HUMANITARIAN PRINCIPLES IN NEGOTIATION

How humanitarians understand, apply and negotiate humanitarian principles

A CCHN research into how the humanitarian system performs its own values

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Cover photo Mogadishu, Somalia. Badbaado camp for internally displaced persons.
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THE CENTRE OF COMPETENCE ON HUMANITARIAN NEGOTIATION

The Centre of Competence on Humanitarian Negotiation (CCHN) is a joint initiative of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), the World Food Programme (WFP), the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) and Médecins Sans Frontières Switzerland (MSF).

It was established in 2016 to provide concrete opportunities for frontline humanitarian negotiators to share and analyse their negotiation practices, to build practitioners' capacity to address recurring challenges and dilemmas in humanitarian negotiation, and to foster peer-to-peer exchange across agencies and regions in a safe environment. Its core objectives are:

- To foster a community of professionals engaged in frontline humanitarian negotiations.
- To promote critical reflection, learning and exchanges among peers within this community.
- To develop a stronger analytical framework and greater capacity for effective practice.

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Foreword

The four principles of neutrality, independence, impartiality and humanity have long been considered the undisputed pillars of humanitarian action. Despite academic debate around the universal applicability and realistic practice of these principles, for example, whether neutrality can realistically be expected of humanitarian workers whose own communities are under attack or first responders from conflict parties, the dominant donor and institutional narrative has continued to position these principles as central to humanitarian identity, often treating them as synonymous with it and as an inherent virtue.

In the context of denied access, attacks and killing of aid workers, and the general situation on the ground in places like Gaza, Sudan, and Ukraine, have brought to the forefront conversation amongst practitioners themselves on how “principles” that were supposed to protect failed, or the current ground realities that have proven that the principles are “outdated” and not applicable.

To answer questions about the relevance, effectiveness, and limitations of humanitarian principles, it would be prudent to first explore whether they are adequately understood, internalised, and operationalised. While the general operating environment has unquestionably changed, the fundamental question of whether the challenge lies with the principles, the external operating environment, or in how they are being used in practice remains. Given the CCHN's focus on negotiation practice, we pursued this inquiry from a negotiation lens.

Humanitarian negotiation is frequently and erroneously understood as a compromise on humanitarian principles, and at times, even as ethically suspect. In practice, negotiation is one of the primary means through which principled action is upheld. However, this demands a high level of mastery: humanitarian negotiators must be able to interpret and prioritise principles in context, while actively managing how their actions are perceived by their counterparts.

In essence, humanitarians are neither simply “principled” nor “unprincipled.” It is their actions – and, more importantly, how those actions are understood – that give meaning to their adherence to principles. In negotiation settings, the perception of neutrality, impartiality, and independence in the eyes of counterparts likely carries more weight than the humanitarian actors' intentions. Principled action, therefore, is not only a matter of conduct, but of perception.

Therefore, an important dimension of humanitarian negotiations is not an application of fixed rules but a constant balancing act: amongst the four principles, between organisational and donor expectations, policies and regulations, and between intention and perception.

To do so effectively, negotiators require not only skill but also space to exercise judgment, interpret principles in context, and manage how their positions are perceived. Without such space, principles risk becoming rigid formulations or performative assertions, rather than practical tools for achieving humanitarian outcomes. It is within this space that principled negotiation becomes possible, and where humanitarian principles move from abstract commitments to lived practice.

To address these aspects, the CCHN commissioned a two-part research series to examine two intrinsically linked but important aspects of this puzzle: Series 1 explores how humanitarian negotiators today understand, apply, and communicate humanitarian principles in practice, and how these principles are perceived by their counterparts in negotiation contexts.

Series 2 examines how principled action is enabled or constrained at the organisational level; it considers the systemic factors that reinforce, incentivise and inhibit principled action from a systems perspective.

Taken together, these two stages aim to generate a more grounded understanding of what principled humanitarian negotiation looks like in practice and to identify where the system supports or undermines such efforts.

Ultimately, these findings underscore that principled action and negotiations demand thorough mastery of core principles and capacity-building, both of which require dedicated investment. Crucially, this practical mastery must be underpinned by a culture that actively supports and enables principled action within organisations and among donors.

We hope that the insights in these two reports will provide guidance and food for thought for anyone tasked with upholding and applying humanitarian principles in practice.

Rehan Zahid
CCHN Deputy Director

Executive summary

This report presents findings from series one of “Humanitarian principles in practice”, a multi-phase inquiry led by the Centre of Competence on Humanitarian Negotiations (CCHN). Drawing on 34 semi-structured interviews with humanitarian staff across contexts, including Afghanistan, Gaza, Myanmar, Sudan, and Yemen, the research examines how humanitarian negotiators understand, apply, and communicate the four core principles – humanity, impartiality, neutrality, and independence – in practice, and how these principles are perceived by their counterparts.

At the foundational level, the research reveals a gap between conceptual knowledge of principles and operational application. While some practitioners struggled to define principles accurately, particularly neutrality and impartiality, many demonstrated broadly principled behaviour in their negotiations, suggesting that real-world exposure matters at least as much as formal training.

When looking at counterparts’ perceptions of principles, humanity emerges as the most universally applicable, while neutrality proves the most contested – perceived by authorities as foreign interference or implicit support for adversaries, and by communities as failure to provide protection or silence in the face of harm.

Language plays a crucial role in the application of humanitarian principles in negotiations. In practice, negotiators rarely invoke principles in abstract terms: they translate them into locally resonant language grounded in cultural or religious values, or frame them in practical, problem-solving terms.

Political power represents another critical dimension. Strong ideologically-driven political authority, highly politicised environments, the persistent use of force, or the absolute prioritisation of the military imperative, can restrict operational space and hinder principled action. These environments, at times, force practitioners and their organisations to recognise their limits, as they may require interventions beyond field negotiation, such as political pressure from the international community.

Principled pragmatism is widespread: compromises on impartiality, independence, and, occasionally, neutrality are frequently made to preserve access to communities in need and staff safety, in the name of humanity. Yet red lines – the thresholds negotiators refuse to cross – are rarely shared across organisations, and what constitutes an unacceptable compromise in one context may become a pragmatic necessity in another.

