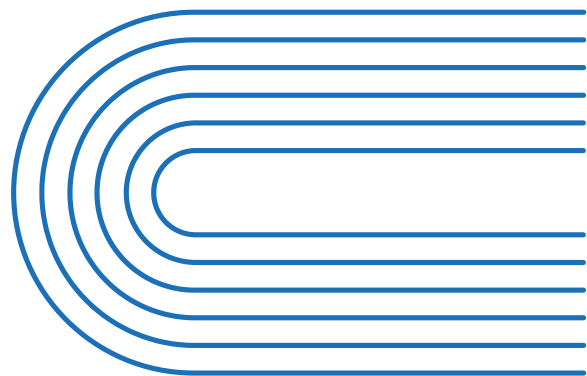




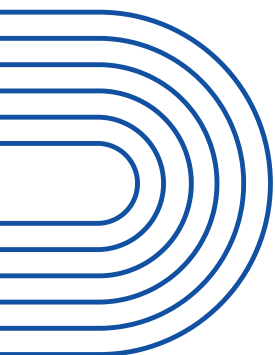
A GLOBAL NGO NETWORK
FOR PRINCIPLED AND EFFECTIVE
HUMANITARIAN ACTION



Putting the Humanitarian Principles into Practice:

A Practical Guide for
Humanitarian NGO Leaders

May 2025



**The ICVA Demystifies Series:
Humanitarian Principles**





Table of Contents

Introduction	2
Part 1: How to develop a Principled Engagement Policy & Framework	3
Part 2: Example of a Principled Engagement Policy	4
Part 3: Example of a Principled Engagement Framework	7

About ICVA

ICVA is a global network of over 160 non-governmental organisations whose mission is to make humanitarian action more principled and effective by working collectively and independently to influence policy and practice.

Acknowledgements

This paper was authored by Eileen Morrow, ICVA's Head of Policy and Advocacy and by an experienced humanitarian access specialist who wishes to remain anonymous, but whose inputs were core to its development. The authors would like to thank the members of ICVA's Humanitarian Access Working Group for their inputs in the development and review of this guidance.

Introduction

Overview

Every day hundreds of humanitarian staff, from frontline workers to senior leaders, must engage with people in positions of power. They do so to negotiate the safe and rapid delivery of humanitarian aid. These people range from soldiers and warlords to donors and state authorities. Negotiating with everyone who controls or has influence over the provision of aid, services and assistance is a key part of humanitarian work. Without a doubt, it is also challenging:

During these negotiations, staff can face pressures to make compromises to the humanitarian principles. For example, they may be told to accept interference in their programmes, take armed escorts, handover sensitive data or pay bribes if they want approvals to operate. Requests can be reasonable and based on real concerns, for example authorities might be concerned that aid is being misused or of poor quality. Other requests may be attempts to delay or redirect humanitarian assistance for political, financial or military purposes. These requests may lead to additional costs, inefficiencies or liabilities for the organisation, which means less resources for aid. More importantly, for people in need, interference may cause delays and unnecessary suffering.

To have successful negotiations, staff need to have clarity on organisational positions. They need to know what they can agree to, what they need to escalate to their leadership, and what requests they need to walk away from. If staff do not have clarity they may make compromises that undermine principled and effective humanitarian action, or they may escalate all decisions to management.

ICVA surveys have found that few organisations currently have guidance on what principled humanitarian action means in their operations, meaning often staff are left to make decisions about how to approach a request themselves, and may make compromises that have negative consequences.

Purpose

Recent reviews of the humanitarian response in Sudan and [Ethiopia](#) have found that many NGO staff see the humanitarian principles as an ideological framework, rather than of practical use. This can have major consequences on humanitarian access and space,

The purpose of this guidance is to help NGO leaders and middle management at operational level clarify with their teams how to practically apply the humanitarian principles in their daily work - in consultation with their frontline staff. The guidance supports senior leaders to develop a Principled Engagement Policy (for senior NGO leaders) and a Principled Engagement Framework (for frontline NGO staff).

A Principled Engagement Policy and Framework acts like a delegation of authority to empower frontline staff to successfully navigate requests and uphold principled humanitarian action. While they are similar to the [Joint Operating Protocols \(JOPS\)](#), the approach is bottom up rather than top down. This ensures the Policy is based on contextual realities rather than on aspirations.

