



Winter Course 2025: Introduction to Humanitarian Aid

Training

21 - 22 January, The Hague



Summary report

Introduction

Due to high demand, KUNO has organized an additional course on humanitarian aid—this time in the winter. For humanitarians, working in tumultuous conditions is the norm. Yet, today's challenges feel unprecedented. The number of conflicts is rising, climate disasters are intensifying, and a shifting political landscape is placing even greater pressure on humanitarian organizations. Just one day before this Winter Course, U.S. President Trump imposed a 90-day freeze on all U.S. foreign aid, underscoring the urgency of critical learning and reflection in the field.

This year's participants came from a diverse range of humanitarian NGOs, including Oxfam, Stichting Vluchteling, Save the Children, Terre des Hommes, and ZOA. Notably, one participant came from an international financial services company, eager to gain deeper insights into the humanitarian sector. Their expertise spanned multiple departments, including advocacy, lobbying & communications, programs, fundraising, research, learning & knowledge management, finance, and external relations & donor engagement.

This two-day introductory course brought together humanitarian professionals for an immersive learning experience. Guided by experienced speakers, participants not only gained essential insights but also exchanged knowledge, engaged in thought-provoking discussions, and built valuable connections. The course varied from learning theoretical perspectives to critically analysing humanitarian communication as presented in a documentary. Participants even embarked on a simulated mission to the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), where they worked together to navigate complex security dilemmas.

Day 1

Session 1 [morning]: Humanitarian action & the changing global context

Thea Hilhorst, Professor of Humanitarian Studies at the International Institute of Social Studies (ISS), Erasmus University, and Director of the Humanitarian Studies Centre (HSC).

The Winter Course began with an insightful and interactive presentation by Thea Hilhorst on the history of humanitarianism. She traced its evolution—from the early humanitarian aid paradigm to today’s resilience-based humanitarianism, which shapes contemporary practices and standards. Using a historical timeline, she explored key humanitarian interventions, crises, and conflicts, shedding light on the origins, trends, and increasing politicization of the field. Thea emphasised how international humanitarian law (IHL) is under immense pressure today, with double standards making it harder to argue that the current system is truly functioning. She urged humanitarians to remain vigilant to keep it alive. The session sparked dynamic discussions among participants on critical issues in the sector, including socio-natural disasters (“famine is always a social production”), the triple nexus, and localization—questioning whether the term itself reflects a truly respectful approach.

“She was telling lively, and opened a bright historic view on things”

Session 2 [afternoon]: The Netherlands & Humanitarian Action - policy, priorities & practice

Paul van den Berg, Political Advisor Cordaid and Chair Visibility Working Group DRA;

Rolf Wijnstra, Senior Policy Advisor in Humanitarian Aid & Diplomacy of the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Paul and Rolf led a compelling collaborative session on the Dutch approach and priorities in humanitarian action. Paul opened the discussion by outlining the origins of the Dutch Relief Alliance (DRA), a coalition of 14 Dutch NGOs working globally in partnership with the Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs. He detailed the DRA’s joint response mechanisms, which address both protracted and acute crises, and emphasized the uniqueness of multi-annual funding—a model that fosters long-term impact and stability. He also underscored the mutual trust between DRA members and their partners as a cornerstone of effective collaboration.

Rolf followed with a comprehensive overview of the Netherlands' humanitarian policy, providing participants with insights into Dutch humanitarian diplomacy, funding mechanisms, and strategic priorities. He outlined the key focus areas: Localisation & locally led action; Risk-sharing approaches; Mental health & psychosocial support (MHPSS); Humanitarian exemptions in sanction regimes. Rolf also addressed the most pressing challenges facing humanitarian action today. He highlighted the shrinking humanitarian space and the undermining of International Humanitarian Law (IHL) due to geopolitical shifts and power struggles. He pointed to country-specific crises—such as those in Sudan, Gaza, Afghanistan, the Sahel, and Ukraine—as well as political shifts in the West, particularly in the US and the Netherlands. He referenced Foreign Trade and Development Minister Reinette Klever's plan to significantly cut development aid budgets, a move that could have far-reaching consequences for humanitarian efforts.