Introduction

Humanity, impartiality, neutrality, and independence. These are the four core humanitarian principles formally proclaimed in Vienna in 1965 by the International Conference of the Red Cross and Red Crescent (RCRC) and later reaffirmed in United Nations (UN) General Assembly resolutions and enshrined in numerous humanitarian standards and guidelines (CCHN, n.d.).

For decades, these principles have shaped the identity and boundaries of the humanitarian system, serving as both an ethical compass and an operational framework for humanitarian action. In recent years, however, decreasing respect for international humanitarian law, restrictive counter-terrorism measures, politicisation and conditionality of aid, funding cuts and attacks on humanitarian workers have contributed to the progressive shrinking of humanitarian space (O'Leary, 2021; Roepstorff, Faltas and Hövelmann, 2020; VanRooyen, 2025).

These challenges have directly affected populations in need by depriving them of access to assistance, while also constraining humanitarian actors' ability to uphold principles not only in their language but also in their practice.

This has also exacerbated a longstanding tension among humanitarian workers between the imperative to adhere to humanitarian principles and the need to maintain access to affected populations by managing counterparts' expectations, ensuring staff security, and fulfilling organisational mandates.

Building a lasting relationship of trust with counterparts while ensuring access to people in need is what humanitarian workers accomplish daily through humanitarian negotiations. Hence, now more than ever, the relevance and applicability of humanitarian principles in humanitarian operations and negotiations are pertinent.

Faced with increasingly complex dynamics in armed conflicts, humanitarian actors have expanded their investments in guidance, skills, and capacity-building to operate in high-risk and access-constrained environments (Harmer and Stoddard, 2018). To this end, the CCHN is undertaking a multi-phase inquiry entitled "Walking the talk: The practice of humanitarian principles: a multi-phase inquiry into how the humanitarian system performs its own values."

This report presents findings from Series One of this inquiry, which focuses on how humanitarian negotiators understand, apply, and communicate humanitarian principles in practice, and on how these principles are perceived by their counterparts in negotiation contexts.

Specifically, this research seeks to address the following core questions:

- How do humanitarians describe and enact humanitarian principles in negotiations?
- What factors influence how negotiators apply principles in humanitarian negotiations?
- How do counterparts perceive principles?
- What justifies compromising principles during humanitarian negotiations?
- What lessons can be drawn to strengthen humanitarian practice in negotiations?

This research adopts the CCHN definition of humanitarian negotiations as the interaction between humanitarian organisations and their counterparts to establish and maintain the presence of humanitarian organisations in crisis environments (conflicts, disasters, migration flows, epidemics, etc.), ensure humanitarian access to people in need, and deliver humanitarian aid and implement protection activities.

Methodology

As part of its multi-phased initiative on the practice of humanitarian principles, in summer 2025, the CCHN conducted a survey (CCHN, 2025) with around 380 respondents from its community of negotiators, the RCRC, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), and UN humanitarian staff working in over 30 countries. The survey aimed to collect indicative quantitative data on the level of theoretical and practical understanding of principles and challenges linked to their application in humanitarian negotiations.

A preliminary desk review of CCHN survey results informed both the sample selection process and the interview protocol. However, the core data collection for this research was conducted through online semi-structured interviews with 34 humanitarian staff selected from those who participated in the above-mentioned survey and indicated that they had a story of principles in negotiation to share. This group included staff of the RCRC, NGOs, UN agencies, mostly national and some international, who have been engaged in humanitarian negotiations in various contexts – including Afghanistan, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Myanmar, Nigeria, the Occupied Palestinian Territories, South Sudan, Sudan, Syria, Venezuela, and Yemen.

The sample included a mixed representation of gender and age, as well as staff from both national and international NGOs, with a small group of UN and RCRC staff.

The average respondent was 30 to 50 years old, held a university degree, had worked for ten years in the sector, and held managerial and non-managerial roles in protection, access, security, health, and programme development areas. In line with standard practice, and to encourage an open and frank exchange, interviews were conducted in full respect of respondents' confidentiality. Additionally, for the purpose of report publication, any sensitive information linked to specific individuals or locations that might cause harm to any person or community has been removed.

Finally, data analysis was complemented by a desk review of relevant literature. Literature references have been included only when relevant to the data findings, ensuring the analysis remained grounded in empirical evidence rather than predetermined by existing literature.

Research limitations

This study presents some methodological limitations that should be considered while interpreting the findings.

First, the research sample of 34 humanitarian negotiators is limited, and therefore, its findings offer indicative rather than representative insights into the broader humanitarian sector. Second, the research sample did not include representatives of authorities, armed groups, donors or communities. Counterparts' perceptions of humanitarian principles have been analysed exclusively through the interpretations of humanitarian negotiators. Direct engagement with counterparts could be necessary to validate these findings and is recommended for future research.

Third, while exploring how organisational and systemic factors – such as organisational cultures and policies, donors' frameworks and institutional policies – influence negotiators' behaviour, this research does so only through negotiators' own perceptions of this influence. A comprehensive analysis of how these factors shape principled action falls under the scope of Series 2 of this multi-phased initiative.

Principles' definitions and perceptions

Principles in humanitarian negotiations

According to the CCHN definition, and as understood by most interviewees, humanitarian negotiations encompass both a relational component – focused on building sustained relationships of trust with counterparts – and a transactional one – focused on establishing and agreeing on the specific terms and logistics of humanitarian operations. Their ultimate purpose is to ensure that humanitarian agencies can access people in need to provide humanitarian assistance and protection.

From the perspective of most interviewees, humanitarian principles are seen as tools that frame negotiations in three ways (also identified by McHugh and Bessler, 2006):

- As a **moral compass**, providing guidance on how negotiations should be undertaken, as they help negotiators answer foundational questions like 'why am I here and what must I prioritise?'. They are seen as foundational pillars of humanitarian work, reflecting humanitarian workers' moral commitment. As one participant expressed, principles act as 'a constant reminder of staying focused on the needs of the vulnerable people and away from any other agenda'.
- As **red lines** defining boundaries that cannot be crossed and within which to seek agreements. Principles help set the limits of what humanitarian actors can commit to during negotiations. Examples of red lines identified by respondents include putting staff at risk or allowing armed actors to enter humanitarian sites. Further analysis is included in the 'red lines' section.
- As a **negotiation framework**, providing criteria for developing options and arguments to foster dialogue and justify positioning. For example, stating the need to access a community with the aim of providing lifesaving assistance or justifying refusing the use of armed escorts because of the need to maintain neutrality.

