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Narrative Dimensions of Solidarity in European Union Humanitarian Aid Policy

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Abstract

International solidarity is routinely invoked as a normative cornerstone of humanitarian action, yet the concept remains analytically underdetermined and politically contested in political theory and humanitarian studies. This article conceptualises solidarity as a normative political category that claims shared responsibility and collective agency, that is, as a framework for structuring claims of obligation among collective actors, rather than as an expression of voluntary moral attitudes. Building on the literature on solidarity as a practice of boundary-drawing and obligation allocation, it examines how EU institutional narratives construct humanitarian solidarity in a documentary corpus of EU policy texts issued between 1996 and 2026. The article draws on interpretive Narrative Policy Analysis to examine how EU institutional documents articulate solidarity in humanitarian aid policy. It investigates three connected dimensions: the attribution of responsibility (who is expected to act), the prioritisation of humanitarian need (which contexts are recognised as requiring assistance), and the justification of humanitarian action (which actions are represented as legitimate). Applying this framework to EU humanitarian policy, the article reconstructs the EU's narrative as a promoter of solidarity and principled humanitarian aid. The article first identifies the narrative structure through which EU institutions articulate humanitarian solidarity. Second, it examines how this narrative articulates the relationship between established humanitarian principles (neutrality, impartiality, independence) and the political obligations of solidarity. The analysis shows how the documents combine a politically bounded allocation of responsibilities (duty-bearers) among EU institutions and Member States with a universalistic representation of people affected by humanitarian crises as potential beneficiaries. The documents also present solidarity as operating alongside, rather than replacing, the humanitarian principles of humanity, impartiality, neutrality, and independence. It thus shows the coexistence of responsibilities organised internally between the EU and the Member States in terms of distributive solidarity and external, potentially universalistic, humanitarian responsibility.

Keywords: narratives; solidarity; European Union; humanitarian aid; interpretive policy analysis; public policy

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1. Introduction

Solidarity has become one of the most frequently mobilised concepts in European political discourse (Pusterla Piccin 2026). It appears in European Union (EU) treaties, migration policies, the response to the pandemic, the war in Ukraine (Stjernø 2011), and, increasingly, in external humanitarian and migration policy (Pusterla and Pusterla 2018;

Wallaschek 2020). Despite its centrality in politics, the concept continues to be used with diverse and sometimes highly differentiated dimensions (Lahusen 2020). The literature interprets it alternatively as a moral principle, a constitutional value, a social practice, or a distributive criterion (Brunkhorst 2005; Prainsack and Buyx 2017; Sangiovanni 2015; Scholz 2008), without a shared definition of its function in public policy emerging.

In particular, the literature on humanitarian aid frequently treats solidarity as a value that motivates assistance or as an ethical principle that complements established humanitarian principles (Barnett 2011; Fassin 2011; Slim 2015). Recent crises, including those in Ukraine and Myanmar, have placed humanitarian principles under renewed ethical and political scrutiny (Lloydd 2024). In particular, recent research on the humanitarian response to Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine illustrates why the relationship between solidarity and humanitarian principles warrants closer examination. Studies have identified narratives of solidarity with Ukraine, the exceptional nature of the crisis, and the vulnerability of affected populations as significant frames shaping humanitarian responses and public understandings of assistance (Moallin et al. 2023; Hargrave et al. 2024). These debates also intersect with broader calls to decolonise humanitarian action, which challenge the persistence of hierarchical relations between international donors and aid recipients, including in knowledge production and the distribution of decision-making authority. Although localisation and decolonisation are related, they are not synonymous: the former concerns the role and authority of local actors in humanitarian responses, whereas the latter raises broader questions about the power structures underpinning the international humanitarian system (Aloudat and Khan 2022; Sulley and Richey 2023). Despite differences, both these narratives on localisation and decolonialisation can mobilise support and acknowledge urgent humanitarian needs; however, they also raise questions about impartiality, the selective visibility of crises, and the criteria by which certain populations become particularly prominent as recipients of assistance. Research on Ukraine has also highlighted tensions between portrayals of an exceptionally successful localisation response and the experiences of local civil society actors. It is therefore important to examine how institutions that invoke its significance define and articulate solidarity and how these formulations relate to the responsibilities and limits of humanitarian action. This requires distinguishing humanitarian aid from coercive humanitarian intervention and examining how institutions define responsibility, recognise humanitarian need, and justify particular forms of assistance (Weiss 2000).

This question is particularly relevant to the EU, where solidarity and humanitarian aid have often been discussed as distinct concepts. Humanitarian aid has long been grounded in providing relief to people in need and in the principles of humanity, impartiality, neutrality, and independence (Barnett 2005). Accordingly, the EU Treaties state solidarity as a grounding principle of mutual support. 'Victims of humanitarian crises often have only one hope of survival: the hope that other countries—with the resources to help—will come to their aid. This is called international solidarity. […] Solidarity is […] one of the values that shapes who we are and whom we will become' (European Commission 2023). However, solidarity has recently been reaffirmed as a principle, adding more ambitious political implications and binding obligations (Derpmann 2020), and the EU institutions have increasingly articulated solidarity as a normative basis for collective humanitarian action. However, the assertion that solidarity informs a particular EU strategy should be distinguished from scholarly arguments concerning how humanitarian governance ought to develop. For example, Charlotte Dany presents an argument concerning solidarity and localisation, informed by the EU strategy's aim to 'overcome established donor-receiver relations [and] integrate a more solidarity-focused approach that empowers the receivers of aid' (Dany 2021, p. 2). The question addressed here is how EU institutional documents

link the normative claim of solidarity to specific obligations. More specifically, the article examines how these documents identify the actors expected to act, frame humanitarian need as a claim upon those actors, and justify the forms of humanitarian action deemed legitimate. The analysis focuses on humanitarian aid and action as represented in EU policy discourse, not on coercive humanitarian intervention or the use of military force to protect populations.

In this sense, research on policy narratives has shown how institutional accounts organise political meanings and connect problems, responsibility, and justifications (Roe 1994; Stone 2011). Nevertheless, the interpretive analysis of how solidarity is articulated within the EU humanitarian aid remains comparatively underdeveloped. This article addresses this gap by examining the institutional narratives through which solidarity connects to collective responsibility, the recognition of humanitarian need, and the justification of assistance. It is yet out of the scope of this paper to investigate whether and to what extent institutional narratives determine or influence humanitarian aid implementation.

This article therefore does not mean to conceptualise solidarity as a narrative mechanism in itself, but as a normative political category whose meaning is articulated through institutional narratives. It applies interpretive Narrative Policy Analysis to select EU legal and policy documents, examining three dimensions: the attribution of responsibility, the prioritisation of humanitarian need, and the justification of humanitarian action. The documentary comparison spans selected policy moments from the 1996 legal framework to the 2026 Joint Communication. It identifies recurring normative commitments alongside differences in institutional emphasis, without presuming a linear transition from internal European solidarity to external humanitarian responsibility.

2. Materials and Methods

The article adopts a theoretical–interpretive research design to reconstruct how EU humanitarian aid policy articulates solidarity. It examines how institutional documents connect humanitarian problems, responsibilities, and forms of action. This approach draws on interpretive policy analysis (Fischer and Forester 1993; Hajer 1997; Yanow 2000), which treats policy documents not merely as administrative records but as sites where political meanings are articulated and legitimised.