The benefits of this approach include:

- Improved relationships with authorities and armed actors as humanitarian staff demonstrate predictable, consistent and transparent behaviours.
- Staff have better clarity on what their leaders expect from them and feel improved confidence in their negotiations with their counterparts

- Reduced delays and bottlenecks in humanitarian action, as staff have clarity on what requests they can agree to immediately (without waiting for SMT decisions on) and what they need to escalate or refuse.

This guidance is structured in three parts:

- **Part 1:** Outlines the [methodology](#) for identifying what principled humanitarian action looks like in practice and developing a Principled Engagement Policy and Framework.
- **Part 2** Gives an example of a [Principled Engagement Policy](#). This document is most useful for middle to senior staff to explain why there is a need for a Principled Engagement Framework.
- **Part 3:** Gives an example of a [Principled Engagement Framework](#). This document is most useful for staff at the frontlines to middle management.

Part 1: How to develop a Principled Engagement Policy & Framework

General guidance

- **Senior leadership buy in** is the first requirement. The rationale for a Principled Engagement Policy should first be discussed at senior management level.
- The senior management team should **develop a plan** for consulting their sub-offices to develop their specific Principled Engagement Frameworks. In some contexts, a blanket Principled Engagement Framework approach will not work. In many countries, the internal context can vary, and staff may face very different pressures that must be identified and addressed.
- **Hold workshops or discussions at suboffices** to develop Principled Engagement Framework with staff.
 - ♦ It may be useful to bring in an experienced external facilitator for these conversations so that staff are more open about the pressures they face and the compromises they have made.
 - ♦ Invite all public facing staff working in the context e.g. project, logistics, administration, finance, drivers and communications.
 - ♦ Establish a safe space for dialogue. Ensure all staff are aware that they will not be penalised for the information they share in the discussions. [Contact ICVA for further guidance if required.](#)
 - ♦ Run the humanitarian principles quiz to explain the humanitarian principles and address concerns and misunderstandings. The quiz template is [available here](#) or [contact ICVA](#).
 - ♦ Ask staff in groups to identify the key pressures they are facing in their daily work that might undermine the humanitarian principles.
 - ♦ Discuss current practices and whether they align to the organisation's policies and understanding of the principles.
 - ♦ Identify realistic practices that promote principled humanitarian action.
 - ♦ Document these in the framework. Senior management approves the framework.

- ♦ As new pressures and opportunities arise, review the framework and update accordingly.
- **The policy and framework must be contextualised:** Every humanitarian context is unique. The content of the Principled Engagement Policy or Framework **should not be copy-pasted**. It is critical to discuss the challenges and pressures teams are experiencing to identify existing practice. What works in one context may not be appropriate in another. For example, stating that staff must never pay fees at checkpoints might be fine in one context, but in others paying fees is a standard way of working.
- **Process is more important than policy in promoting principled action.** For this to be more than a document, staff must be consulted in its development and empowered in its rollout.
- **Staff must know that they have their leadership's full support to exit** a dangerous situation or a negotiation that would negatively impact on humanitarian response. For example, turning back at a checkpoint or leaving a government office without a signed Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) is preferable to paying bribes or letting aid be diverted.
- **Leadership must adopt a listening rather than compliance approach** when developing and rolling out their Principled Engagement Policy. Management should encourage staff to raise the pressures they experience without fear of losing their jobs. This requires management clearly communicating expectations and support.
- **When practice is not in line with the humanitarian principles** (or even organisational policies), leadership will need to identify how to provide support to ensure the practice can be phased out or issue a waiver until the context changes.
- **Monitor the context and adapt** the Principled Engagement Policy & Framework as necessary. To the greatest extent possible, document decisions and changes, and identify strategies for strengthening principled action where damaging compromises have been made. This will usually require extensive negotiations with key counterparts and support from the wider humanitarian community operating in the context.
- **Translate the framework** Ensure the Principled Engagement Policy is available in local languages and communicated to all staff.
- **Expect the framework and policy to be shared externally.** This should be a good thing – the framework should be aligned to the laws of the land and it should clarify expectations of staff, which helps build confidence of all actors.

