



Back to basics: humanitarian principles in contemporary armed conflict

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As with many conflicts in the past, the Ukraine crisis has revived heated discussions on the humanitarian principles and their relevance in contemporary armed conflict. We have all been reminded how the principles, in particular the principle of neutrality, can lead to misunderstanding and even outrage – and why they nonetheless remain such a valuable compass and operational tool in highly polarized situations.

In this post, ICRC Director-General Robert Mardini carves out a space for debate with a new series: ‘Back to basics: humanitarian principles in contemporary armed conflict’, calling on partners to contribute to this important discussion.

ICRC Humanitarian Law & Policy Blog - Back to basics: humanitarian principles in contemporary armed conflict

Discussions about our neutrality in the Ukraine crisis jarred many of us at the ICRC, myself included, and reminded us that perhaps we have been taking for granted a universal acceptance and understanding of the bedrock of our everyday work: the humanitarian principles. In the spirit of going back to the basics, let me open this series with some straightforward considerations.

The purpose of humanitarian action is to prevent and alleviate human suffering, wherever it may be found – a seemingly indisputable intention. Yet, meeting conflict-related needs is challenging, as crisis tends to come hand in hand with high levels of mistrust, division and violence, all of which can hinder humanitarian action. In 1965, drawing on more than a century of experience, the International Red Cross Red Crescent Movement developed an ethical and

operational framework to guide and enable its work, notably in highly polarized situations: the seven Fundamental Principles of the Movement. The first four principles – humanity, impartiality, neutrality and independence – have come to embody international humanitarian action.

The principles are hierarchically organized and offer both an ethical and an operational framework. Humanity and impartiality are substantive principles providing a moral compass: humanitarian action aims to prevent and alleviate suffering (humanity) and is driven solely by needs, irrespective of nationality, race, religious beliefs, class or political opinions (impartiality).

Neutrality and independence, on the other hand, have no intrinsic moral value – they are the practical tools for securing access to those affected by conflict or violence by creating and protecting a humanitarian space. They were devised to win the trust, or at least acceptance, of all: neutrality commands that we not take sides, and independence means determining needs and making operational decisions autonomously, irrespective of any other considerations.

These principles rely on the assumption that even war has limits and that belligerents will allow for the provision of principled humanitarian assistance in a safe and unimpeded way, as long as humanitarians avoid interfering in the dynamics of the conflict.

Negotiating principles

Since the adoption of humanitarian principles there has been a near constant debate and discussion on their relevance and applicability, and the extent to which one can truly be a principled humanitarian actor.

That a tension exists between the simplicity of the humanitarian principles and the difficulties associated with their application is beyond dispute. Humanitarian action is rarely driven solely by needs, but also by access and security considerations, and availability of funding. An organization's ability to provide support also depends on its ability to strike a balance between competing priorities, needs and perception in order to preserve trust and acceptance.

The principle of neutrality surely causes the greatest levels of discomfort. How can anyone not take sides in the face of suffering and injustice? How can anyone provide support to people who sympathize with the enemy? And how can anyone speak to all sides of a conflict? Such acts are sometimes perceived as a testimony of inexcusable detachment in the face of suffering and a failure of moral judgement, rather than a tool to enable action on behalf of all victims.

The reality is that aid organizations do take sides: they take the side of victims. Speaking with parties to conflict does not mean supporting them. In fact, neutrality does not command silence: humanitarians can and have publicly condemned actions, such as the bombing of a hospital, without compromising their neutrality. The decision whether to speak out must be weighed against considerations of access, security and acceptance.

The fact that ICRC's action is guided by a clear set of humanitarian principles does not mean that it is the only acceptable way of working, and there can be complementarity between approaches. Some place the emphasis on preserving humanitarian access to meet the needs of the most vulnerable, and others focus on strengthening respect for human rights.

Organizations that are openly supportive of a party might not be able to work across front lines, but they may have better access to communities living on the territory under the control of the side that they support. Development or peace actors are driven by yet another set of ambitions. Each of these different approaches have their place and fulfill a specific function. None of them are perfect nor do they work at all times – but dismissing neutrality because it is misunderstood would be shortsighted.

Please, join the conversation

At the end of the day, principled humanitarian action, when it works and is allowed to work, saves lives. Because of the centrality of the humanitarian principles in the ICRC's action and the role that the Red Cross Red Crescent Movement has played in shaping these principles, we see the need to create a space for a conversation on humanitarian principles, starting today.

The first contribution comes from the head of our Centre for Operational Research and Experience (CORE), Fiona Terry, who shares a personal journey of how she has overcome her unease with neutrality and embraced it as a critical enabler for humanitarian action.

And then we want to hear from you. We want to hear more on how principles are being negotiated and interpreted in your day-to-day work, including perspectives that we might not be perfectly comfortable with. We are keen to hear from local organizations on how they operate in highly polarized environments; and from States on how their view of principles might have evolved over the years, notably in the context of the so-called 'war on terror'. We will also feature other ICRC contributions on gender, neutrality, humanity and impartiality and the impact of misinformation and propaganda on the space for principled humanitarian action. Please contact our editor, Elizabeth Rushing (erushing@icrc.org), if you would like to contribute to this conversation.

I value this space for discussion and welcome dissent – it is healthy and critical to reflect together on how to ensure that we deliver the best humanitarian responses. Ultimately, I want to believe that we have a shared ambition: to help those most in need, even in the most challenging situations.

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