



Humanitarian principles in practice

The humanitarian principles are practical tools for securing the acceptance of local communities and stakeholders and thereby, access to populations in need.

What are the humanitarian principles?

The humanitarian principles (humanity, impartiality, neutrality and independence) are crucial for humanitarian actors in operational contexts and serve as tools in decision-making. They help to improve effectiveness of humanitarian action – protection and assistance to populations most in need – by guiding beneficiary selection, planning and implementation; and reducing risks of misuse and diversion of assistance. The humanitarian principles also serve to improve security and access through acceptance by the local population, state and non-state actors, particularly, in situations of conflict, internal disturbances or tensions, where access is more likely to be restricted. These principles are supported by International Humanitarian Law (IHL) and various policy frameworks, such as the Code of Conduct¹. They are also included in humanitarian standards and

institutional mandates. The operational benefits of adhering to the core principles have been clearly demonstrated over the years. However, humanitarian actors articulate the principles differently across contexts and face challenges in applying them consistently. According to various studies carried out by NRC, access, aid-diversion, politicisation, counter-terrorism and integrated missions are some examples of the main challenges that hamper principled humanitarian action.

Humanity

Human suffering must be addressed wherever it is found. The purpose of humanitarian action is to protect life and health and ensure respect for human beings.

Humanity is the fundamental concept which underpins all humanitarian work. It is often considered that it should take priority over all other principles and concepts as it articulates the rationale for humanitarian action: addressing human suffering. However, the principle of humanity cannot stand alone and cannot be the sole guide for decision making, since humanity without impartiality remains an empty principle.

¹ The Code of Conduct for The International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and NGOs in Disaster Relief is available at: <http://www.ifrc.org/en/publications-and-reports/code-of-conduct/>

Impartiality

Humanitarian action must be carried out on the basis of need alone, giving priority to the most urgent cases of distress and making no distinctions on the basis of nationality, race, gender, religious belief, class or political opinions.

While not questioned by most humanitarian actors, impartiality can be understood and applied differently on the ground². Some organisations also consider that assisting certain groups (e.g. minorities), who may not be those most in need, does not mean that the organisation is not impartial. This approach can be problematic in practice and it should be tied to a collective and coordinated response by actors on the ground, to ensure impartiality (that assistance is provided to those in most urgent need), with the principles continuously being considered at all levels of decision-making. A question of consistency in applying the principle of impartiality (and neutrality) also arises for organisations with dual humanitarian and development mandates. Certain organisations argue that in order to preserve the principles, humanitarian organisations should refrain from mixing mandates, in particular in protracted conflict settings.

Neutrality

Humanitarian actors must not take sides in hostilities or engage in controversies of a political, racial, religious or ideological nature.

The concept of neutrality has different dimensions:

- (i) perceptions of the organisation;
- (ii) public positions by the organisation ('external neutrality'), and
- (iii) the real nature of programmes ('internal neutrality')³.

² The Steering Committee for Humanitarian Response has been doing a lot of work around principles including impartiality and the development of indicators.

³ See Humanitarian Exchange, Number 25, ODI HPN, 2003

'Pure' neutrality is sometimes considered to be unrealistic by some organisations, particularly the requirement to *not engage in political, religious, racial or ideological debates or controversies*.⁴ Consequences of not being neutral, particularly in conflict-settings, can lead to a lack of access to affected populations and higher risks of insecurity for humanitarian actors. There are also questions around whether inter-governmental organisations, if involved in multi-mandates operations and political controversies, can ever provide "neutral assistance". One interpretation is that they can, if humanitarian assistance is provided based on need alone⁵. Neutrality and impartiality are traditionally considered to be the key principles in crises, and are found in many institutional mandates. Both, however, have been interpreted in different ways in practice, and are sometimes confused with one another.



Independence

Humanitarian action must be autonomous from the political, economic, military or other objectives that any actor may hold with regard to areas where humanitarian action is being implemented.

True impartiality requires operational independence from economic and political

⁴ Internal discussion paper on humanitarian principles by Marit Glad, NRC, 2013.