Part 2: Example of a Principled Engagement Policy

NOTE: *This is an example document only. Please refer to the Guidance section before using this document. Words highlighted in bold are the absolute minimum that should be adapted.*

Purpose and scope

The purpose of this Principled Engagement Policy is to enable safe, effective, principled interactions with authorities, armed actors, and community leaders in **[Insert Country Name]**. As a humanitarian organization, **[Insert Agency Name]** speaks with whoever is necessary to enable access for our programming and for programme participants to reach our services.

This Principled Engagement Policy is part of **[Insert Agency Name's]** engagement strategy to support our staff and partners to engage by providing acceptable parameters on common interactions, pressures and demands with authorities, communities and armed actors. Engagement and negotiation objectives and

interactions outside of what is outlined below should be guided by the **Country Director/Executive Director** with the support of the **Board/Access/Security team**.

How to use this Principled Engagement Policy

This Principled Engagement Policy aims to empower staff by clarifying what is possible, what is not, and what needs further discussion. Breaking red lines or making compromises may seem local, but they often have far-reaching consequences across the whole organisation or context. This is why **[Insert Agency Name]** seeks to create an environment where staff know how and when to escalate to discuss next steps.

All staff should be able to communicate the standards and red lines included in this Principled Engagement Policy. Senior staff should be able to interpret the Principled Engagement Policy in its entirety and manage and conduct the dialogue necessary to communicate what is acceptable for **[Insert Agency Name]**. Partners and partnership coordinators should know and be able to apply the escalation and joint incident response mechanism.

Roles and responsibilities: This Principled Engagement Policy aims to empower staff and partners to take decisions on a daily basis. As such, the area coordinators/area managers should take decisions in line with this Principled Engagement Policy. This means that they lead the communication on what is approved without consultation and what are the red lines. Partners should equally be empowered to manage difficult situations within the Principled Engagement Framework parameters outlined below. Staff and partners still may choose to seek advice and/ or report threats to these parameters as an early warning for future pressure. Where further consultation and approval is required, it is outlined who must approve and when consultation may necessarily involve a wider group of staff. This approval should clarify whether it is a one-off approval or a precedent that area coordinators can then repeat for recurrent practices.

Actors covered by this Principled Engagement Policy: The actors covered by this Principled Engagement Policy are all external stakeholders in the country, including local authorities, community leaders, armed actors and affiliated civil administrations. Any parameters that are specific to a type of actor are outlined accordingly.

Navigating the pressure to uphold the ideal outcome: This Principled Engagement Policy outlines concretely what we can agree on to respond to pressures and demands to maintain a principled approach. However, it does not guide staff on all the options we have to maintain the ideal response – the ‘standard’. Much of the time, we can try first to navigate these pressures without compromising at all. For example, by explaining why **[Insert Agency Name]** has a certain position in a way that they would most likely understand, or when staff are pressured to include someone in the recruitment process, they can deflect and explain it is a recruitment led by head/national office. Or if a provincial authority is asking for extra project information, then they can say that this has been shared with central authorities. How staff identify such ways to navigate, and message, should be analysed and planned in coordination with the relevant staff **[specify titles]**.

Security risk to **[Insert Agency Name] staff, partners or programme participants:** The below Principled Engagement Framework parameters are what we should engage and negotiate with. If a staff member feels their security, or that of a partner or programme participants, is at significant risk to adhere to these parameters then they should respond to the situation as they judge to ensure they feel safe – as per Security procedures. This should then immediately be reported as a security incident.

Review and revision: To ensure this Principled Engagement Policy remains relevant to the pressures staff face and the standards, compromises and red lines that will ensure principled access and program delivery in **[xxx area]**, this Principled Engagement Policy will be revised on a six-monthly basis. This process will be led by **the [xxx] team**, in coordination with **Area Coordinators/Programme Managers** and the Senior Management Team.

For INGOs - The use of the Principled Engagement Policy by partners: It is widely agreed that national NGOs share the same fundamental interpretation and application of humanitarian principles in [xxx] country. As such, the parameters for engagement outlined in this Principled Engagement Policy are what [Insert Agency Name] expects partners will adopt and will support them to do so.

