dependent on child begging, and children would have to face stigmatisation by their families for not fulfilling their religious duties (Boiro & Einarsdottir, 2024). But if daraas are introduced into the national education system, religious leaders will lobby against it and accuse it of an anti-Islamic attack.

While begging can be considered as violence against children, it cannot be judged through a Eurocentric lens: it must be contextualised and explored from a local perspective. Only by framing begging as a practice that has a cultural significance among Senegalese, and more broadly, West African, can a solution be found. This does not necessarily imply ending child begging, as we have analysed, is not currently plausible. But a mid-point can be found. Alternative rites of passage, economic support to vulnerable families, basic health and safety measures in daraas, or a stronger legal framework are some of the actions that could be prioritised, ones that consider begging as an embedded social custom, but also protect children's physical and mental integrity.

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