While the above is the perspective of most interviewees, other participants cautioned that principles risk remaining ideals that struggle to find application, particularly in complex contexts, where authorities' interference and aid diversion are widespread, humanitarians are accused of supporting one party over others, and where poverty is so universal that any needs-based prioritisation feels like discrimination.

Principles definitions

Before examining how humanitarian negotiators apply principles in practice, this research assessed their ability to define the four core humanitarian principles. Analysis revealed varying levels of comprehension of the principles.

While some interviewees accurately defined and illustrated principles with relevant examples from their experience, certain respondents demonstrated fundamental confusion between neutrality and impartiality, often describing both as 'not taking sides' or treating them as interchangeable. Interestingly, a few of these same practitioners – despite their definitional confusion – provided coherent narratives demonstrating principled negotiation in practice, **suggesting a gap between conceptual articulation and operational understanding**. Respondents who could not articulate any of the principles were rare.

Notably, theoretical knowledge of principles showed no correlation with respondents' professional characteristics. Neither years of experience (averaging ten years), professional roles held throughout their careers (protection, access, health, programme development, program management), type of organisation they worked for at the time of the interview (local organisations, international NGOs, UN agencies, and the RCRC), geographical context, nor training participation predicted conceptual clarity. Nearly all interviewees

had attended at least one training on humanitarian principles, typically arranged by international organisations (UN and the RCRC), with some from local organisations or country-level coordination platforms.

What can be deduced – and what negotiators themselves emphasised – is that for a similar level of training and regardless of years of professional experience, negotiators' exposure to real-world negotiation scenarios is what elevates their understanding of the implications and application of principles.

The following sections present how research participants define each of the four core humanitarian principles.

Humanity: The most universally understood principle

Respondents understood humanity as alleviating human suffering, saving lives, leaving no one behind and associated it with concepts of dignity, do no harm, human rights, and compassion.

The principle of humanity aligns with religious and cultural values across different contexts. For example, negotiators referenced the concepts of mercy and the moral duty to save lives, as found in Quranic verses and prophetic hadiths. This universality makes humanity the most effective principle to invoke when other arguments fail.

The stories below illustrate that while the formal definitions of principles provide an important framework for humanitarian negotiations, appeals to fundamental human dignity and empathy often prove more persuasive – particularly in contexts where counterparts may not feel bound by international humanitarian law.

BOX 1 I Appealing to humanity

Access to Tigray – In 2022, during the Tigray conflict, discussing assistance to Tigray with the Amhara authorities was extremely difficult due to widespread perception that the UN and international organisations supported the Tigray liberation group. An international organisation approached senior officials in the Health Bureau and the Food Security and Preparedness Bureau to request access for weekly cash distributions in Tigray. During the negotiation, they focused on the urgent need to provide lifesaving assistance to vulnerable civilians, independently from their political affiliation or ethnicity, to ultimately alleviate human suffering.

Eventually, after discussing logistical and operational matters, they secured an agreement to access Tigray.

Removing chains – During visits to detention sites across Chad, a humanitarian organisation encountered a facility in the middle of the Sahara Desert where prisoners wore iron chains on their ankles, ostensibly to prevent escape attempts, though de facto for punishment purposes. Over several meetings, the organisation tried to dissuade the prison authorities from implementing such an inhumane practice by invoking the Mandela Rules on detention, the State constitution and its provisions regarding human dignity, and various international legal frameworks that prohibit such treatment.

None of these approaches succeeded until the team switched its approach, and rather than focusing on legal obligations, appealed to humanity and dignity in personal terms, reminding authorities that those prisoners, like them, have families and are human beings who are already suffering the punishment of imprisonment. This framing resonated with the authorities, and the chains were removed.

Impartiality: The most confused principle

Impartiality emerged as the principle most frequently confused with neutrality, with various respondents conflating the two concepts, as both link to inclusion and fairness.

Analysis of negotiation stories suggests this conceptual confusion does not necessarily translate into flawed practice. While some respondents mislabelled or conflated principles theoretically, they demonstrated accurate practical application through their actions – for example, applying non-discrimination in beneficiary selection and maintaining a non-partisan position in conflict contexts were used as practical examples of impartiality and neutrality, respectively.

Respondents who accurately defined impartiality described it as serving according to need: 'making decisions and providing support based on need and facts, without bias, favouritism, or discrimination'. They associated the principle with vulnerability-based beneficiary selection and needs-based assistance, such as aid distribution or the inclusion of women in project activities. As a negotiation tool, impartiality enables transparency in operational decision-making and builds credibility with counterparts. In practice, this means explaining the rationale behind operational decisions, such as vulnerability-based selection criteria or field assessment processes. This sense of inclusion, even without direct involvement in decision-making, has in several cases proved instrumental in reaching positive negotiation outcomes.

Neutrality: The most controversial principle

Respondents mostly defined neutrality as not taking sides in conflict and avoiding any action that could be interpreted as political. As a participant explained, neutrality means that 'while still engaging actively with all sides to secure safe access for civilians, humanitarian facilities, staff, and assets are not aligned with any party and cannot be used for military or political purposes.'

In practice, negotiators frequently illustrated neutrality through organisational resistance to armed escort requirements, which they viewed as compromising their perceived neutrality with all counterparts. As the story in Box 2 illustrates, in contexts like Myanmar, where trust in humanitarian organisations is low, neutrality is often misunderstood as siding with the opposing party.

As noted above, neutrality emerged as the principle most frequently confused with impartiality. One respondent explained a way to distinguish the two: *'Neutrality enables presence and access, while impartiality is the ethical logic guiding who receives assistance and why. In simple terms, neutrality is what allows us to stay in the room, while impartiality is what justifies what we do and how we do it while we are there.'*

BOX 2 I Balancing neutrality perceptions across conflict lines

Following the 2021 military coup in Myanmar, communities initially rejected humanitarian organisations, suspecting them of siding with the government. By 2022, after humanitarian organisations' efforts to work on coordination and communication, acceptance improved. However, the government of the State Administration Council (SAC) has imposed severe restrictions by its military that believed humanitarian organisations sided with the opposition. In SAC-controlled areas, humanitarian actors can only operate with a very low profile, at very high risk, making logistics extremely challenging. For example, humanitarian supplies cannot be transported by truck, but only in small loads by motorbike trips.