The purpose is to examine how solidarity is represented in selected legal and policy documents and how these representations relate to the normative justification of humanitarian assistance. The analysis considers the meanings and relationships articulated in institutional texts while recognising that such texts do not, in themselves, establish how policies are implemented. The selected documents offer points of comparison across different institutional and policy moments, without tracing the concept longitudinally throughout history. Interpretative methods are particularly useful in this regard because they focus on the meanings through which political practices are constituted rather than treating institutions as merely legal or behavioural phenomena (Bevir et al. 2003, p. 192). '[B]ecause meanings are not directly observable, interpretive research reconstructs them indirectly through the analysis of artefacts that embody political understandings, including language [...]; acts and interactions [...]; and physical objects used in these acts or in written language [...]' (Yanow 2003, p. 11). The analysis therefore relies on close textual reading of policy documents rather than on quantitative content analysis or frequency counts (Schwartz-Shea and Yanow 2002; Yanow 2000). It examines how the documents connect humanitarian need with the attribution of responsibility and the justification of assistance, taking account of each document's institutional function and policy context.

2.1. Narrative Policy Analysis as an Analytical Approach

Building on the interpretive research design outlined above, the article draws on Narrative Policy Analysis (Roe 1994) to examine how EU institutional documents articulate solidarity in humanitarian aid policy. The analysis examines how these texts connect understandings of humanitarian problems with the attribution of responsibility, the representation of need, and the justification of policy responses, treating them as narrative systems that organise events, attribute causality, and construct relationships of responsibility. The analytical procedure therefore examines (1) how documents define the humanitarian context and the problem; (2) which actors are represented as duty-bearers, affected populations, or intermediaries; (3) how causal and normative reasoning connects need to responsibility; (4) which principles or moral claims justify action; and (5) which tensions, omissions, or alternative interpretations are apparent. These questions guide the subsequent interpretation of the documents. The three dimensions developed below are derived from solidarity theory through the concept of boundary-making. This framework guides close textual reading, directing attention not only to recurring themes but also to discontinuities and negative cases.

The policy document served as the unit of analysis, while the passage in which it defined a problem, assigned a role, identified a population, or justified a response served as the unit of interpretation. The three broad analytical dimensions were derived deductively from the theoretical discussion of solidarity, while the interpretation of specific passages remained attentive to their wording, context, and institutional function. Where passages allowed more than one plausible interpretation, the analysis retained their ambiguity and evaluated them in the context of the document as a whole and its institutional purpose, rather than assigning them mechanically to a single category. The comparative reading also identified instances in which documents diverged from recurring formulations or placed different emphasis on particular dimensions. These differences were assessed in light of the documents' distinct institutional functions and the policy contexts in which they were issued. Accordingly, the analysis did not assume that the documents presented a single, internally coherent narrative, nor that recurring formulations necessarily signalled a linear shift in policy.

Before investigating solidarity in the specific context of this article, a theoretical digression on its definition in the political and social sciences and how it has been integrated into EU legal and institutional language is useful. Solidarity dates back to the French Revolution and its core principles, and the French sociologist Émile Durkheim provided an early useful definition. In his work The Division of Labour in Society (Durkheim [1893] 2014), Durkheim distinguishes two fundamental forms of solidarity: (1) mechanical solidarity, which is typical of traditional societies, in which cohesion derives from the similarity between individuals, who share values, beliefs, and lifestyles, and (2) organic solidarity, which is instead characteristic of modern societies, in which cohesion arises from the differentiation of roles and the interdependence produced by the division of labour. People are different, but precisely for this reason, they depend on each other. This second type is particularly relevant to the context of modern and contemporary states. In accordance, 'By recognising the revolutionary principle of solidarity (named fraternité in that context) as the socio-legal marker of the nation states' membership, the newly created national communities of the 18th and 19th centuries transformed solidarity from a philosophical concept into a binding legal standard' (Federico 2018, p. 497).

Over the centuries, although it was already present in Aristotle's thought, the concept has further evolved from the individual to the societal and, ultimately, the political level. Theoretical accounts of solidarity and fraternity differ in how they ground collective obligations and define their scope. Aristotle's account of civic friendship connects political community with shared conceptions of the common good (Aristotle [335–323 BCE] 2013),

whereas Jean-Jacques Rousseau's account of the social contract foregrounds the formation of a political community and the obligations associated with it (Rousseau [1762] 1997). Karl Marx shifts attention to social relations, material inequalities, and collective emancipation (Marx and Engels 1955; Marx [1844] 1974), while John Rawls develops principles of justice for the basic structure of society and considers the conditions under which obligations extend beyond national boundaries (Rawls 1999, [1971] 2003). These traditions should not be regarded as equivalent. Rather, they raise a common analytical question: whether solidaristic obligations derive primarily from membership in a political community, from relationships of social interdependence, or from principles that justify duties extending beyond that community. This distinction is central to the present article. EU institutions and Member States are the principal institutional duty-bearers, while the stated grounds for humanitarian assistance may encompass people regardless of their political membership. This contrast identifies a normative tension; it does not establish that humanitarian assistance is universal or impartial in practice. Addressing this tension requires defining solidarity, as it clarifies the grounds for duties and responsibilities.

'"Solidarity" is now comprehended as a mutual attachment between individuals, encompassing two levels: a factual level of actual common ground between the individuals and a normative level of mutual obligations to aid each other, as and when should be necessary. Without clearly acknowledging the difference between the two levels or their relationship to one another, it has repeatedly been supposed that factual common ground is sufficient justification for normative obligations. This supposition has been made easier by the assumption that actual common ground is not simply objective, but has an emotional dimension: from common ground a feeling of obligation thus spontaneously emerges, bridging the gap between what is and what ought to be' (Bayertz 1999, p. 3).

The inclusion of the principle of solidarity in the constitutional texts of numerous legal systems is therefore not in itself novel. Its legal roots date back to the Roman law of obligations. The *obligatio in solidum* envisaged a bond with multiple debtors or creditors or the unlimited liability of each member of a family or other community for the payment of joint debts (Ibbetson 2016). More recent and theoretically significant here, however, is the proposal to recognise solidarity as a structural principle of public international law. This perspective marks a paradigm shift: solidarity is no longer conceived exclusively as an ethical or political value, nor as a criterion governing relations within state communities, but as an ordering principle of international relations, potentially capable of guiding the attribution of responsibility, cooperation between actors, and the interpretation of international obligations. From this perspective, international solidarity is not a unitary, self-sufficient concept but a principle that materialises through specific modes of operationalisation. Indeed, solidarity is conceptualised as an organisational principle underpinning a political community and fostering international cooperation among states and other international political actors (such as international organisations, NGOs, etc.). This solidarity-based approach extends well beyond individual moral obligations towards other members of one's political community in times of need or emergency (Kotzur and Schmalenbach 2014, p. 68).

This is a normative and theoretical proposition regarding the potential role of solidarity in international law, rather than evidence that international obligations are uniformly defined or implemented on this basis. This does not mean underestimating the widespread tendency to limit solidarity to the private sphere, local political entities, or the nation-state, especially since a sense of belonging strongly influences solidarity (Pusterla Piccin 2026). At the same time, solidarity should not be limited to major global challenges, such as the fight against poverty, sustainable development, or humanitarian aid. Solidarity should represent a permanent criterion for the functioning of international society, influencing the

production, interpretation, and application of international law. Solidarity should aspire to become a 'structural principle of public international law' (Kotzur and Schmalenbach 2014: passim) and contribute to transforming international law into a system more grounded in shared values and capable of defining the very architecture of the legal system.