[Insert Agency Name] staff should use this Principled Engagement Policy, and disseminate the one-page brief, in training and supporting partners. [Insert Agency Name] recognizes that partners operate in difficult conditions where pressures may make principled action difficult, and that national NGOs come under pressure in ways that foreign organizations may not. [Insert Agency Name] wants to work with our partners to support their implementation of principled approaches and decisions. This includes transparency on pressures that partners encounter, acknowledging that [Insert Agency Name] is also challenged in similar situations, discussing and evaluating options jointly, and agreeing any compromises as shared decisions. Partners should be aware of at least two channels in [Insert Agency Name] to escalate concerns regarding threats to principled action, ideally the **Access/xxx team, area coordinators and/or the Partnerships Coordinator**, as well as the [Insert Agency Name] **Programme Participant Feedback line** as a last resort. This escalation should trigger a discussion with the partner and relevant [Insert Agency Name] staff (as per the Principled Engagement Policy and other relevant staff) to identify how [Insert Agency Name] can support the engagement and joint decision making.

Contingency when thresholds are threatened or crossed:

- Communicate threats to these Principled Engagement Framework parameters to line manager, area coordinator and humanitarian access focal point as soon as possible.
- Call if urgent; email if not and follow up in a timely way, as needed. Ensure all the relevant people are informed before deliberation and decision making.
- The relevant Access, Liaison and Security staff must be involved for technical support to debrief on the issue, conduct a risk analysis and assess potential damage done (to [Insert Agency Name] and the wider humanitarian community); identify mitigation measures and advise the decision maker on the way forward.
- SMT and CD will be involved as per the identified escalation levels or if the situation is judged to be of additional risk and concern.
 - ♦ For partners: Should notify through the escalation line(s) channels agreed jointly with them.
 - ♦ **The [Insert Agency Name] staff** will discuss with the partner as per the Principled Engagement Framework parameters below, and if no solution can be found within these, the team will follow the same process as outlined for [Insert Agency Name] above.

Engagement parameters: The below Principled Engagement Framework clarifies the approved thresholds of engagement based on common pressures and transactions. They are classified by a traffic light system where red is not tolerated, yellow requires specific consultation and/or approval, and green is generally approved with additional advisory where necessary.

Other definitions:

- **Authorities:** The term refer to individuals, groups, or institutions holding power and responsibility to govern or administer a specific area, population, or organization. This term encompasses those recognized officially by domestic or international laws and standards, including government entities and local administrations.

- **De facto authorities:** This term identifies entities or individuals that exercise control over a territory or population without formal or legal recognition as legitimate governing bodies by national or international actors.
- **Red line:** A red line refers to a clearly defined and shared organizational position that must not be crossed under any circumstances. Crossing a red line typically poses a significant risk to the organization's ability to safely and effectively carry out its humanitarian mission as there are usually set to protect the organization's commitment to a principled humanitarian approach. Violating a red line could compromise access to populations in need, endanger staff, or undermine the credibility and integrity of the organization.
- **Engagement parameters:** The Engagement Parameters outlined in this Principled Engagement Policy define the threshold of engagement to which agencies and organisations should adhere when confronting specific issues and dilemmas during humanitarian negotiations and beyond.

Part 3: Example of a Principled Engagement Framework

NOTES:








- The examples in this Framework were contributed by ICVA member organisations. They reflect real-world operational realities faced by their staff in specific contexts. ICVA does not officially endorse or oppose these practices —they are shared to support learning and adaptation.
- Before applying this Framework, please [review the Guidance section](#) to ensure the content is appropriately contextualized and aligned with your organization's principles, practices, and decision-making processes.

Common Issues	Thresholds of Engagement
<p>Payment of fees and taxes (including for monitoring, training, administrative approvals, staff or supplies' movements)</p> <p>For example, In Afghanistan, humanitarian organizations are required to pay toll roads to local authorities for the movement of supplies and staff. However, if these authorities are sanctioned entities, paying such fees raises compliance challenges with donors, necessitating careful negotiations to find solutions that ensure continued humanitarian access without breaching legal or ethical guidelines</p>	<p>✓ Tax payments for goods, as per local law</p> <p>✓ Payments for visas, work permits and overstay to Ministry [xxx]</p> <p>✓ As per the policy for authorities for joint visits, monitoring or training¹</p> <p>✓ Payment for official road tolls</p> <p>X No payment for movements/checkpoints</p> <p>X No payment to armed actors</p>
<p>Interference in recruitment: influence, nominating people, observers.</p>	<p>✓ Share the application details for them to apply</p>