Appealing to neutrality and claiming to work with all parties to reach those in need is often interpreted as working for the enemy. This widespread lack of trust in Myanmar has created an impasse for humanitarian action.

Independence: The most difficult -to-preserve principle

Nearly all respondents understood independence as organisational autonomy in decision-making, free from political, economic or military influence. In practice, they identified threats to this principle from two primary sources: authorities, including de facto authorities and armed groups, and donors. Specifically, threats from authorities take the form of interference in operational decision-making regarding geographic areas of intervention, beneficiary selection, organisational staffing, and partnership agreements. Donor-related threats stem from funding conditionalities that dictate intervention area and activity types based more on funding parameters than evidence-based needs assessments.

Given the structural realities of humanitarian financing and the need to operate within sovereign states or areas under armed group control, maintaining principled autonomy while ensuring continued access to populations in need remains a difficult balance to strike.

BOX 3 I Distribution monitoring in South Sudan

In South Sudan, local authorities demanded taking over aid distributions in a refugee camp due to accountability and aid diversion concerns. The humanitarian organisation in charge of the distribution proposed addressing the Commission for Refugee Affairs, a government entity with a relevant mandate, and inviting them to monitor distributions rather than conduct them. This way, the organisation preserved access to the beneficiary list, protecting its confidentiality, while at the same demonstrating a willingness to address authorities' concerns.

Beyond the four: other principles that matter

When asked whether additional principles should be included alongside the core four, or removed, most respondents felt the existing framework should remain unchanged, emphasising that the four principles are interrelated and mutually reinforcing.

However, some respondents suggested that other important humanitarian values should receive equal recognition. Most of these values revolve around concepts of dignity, voice and meaningful participation of affected populations. Respondents highlighted respect for local communities - including indigenous communities, and acknowledgement of their ways, beliefs, and culture, to avoid creating unbalanced power dynamics. They noted that non-discrimination, while falling under the principle of impartiality, lacks visibility as a standalone value. They emphasised community engagement and accountability as meaningful participation of affected communities in programming decisions and accountability to those communities rather than primarily to donors or organisational headquarters. Finally, respondents identified integrity and professionalism as foundational values that should be adopted by all humanitarian professionals.

Principles perceptions

As stated in the introduction, counterparts' perceptions of humanitarian principles in this research have been analysed exclusively through humanitarian negotiators' interpretations. Respondents distinguished between how authorities and communities perceive humanitarian principles.

Regarding authorities – including state armed forces and non-state armed groups – respondents noted that principles are less controversial when clearly tied to a strong organisational mandate and identity. Neutrality, for example, is more readily accepted when invoked by the ICRC or Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF), given their established reputations and historical consistency applying the principles (see Box 5). As Haver and Carter (2016) observe, their principled approach is commonly seen as a major reason these organisations have – at

times – achieved better access in difficult environments. In other words, parties to the conflict perceive these organisations as actually impartial, neutral and independent, and are thus more likely to leave them unharmed.

However, in conflict contexts, authorities tend to disregard principles when leveraging humanitarian assistance for personal benefit becomes possible – for example, by diverting aid resources. More problematically, principles are increasingly overridden when military imperatives take precedence over humanitarian norms. This occurs when principled action becomes structurally constrained and subordinated to strategic or security objectives rather than to humanitarian law and the needs of affected populations. Consequently, humanitarian access may be denied, restricted or weaponised as a tool of conflict, leaving humanitarian actors with little or no leverage to uphold principles. Where political power carries strong ideological connotations, authorities often perceive principles as impositions of Western values clashing with local cultural or religious norms, or as tools of foreign interference in sovereign authority.

Regarding specific principles, while humanity represents universally shared values, respondents noted divergent perceptions of impartiality and neutrality.

Impartiality is more readily understood and more positively perceived by communities than other principles, as it translates to aid being distributed according to vulnerability rather than identity or affiliation. However, as a respondent working in South Sudan reported, in the context of widespread poverty, where needs are nearly universal, applying impartiality becomes difficult and may paradoxically be perceived as discrimination by those not selected.

Neutrality emerged as the most controversial principle due to divergent perceptions across stakeholder groups. Authorities and armed groups in highly politicised contexts often interpret neutrality as reluctance to engage and share information, or even implicit support for adversaries, creating impasses for humanitarian action. As a participant observed regarding Myanmar: 'Appealing to humanitarian principles doesn't work with either side of the conflict. Humanitarian organisations are not trusted: each side thinks we support its opponent.'

Communities in conflict settings may perceive neutrality differently – as passivity, silence or distance. They view it as a failure to provide protection or advocacy when most needed. As a participant said: 'If you are neutral, who speaks for us?'

Some respondents also expressed concerns about the practical application of neutrality, warning that neutrality should not become moral indifference. They argued that nuanced interpretation is essential for practitioners navigating real-world dilemmas while remaining faithful to humanitarian values and avoiding doing harm. As a negotiator in Nigeria reflected: *'When one party is causing more harm to the other, by being neutral, there is the risk that the organisation does more harm. As much as you want to be neutral, I just feel that there are scenarios where you may want to swing more to one side than the other.'*

Notably, while this section has highlighted significant perception challenges, respondents also described instances where principles were positively received – particularly when invoked by organisations with established credibility or when counterparts were already receptive to them. This suggests that the perception

of principles is not uniformly negative and warrants further research to identify the factors that shape how different counterparts interpret and respond to principled humanitarian action.

BOX 4 I When a principled reputation saves lives

In 2014 in Mali, an international organisation's driver was kidnapped by members of a non-state armed group. Once the organisation managed to establish contact with the kidnappers, their leader ordered the driver's immediate release, as he had recognised the organisation as neutral.

