

# The Core Principles of Humanitarian Action

Thursday 28 November 2013, by [MiHANDs](#) (Date first published: 25 November 2013).

**Several core principles guide all humanitarian action and should be respected by all staff and partners at all times. Respect for these principles is critical for the integrity of our work and the credibility and safety of humanitarian operations.**

**Do No Harm :** Action, as well as inaction, can have unintended negative consequences. We must ensure that our actions and interventions (or lack thereof) do not adversely affect individuals and their communities, our partners or colleagues, or expose them to harm. Before taking action, we must anticipate the consequences and assess any potential risk factors, and take measures to eliminate and minimize such risks.

**Humanity and the humanitarian imperative :** The prime motivation and purpose of our work is to save lives and to prevent and alleviate human suffering, wherever it is found. Individuals must be treated humanely, with dignity and respect, and have a full and equal right and ability to receive humanitarian assistance.

**Impartiality :** Humanitarian action must be taken without any adverse distinction based on nationality, ethnic origin, religion, class, political opinion or other ground. Priorities for humanitarian action must be determined on the basis of rights and needs alone. The principle of impartiality therefore establishes two clear rules of conduct for humanitarian work: non-discrimination and proportionality according to need.

**Independence :** Humanitarian action must be free from interference, whether political, ideological, economic or military.

**Neutrality :** Humanitarian action must not take or be perceived to take sides in an armed conflict or other dispute. The principle of neutrality does not prevent us from taking action, nor does it provide an excuse for inaction; indeed, failure to take action could even amount to taking sides. Rather, it provides important guidance on how we should act, by considering how our actions might be interpreted by others. We therefore need to be aware of our own prejudices as well as the ways in which aid can be manipulated, diverted or exploited for political or military purposes. Our actions and activities must be transparent, balanced and based on objective criteria.

In addition to the core principles, several key considerations should guide us in our work.

**Confidentiality :** Respecting confidentiality and guaranteeing the privacy and security of individuals, their families and wider communities must be of paramount consideration at all times. Breach of confidentiality or careless handling of information can have serious consequences for persons of concern as well as for our partners, our colleagues and even the humanitarian operation as a whole. We must always assess potential risk factors and seek informed consent for the gathering and use of information. Vigorous data-protection methods must be in place to guarantee the security of recorded information.

**Sensitivity :** Many internally displaced persons have experienced violence, abuse and other forms of

personal harm. We should be sensitive to their suffering, treat them with respect and dignity, and avoid creating more harm by requiring them to relive painful experiences through repeated interviewing. We must also be careful to avoid creating false hopes and unrealistic expectations about what protection and assistance we can offer; failure to do so risks increased anxiety and hopelessness, and might even put people at greater risk by giving them a false sense of security.

**Strengthen local capacities :** The role of humanitarian actors is not to substitute, but rather to support and strengthen, local capacities: both the capacity of individuals to claim their rights and the capacity of States and other authorities to fulfill their responsibilities to ensure protection of these rights. To this end, humanitarian actors should identify and work to strengthen effective local coping strategies and protection mechanisms.

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## Operationalizing Protection

Effective field-based protection strategies are built around three common and inter-connected approaches:

- 1. Protection must be rights-based** (a rights-based approach);
- 2. Individuals and communities are active and equal partners in their protection** (a community-based approach);
- 3. Protection promotes full and equal respect for the human rights of all individuals**, without discrimination of any kind.

Use of these approaches is fundamental to ensuring that a protection perspective is integrated throughout all the different sectors of humanitarian response.

Protection is about realizing human rights (a rights-based approach)

Because protection is about respect for rights, it requires an approach grounded upon and geared towards the full and equal enjoyment of rights.

This way of working requires that we recognize individuals as rights-holders with legal entitlements to protection and assistance.

Unlike “needs,” rights generate responsibilities to ensure the protection and well-being of individuals. The State and other authorities are duty-bearers with responsibilities to respect and protect individuals’ rights.

These rights and responsibilities are firmly rooted in international law, particularly human rights and international humanitarian law, and refugee law, where relevant.

A rights-based approach means that all of our policies, programmes and activities: are based on rights, as provided in international law; further the realization of rights; and

Refugee law does not apply to the protection of internally displaced persons, although some refugee law principles are relevant, by analogy. The international legal framework for the protection of IDPs

is discussed in Part I, Chapter 2. seek to strengthen the capacities of rights-holders (women, men, girls and boys) to claim their rights, and the capacities of duty-bearers (State and other authorities) to meet their obligations to respect, protect and fulfill those rights.

A rights-based approach can strengthen our work by anchoring it in a system of rights and corresponding obligations established by international law. By empowering people to claim their rights and strengthening the capacities of duty-bearers to fulfill these rights, a rights-based approach also promotes and strengthens the sustainability of our efforts.

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