

OCHA on Message: Humanitarian Principles

What are Humanitarian Principles?

Humanitarian principles provide the fundamental foundations for humanitarian action.

Humanitarian principles are central to establishing and maintaining access to affected populations whether in the context of a natural disaster, an armed conflict or a complex emergency. Promoting compliance with humanitarian principles in humanitarian response is an essential element of effective humanitarian coordination. It is also central to the role of OCHA.

Humanitarian Principles

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

The central role of these principles in the United Nations humanitarian work is formally enshrined in two resolutions by the General Assembly. The first three principles are endorsed in General Assembly Resolution 46/182, which was passed in 1991. This is also the resolution that established the role of the Emergency Relief Coordinator (ERC). The fourth principle was added in 2004 under Resolution 58/114.

Commitment to humanitarian principles is also expressed at an institutional level by the vast majority of humanitarian organizations. In addition, 481 organizations globally are signatory to the Red Cross/NGO Code of Conduct for operations in disasters, which includes a commitment to adhere to these humanitarian principles¹.

Humanitarian principles have practical operational relevance. Much humanitarian action

“The moral authority of the United Nations depends on its ability to help people most in need and it must do so with the highest ethical standards and professionalism.”

Secretary-General
Ban Ki-moon,
Council of Foreign Relations,
New York, May 2006

¹ www.ifrc.org - list of signatories. Note that the Red Cross/NGO Code of Conduct includes principles beyond the core four principles endorsed by the General Assembly. In addition, humanitarian organizations may find that some of these additional principles have particular meaning in certain contexts (for example, “participation” is often cited as an important humanitarian principle). However, for UN humanitarian agencies, these principles are considered to be the essential ones. Conceptually, many other principles can be linked back to the four endorsed by the General Assembly.

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OCHA

takes place in contexts of conflict or great instability. Adherence to the principles is what allows humanitarian action to be distinguished from the activities and objectives of other actors, and thus not considered improper interference in States' domestic affairs.

Communicating clearly about humanitarian principles, and ensuring that we act in accordance with them, is key to gaining acceptance by all relevant actors on the ground for humanitarian action to be carried out. It thus helps to ensure access to affected populations and the safety of humanitarian personnel and beneficiaries. Sustained access in turn reinforces humanitarian principles in practice, for example allowing them to directly undertake and monitor the distribution of goods to suffering populations, thus ensuring aid is distributed impartially and reaches those most in need.

What is the role of OCHA?

To fulfill the ERC's responsibilities, as set down in GA 46/182, humanitarian principles are inherent in OCHA's mandate and relevant in each of its core functions. As stated in the OCHA mission statement (to "mobilize and coordinate principled humanitarian action") OCHA works to promote the entire humanitarian community's compliance with humanitarian principles in every humanitarian response. It does this by promoting practical compliance measures within the Humanitarian Country Team, through its engagement with state and non-state actors at all levels and through participation in policy development in the United Nations Secretariat.

What does OCHA say?

- Humanitarian principles govern our own conduct as humanitarian actors.
- Our compliance with humanitarian principles affects our credibility and therefore our ability to enter into negotiations with relevant actors and to establish safe access to affected populations. However, it is not enough to repeatedly recite humanitarian principles. Rhetoric must be matched by leadership and practice. In other words, humanitarian actors must "walk the talk".
- There are multiple pressures on humanitarian actors from various sources to compromise humanitarian principles. For example, to provide humanitarian aid as part of efforts to achieve political ends. Maintaining principled humanitarian action in the face of these pressures is an essential task, but not an easy one. To compromise is detrimental to effective humanitarian action.
- Humanitarian negotiations with all parties to conflict, for humanitarian purposes alone, are essential. This includes ongoing liaison and negotiation with non-state armed groups. Humanitarian principles underpin and inform such negotiations and help to realize the application of humanitarian principles in practice.

To find out more

- United Nations Resolution 46/182 available here: <http://www.un.org/documents/ga/res/46/a46r182.htm>
- For the Red Cross Code of Conduct see: www.ifrc.org
- OCHA Annual Report 2008
- <http://www.reliefweb.int/rw/lib.nsf/db900SID/SHIG-7S6E3Y?OpenDocument>

Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC): In December 1999, conflict between the Lendu and Hema ethnic groups in DRC displaced over 140,000 people. OCHA and a group of NGOs mobilized to respond. Both ethnic groups quickly accused the humanitarian community of choosing sides and favouring the other ethnic group. In particular the Hema community accused Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) of only treating the Lendu community, which led to an attack on an MSF team. To convince people of the humanitarian community's neutrality, an OCHA negotiator met with leaders from both communities and toured areas affected by violence. "We demonstrated that there was equal need and equal treatment," said OCHA's senior humanitarian adviser at the time. "We gave them reasons to go back to their communities and explain why we were helping both sides." OCHA then organized humanitarian liaison committees comprising Hema and Lendu leaders. This empowered local leaders, restored their positions in their communities and provided genuine guidance for humanitarians.²

² Handbook on United Nations Multidimensional Peacekeeping Operations, DPKO 2003, pp165

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