This shifts solidarity at the international level from a predominantly ethical category to a legal–institutional one, with implications for how relationships among states, international organisations, and other global actors are conceived. In this direction, international organisations have made numerous efforts in recent years. In 2005, the UN established the mandate of the Independent Expert on Human Rights and International Solidarity, tasked with developing and promoting this right through a Declaration on the Right to International Solidarity (Okafor 2023). The broader international context is also reflected in UN General Assembly Resolution 46/182 (United Nations General Assembly 1991), which established a framework for strengthening the coordination of international humanitarian emergency assistance, and Resolution 58/114 (United Nations General Assembly 2004), which reaffirmed the importance of the fundamental humanitarian principles of humanity, neutrality, impartiality, and independence. These resolutions situate humanitarian assistance within an international framework of coordination and principled action that extends beyond the EU's institutional arrangements. The EU's own humanitarian policy framework explicitly recognises these principles, providing a relevant point of reference for examining how European institutions articulate solidarity alongside the normative constraints governing humanitarian action. This distinction is central to the present analysis: solidarity concerns how responsibility for responding to humanitarian crises is articulated and distributed among European actors, while humanitarian principles provide normative standards for the conduct of assistance.

The goal is to make solidarity a tool that reduces inequalities between and within states, eliminates the structural causes of poverty and inequality, strengthens mutual trust and international cooperation, promotes peace and security, and fosters an international order in which all human rights can be fully realised. From this perspective, international solidarity is understood as an expression of unity between peoples and individuals, aimed at building a peaceful, just, and equitable international order oriented toward sustainable development (Haaf and Anderl 2024). Other international organisations have made similar efforts. UNESCO's 2021 Declaration of Principles (UNESCO General Assembly of States Parties to the World Heritage Convention 2021) explicitly aims to promote solidarity and international cooperation to conserve world heritage. ILO, moreover, calls for solidarity as a basis for organising collective responses to transnational vulnerabilities; in this case, international support for social protection systems.

Once solidarity is understood as a legal–institutional and political category, the question is no longer only whether actors have a moral reason to assist others, but how solidarity is translated into concrete relations of obligation, recognition, and action. This issue is far from trivial. In fact, it allows us to move beyond a classical conception of solidarity that reduces moral responsibility to solidarity understood as an emotional bond uniting people through mutual care and concern or as linked to common interests and concerns (Dean 1995). Conversely, this institutionalisation offers one possible response to the limitation of solidarity, often called the 'distributive objection' (Scheffler 2001), which concerns the grounds on which obligations are restricted to a particular group rather than extended more broadly. Unlike emotional or interest-based ties, obligations of solidarity would therefore not rest on a relationship-independent value derived from assuming such duties. Specific duties of solidarity would be justified as institutionalised role obligations accepted by the community that identifies with the institution. Thus, by assuming a legal duty of solidarity, the contracting parties would believe they can benefit from attributing such duties by increasing the system's

overall capacity to fulfil collective and impartial moral demands. According to this strategy, duties of solidarity would ultimately be based on non-partisan values such as fairness and natural justice (Kolodny 2002; Lazar 2009). Naturally, this intent has operational implications. Because the definition of duties is often highly debated, fulfilling those obligations can be limited. Therefore, institutionalising solidarity requires a clear, shared definition and the ability to coordinate complex actions with other members of the organisation. Institutionalisation may help address both the distributive objection and scepticism about the practical possibility of coordinating solidarity; however, it does not, in itself, guarantee that duties will be fulfilled or that their distribution will be impartial. Indeed, solidarity must be morally justified not only because of the rightness of helping others but also because assuming concrete, codified commitments of solidarity can make the fulfilment of that general duty more effective (Kolers 2016; Sangiovanni and Viehoff 2023).

This discussion suggests examining the institutionalisation of solidarity through three interconnected boundary questions. The attribution of responsibility identifies the actors represented as bearing duties; the prioritisation of humanitarian need examines how affected populations and their claims to assistance are represented; and the justification of humanitarian action identifies the grounds on which responses are presented as legitimate. These dimensions are neither exclusive to solidarity nor sufficient to establish that solidarity is realised in practice. Their specific analytical relevance lies in how they connect the allocation of obligations within a political community with the representation of claims to assistance beyond that community. They therefore provide an interpretive framework for examining institutional narratives, rather than a direct measure of funding, implementation, or outcomes. Applied to EU humanitarian aid policy, this framework highlights how institutional documents articulate the relationship between the responsibilities of the EU and its Member States and the representation of people affected by humanitarian crises as potential recipients of assistance. The empirical analysis examines how these relationships are narrated and justified, while remaining attentive to institutional differences, ambiguities, and shifts in emphasis. It does not presume that the discourse is internally coherent or that its normative commitments are consistently translated into policy practice.

2.2. The Three Dimensions of Solidarity

The first dimension relates solidarity to responsibility. They are closely and reciprocally linked. Solidarity requires responsibility and is a necessary consequence of it (Morano-Foadi 2017). At the international level, institutionalising responsibility means the group accepts collective responsibility for its members' actions. That is, members of solidarity groups are expected to take responsibility for the actions of individual members, to the extent that they act within the group. Furthermore, solidarity is often assumed to require a consensus on values within the group concerned. The group must internalise the norms that constitute solidarity itself, whatever they may be. Indeed, as mentioned, sharing responsibility may have moral reasons, but at the international level, collective responsibility more often arises from mutual interest or a shared difficult situation (Feinberg 1968; Miller 2017). For this reason, an evolution of humanitarian aid policy that strengthens responsibility alongside solidarity is desirable to foster effective political practices. In this sense, we speak of two different types of responsibility for implementing the principle of solidarity. The first is directed at aid to recipient countries (solidarity/external responsibility); the second refers to the distribution and sharing of burdens among Member States (solidarity/internal responsibility). The latter has long been the main dimension and definition of solidarity within the EU and finds its legal foundation in the principle of 'sincere cooperation' enshrined in Article 4(3) of the TEU: 'Pursuant to the principle of sincere cooperation, the Union and the Member States shall, in full mutual respect, assist each other in carrying out tasks which flow

from the Treaties. It is a means of protecting the collective interest and preventing unilateral actions by Member States that could undermine the entire EU project' (European Union 2006). This principle applies to the EU humanitarian aid policy, as it is listed among the policies for which the EU does not have exclusive competence and, therefore, 'In accordance with Article 5, competences not conferred upon the Union in the Treaties remain with the Member States' (European Union 2006). The former type of solidarity, namely that directed towards aid-recipient countries, is hereafter referred to as solidarity/external responsibility. In the EU context, as said, solidarity has traditionally been institutionalised primarily as an internal principle of mutual support and responsibility-sharing among Member States, whereas solidarity towards third countries has remained a distinct and comparatively less institutionalised external dimension. However, the external dimension of solidarity increasingly derives from the commitments made by the Union (and consequently by the Member States) with third countries in areas of particular political relevance, such as asylum and immigration policies. Indeed, '[...] there is an (autonomous) EU requirement to engage externally with the wider world in a manner that is 'solidarity-prone' and produces 'fair' outcomes for refugees [...] solidarity should dictate the choice between alternative options and direct preferences towards the most 'solidarity-friendly' among those available. Legal outcomes should hereafter be mediated and penetrated by solidarity (in both internal and external policies)' (Moreno-Lax 2017, pp. 743–47).