In this case, the organisation's principled reputation helped save the humanitarian worker's life. Tragically, however, there have been other cases where even a strong principled reputation proved insufficient to prevent loss of life.

Principles in action

Upholding humanitarian principles in negotiations requires more than merely stating them verbally. This section examines how negotiators translate principles into practices, adapt their language to resonate locally, and negotiate trade-offs between principled stances and operational realities.

Factors shaping the application of principles in negotiation practice

Negotiators' ability to apply principles in negotiations is shaped by multiple factors. As explored in the previous chapter, theoretical **knowledge** of principles combined with exposure to real-world negotiation scenarios forms one dimension. Organisational dynamics (mandate clarity, reputation, institutional red lines, internal support/backing in negotiations) and donors' guidelines (earmarked funding, institutional red lines) also emerged as factors influencing the application of principles. These **systemic factors** require further analysis.

Analysis of counterparts' perceptions revealed that building **trust** precedes invoking humanitarian principles in negotiations. Trust establishes both individual and organisational credibility, determining whether principled stances are perceived as legitimate concerns by counterparts or dismissed as interference. Negotiators' stories reveal that trust is built through consistent and transparent behaviours and context-appropriate language. Below are the identified common behaviours that negotiators adopt to apply principles in practice: each humanitarian principle manifests through distinct but interconnected practices.

Humanity emerges in how negotiators build connections by appealing to shared human values (compassion, mercy), connecting with religious and cultural values, and demonstrating respect and dignity towards counterparts. It also manifests in a sustained focus on saving lives and relieving suffering by articulating practical consequences when principles are violated and by sustaining operational presence in high-risk areas or locations that others have abandoned, but where needs are high.

Impartiality requires applying non-discrimination in both substance and process by focusing on beneficiaries' individual vulnerabilities, transcending political affiliation, ethnicity, or other factors, and demonstrating operational transparency through practices such as field assessments or beneficiary selection processes.

Neutrality emerges through boundary-setting with all conflict parties by engaging with all parties and factions, declining partisan demands (for example, declining to endorse political statements or positions), informing counterparts about organisational mandate to build their understanding of institutional and operational missions and limitations.

Independence centres on protecting organisational autonomy from external pressures by preserving decision-making authority over sensitive processes (beneficiary selections, staffing, budgeting), and by invoking alternative accountability mechanisms, including donor requirements or headquarters guidelines.

Analysis revealed two complementary **language** strategies adopted by practitioners, illustrated in stories in box 5 below. First, negotiators frequently avoid explicit principles terminology, recognising it may not resonate with counterparts, particularly authorities, as previously illustrated. Humanity is the exception due to its discussed universality. Instead, negotiators find it more effective to translate principles into locally resonant language grounded in cultural or religious values, either speaking the local language or working with cultural intermediaries.

Second, negotiators employ practical language. Rather than invoking abstract principles, they emphasise tangible outcomes and the impact of principled actions. They seek common ground in values, interests, and outcomes with their counterparts, framing issues in operational and problem-solving terms rather than rights-based language. As a practitioner working in Afghanistan observed, 'Talking about humanitarian principles nowadays can be considered too political and sensitive. Otherwise, talking about practical needs may work better instead.'

Annex II further explores how negotiators most commonly define and communicate each of the four core principles.

Political power represents another critical dimension that can, to varying degrees, challenge negotiators' ability to uphold principles in negotiations (see stories in Box 6 below).

Strongly ideologically driven political authority often creates incompatibility between humanitarian values and prevailing ideological, cultural and religious frameworks, often challenging negotiators' ability to establish common ground as a foundation for engagement. This is the case, for example, with authorities and armed groups whose governance is grounded in religious doctrine, such as the Taliban in Afghanistan, the Houthis in Yemen, and Boko Haram in the Lake Chad basin. Highly politicised environments, such as those in Myanmar, Sudan, Syria, the Occupied Palestinian Territories, where humanitarian neutrality is contested, can restrict operational space and hinder principled action. In most extreme contexts, like Gaza, where political power treats humanitarian norms as secondary to its own military strategic objectives, or disregards them entirely, humanitarian action becomes structurally subordinated to it – blocked, curtailed or turned into a bargaining chip. In such cases, humanitarian actors' ability to uphold principled action is eroded by forces well beyond their control, requiring solutions that extend beyond negotiation alone into the broader terrain of political and humanitarian diplomacy.

The table below offers an overview of the extent to which humanitarian negotiators can influence the factors examined above in relation to the application of humanitarian principles in negotiations:

Most controllable	Somewhat controllable	Least controllable
Negotiators' theoretical knowledge of principles	Level of trust and credibility with counterparts	Political power (when there is little to no space for humanitarian norms to operate)
Language adopted	Negotiators' exposure to negotiation practice	
	Organisation political power (when there is some space for dialogue and search for common ground)	Prioritisation

BOX 5 I Language in negotiations

Earthquake response in Myanmar - Following a recent earthquake, humanitarian access in Myanmar became increasingly complex as local authorities began determining who would receive assistance and where it could be delivered. The situation required constant negotiations to ensure that aid reached the most vulnerable populations based on need rather than political considerations.

During an access negotiation with authorities to conduct multi-purpose cash assistance, the negotiation team of a local humanitarian organisation deliberately avoided technical humanitarian jargon and instead adapted a language that resonated with Myanmar's cultural values, speaking of helping neighbours in times of need and practising fairness, concepts deeply rooted in local tradition. They also spoke about the needs of the most vulnerable, emphasising the shared responsibility to save lives.

This approach proved effective. Counterparts began to engage constructively, asking practical questions about how to avoid duplication, monitor distributions and ensure fairness. As a result, the team was able to deliver multi-purpose cash assistance. As the interviewee reflected, the negotiation succeeded because 'when we focus on shared values and not politics, humanitarian action can move forward even in the most complex situations.'

Women's travel and *mahram* in Yemen - In Yemen's Houthi-controlled areas, a negotiator organised for women doctors to participate in a European training. Authorities were reticent both to allow the training to be conducted in Europe, and to permit women to attend without a male guardian (*mahram*); noncompliance risked accusations of violating religious principles, promoting Western immorality, or espionage.