Session 3 [afternoon]: Humanitarian Action – A Local Perspective

Pia Zeinoun, Research Lead at Oxfam Novib, Netherlands. Vice-president of Embrace (Lebanon) and former Director of the Embrace Mental Health Center.

In the last session, Pia Zeinoun spoke about local aid and the local NGO Embrace, which she founded in Lebanon. Embrace specifically focuses on Mental Health and Psychosocial Support. Pia explained how Embrace began as a small mission-driven organisation, but since the Beirut explosion (2020) rapidly developed into a free community mental health centre, providing mental health first aid in (future) emergencies. This emergency unfortunately occurred a lot quicker than expected, when on 1 October 2024, Israel invaded Southern Lebanon, marking the sixth Israeli invasion of Lebanon since 1978.

"I will share this MHPSS approach with my colleagues"



Day 2

Session 1 [morning]: Security Risk Management in the field: A fine balancing act!

Henrieke Hommes, Security Advisor at ZOA.

Henrieke Hommes started the second day by introducing Security Risk Management in humanitarian work. She highlighted that the practice is surely not just an exercise, but that the threats are present and real – the events in an security assignment Henrieke created actually happened more or less in the same way in real life. Read more about it [here](#).

The participants were split up into groups and Henrieke presented scenarios in a specific context to which all groups had to reply and present findings at the end of every scenario. All the scenarios focused on threats and dangers, and difficult decisions that NGOs, Head Quarters and local leaders have to make daily. The scenarios varied from choosing a hotel, to one that was about ensuring safe transport and travel. At the end of the morning, the participants were better informed of the types of risks that people in the field are facing, the coordination mechanisms and the difficulties that come with that when deciding about delicate or sometimes very complex issues. One of the learnings was that making a decision is rarely clear-cut, and careful consideration and collaborative action are needed to find the best option.



"I will not do many field trips myself, but very relevant to understand the practice"

Session 2 [afternoon]: Introduction to Humanitarian Communication

Emiel Martens & Wouter Oomen, Founders and Directors Expertise Centre Humanitaire Communication.

In the final session Emiel Martens and Wouter Oomen talked about the importance of ethical communication. They provided an introduction to the features and pitfalls of communication on humanitarian aid and international cooperation. The discourse on humanitarian communication gained traction in the 1970s and 1980s as INGOs increasingly sought public support beyond government funding. This sparked

discussions on the use of spectacle, stereotypes, and power imbalances in fundraising campaigns.

As a practical assignment, the group watched the documentary *Poverty, Inc.* During the screening, participants were asked to reflect on three key questions, encouraging them to critically analyze the film—considering not only its message but also the historical and political context in which it was produced. Following the film, participants engaged in a thought-provoking discussion with Wouter and Emiel. The conversation explored how the solutions that are presented in the documentary were deeply embedded in free market beliefs. Also, emphasis was given on problematic forms of communication, for example where international actors are telling stories of people affected by poverty or crises. The group also noted how self-awareness and critical reflection have led to meaningful changes since the recording of the documentary, such as the evolution of imagery used in humanitarian efforts.

Concluding remarks

The Winter Course was once again a success. Both new and experienced humanitarian professionals had the opportunity to learn, expand their networks, and exchange ideas on humanitarian action. Especially in these challenging times, such discussions feel more important than ever. We hope the course offered a diverse and enriching program that met participants' expectations.

"What I loved about the course was the mix of participants from different organizations. It brought diverse perspectives and experiences into the discussions—something I rarely encounter in my daily work. Engaging with people outside my own organization was interesting and valuable, and it was great to connect with so many new people."

- Romy Metz, Fundraising officer at Stichting Vluchteling.

Do you have any questions or suggestions on what to include in the next training, please contact us at kuno@kuno.platform.nl.