⁵ See : Neutrality and Neutrality of Humanitarian Assistance, 1996, D.Platter, ICRC. International Review of the Red Cross, No. 311.

pressures. Thus financial independence and proportionate donor conditionality are necessary to be able to act impartially and independently. Independence is increasingly relevant with the growing tendency of states to include humanitarian action in politico-military strategies, as is occurring in complex emergencies and particularly since the beginning of the Global War on Terror. Operational independence can be compromised when aid is linked to political, economic, religious or historically-rooted geopolitical priorities; stabilisation and counter-terrorism objectives.

Prioritising or compromising on the principles?

Some of the principles are found at times to sit uncomfortably with one another and humanitarian organisations sometimes need to prioritise one or more of the principles, in order to be able to provide assistance to those in need. An example is when access is only authorised to a part of the population, or is tied to certain conditions. Such obstacles are not uncommon (e.g. restrictions of access and/or conditions on humanitarian activities to advance political, military, religious, and other objectives). This risk of comprising principles should be minimised and one way is through collective and institutional dialogue with relevant stakeholders.

Compromising any of the principles can ultimately reduce access to populations by affecting the institution's perception and perceptions of other humanitarian organisations on the ground, especially in conflict situations. Recognising that different decisions will be made in different cases, humanitarian actors should ensure that the humanitarian principles have been mainstreamed into their operational and strategic decision-making processes. They should also be clearly discussed collectively within the humanitarian coordination system in country.

Strengthening Principles in Humanitarian Action: what more can be done?

Even though the principles are supported by all humanitarian stakeholders, throughout recent years the difficulties in applying the humanitarian principles have prevailed, especially in contexts where IHL is not respected by warring parties.

At the 32nd International Conference of the Red Cross Red Crescent in Geneva, NRC called for humanity to be at the core of humanitarian action. A key element of discussion between states and the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement was an attempt to strengthen compliance IHL, in which the humanitarian principles are rooted. Although the proposed resolution did not receive the support it required to be passed, conference participants agreed to remain engaged on the topic.

In Istanbul in May 2016, NRC co-hosted the Special Session on Humanitarian Principles at the World Humanitarian Summit. This was a key opportunity to reaffirm the importance of the humanitarian principles for all humanitarian actors (echoing the UN Secretary General's World Humanitarian Summit report) and the need to strengthen the capacities of field teams, as well as to invest more in humanitarian diplomacy.

NRC is engaged in various initiatives to strengthen common understanding and application of the principles. These include research to demonstrate the practical relevance of the principles; capacity and policy-strengthening at strategic and operational levels; reinforcing accountability standards and mechanisms and engaging in an open dialogue with states.

NRC recommendations:

Inward-looking reflections and collective dialogue are needed to raise awareness about the principles and certain dilemmas related to their application. This dialogue should include states with a stake in humanitarian affairs.

The questions and suggested guidelines mentioned below are an attempt to provide some guidance for ensuring that we strengthen our adherence to principled humanitarian action.

- Strengthen the ability of staff to interpret and prioritise the principles as tools for navigating obstacles, including methods to strengthen guidance for principled decision-making and consistent training and capacity building.

Humanity

- "Humanity first" needs to be understood in terms of its implementation and not as a conceptual explanation.
- Support country offices to ensure that those who are most in need are reached effectively and efficiently.

Neutrality

- In terms of public statements, avoid commenting on who is "right"/"wrong" in relation to a conflict and on the means or methods that should be employed by one side in order to win. Comments should be focused on International Humanitarian Law, human rights, refugee law and the Guiding Principles for internally displaced people.
- Projects should be assessed in terms of 'do no harm', ensuring that our staff are not perceived as supporting any of the party to conflict.

Impartiality

- Support discussions on whether humanitarian organisations can freely select beneficiaries based on vulnerability criteria.
- Ensure that NRC intervenes on the basis of needs and not for other reasons.

Independence

- Implement projects according to the organisation's mission and best practices.
- Contribute to establishing common positions on what constitutes principled humanitarian funding and unacceptable donors' conditions, in order to foster collective and more effective action.

Links to other relevant information:

<https://www.nrc.no/what-we-do/speaking-up-for-rights/humanitarian-access/>

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