During negotiations, the team explained that the training would prepare women doctors to treat female patients, addressing a healthcare gap that authorities recognised. Rather than challenging the *mahram* requirement directly, they explained their organisation could not assume responsibility for male guardians during international travel, as they were not staff members. The negotiator included a local team member to advise on culturally appropriate language.

The women doctors were allowed to travel without a *mahram*. The negotiator reflected that in contexts where access is restricted and humanitarian principles are poorly understood, focusing on practical purposes is more effective than invoking abstract principles or human rights language.

BOX 6 I When negotiations fail

The stories below illustrate situations in which negotiation outcomes are influenced by factors beyond the negotiator's control, such as political power dynamics and the ideological factors discussed above.

Women's medical education, Afghanistan – A former humanitarian worker was organising medical classes for a group of women eager to become doctors, in an attempt to address the critical shortage of female healthcare providers created by restrictions on women's work and education under the Taliban's rule.

When the authorities found out, he was instructed to halt them. The decision came from the highest level of authority in Kabul, leaving little room for negotiation, and was justified by the Taliban-imposed ban on women's education and employment. Nevertheless, he persisted and tried to negotiate, invoking the principle of humanity through religiously grounded, culturally appropriate language. He also emphasised that having educated women doctors was essential to ensure access to health care to Afghan women, who could not be visited by male doctors. Despite his efforts, while some officials privately expressed understanding and promised to support his intent, he was referred to court and forced to stop the program.

Women's access to legal services, Yemen - A local humanitarian organisation in Yemen received funding for a project aimed at providing access to legal services to women in Yemen. To get the project approved by the authorities, the organisation leveraged contacts at different government levels as well as other influential contacts. During these meetings, the authorities seemed positively receptive. However, the organisation subsequently received a formal rejection accompanied by the accusation of contributing to destroying families by encouraging women to seek divorce. For the authorities, the project constituted a threat to cultural norms founded in their ideology. The negotiator tried to defend the project by appealing to the principle of humanity, arguing that helping women access legal services was about protecting their rights and well-being, not about promoting divorce. However, these efforts proved vain. As the interviewee stated: 'Sometimes showing evidence-based data is the only way you can convince government actors, but in Yemen, limited operational access often prevents collecting such data.'

Health care in time of conflict, Cameroon – During an ongoing conflict in Cameroon, the mobile clinic of a humanitarian organisation picked up a wounded combatant who needed urgent hospital care. On the way to the nearest hospital, they got stopped at the checkpoint controlled by the opposing party in the conflict. The armed authorities at the checkpoint demanded personal data of all the people in the mobile clinic, including the patient. The organisation refused, citing the principles of independence, medical confidentiality, and protection of medical transport under international humanitarian law. These appeals did not resonate with the authorities, whose main concern was to enforce their military presence in the area and identify and capture suspect enemy combatants. Consequently, they ended up forcefully taking custody of the patient and arresting the ambulance staff.

BOX 6 I When negotiations fail (continued)

Humanitarian zones, Gaza – In 2024, during the ongoing genocide in Gaza, civilians were forcibly displaced from north of the Gaza Strip to the south, in West Khan Younis, into what was designated a 'humanitarian zone' – where humanitarian assistance was allowed from time to time, at the Israeli authorities' discretion. No assistance was allowed at all in the north. In October, the authorities decided to block humanitarian access in both north and south of Gaza for three consecutive months, apparently due to a major Israeli military operation in the north. During that period, any attempt to negotiate with Israeli authorities failed, due to their lack of political will to engage in humanitarian negotiations that interfered with their military objectives: 'They have no regard for civilians' rights. They prioritise their strategic and military goals over humanitarian principles.' At the time of writing, the January 2025 ceasefire allowed minimal resumption of some negotiations, though access remained severely constrained and unpredictable.

When principles are compromised

Humanitarian negotiators often operate in complex contexts where principles are confronted with operational realities. These realities compel negotiators to assess difficult trade-offs: weighing the costs of compromise against the imperative to uphold principled action.

In respondents' stories, these trade-offs are generally triggered by authorities' or, more rarely, donor interference, as well as community pressure. What did not emerge from the data – and may warrant further exploration – is the extent to which internal factors, such as negotiators' uncertainty about their own red lines or insufficient organisational guidance, also drive compromise decisions.

As illustrated by stories in box 7, when negotiators compromise, impartiality and independence are most frequently affected, with neutrality affected to a lesser extent. Particularly, respondents reported making concessions around impartiality by allowing partial influence over beneficiary selection or project geographical coverage; independence by tolerating interference with project implementation, such as staffing decisions or authorities' participation in distribution monitoring; and neutrality by accepting armed escort requirements.

These compromises are typically justified by competing imperatives: ensuring staff security and safety, preserving working relationships with counterparts, and subsequently, maintaining access to meet humanitarian needs, which represents the fundamental goal of humanitarian action and embodies the principle of humanity. As Haver and Carter (2016) observe, because humanity is the heart of the humanitarian endeavour, upholding it sometimes requires compromising impartiality, neutrality or independence.

Spending imperative, peer pressure among organisations and organisational reputational risk – though plausible drivers of compromise – did not emerge from the interviews and would require further exploration.

As stories reveal, several situational factors shape negotiators' trade-off decisions. The most common denominator is the exceptionality of the situation, typically accompanied by urgency to save lives and strict timeframes. Time pressure can also lead to a real or perceived lack of alternatives, compelling negotiators to make quick decisions to meet urgent needs. When time allows, negotiators navigate the decision-making process by securing collective approval through intra- and inter-agency coordination mechanisms, such as headquarters approval and United Nations Country Team (UNCT) coordinated positioning, and through evidence-based assessments, like relocating or adding an area of implementation.

Overall, many respondents recognised that compromise is often unavoidable in certain situations. For these practitioners, what matters is identifying whether and when compromise is worthwhile and determining what threshold should not be crossed to still consider themselves acting in a principled manner. Notably absent

from these reflections were considerations of setting precedents and how they play in trade-off decisions. In contrast, some respondents demonstrated a degree of aversion to compromise, which, though not expressed explicitly, may reveal a vision of principles as inviolable. As one respondent reflected, 'if one principle is compromised, the others are at risk, as they are strictly interrelated.' From this standpoint, each concession on one principle carries systematic implications for the others. For example, allowing authorities to influence beneficiary lists may be interpreted as political alignment with them, undermining the organisation's perceived neutrality.