The second dimension relates solidarity to the prioritisation of humanitarian action. It examines how institutional documents identify populations affected by humanitarian crises, represent their needs, and articulate the criteria for providing and prioritising aid. This dimension is related to, but distinct from, the literature on deservingness, which investigates how individuals or groups may be morally assessed and classified as more or less worthy of aid and public resources (Watkins-Hayes and Kovalsky 2016). This distinction is significant to the present analysis. Accordingly, this article analyses how EU institutional documents frame humanitarian need as a claim directed at political actors and articulate the principles governing its recognition and prioritisation, without impinging upon deservingness criteria. Humanitarian prioritisation occurs amid constrained resources and rising global needs. Consequently, the gap between humanitarian requirements and the resources available to meet them has become an increasingly prominent concern in policy discussions (Jones and Mazzara 2018; Red Cross EU Office and International Committee of the Red Cross 2018; Veron and Hauck 2021). For the EU, as for many international organisations in the broadest sense, implementing international solidarity as a core value of its humanitarian aid policy requires addressing this insufficiency and deciding which humanitarian actions to undertake to support the previously identified victims of global humanitarian crises. Research on aid distribution has also highlighted how perceptions of fairness and competing understandings of need may shape affected communities' reception of assistance (Breslawski 2024; Findley et al. 2017; Singh and Williamson 2022). These decisions often generate disagreement or debate among aid-recipient communities, potentially intensifying tensions both within and between communities (Alatas et al. 2019; De Herdt and de Sardan 2015; Rai 2002). These contributions provide relevant context for understanding the broader politics of humanitarian allocation. However, this article does not examine recipients' perceptions or actual resource allocation. Instead, it analyses how EU institutional documents recognise humanitarian needs, represent affected populations, and justify prioritising assistance. Accordingly, the analysis focuses on the institutional construction of humanitarian need rather than on recipients' moral deservingness or the practical outcomes of allocation decisions.

The third dimension relates solidarity to the justification of humanitarian action. More specifically, it examines how EU institutional documents justify humanitarian action and articulate the principle governing it. The starting point, and one that has fuelled the debate

on humanitarian aid since at least the 1990s, and therefore since the end of the Cold War, is: on what basis do states decide where and how to act? In this article, humanitarian action refers to decisions about providing and organising humanitarian assistance and does not involve coercive humanitarian intervention or military action. The debate, in general, revolves around a dichotomy between actions in the interests of donors and actions for normative, ethical, and moral reasons (Dunne et al. 2001; Wheeler 2000). While the two perspectives do not coincide, they are not completely mutually exclusive (Bellamy 2002), especially in a regulated context such as international organisations and the EU. A state-centred, realist perspective emphasises that states may act not only in response to the suffering of others but also in pursuit of strategic interests (Pusterla 2015), even to the detriment of their own public statements (Krasner 1999). A frequently cited example of this is NATO's intervention in Kosovo (Chomsky 1999). However, it concerns coercive military intervention and cannot, in itself, establish how the EU and its Member States justify humanitarian aid. It is therefore relevant here only as a broader illustration of the debate concerning the relationship between humanitarian claims and political interests, not as direct evidence of EU humanitarian aid policy.

The alternative perspective, the solidarist approach advocated by the English School, emphasises the possibility that international society may develop shared norms and moral criteria for determining when collective action is justified, rather than treating state interests as the sole explanation of state behaviour. This perspective allows us to understand what happens when states are no longer monads but are inserted into a normative international society. In this context, solidarists argue that international society can develop norms that prevent state sovereignty from providing absolute protection when a state seriously violates its citizens' fundamental rights or its international obligations (Walzer 1994; Jackson 2003). Although this debate has often focused on coercive intervention and the limits of sovereignty, its broader relevance to this article only lies in the relationship among political interests, normative commitments, and the justification of collective action. The argument must therefore be applied to humanitarian aid without conflating the provision of assistance with the use of force.

The challenge here, therefore, is to understand how these two perspectives coexist in the contemporary context of the EU, where Member States, representing specific and sometimes distinct national interests yet embedded within the broader spectrum of international society (Holzgreffe 2003; Riddell 2007; Martin and Kaldor 2009; Kaldor 2010), interact with each other and justify collective action in the field of the EU's humanitarian aid policy. In this sense, it is necessary to explore the synthesis between the two schools of thought mentioned above. It is therefore no longer just a question of the EU's leading role as an international actor (Govaere and Poli 2014; Attinà 2015), the distinctive role played by individual Member States (Carbone 2007, 2017) or the effectiveness of multilateral European foreign aid (Gillespie 2011; Carbone 2011; Moumoutzis 2011) in comparison with the policies of individual Member States (Versluys and Orbie 2006; Versluys 2008; Orbie 2016; Kutlay 2018; Rhinard and Sjöstedt 2019). Rather, it is about understanding how the two perspectives interact in the institutional justification of humanitarian assistance.

Legally, Member States are not required to take further action once they fulfil their obligations to the EU because the Treaty of Lisbon provides the humanitarian aid policy with shared competencies and, specifically, parallel competencies (European Union 2010, Art. 4, Par. 4). Article 4(4) TFEU provides that the EU's competence in development cooperation and humanitarian aid does not preclude Member States from exercising their own competence. This legal arrangement is relevant to the relationship between EU-level commitments and Member States' autonomous action; however, it should not be interpreted as establishing that Member States have no further obligations under applicable EU or

international law. Thus, if the provision of humanitarian aid is believed to affect states' capability to act as a 'positive provider of whatever form of goods and wealth are needed by the state citizenship' (Bayertz 1999, p. 4), states may privilege national interest to the detriment of solidarity. However, moral and normative solidarity principles go beyond formal and institutional obligations (Schwartz 2007; Wilde 2007), and Member States have to balance internal and external inputs. These considerations may shape the justification of collective humanitarian commitments; however, documentary analysis alone cannot establish how national interests influence actual allocations or implementation.

The objective here is therefore to understand how institutional discourse represents humanitarian action as more than an autonomous decision by individual Member States, and how its justification connects to collective commitments and the principle of solidarity enshrined in the European treaties. The pivotal step in this process is to examine how solidarity is articulated in the context of humanitarian aid—as a relationship involving collective responsibility and assistance to people affected by humanitarian crises. Accordingly, the analysis considers how documents represent needs, assign responsibilities, and justify particular responses. Indeed, in this regard, it is appropriate to speak of collective intentional action. 'A collective (intentional) action is an action the subject of which is a collective intentional agent. A collective *behavior* is a doing or behavior that is the result of a collective, though not the result of its intentions. A *collective action* is caused by the beliefs and desires (wants) of the collective itself, whether or not such beliefs and desires can be accounted for or explained in individualistic terms' (Corlett 2001, p. 575).

This concept provides a theoretical lens for considering the possibility of collective agency, but collective intentionality should not be inferred from institutional statements alone. In the analysis, the relevant question is how EU documents represent collective responsibility and justify humanitarian assistance, including the relationship between Member States' interests and the solidarity commitments articulated at the EU level.

