

Humanitarian principles

14 March 2025

Key points

- Collaborate with partners (including in the Humanitarian Country Team, where it exists) in identifying potential risks to humanitarian operations and the negative perceptions that might hinder acceptance and access. Humanitarian principles should serve as the foundation for developing effective strategies to mitigate or eliminate these risks
- Effectively convey consistent and transparent messages, including to affected communities regarding the humanitarian nature of UNHCR's mandate and its work and that of its partners
- Adopt a community-based approach that considers age, gender, and diversity differences. Engage affected populations in needs assessments and ensure their meaningful participation in the design, implementation, and monitoring and evaluation of the humanitarian response
- When providing support to non-UN security forces such as police and border officials, UNHCR must adhere to humanitarian principles, human rights standards and inter-agency guidelines, including the Human Rights Due Diligence Policy
- Building a solid understanding of humanitarian principles within UNHCR and among key partners is a foundational requirement. Where appropriate, promote familiarity with the international normative legal framework to maintain ethical and effective humanitarian interventions

1. Overview

At the core of all humanitarian actions lie the fundamental principles of **humanity, impartiality, neutrality, and independence**. These principles, rooted in international humanitarian law, have been embraced by the United Nations through General Assembly Resolutions 46/182 and 58/114. Their widespread acceptance and significance are further emphasized by their incorporation into the Code of Conduct for the International Red Cross and

Red Crescent Movement and Non-Governmental Organizations in Disaster Relief, as well as the [Core Humanitarian Standard on Quality and Accountability](#).

UNHCR's mandate is founded upon non-political, humanitarian principles. The organization consistently upholds these humanitarian principles when responding to all types of crises, whether they stem from conflict, violence, or natural/man-made disasters. Additionally, UNHCR aligns with internationally recognized principles that complement its commitment to 'principled humanitarianism'. One such principle is the imperative of 'do no harm,' which mandates that UNHCR takes measures to prevent and alleviate any adverse consequences of its actions on the affected populations. Equally significant is UNHCR's dedication to rights-based and community-based approaches, which encompass efforts to actively engage and empower individuals of concern in decisions that impact 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 in situations of armed conflict, violence and natural or man-made disaster that characterize many emergencies. Consistent adherence to humanitarian principles can enable organizations like UNHCR to distinguish themselves from other actors and to

- Gain and maintain access and proximity to affected populations, including forcibly displaced and stateless persons as well as host communities.
- Mitigate risks to affected populations, staff, partners, and assets.
- Promote the rights and dignity of affected populations.
- Establish a principled engagement with authorities and, where appropriate, with non-State parties to a conflict.
- Plan and carry out protection and assistance interventions without discrimination, giving priority to persons facing the most acute protection risks or having the most urgent needs.

3. Main guidance

The principal motivation behind humanitarian action is to save lives and alleviate suffering while upholding and restoring personal dignity. Accordingly, **humanity** is the principal driver for responding to crises, whether triggered by conflict, violence, or natural or man-made disasters.

Humanitarian actors distinguish themselves from other responders to crises through their commitment to **impartiality**. This means that humanitarian action is based solely on need, with priority given to the most urgent cases irrespective of factors such as 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, subordination, or influence 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 must acquaint themselves with and consistently apply these principles, in particular in situations of armed conflict.

During an armed conflict involving multiple actors, adhering 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 with these actors, humanitarian actors can maximise the protection of civilians.

As an illustration, most UN peace operations have a mandate to protect civilians. This role can lead them to patrol high risk areas ensuring the security of refugee and/or internally displaced persons (IDP) camps, clear areas of explosive ordnance or unexploded remnants of war or facilitate voluntary return or relocation.

UNHCR and the Protection Cluster should work to complement such efforts, for example by providing updated protection analysis based on a solid conflict sensitive 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 armed conflict, which can involve dealing with a UN Peacekeeping mission's presence that has a protection of civilians mandate, please see the section on 'Protection of Civilians – UNHCR's role' in [the ToolKit on Protection in Armed Conflict](#).

The toolkit also provides guidance on engaging with weapon bearers and on how to conduct humanitarian negotiation. In an armed conflict, humanitarian negotiation plays a crucial role in gaining or improving access and creating the conditions for effective protection.

For this reason, UNHCR has established a strategic partnership with the [Centre for Competence on Humanitarian Negotiation \(CCHN\)](#) to bolster the capacity of its staff and partners in negotiating issues related to protection on the front lines.

Post emergency phase

The objectives of humanitarian action are to save lives, alleviate suffering and uphold human dignity amid crises and their aftermath, while also focusing on the prevention of such situations and bolstering preparedness. It is essential to adhere to humanitarian principles not only during emergencies but also while establishing the groundwork for sustainable recovery and lasting solutions.

Annexes

[The CCHN Field Manual on Frontline humanitarian negotiation, 2019](#)

[Code of Conduct for the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and Non-Governmental Organizations in Disaster Relief \(ICRC and IFRC\), 1994](#)

[The Sphere Handbook, 2018](#)

[The CHS Alliance and the Sphere Project - The Core Humanitarian Standard on Quality and Accountability, 2024](#)

[UNGA, General Assembly Resolution 58-114, 2004](#)

[The Human Rights Due Diligence Policy on UN Support to non-UN security Forces, 2015](#)

4. Links

[The CCHN Field Manual on Frontline humanitarian negotiation UNHCR - Protection in Armed Conflict Toolkit | Global Protection Cluster](#)

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.