BOX 7 I Stories of principles compromised

Impartiality

Managing pressure during aid distribution in Gaza – In 2025, during a shelter distribution in Gaza, large crowds gathered around the distribution point, including a group of individuals who demanded to see the beneficiary list to verify that the extremely vulnerable people they knew were included. Sharing the list would have compromised impartiality, confidentiality and community trust. However, outright refusal would have risked sparking violence and suspending the distribution.

To manage the situation, the humanitarian team rapidly conducted phone vulnerability assessments of the proposed individuals and added 80% to the distribution list. To prevent recurrence, they met the following day with the *mukhtar* and the families involved, explaining that such interventions created security risks and raised fairness concerns. The families acknowledged the issue and offered to help maintain safety at future distributions through their unarmed presence on site.

Communal violence in Myanmar – Following the spark of communal violence in 2012 in Rakhine State, the local population started protesting, accusing the UN and the humanitarian community of favouring the Rohingya population and excluding them from assistance. Many Rohingya staff were arrested.

After months of coordination and consultations with authorities and the local community, a UN agency committed to a 50-50 assistance model (50% to the local community and 50% to the Rohingya). Negotiators avoided high-level, principled language, focusing instead on practical explanations of the organisational mandate, the type of assistance, and targeting criteria based on needs rather than ethnicity. As the interviewee noted, 'It takes time to build trust in negotiations, and compromises sometimes have to be made in order to still be able to reach some of the most vulnerable.'

BOX 7 I Stories of principles compromised (continued)

Access and beneficiary list in Yemen – In 2016, Ansar Allah denied humanitarians access to most frontline areas in Yemen. They demanded that all beneficiary lists be reviewed and cleared by them – a requirement that the humanitarian community found unacceptable due to protection concerns and for fear of setting a dangerous precedent that would have eroded the principles of impartiality and independence. One of the few international organisations still active in those areas proposed a compromise: authorities could submit their own beneficiary lists, which the organisation would review. For individuals appearing on the humanitarian list but not on the authorities' list, joint screening would be conducted.

This prevented full list disclosure, while accepting some degree of authority interference in beneficiary selection – a trade-off deemed necessary to maintain the already limited access to critical areas. As the negotiator noted, 'In negotiations, you act on a thin line if you are the only one operating in a certain area: sometimes you need to compromise.'

Independence

Waste collection in Gaza – In a camp for internally displaced persons (IDP) in Gaza with 200,000 civilian residents in need of daily waste collection, Israeli authorities blocked the entry of all water, sanitation and hygiene materials for over a month. During negotiations, the humanitarian organisation responsible for waste collection had minimal leverage and felt it had no alternative but to accept a constrained permission: garbage collection twice weekly within a three-hour window (8-11am).

This arrangement was drastically inadequate: minimum health and sanitation standards required daily collection, preferably early in the morning to prevent the spread of disease. Authorities sometimes randomly revoked even the twice-a-week permission, further worsening conditions. As the negotiator reflected: *'Because of the compromise, needs were partially met, the emergency situation was partially managed, minimum standards somehow met. But we lost our operational independence. Authorities' interference was huge.'*

Female staff in Afghanistan – During a vulnerability assessment conducted by a UN agency's local implementing partner, the Taliban halted the activity because of female staff presence, despite their compliance with hijab and *mahram* requirements. Staff tried to negotiate and leverage networks, but without success. The governor, who was from Kandahar and close to the Taliban leadership, threatened to cancel their Memorandum of Understanding.

Under such pressure, the organisation replaced female staff with male colleagues for that specific activity. Despite this compromise, they maintained control over the beneficiary list, which primarily included women-headed households.

BOX 7 I Stories of principles compromised (continued)

Neutrality and independence

Armed escort in Sudan – A Sudanese humanitarian organisation needed to transport relief supplies from their warehouse to a distribution site. As the route required driving through an area frequently under active shelling, authorities presented two options: accept a military escort or allow the military to take over the truck and complete the delivery themselves. The second option was unacceptable to the organisation: after internal consultations and coordination with other organisations, it opted to accept the military escort as the only viable means of delivering assistance. To mitigate the risk to their perceived neutrality, they engaged the recipient community in advance to explain the situation. The community demonstrated understanding of the exceptional security circumstances and did not question the organisation's neutrality.

Armed escort in Nigeria – A local organisation in Nigeria was required to use armed escorts during a cash distribution, as per the donor's security procedures for implementing partners. The organisation challenged this requirement, arguing that the distribution site was safer than other locations where they had operated without escorts. More significantly, they warned that visible armed protection would undermine their perceived neutrality within the community.

Despite these arguments, the donor maintained its position, citing mandatory procedures. The organisation eventually complied to ensure assistance could be distributed. As anticipated, some community members questioned their neutrality. Fortunately, this remained an isolated episode, as other distribution sites located within camps or more secure areas did not trigger the same procedural requirements.

Armed escort in Somalia – In Somalia, an international humanitarian organisation was meant to provide life-saving medical assistance in an area at high security risk due to the presence of Al-Shabaab. During access negotiations, authorities presented a non-negotiable condition: the organisation must accept local armed community protection escorts or withdraw from the area entirely. Despite invoking their imperative to maintain neutrality, the organisation found no room for negotiation and decided to operate, exceptionally, with armed escorts to deliver assistance.

Red lines

What are the thresholds where negotiators draw the line? For some, what constitutes an unacceptable compromise in one setting may become a pragmatic necessity in another. As one respondent put it, 'What may be negotiable in one context can become non-negotiable in another: it is the context that determines whether a principle is a red, yellow, or green line.'

The use of armed escorts, authorities' interference in staffing decisions or beneficiary selection– all areas where compromise might occur – can shift from flexible negotiation points to red lines depending on the specific operational environment and related risk assessment.