2.3. Documentary Corpus

The documentary corpus is purposively selected to examine how EU humanitarian aid policy articulates solidarity across diverse institutional settings, document types, and policy moments. It comprises legal provisions, strategic communications, institutional conclusions, and documents issued by the European Commission's Directorate-General for European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations (DG ECHO). These sources serve distinct institutional functions: legal acts establish the formal framework for humanitarian aid; Commission communications articulate policy orientations; Council conclusions express Member States' political positions; and DG ECHO publications communicate the principles and priorities underpinning the EU's humanitarian action. The corpus includes the following documents:

- **Council of the European Union** (EC) No. 1257/96 of 20 June 1996 concerning humanitarian aid (Council of the European Union 1996).
- **Commission of the European Communities (2007).** *Towards a European Consensus on Humanitarian Aid*. Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament and the Council, COM(2007) 317 final, Brussels, 13 June 2007 (Commission of the European Communities 2007).
- **Council of the European Union, European Parliament, and Commission of the European Communities (2008).** *The European Consensus on Humanitarian Aid*. Joint Statement by the Council and the Representatives of the Governments of the Member States meeting within the Council, the European Parliament, and the European Commission, 2008/C 25/01, *Official Journal of the European Union*, C 25, 30 January 2008, pp. 1–12 (Council of the European Union et al. 2008).

- **European Commission (2010).** The mid-term review of the European Consensus on Humanitarian Aid Action Plan—implementing effective, principled EU humanitarian action. Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament and the Council, COM(2010) 722 final, Brussels, 8 December 2010 (European Commission 2010).
- **Council of the European Union (2011).** Council conclusions on the mid-term review of the European Consensus on Humanitarian Aid Action Plan—implementing effective, principled EU humanitarian action. 3088th Economic and Financial Affairs Council meeting, Brussels, 17 May 2011 (Council of the European Union 2011).
- **European Union (2006).** *Treaty establishing the European Community (consolidated version). Official Journal of the European Union*, C 321 E, 29 December 2006, pp. 37–186 (European Union 2006).
- **European Union (2010).** Consolidated versions of the Treaty on European Union and the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union. Official Journal of the European Union, C 83, 30 March 2010, pp. 1–388 (European Union 2010).
- **European Commission (2021).** *On the EU's humanitarian action: new challenges, same principles*. Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament and the Council, COM(2021) 110 final, Brussels, 10 March 2021 (European Commission 2021).
- **Council of the European Union (2021).** Council conclusions on the Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament and the Council on the EU's humanitarian action: new challenges, same principles. 8966/21, Brussels, 20 May 2021 (Council of the European Union 2021).
- **European Commission, Directorate-General for European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations (ECHO) (2023).** *What is solidarity? Humanitarian aid brochure*. European Commission (2023).
- **European Commission and High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy**, *Defending values, driving reform, delivering impact: the EU's humanitarian action in a shifting global order*, Joint Communication JOIN(2026) 25 final, 27 May 2026 (European Commission and High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy 2026).

The corpus is purposively selected. It covers selected institutional and policy moments from 1996 to 2026, including legal acts, strategic communications, Council Conclusions, and a DG ECHO publication. The documents are compared as distinct institutional acts, rather than treated as a continuous or comprehensive record of policy development. The documents were read comparatively with attention to the three sensitising dimensions described above: attribution of responsibility, prioritisation of humanitarian need, and justification of humanitarian action. The analysis considers both recurring formulations and differences in emphasis across document types and policy moments. It does not infer policy implementation, funding outcomes, or recipient experiences from institutional discourse alone.

3. Results

The documentary corpus describes how the EU humanitarian aid policy framework builds solidarity, organised into three dimensions that appear throughout the corpus with shifting emphasis, from the 1996 Council Regulation through the European Consensus of 2007–2008 and its subsequent review to the 2021 policy framework and the 2026 Joint Communication. Thus, solidarity functions within the normative framework of humanitarianism, although the documents articulate its constituent dimensions differently across legal and strategic contexts. The analysis therefore examines both recurring normative commitments and shifts in institutional emphasis, rather than assuming a single, unchanging narrative across the period.

3.1. Attribution of Responsibility

Across these documents, responsibility is consistently seen as shared rather than exclusive. The documents do not credit any one European institution or Member State with sole responsibility for humanitarian efforts. Instead, they view humanitarian action as a collective sector that requires various European actors to collaborate and pool resources. The Council Regulation (Council of the European Union 1996) establishes an early legal framework for Community humanitarian assistance. It primarily focuses on providing assistance, relief, and protection to people affected by natural disasters, wars, armed conflicts, and comparable exceptional circumstances. It assigns the Community a role in delivering assistance and facilitating access to affected populations while recognising situations in which national authorities may be unable to provide effective relief. Responsibility is therefore initially framed in terms of providing assistance to people in distress and the circumstances under which such assistance becomes necessary.

This idea is explicitly outlined in the Council of the European Union, European Parliament, and European Commission, 'Towards a European Consensus on Humanitarian Aid' (2008). The document describes humanitarian aid as a tradition rooted in solidarity and emphasises the need for a more unified and coordinated European strategy. It especially stresses improving coordination between Member States' humanitarian efforts and those of the Community and defining clear roles for all involved actors. The Consensus clarifies the division of responsibilities: EU humanitarian aid is a shared competence between Member States and the European Community, while humanitarian action involves a broader international system, including the United Nations, the Red Cross/Red Crescent Movement, NGOs, and local entities. Meanwhile, crisis-affected national authorities hold primary responsibility for protecting their populations. Responsibilities are shared across levels: the affected state is mainly responsible for its people; international humanitarian organisations contribute based on their roles; and the EU and Member States are tasked with mobilising and coordinating European humanitarian efforts. Solidarity, therefore, pertains to the coordination and complementarity of these responsibilities, rather than replacing them.

This framework is reinforced by the 2010 mid-term review of the European Consensus and the 2011 Council Conclusions (European Commission 2010, 17 May 2011) It focuses on implementing the common framework, enhancing coordination, and ensuring that EU and Member States' contributions are integrated into a more cohesive humanitarian response. The notion of solidarity rests on differentiated responsibilities, emphasising collective action over a single European obligation. In the 2021 framework, this principle is clearly discernible, though articulated with more explicit terminology at the global level. The Commission Communication titled 'EU Humanitarian Action: New Challenges, Same Principles' (2021) articulates humanitarian efforts as a unified response to escalating needs and advocates for increased coordination of European capacities. A key objective is to promote a 'Team Europe' approach, involving both the EU and Member States.

The Council's response underscores the importance of the collective dimension, advocating for increased efforts to enhance resources for humanitarian action, improve the use of existing resources, and strengthen coordination among European and international entities (Council of the European Union 2021). It also highlights the critical role of local and national actors as key participants. The document consistently links solidarity to shared responsibility, using language that unites diverse institutional and political responsibilities within a cohesive European humanitarian framework. This collective orientation is further developed in the 2026 Joint Communication (European Commission and High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy 2026), which emphasises a collaborative 'Team Europe' approach to humanitarian diplomacy, examines options for

pooling resources, and underscores cooperation with international organisations, local actors, international financial institutions, the private sector, and philanthropic organisations. Responsibility is therefore articulated not only in terms of the contributions of European actors but also through a broader network of institutional and operational relationships.

