

OCHA on Message: Humanitarian Principles

What are Humanitarian Principles?

All OCHA activities are guided by the four humanitarian principles: humanity, neutrality, impartiality and independence. These principles provide the

foundations for humanitarian action. They are central to establishing and maintaining access to affected people, whether in a natural disaster or a complex emergency, such as armed conflict.

Promoting and ensuring compliance with the principles are essential elements of effective humanitarian coordination.

Origins and implementation

The humanitarian principles are derived from the core principles, which have long guided the work of the International Committee of the Red Cross and the national Red Cross/Red Crescent Societies.¹

The principles' centrality to the work of OCHA and other humanitarian organizations is formally enshrined in two General Assembly resolutions. The first three principles (humanity, neutrality and impartiality) are endorsed in General Assembly resolution 46/182, which was adopted in 1991. This resolution also

established the role of the Emergency Relief Coordinator (ERC). General Assembly resolution 58/114 (2004) added independence as a fourth key principle underlying humanitarian action. The General Assembly has repeatedly reaffirmed the importance of promoting and respecting these principles within the framework of humanitarian assistance.

Commitment to the principles has also been expressed at an institutional level by many humanitarian organizations. Of particular note is the Code of Conduct

for the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, and non-governmental organizations in disaster relief. The code provides a set of common standards for organizations involved in humanitarian activities, including a commitment to adhere to the humanitarian principles. More than 492 organizations have signed the Code of Conduct.² Also of note is the Humanitarian Charter and Minimum Standards in Humanitarian Response elaborated by the Sphere Project.³

Humanity	Neutrality	Impartiality	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.

¹ These are humanity, impartiality, neutrality, independence, voluntary service, unity and universality. See the Fundamental Principles of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, proclaimed in Vienna in 1965 by the 20th International Conference of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement.

² The International Red Cross and Red Crescent 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). Conceptually, many other principles can be linked back to the four endorsed by the General Assembly.

³ See: www.sphereproject.org/handbook/

“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 on Foreign Relations, New York, May 2006

The humanitarian principles have practical operational relevance. Humanitarian action almost always takes place in complex political and militarized environments. Adherence to the principles is therefore critical in order to distinguish humanitarian action from the activities and objectives of political, military and other actors. Promoting

humanitarian principles and, importantly, ensuring that humanitarian organizations act in accordance with them are key to gaining acceptance by all relevant actors on the ground for humanitarian action to be carried out. This acceptance is critical to ensuring humanitarian personnel have safe and sustained access to affected people.

Sustained access is, in turn, crucial for strengthening the implementation of the humanitarian principles. For example, it allows humanitarian actors to directly undertake and monitor the distribution of assistance to people, thus ensuring that aid is distributed impartially and reaches those most in need.

What is OCHA's role?

OCHA's mission is to mobilize and coordinate principled humanitarian action. OCHA promotes the humanitarian community's compliance with humanitarian principles in

every humanitarian response. It does this by promoting practical compliance measures within a Humanitarian Country Team through its engagement with State and

non-state actors at all levels, and by undertaking and contributing to policy development within the United Nations.

What does OCHA say?

1. Humanitarian principles govern humanitarian actors' conduct.

2. Humanitarian actors must engage in dialogue with all parties to conflict for strictly humanitarian purposes. This includes ongoing liaison and negotiation with non-state armed groups.

3. Our compliance with humanitarian principles affects our credibility, and therefore our ability to enter into negotiations with relevant actors and establish safe access to affected people. 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”.

4. There are multiple pressures on humanitarian actors to compromise humanitarian principles, such as providing 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 find out more

- United Nations resolution 46/182: www.un.org/documents/ga/res/46/a46r182.htm
- The International Red Cross and Red Crescent Code of Conduct: www.ifrc.org

Contact:

Simon Bagshaw,

Protection and Displacement Section

bagshaw@un.org

June 2012