Humanitarian principles

10 October 2023

Key points

- Work with partners (including in the Humanitarian Country Team, where it exists) to identify risks to humanitarian action and perceptions of humanitarian action that may limit acceptance and impede access. Develop strategies to mitigate or remove these risks and perceptions.

- Communicate consistent and transparent messages, including to affected communities and persons of concern to UNHCR about the humanitarian nature of UNHCR’s work and that of its partners.

- Adhering to a community-based approach that is sensitive to differences in age, gender and diversity, engage and empower affected populations to participate in needs assessments as well as in the design and implementation of the humanitarian response.

- Ensure that any support provided by UNHCR to non-UN security forces (including police and border officials) complies with UNHCR and inter-agency principles and standards.

- In UNHCR, and among key partners engaged in the response, develop a basic understanding of and appreciation for humanitarian principles. Where appropriate, promote familiarity with the international normative legal framework as it relates to humanitarian action.

1. Overview

Underlining all humanitarian action are the principles of humanity, impartiality, neutrality and independence. These principles, derived from international humanitarian law, have been taken up by the United Nations in General Assembly Resolutions 46/182 and 58/114. Their global recognition and relevance is further underscored by the Code of Conduct for the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and Non-Governmental Organizations in Disaster Relief and the Core Humanitarian Standard on Quality and Accountability.
Because UNHCR's mandate is non-political, humanitarian and social, the organization is guided by humanitarian principles in its response to all humanitarian crises, whether caused by conflict, violence or natural disasters. UNHCR also adheres to other internationally recognized principles that complement "principled humanitarianism." The principle of "do no harm," for instance, obliges UNHCR to prevent and mitigate any negative impact of its actions on affected populations. Equally important is UNHCR's commitment to rights-based and community-based approaches that include efforts to engage and empower persons of concern in decisions that affect their lives.

Ultimately, States have the primary responsibility to protect and assist persons in their territories who are affected by disasters, armed conflicts or violence. Humanitarian action is designed to complement and support States in fulfilling those responsibilities; it should neither undermine nor supplement state responsibility.

2. Relevance for emergency operations

Humanitarian principles have practical operational relevance, especially in situations of open armed conflict and hostility that characterizes many emergencies. Consistent adherence to humanitarian principles can enable organizations like UNHCR to distinguish themselves from other actors and potentially:

- Gain and maintain access and proximity to affected populations, including persons of concern to UNHCR
- Mitigate risks to affected populations, staff, partners and assets;
- Promote the rights and dignity of affected populations;
- Establish a principled engagement with authorities and also, where appropriate, with non-State parties to a conflict.

3. Main guidance

Description and guidance

The principal motivation of humanitarian action is to save lives and alleviate suffering in a manner that respects and restores personal dignity. Accordingly, humanity is the principal driver for any response to a crisis, whether caused by conflict, violence or natural or man-made disaster.

At the same time, humanitarian actors distinguish themselves from other actors responding to a crisis by their impartiality. This means that humanitarian action is based solely on need, with priority given to the most urgent cases irrespective of race, nationality, gender, religious belief, political opinion or class.

The neutrality of humanitarian action is further upheld when humanitarian actors refrain from taking sides in hostilities or engaging in political, racial, religious or ideological controversies. At
the same time, independence requires humanitarian actors to be autonomous. They are not to be subject to control or subordination by political, economic, military or other non-humanitarian objectives.

‘Principled humanitarianism' is a commitment to meet the assistance and protection needs of affected populations in a way that is distinct and separate from political and other motivations. Humanitarian actors therefore need to be familiar with and apply the above principles, in particular in situations of armed conflict.

During an armed conflict, when multiple actors are involved, adherence to humanitarian principles requires a clear division of labour between humanitarian and other actors, notably those in the political and military realms. Military actors can include the armed forces of the host State, but also international and regional forces, armed non-State actors, and UN peace operations. By affirming complementary roles, humanitarian actors can maximise the protection of civilians. By way of example, most UN peace operations have a mandate to protect civilians. This role can lead them to patrol high risk areas, provide security to refugee or IDP camps, clear areas of mines or unexploded remnants of war, or facilitate voluntary return. UNHCR or the Protection Cluster should work to complement such efforts, for example by providing updated protection analysis. Further guidance on coordination between humanitarian and military actors can be found in the Entry on civil-military coordination. For guidance on UNHCR's work in and near armed conflict situations, which can involve dealing with a UN presence that has a protection of civilians mandate, please see Protection of Civilians – UNHCR’s role in the Tool Kit on Protection in Armed Conflict.

Annexes

Code of Conduct for the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and Non-Governmental Organizations in Disaster Relief (ICRC and IFRC)

The Sphere Handbook. Humanitarian Charter and Minimum Standards in Humanitarian Response (The Sphere Project)

The Core Humanitarian Standard on Quality and Accountability (HAP International, People In Aid and the Sphere Project)

General Assembly Resolution 58-114

4. Links

OCHA, Humanitarian Principles The SPHERE Project Humanitarian Accountability Partnership Core Humanitarian Standard General Assembly Resolution 46/182 IFRC Principles Code of Conduct for the IFRC and Red Crescent Movement
5. Main contacts

The first port of call is the UNHCR Dep. Representative (Protection) or the UNHCR Asst. Rep. (Protection), and/or Snr Protection Officer in the country; alternatively contact the UNHCR Regional Asst./Dep Rep (Protection) and/or Snr. Regional Protection Officer at the regional office (if applicable). You may also contact the Snr.Regional Legal Advisor in the respective UNHCR regional bureau, covering the respective country region, who will liaise as required with the parent unit at UNHCR DIP.

UNHCR Division of Emergency, Security, and Supply (DESS, at hqemhand@unhcr.org), and the Division of External Relations for inter-agency processes relating to humanitarian principles, including UNHCR’s work within an integrated mission setting

UNHCR Field Safety Service, DESS (at FS00@unhcr.org) is responsible for the security of persons of concern, and the security of UNHCR’s workforce