Across the selected documents, responsibility is articulated at two related levels: the normative obligation to respond to humanitarian needs and the institutional organisation of the actors, resources, and partnerships through which a response is expected to be delivered. The latter documents address the second level more explicitly, particularly the EU's collective capacity and the operational relationships required to sustain humanitarian action. This does not establish that the EU has progressively assumed exclusive responsibility for humanitarian crises, nor does it demonstrate how authority, resources, or decision-making power are distributed among the actors involved in practice. Rather, the documents portray European responsibility as collective and relational, involving Member States and the broader humanitarian system. These differences reflect the documents' distinct institutional functions, and the comparison thus accounts for the different forms of authority and responsibility through which the corpus articulates solidarity. Accordingly, the Regulation establishes a legal framework for providing assistance; Commission Communications articulate policy orientations; Council Conclusions express Member States' political positions; and the 2026 Joint Communication situates humanitarian action within a broader network of institutional and operational partnerships.

3.2. Prioritisation of Humanitarian Need

The second dimension pertains to the prioritisation of humanitarian need. Documents illustrate how EU actors identify the populations whose needs require humanitarian assistance and highlight a close connection between solidarity and humanitarian need. The 1996 Council Regulation (Council of the European Union 1996) provides an important baseline for this analysis by defining the scope of Community humanitarian assistance with reference to people affected by natural disasters, human-made crises, and comparable exceptional circumstances. Its emphasis on non-discrimination and vulnerable populations establishes an early connection between assistance, vulnerability, and a normative commitment to responding to humanitarian need. A comparison with the European Consensus clarifies that the universalist basis of humanitarian assistance predates the establishment of a common European policy framework. The 1996 Regulation already requires non-discriminatory assistance based on the needs and interests of affected populations, while the Consensus more explicitly articulates the objective of providing a needs-based response wherever needs arise, and local or national actors are unable or unwilling to respond. The difference, therefore, lies less in the emergence of a universalist principle than in its articulation within a more developed framework of coordination and shared responsibility. In particular, the 2007 Communication establishes this framework by stating that humanitarian assistance aims to save lives and provide immediate relief to those in severe crises, whether caused by natural or man-made disasters (Commission of the European Communities 2007). It also emphasises the vulnerability of civilians impacted by these crises and the importance of ensuring continued access to help for those in need.

The European Consensus further clarifies this logic by introducing the principles of humanity, neutrality, impartiality, and independence (Commission of the European Communities 2007). As a result, humanitarian aid targets populations based on their humanitarian condition rather than their political, national, or other affiliations. The initial formulation of the Consensus is particularly illustrative: humanitarian assistance is described both as a 'fundamental expression of the universal value of solidarity among peoples' and, consequently, as a moral obligation. This combination connects solidarity to a

universalist rationale for assistance but does not in itself establish a meritocratic allocation system. The documents do not depict beneficiaries as deserving aid because of their membership in a specific political community or a special relationship with the EU (Pusterla 2015). Instead, humanitarian need is the primary criterion for recognising individuals as aid recipients.

The resulting narrative thereby adopts a universalising perspective. Solidarity is directed toward individuals affected by serious crises, irrespective of their geographic or political location, rather than toward a geographically or politically defined community. The 2007 Communication underscores the necessity to respond to crises and to aid populations in need, highlighting the escalating humanitarian demands associated with conflict, poverty, disasters, and other forms of vulnerability (Commission of the European Communities 2007). At the same time, the documents show that recognising humanitarian need does not eliminate the problem of prioritisation. Humanitarian governance inherently entails assessment and prioritisation, given resource scarcity and the unequal recognition and addressing of humanitarian needs. Consequently, identifying needs, vulnerable populations, and underfunded or neglected crises becomes a fundamental aspect of the institutional framework shaping the provision of assistance.

This dimension is particularly relevant in the 2021 Communication (European Commission 2021). The document notes a significant escalation in humanitarian needs and the widening gap between these needs and available resources. Its primary objective is to enhance the EU's capacity to deliver assistance effectively to those in need, in alignment with the principles that govern humanitarian action. The Council Conclusions also contextualise the issue within the unprecedented scale of humanitarian demand and a widening financial gap. They advocate for increased resources and more efficient implementation, while reaffirming the importance of principled humanitarian action (Council of the European Union 2021). Solidarity does not create a distinct category of beneficiaries separate from humanitarian need; rather, it offers a political and collective rationale for responding to needs identified and prioritised through humanitarian mechanisms.

The 2026 Joint Communication (European Commission and High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy 2026) reinforces the concern with the scale of humanitarian need and the constraints affecting the humanitarian system. It emphasises reaching people who need assistance, protecting vulnerable populations, and strengthening the role of local actors and affected communities. Its focus on shared data on people's needs, cash assistance, anticipatory action, and multi-year funding also links the recognition of need to the systems through which assistance is planned and delivered. Compared with the earlier legal framework, the 2026 document gives more explicit attention to the operational means through which needs can be identified, prioritised, and addressed.

Across the corpus, the principal continuity lies in the normative commitment to assisting people based on humanitarian need. The later strategic documents place greater emphasis on the practical constraints and instruments involved in responding to that need. This universalist orientation does not imply that every crisis receives equal resources or institutional attention, nor does recognition of vulnerability establish a moral ranking of recipients. The documents demonstrate how institutions justify assistance and describe the challenge of prioritisation; however, they do not, on their own, establish which crises receive funding, which populations remain underserved, or whether particular forms of need are systematically privileged. The comparison also suggests that changes across the corpus concern not only the institutional articulation of responsibility but also the degree of attention devoted to the instruments and operational conditions of humanitarian action. Preparedness, prevention, and links with longer-term recovery are already present in the 1996 Regulation and the European Consensus; later documents situate these concerns

within more explicit discussions of resource constraints, coordination, partnerships, and the broader strategic environment. This is therefore better understood as a shift in emphasis and institutional framing than as a linear transition from emergency relief to a newly integrated approach. Indeed, this finding provides an important counterpoint to interpretations of the documentary sequence as a linear progression from emergency relief toward prevention and longer-term approaches. Accordingly, the presence of these elements in earlier documents was taken into account when assessing changes across the corpus, suggesting a shift in institutional emphasis rather than the introduction of entirely new policy concerns.

The 2026 Communication also places humanitarian needs within a wider discussion of resilience and durable solutions. This broadens the institutional framing beyond immediate relief, while raising questions about the relationship between responding to urgent needs and supporting longer-term transitions away from dependence on humanitarian assistance. The document presents these objectives as connected, but the selected corpus does not establish how potential tensions between immediate humanitarian requirements and longer-term policy objectives are resolved in practice.

3.3. Justification of Humanitarian Action

The third dimension delineates the boundaries and modalities of humanitarian action and its justification. The documents consistently define humanitarian action as legitimate when it addresses a humanitarian need and adheres to the principles governing humanitarian assistance. The 1996 Council Regulation (Council of the European Union 1996) provides an early legal basis for this relationship by justifying assistance in light of the circumstances of people in distress, the imperative to save and preserve life, and the provision of relief and protection during emergencies. Its provisions also address access to affected populations and the delivery of assistance.

The 2007 Communication is then particularly significant in establishing this relationship. It regards solidarity as an integral component of the historical and normative foundation of humanitarian action, while simultaneously highlighting the increasing importance of humanitarian principles, quality, and professionalism. The resultant formulation clarifies that solidarity does not equate to unrestricted intervention. Instead, solidarity is articulated alongside the principles that define legitimate humanitarian conduct (Commission of the European Communities 2007).

