

# OCHA on Message: Humanitarian Principles

## What are Humanitarian Principles?

The humanitarian principles of humanity, neutrality, impartiality and independence provide the foundation for humanitarian action. They are central to

establishing and maintaining access and delivering humanitarian assistance to affected people, whether in a disaster or a complex emergency, such as armed conflict.

Promoting and ensuring compliance with the principles are essential for effective humanitarian coordination and response.

### Origins and implementation

The humanitarian principles are derived from the Red Cross Movement's 'fundamental' principles, which have long guided the work of the International Committee of the Red Cross and National Red Cross/Red Crescent Societies.<sup>1</sup>

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, adopted in 1991. The fourth principle (independence)

was added in 2004 under General Assembly resolution 58/114. These principles are reaffirmed in subsequent humanitarian resolutions of the General Assembly and the Economic and Social Council. The need to respect humanitarian principles is also recognized in various country-specific and thematic Security Council resolutions, including in relation to the coherence and complementarity of principled humanitarian action, development and peace activities.

Commitment to the principles has also been

expressed at an institutional level by most humanitarian organizations. In addition, nearly 900 organizations globally are signatories to 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<sup>2</sup>. Also of note is the Humanitarian Charter and Minimum Standards in Humanitarian Response elaborated by the Sphere Project<sup>3</sup>.

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. It has 871 signatories as of November 2020. 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](http://www.sphereproject.org/handbook)

*“Preserving humanitarian space also requires that we do not blur the lines between military operations, political objectives and humanitarian efforts. Upholding the principles of humanitarian action ... is essential to building trust.”*

- Amina Mohammed,  
UN Deputy Secretary-  
General

The humanitarian principles have practical operational relevance. Adherence to the principles is critical in order to distinguish humanitarian action from the activities and objectives of political, military and other actors, especially in complex and militarized environments where humanitarian action often takes place. 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, unimpeded and sustained access to affected people.

Sustained and principled access is, in turn, crucial for strengthening 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?

Humanitarian principles are central to OCHA's mandate and core functions. OCHA's mission is to mobilize and coordinate principled humanitarian action. OCHA works to promote the humanitarian community's adherence to humanitarian

principles in every humanitarian response, and to build understanding of and respect for the humanitarian principles among non-humanitarian stakeholders. It does this by promoting practical compliance measures within the

Humanitarian Country Team and through its engagement with State and non-State actors at all levels, and through support to policy development in the Inter-Agency Standing Committee, across the UN and at the intergovernmental level.

## What does OCHA say?

**1.** Humanitarian principles govern humanitarian actors' conduct in all humanitarian action.

**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 essential to ensure humanitarian response is guided solely by the specific needs of affected people in all contexts.

## To find out more

- United Nations General Assembly resolution 46/182: <https://undocs.org/a/res/46/182.htm>.
- The International Red Cross and Red Crescent Code of Conduct: <https://media.ifrc.org/ifrc/who-we-are/the-movement/code-of-conduct/>

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