<p>For example, the authorities request that the NGO recruits family members or former government staff or asks to participate in the interview process.</p>	<p>✓ Collaboration with local community leaders to recommend local talent (when appropriate)</p> <p>✋ Share the applicant's name with HR/Operations Director for possible longlist (based on their thorough review against the criteria) – HR approval</p> <p>✋ Presence of authorities or local leaders during the recruitment process</p> <p>X No recruitment without a standard agency recruitment process</p> <p>X Do not give priority or any advantage on tests or interview information</p> <p>X Influence or interference in recruitment that bypasses merit-based hiring</p>
<p>Interference in partnership selection</p> <p>For example, local government officials request that the NGO develops a partnership with a specific CSO working in the locality.</p>	<p>✓ Share the program and operational criteria needed for a partnership</p> <p>✋ Share any partner with the localization lead/Head of Programmes for a thorough review against the criteria and completed due diligence process</p> <p>X No selection without [insert agency name]'s due diligence process</p>
<p>Interference in tendering process, audits or financial procedures</p>	<p>✓ Independent tender process as per standard procurement practice.</p> <p>✓ Potential suppliers can be present in the audience during open tender processes</p> <p>✓ Inquiries or approved audits by authorised bodies with clear boundaries on transparency</p> <p>✓ Importation/custom controls</p> <p>✋ Verbal sharing of results and decision – Head of Finance/Area Coordinator/Head of Operations approval</p> <p>✋ Requests from local authorities for influence on vendor selection – Senior management must be involved</p> <p>X Bribery or other illicit requests of funds such as illicit additional taxation.</p> <p>X Direct interference by any actor, including vendors or armed groups, in the procurement process that impacts impartiality or due process</p>

	X Direct observation or participation in closed tendering processes
<p>Sharing movement plans and information</p> <p>In certain contexts, sharing movement plans is an established practice. Therefore, if sharing movement plans with authorities is part of an established and agreed-upon procedure, it may be acceptable. However, if it's a new or unapproved request, granting access could set a precedent that compromises future operational neutrality.</p>	<p>✓ ID shared for international staff in Country office-led process in line with authority established processes and procedures.</p> <p>✋ Daily number of national staff movement to [xxx] area – Area Manager approval</p> <p>✋ Daily team movement - consult (insert title here – e.g. security focal point) position, (insert title here – e.g. Area Manager) approval</p> <p>X Sharing of team movement lists externally X Sharing of ID cards for international or national staff for new or unofficial requests.</p>
<p>Sharing of programme participants' information</p> <p><i>Any programme participant information shared must be with their informed consent. Organisations need to also ensure that any personal data stored online or in hard copy is protected.</i></p>	<p>✓ Number of programme participants served and type of assistance ✓ Name of locations to village level ✓ Programme participant selection criteria</p> <p>✋ Influence over the decision on location of people in need (only if this allow carrying out activities where aid is needed)</p> <p>✋ Protected health information only with medical staff directly involved</p> <p>✋ Refer request to the authorities who were invited to the needs assessment – (Insert title e.g. Area Manager approval)</p> <p>X Personally identifiable information from final lists or individuals of programme participants served X Authorities exclusively deciding which groups to target. X Demands for lists or data that compromise privacy, data protection, or could lead to discriminatory targeting of groups</p>
<p>Sharing of staff information</p> <p><i>Any staff information shared must be with their informed consent.</i></p> <p>Authorities may sometimes request organizations to provide internal documentation, including sensitive information such as employee data, payroll details, or other</p>	<p>✓ [Insert agency name] Staff IDs and work permits ✓ Name and father's name of staff, education, gender, contract start and end date, and position with Ministry [xxx]</p> <p>✋ National ID card with Ministry [xxx] for work permits – CD approval</p>