The European Consensus (Council of the European Union et al. 2008) formalises this relationship. As previously noted, it merges the universal value of solidarity with the foundational principles of humanity, neutrality, impartiality, and independence. The EU's dedication to collective action is, therefore, complemented by an explicit commitment to maintaining the humanitarian integrity of such endeavours. This distinction matters because the EU has a diverse array of political, financial, and operational tools that extend beyond humanitarian assistance in its strict sense. Consequently, the documentary framework consistently differentiates humanitarian action from political, military, or other types of external intervention. Humanitarian aid is justified by humanitarian needs and must remain autonomous from political objectives.

The 2021 Communication maintains this architecture while contextualising it within a broader global setting (European Commission 2021). The title itself—'New Challenges, Same Principles'—articulates the relationship between change and continuity: although the humanitarian environment and the scope of needs have evolved, the fundamental principles governing legitimate humanitarian action remain constant. The Communication underscores the need to strengthen the EU's global humanitarian efforts while reaffirming the core principles of humanitarian assistance. The Council conclusions further reinforce this approach, emphasising respect for international humanitarian law and the protection

of civilians as central to EU humanitarian endeavours. They also highlight the importance of safeguarding humanitarian space and advocating for principled humanitarian action (Council of the European Union 2021). Throughout the corpus of texts, therefore, solidarity does not function as an unlimited justification for humanitarian action. Instead, it is embedded within a normative architecture that delineates the circumstances and methods by which humanitarian action is deemed legitimate. Solidarity offers a rationale for collective European engagement, while humanitarian principles set the acceptable parameters of that engagement.

A tension nevertheless arises between the institutional integration of humanitarian aid into EU external action and the principle that humanitarian assistance should remain independent of political objectives. The 1996 Regulation states that humanitarian aid must not be guided by or subject to political considerations and that decisions must be taken impartially, in accordance with the needs and interests of affected populations (Council of the European Union 1996). The 2007 Communication, while situating humanitarian aid within the continuum of EU external action, explicitly states that it is not a crisis management tool and reaffirms the principles of humanity, neutrality, impartiality, and independence (Commission of the European Communities 2007). The 2021 Communication places humanitarian aid more explicitly within the EU's capacity to project its values globally and proposes closer links between humanitarian concerns, political dialogue, and external action (European Commission 2021).

These formulations do not, in themselves, demonstrate that humanitarian principles have been subordinated to political objectives. Nevertheless, they reveal a recurring institutional tension: humanitarian aid is presented both as an autonomous, needs-based form of assistance and as a component of the EU's broader external engagement. This juxtaposition was treated as an unresolved tension within the institutional narrative, rather than as evidence of a definitive shift towards the political instrumentalisation of humanitarian aid. The analysis therefore retained both elements of the documents' articulation: the reaffirmation of humanitarian autonomy and the closer association of humanitarian action with the EU's broader external engagement. The 2026 Joint Communication makes this relationship particularly salient by combining the defence of humanitarian principles with a broader agenda of reform, impact, and humanitarian diplomacy.

The 2026 Joint Communication continues to affirm humanity, impartiality, neutrality and independence, while framing EU humanitarian action through three pillars: 'protect, perform and partner'. These pillars place protection and the conditions for safe humanitarian access alongside operational performance, cost-effectiveness, supply-chain reform, partnerships and the development of more predictable funding modalities. The Communication also gives prominence to humanitarian diplomacy, including advocacy and coordination in international forums, and situates humanitarian action in relation to resilience, peace and the wider consequences of conflicts and disasters (European Commission and High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy 2026).

This formulation introduces a shift in emphasis. The earlier legal and policy framework foregrounds assistance and the principles governing it, whereas the 2026 Communication retains those commitments while situating them within a broader strategic and operational framework. Humanitarian action is presented not only as a response to immediate needs but also as an endeavour whose effectiveness depends on diplomacy, partnerships, delivery systems, and coordination with other actors. This relationship between principled humanitarian assistance and broader EU external engagement should not automatically be interpreted as a contradiction. The 2026 Communication explicitly reaffirms humanitarian principles and the need to protect the delivery of assistance. Nevertheless, the coexistence of humanitarian commitments with objectives concerning resilience, peace and global stability

raises a question for interpretation: how are the requirements of principled humanitarian assistance related to the wider policy purposes associated with European external engagement? The documents present these objectives as compatible, but their institutional framing alone cannot establish how possible tensions are managed in operational decisions.

The three dimensions, despite being analytically distinct, are empirically interconnected and form a recurring set of relationships across the documentary corpus. Humanitarian need identifies those whose claims require attention; this recognition creates a duty to act. Solidarity distributes this duty across European actors, and humanitarian action is justified when it responds to these needs while upholding humanitarian principles. This sequence appears in the 2007 Communication, linking humanitarian suffering from crises to the need for a coherent European response based on shared values. The European Consensus reinforces this through European competence, needs-based aid, partnership, and principles. By 2021, EU global humanitarian action explicitly frames aid as part of the EU's collective response to rising global needs, emphasising cooperation among EU institutions and Member States, with the Council calling for more resources, coordination, and respect for principles. The 1996 Regulation demonstrates that the commitment to non-discriminatory assistance predates the European Consensus, while the 2026 Communication situates this enduring normative commitment within a broader operational and strategic framework. Taken together, the documents indicate continuity in the normative foundations of assistance, alongside changes in the institutional articulation of responsibility and the justification of humanitarian action. However, they do not establish a single, internally consistent narrative across the period, nor do they show a linear progression from internal European solidarity to external humanitarian responsibility.

4. Discussion

Regarding the relationship between solidarity and responsibility, the examined documents show that it gains political significance through the connections it creates among those expected to act, those in need of assistance, and the circumstances that legitimise action. This perspective offers valuable insights into EU humanitarian governance and the broader understanding of international solidarity.

More specifically, the examined documents indicate that solidarity operates by distributing and collectivising responsibilities among European actors to address needs beyond their community. Solidarity is thus not depicted solely as a connection among members of a shared political community. This perspective shifts the focus from solidarity as identification or reciprocity to solidarity as a political tool for coordinating efforts. This finding highlights the broader difference between general duties and specific obligations. The EU's humanitarian system assigns different responsibilities: Member States and EU institutions are expected to help as part of a collective effort, while affected states and humanitarian organisations also bear responsibilities. Eligibility is not based on membership in the European political community. This is crucial in international solidarity, showing that a political community can aid outsiders while using universal, needs-based standards to determine valid claims. Thus, the EU framework combines political responsibility with a universal view of aid eligibility.

Findings also indicate that solidarity plays a crucial role in linking different aspects of humanitarian governance by tying the acknowledgement of need to assigning responsibility and organising collective efforts. This is analytically important because it connects the idea of solidarity with both normative principles and institutional practice. It offers a way to express humanitarian needs as claims directed at political actors, while also framing collective action as a shared duty rather than a purely voluntary act. Thus, solidarity helps define the relationship among need, responsibility, and action without overriding

the fundamental principles guiding humanitarian aid. This interpretation also clarifies the connection between solidarity and impartiality. These principles operate at different levels: solidarity promotes a collective duty among European actors, while impartiality guides how they fulfil that duty by emphasising assistance based on need, not political, cultural, or other proximity factors. The apparent conflict between the specificity of European responsibility and the universal goal of humanitarian aid can be seen as a division of roles: solidarity identifies and organises the duty-holders, while humanitarian principles govern how they carry out their responsibilities.

