



WORLD HUMANITARIAN SUMMIT

ISTANBUL • 23-24 May 2016

Humanitarian Principles

SPECIAL SESSION SUMMARY

Core Responsibility Two of the Agenda for Humanity



“The principles are the key of our success; it is impossible to be successful without them. You have to explain why principles are to the benefit to everybody, to the government, to the opposition, to our volunteers.”

**Fatima Gailani,
President, Afghan Red
Crescent Society**

I. Overview

2016 marked the 50th anniversary of the proclamation of the Fundamental Principles by the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement – principles that since then have been widely adopted across the sector. 50 years on, there remain major challenges in ensuring the principles are applied and respected.

During the WHS consultations, there was a resounding reaffirmation of the principles and of their universality across cultures and regions. Participants from all parts of the world highlighted the significant role the principles can and do play in ensuring access in the most difficult environments, focusing our attention on those most in need and protecting our staff and volunteers.

This session aimed to bridge the gap between rhetoric and practice. It explored how to ensure humanitarian action remains distinct from political agendas. Most importantly, it focused on the concrete actions and commitments that are needed to address some of these challenges.

II. Key outcomes/themes

This session highlighted that a major challenge for humanitarian actors is to ensure that humanitarian action remains distinct from political agendas. In today's world, this is becoming more and more challenging. For example, there is a tendency for humanitarian response and funding to focus on contexts which attract greater political and media interest, while largely ignoring the millions in need in Central African Republic, Mali and Yemen, for example. The response to refugee flows into Europe, a small percentage of those received by other, less wealthy regions, has been marked by a distinct lack of humanity.

The session also acknowledged that humanitarian actors themselves apply the principles very inconsistently, often investing little in ensuring staff and volunteers understand how to apply principles in practice. Participants emphasized the need for humanitarian actors to have opportunities to exchange best practices on principled and quality programming, and be open and willing to learn from each other.

The particular challenges faced by national NGOs were highlighted, as these actors may struggle to find funding from donors who are politically neutral in conflict situations. As a result, they may face conditions such as compliance with specific strategies or geographical priorities. National NGOs are sometimes unable to choose the areas of interventions and beneficiaries based on needs. This affects the perception of local communities about them being a neutral and impartial organization.

The session also emphasized the critical role that governments must play in acknowledging their role in ensuring principled humanitarian action, whether as donor countries or countries facing crises. Humanitarian actors must discuss and agree with governments upon principled humanitarian action from the outset of a crisis and in all humanitarian operations.

The following specific commitments and announcements were made during the session:²

- Switzerland committed to clearly distinguish humanitarian action from the political agenda, including by preventing the use of Swiss humanitarian aid for political purposes, by consistently respecting and promoting humanitarian principles, and by developing public education programs to disseminate humanitarian principles informed by social and cultural traditions.
- Switzerland further committed to facilitate humanitarian action that is based exclusively on needs and conducted without discrimination, and to provide more core funding and reducing earmarking, thereby enabling humanitarian actors to

² Commitments that were submitted in writing can be found online at: www.agendaforhumanity.org

develop the financial independence necessary for principled humanitarian action.

- Germany committed to actively promote the humanitarian principles, to continue to enhance unconditional adherence to the humanitarian principles and to continue active dialogue with States and humanitarian partners on the value and importance of respecting the principles including in natural disasters and protracted crises.
- Germany further committed to continue to support and promote a clear distinction between humanitarian and political action, and to continue to participate in negotiating access for principled humanitarian action.
- The Secretariat of the Organisation for Islamic Cooperation (OIC) committed to continue to promote humanitarian principles and to integrate these principles into its humanitarian policy frameworks. The OIC further committed to facilitating experience sharing on challenges facing different actors in adhering to the principles.
- The United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA) committed to continue to call for accountability for violations of international law and to advocate and strive for greater humanitarian access to Palestine refugees when their essential needs are not being met. UNRWA also announced their intention to train their 30,000 staff on principles and how to apply them.
- The Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC) committed to defending the humanitarian principles through provision of humanitarian assistance and protection, and through courageous advocacy, and to challenging states on counter-terrorism measure that impede principled humanitarian action. NRC also announced that they would invest more resources in training staff to speak out more systematically when principles are violated, to invest more in humanitarian diplomacy, and to explain the principles to parties to conflict and civilian populations.

III. Way Forward

The session concluded that several concrete actions can contribute to greater practice of principled humanitarian action, including: training staff and volunteers on humanitarian principles and their application; speaking out about violations of humanitarian principles, and exerting pressure on other organisations to respect the principles; and engaging in dialogue with governments to agree on principled humanitarian response strategies.

The session concluded by agreeing on three overarching commitments moving forward:

- Uphold humanitarian principles as the foundation for all humanitarian action;
- Commit to applying them;
- Invest in knowledge and capacity building on the principles.

IV. Speakers

Moderator:

- Sorcha O'Callaghan, Head of Humanitarian Policy, British Red Cross

Speakers:

- Ambassador Manuel Bessler, Vice-Director, Delegate for humanitarian aid and head of the Swiss Humanitarian Aid Unit, Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation
- Ambassador Hesham Youssef, Assistant Secretary General, Organization of Islamic Cooperation
- Fatima Gailani, President, Afghan Red Crescent Society
- Pierre Krähenbühl, Commissioner General, United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA)
- Jan Egeland, Secretary General, Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC)
- Noha Yehya, Executive Director, Humanitarian Forum Yemen