<p>confidential records. Generally, personal and sensitive information should never be disclosed without proper justification, legal compliance, and safeguarding measures. Relevant compliance to relevant privacy laws and internal policies should also be prioritised.</p>	<p> Contracts with blacked out sensitive information or summary one page contract – CD approval</p> <p> Staff accommodation details or leases – CD approval</p> <p>X Sensitive personally identifiable information – CD approval</p> <p>X Sensitive information known to the organization that could put in danger a staff member(s)</p> <p>X Full copies of staff contracts, including staff salary</p>
<p>Sharing of project information, including full proposal, budget, workplan, procurement plan, bank account</p>	<p>✓ [Insert agency name] publicly- available information</p> <p>✓ Summary of project and budget in SMT approved format</p> <p>✓ Project summary presentation and verbal sharing of relevant budget technical activity information to line departments in capital and provinces</p> <p>✓ Reporting as per the MoU</p> <p> Submitting additional project and budget in provinces – consult [xxx], approval from [xxx]</p> <p>X Sharing information of military or sensitive nature with authorities or parties to the conflict</p>
<p>Post-distribution aid diversion</p> <p>Two recurrent issues regarding aid diversion are post-distribution extortion of beneficiaries in IDP camps or aid being re-directed to persons other than originally intended beneficiaries.</p>	<p>X Diversion by organized groups, armed actors, or authorities that leads to loss or sale of aid for profit or military use</p> <p>X Bribes or informal ‘access fees’ being extorted from humanitarian staff</p> <p>X Items/commodities donated to support the provision of basic services (fuel, electrical generators, etc.) being used for purposes other than the originally intended one.</p>
<p>Accompaniment by the authorities, security actors, or any other kind of escort</p> <p>Different actors (such as peacekeepers, counter-insurgents, armed forces, armed groups or private security companies) may join humanitarian convoys in specific contexts. This</p>	<p>✓ Use of private security companies for the protection of camps and/or premises (specific guidelines should apply)</p> <p>✓ Escort provided by private security companies in accordance with pre-agreed security protocols</p>

<p>can however impact the organization's perceived and actual positioning, particularly in relation to neutrality and independence.</p> <p>As stated in the IASC Non-Binding Guidelines on the Use of Armed Escorts for Humanitarian Convoys, as a general rule, humanitarian convoys should never use armed escorts.</p>	<p> Escort provided by authorities (only as last resort to get access and following dedicated guidelines)</p> <p> Authorities requesting to accompany certain operations</p> <p>X Any armed accompaniment or escort by authorities that could compromise the perception of neutrality or put beneficiaries at risk.</p>
<p>Facilitation of visits/monitoring by authorities (also depending on the types of authority)</p>	<p> Presence of local officials during monitoring visits (requires consultations beforehand)</p> <p>X Unannounced monitoring or any action by authorities that puts pressure on staff, beneficiaries, or activities</p> <p>X Presence of armed authorities during visits inside premises.</p>
<p>Weapons, transport and presence of armed actors at distribution sites and offices.</p> <p>A recurrent issue in conflict zones arises when armed fighters attempt to enter humanitarian facilities carrying weapons. In such cases, humanitarian organizations must prioritize de-escalating the situation. This typically involves calmly explaining the organization's policies prohibiting weapons on-site, emphasizing the need to maintain neutrality and the safety of all individuals present. When possible, staff should politely request that armed individuals either leave the premises or securely store their weapons outside before entering.</p>	<p> Presence of armed UN Peacekeeping Officers (for instance, inside IDPs camps)</p> <p> Police or Private Security Companies armed in exceptional cases presence outside of distribution sites; needs Board/HQ approval</p> <p>X No weapons to be present in humanitarian vehicles, within distribution sites, humanitarian facilities, hospital, or staff premises with weapons</p>
<p>Staff involvement in politics, activism, or protest.</p> <p>This issue is particularly sensitive as it touches on the personal rights of staff members. A common concern arises when one or more staff openly express support for a specific party or actor in an ongoing conflict or crisis. This becomes especially problematic and poses significant risks in highly politicized environments or active conflict zones, where such actions can jeopardize both the</p>	<p> Non-partisan community engagement by staff within the scope of their humanitarian roles.</p> <p> Social media engagement on topics that could be perceived as partisan.</p> <p>X Participation in lobbying groups or political campaigns, especially those linked to conflict actors</p> <p>X Engaging in lobbying or political activities connected to specific groups or parties</p>

individual's safety and the organization's perceived neutrality and security.	involved in the conflict, using the organization's name, email, brand, or identity.
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