The inclusion of the 1996 Council Regulation further qualifies the historical interpretation of this relationship. The commitment to non-discriminatory assistance and the recognition of humanitarian need predate the 2007 European Consensus. The later framework did not establish this universalist orientation; rather, it articulated it more explicitly within a common European policy framework and linked it to coordination between the Community and the Member States. Accordingly, the evidence supports an account of institutional articulation and consolidation, rather than a strict historical transition from a purely internal European conception of solidarity to an external one.

These results have wider implications for understanding international solidarity. Typically, international solidarity is seen either as support among states or as a moral stance toward transnational issues. The EU humanitarian framework, however, exemplifies a more intricate setup where institutionalised collective responsibility and universalistic humanitarian principles exist side by side. What stands out is that the EU formalises a type of responsibility whose beneficiaries are not limited by the political borders of the actors taking it on. This indicates that distinguishing between duty-bearers and beneficiaries is crucial for understanding international solidarity. Such a relationship can be politically restricted for those responsible for acting yet remain universalistic for those whose needs create a claim for aid. The EU case therefore offers a valuable conceptual framework for analysing international solidarity beyond Europe.

It suggests that solidarity can be examined by considering the distribution of responsibility, the recognition and prioritisation of humanitarian need, and the justification of collective action across political borders. The findings also suggest that the construction of humanitarian need should not be conflated with the moral deservingness of recipients. Across the documents, vulnerability, humanitarian need, and impartiality provide the principal normative grounds for assistance. The analysis does not establish a meritocratic allocation system. Rather, the relevant political question concerns how humanitarian needs are recognised and prioritised within a framework of limited resources. Although the 2021 and 2026 documents address the scale of humanitarian demands and constraints on delivering assistance, the selected texts do not establish how funding decisions distribute resources among crises or populations. They provide evidence of the normative terms through which prioritisation is justified, rather than a direct account of its practical outcomes.

The 2026 Joint Communication is particularly significant for understanding the evolving scope of institutional justification. It retains established humanitarian principles while structuring its proposed approach around protection, performance, and partnership. Humanitarian diplomacy, delivery efficiency, supply-chain reform, partnerships, and support for resilience receive greater emphasis, alongside the commitment to provide principled assistance. This formulation does not, in itself, demonstrate that humanitarian principles have been subordinated to strategic interests. It does, however, make more visible the relationship between the normative justification for assistance and the broader institutional objectives through which the EU seeks to organise its external action.

This relationship raises a question central to the political interpretation of humanitarian solidarity: How can the EU present humanitarian action as being governed by universal

principles while also situating it within a broader agenda encompassing diplomacy, resilience, peace, and global stability? The documents examined present these commitments as compatible; however, this compatibility should not be assumed automatically. Their coexistence points to a potential tension between the requirements of principled humanitarian assistance and the broader policy objectives associated with European external engagement. Determining whether, and under what conditions, such tensions influence decision-making would require evidence beyond institutional statements, including funding allocations, operational practices, and the experiences of humanitarian actors.

The comparison also indicates a shift in how institutions represent responsibility. The 1996 Regulation establishes a legal framework for assistance, whereas the 2007 Consensus and subsequent review documents place greater emphasis on coordination and shared responsibility within the European framework. The 2021 and 2026 documents further underscore the collective capacity of the EU and its Member States, resource mobilisation, partnerships, and the operational conditions required to deliver assistance. This may be interpreted as a broadening of the institutional account of how humanitarian responsibility is organised. However, it should not be regarded as evidence of a linear historical process or as proof that the EU has assumed exclusive responsibility for humanitarian crises.

The interpretive approach contributes by reconstructing how institutional documents connect problems, responsibilities, and justifications in ways that confer political meaning on humanitarian solidarity. The article does not establish a causal effect of narratives on policy implementation, nor does it claim that all documents reproduce an identical account. Rather, it identifies normative relationships articulated across different policy moments and document types, including both recurring commitments and shifts in emphasis. Comparing a legal act, strategic policy documents, and the 2026 Joint Communication proves valuable because these documents serve distinct institutional functions and should not be treated as interchangeable expressions of a single institutional voice.

This investigation is not without limitations, yet it offers relevant avenues for further research. The results should be understood within the context of the corpus's nature. The analysis maps out the institutional and normative framework that shapes EU humanitarian action, but it does not indicate how these principles are put into practice or experienced by those involved in humanitarian action. Moreover, the corpus mainly relies on EU institutional sources; it offers only limited access to the perspectives of Member States, humanitarian organisations, local actors, and recipients. Future research could address these limitations by comparing Member State policies, humanitarian organisations, and crisis-specific practices and by involving actors and populations directly affected by humanitarian efforts. Such research could investigate whether the relationship identified here between differentiated responsibility and universalist humanitarian principles is evident in practice and how tensions between humanitarian needs and broader strategic objectives are addressed.

5. Conclusions

This article has examined how EU institutional documents articulate solidarity in humanitarian aid policy across three interconnected dimensions: the attribution of responsibility, the prioritisation of humanitarian need, and the justification of humanitarian action. Drawing on interpretive Narrative Policy Analysis, it treats solidarity not merely as a general moral commitment but as a political category through which relationships of responsibility and obligation are articulated.

A comparison of the 1996 Council Regulation, the European Consensus and its subsequent review, the 2021 policy framework, and the 2026 Joint Communication reveals both continuity and change. The commitment to assisting people on the basis of humanitarian

need and in accordance with humanitarian principles persists across the selected documents. What changes is the institutional articulation of responsibility and the scope of the policy framework through which assistance is justified. The 2007–2011 documents emphasise the development and coordination of a common European framework, whereas the 2021 and 2026 documents place greater emphasis on collective capacity, resource mobilisation, operational performance, and partnerships. The 2026 Communication also situates humanitarian action within a broader discussion of diplomacy, resilience, and peace, while reaffirming the established principles governing humanitarian assistance.

The article's central conceptual contribution is its distinction between the political organisation of responsibility and the normative grounds on which assistance is provided. EU institutions and Member States are presented as actors expected to contribute to humanitarian action, while humanitarian need provides the basis for assisting people beyond the European political community. Solidarity thus connects a politically organised capacity to act with a universalist orientation towards those affected by crises. This relationship does not indicate a linear historical shift; rather, it reflects a recurring normative configuration articulated differently across the selected documents.

The analysis also demonstrates the importance of distinguishing institutional justification from policy implementation. The documents show how humanitarian solidarity is represented and legitimised, but they do not establish whether the commitments expressed translate into particular funding allocations, operational practices, or experiences for affected populations. Further research should examine how these narratives relate to resource distribution, differences among Member States, the role of local actors, and the practical relationship between principled humanitarian assistance and broader strategic objectives.

Understanding EU humanitarian solidarity therefore requires attention both to the normative commitments expressed by institutions and to the political relationships through which responsibility is organised. By reconstructing these relationships across selected legal and strategic documents, the article offers an interpretive framework for examining how EU humanitarian policy articulates, justifies, and potentially contests humanitarian solidarity.

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