In contrast, a small number of respondents were clear that certain boundaries should always remain non-negotiable and thus constitute hard red lines. For them, humanitarian principles function as critical red lines in negotiations. Examples include:

Aid diversion/independence – Accepting any request, explicit or implicit, that humanitarian assistance be diverted or controlled by armed actors or authorities for political, military, or personal gain. This includes allowing local authorities to interfere in aid allocation, for example, favouring certain groups, such as

combatants' families over others. Accepting such conditions would compromise independence, potentially put beneficiaries at risk and erode community trust. The same applies to cases in which humanitarian staff misuse or divert aid for personal purposes, eroding the trust of affected communities.

Sharing information for military intelligence and accepting armed personnel presence in humanitarian sites/neutrality – Sharing information that could be used for military or security purposes, such as sensitive data on displaced populations, opposing a faction's leadership structures, or security incidents that could serve beyond the humanitarian scope and could put civilians and staff at risk. Another red line is to accept the presence of weapons, armed personnel, or military activities in humanitarian sites (distribution points, IDP camps) or facilities. In one instance, a humanitarian organisation in Myanmar suspended a planned aid distribution when armed actors insisted on attending it. While this delayed assistance, it preserved the civilian and humanitarian character of the response. Similarly, during the Tigray conflict, when government authorities pressured humanitarian actors to deliver assistance only in government-controlled areas, humanitarian organisations resisted such pressure. As a humanitarian worker stated, 'While we were flexible on modalities, sequencing, and monitoring arrangements, we could not compromise on needs-based targeting'.

Excluding groups from assistance/impartiality – Surrendering to authorities' pressure to exclude or prioritise beneficiaries based on ethnicity, political affiliation, or perceived loyalty. For example, in Kayah State, Myanmar, authorities pressured a humanitarian organisation to exclude from assistance certain communities deemed 'unsupportive'. The organisation consistently refused such demands, maintaining that assistance must be based solely on need.

Putting beneficiaries at risk/humanity – Accepting authorities' request to violate data confidentiality, particularly in protection programming[1], which – if compromised – could cause serious harm to beneficiaries.

Putting staff at risk/humanity – Accepting criminalisation and detention of humanitarian actors, tolerating operational circumstances that would put humanitarian staff at serious risk, such as travelling through active conflict areas without security assurances.

Red lines are easier to uphold when applied consistently, agreed upon and shared with other humanitarian actors. As one respondent stated, 'When appealing to red lines, consistency across agencies makes a big difference; red lines are much harder to uphold alone'.

[1] While some degree of sharing beneficiary lists appeared justifiable in some negotiation compromises described in interviews, these cases referred to aid distributions rather than protection activities, which are inherently considered more sensitive.

What did not emerge from the data collected, and may warrant further exploration, is the level of guidance negotiators receive from their organisations on making trade-offs, and the ethical frameworks, rather than the principles themselves, and risk management approaches they use to make these decisions.

BOX 8 I Stories of red lines

The stories below illustrate that clearly stating red lines as principled boundaries rather than mere negotiation tactics does not end negotiations, but can shift the conversation towards workable solutions. As another respondent stated, 'Flexibility in how assistance is delivered can coexist with firmness on what cannot be compromised'.

Humanity in Sudan – At a gathering site hosting displaced populations in Sudan, authorities asked a humanitarian organisation to disclose gender-based violence (GBV) programming data, stating that their responsibility for the site population required access to this information. Rather than simply invoking the principles of confidentiality and do no harm, or categorically refusing, which could risk jeopardising the negotiation, the organisation provided a detailed, transparent explanation of its data management systems for GBV survivors and explained the very limited degree of involvement of most staff. This helped to reassure authorities that confidentiality wasn't about keeping information from them or failing to be accountable to them, but rather a systematic protection measure applied to everyone. After such a thorough explanation, the authorities agreed to allow the activities to proceed.

Neutrality and independence in Sudan – When a local humanitarian organisation planned to renovate a space for children's services in a public building in Sudan, authorities requested the rehabilitation of the entire building, including administrative offices and displaying the organisation's logo alongside the government's. The organisation stood its ground, limiting interventions to the children's area as planned. Additionally, they created an activity-specific logo that could be displayed without compromising organisational neutrality.

Lessons learned and recommendations

This research has reflected on the **gap between the definitions of humanitarian principles and how humanitarian practitioners apply and communicate** them in their negotiation practices.

We learned that practitioners often struggle to articulate textbook definitions, especially of impartiality and neutrality, yet many can describe context-aware decisions in negotiations that are broadly principled. This suggests that conceptual clarity and practical wisdom do not always evolve in parallel, and that real-life experience matters at least as much as formal training.

We also learned how **central language and framing are to principled practice**. Negotiators rarely talk about principles in abstract or technical terms; instead, they translate them into locally meaningful notions and concrete problem-solving. Humanity is the only principle relatively recognised across contexts, while others must often be reframed to avoid being perceived as foreign or politicised.

A further lesson concerns the **limits of individual agency**. Negotiators often operate within structural constraints that they only partially control. Politicised environments, ideologically driven authorities, and military imperatives all limit the space for principled action. In this constrained space, **principled pragmatism** is widely practised, though rarely made explicit or reflected upon: compromises on impartiality, independence and occasionally neutrality are often justified by negotiators in the name of preserving access and staff security, in line with the principle of humanity. **Red lines** are not widely shared: what constitutes an unacceptable compromise in one setting may become a pragmatic necessity in another.

Finally, the study underlines the centrality of **trust** – in individual negotiators and organisational reputations – for the effectiveness of principled negotiation. However, this research captures only negotiators' own interpretations of their counterparts' perspectives, which warrants further exploration.

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Annexes

Annex I – Interview protocol

Humanitarian principles in negotiations: interpretation, application and challenges

PART I - Demographics

Gender
Age range: 30-45, 46-55, 56+
Level of education: primary, secondary, university
Country you currently work in
Type of organisation you currently work for: local NGO, international NGO, RCRC, UN
Years of experience in the humanitarian sector (field vs. headquarters)
In which type of role/sector

PART II - Concepts and interpretation

1. I'm going to present a scenario of a general humanitarian context:

   You are a humanitarian staff member in country A, currently torn by a civil war (existing government vs liberation/other movement). You are the camp manager of an IDP camp located close to the front line. You oversee the provision of essential services to the camp population.

   I'd like you to give me four practical examples (one for each principle) of how humanitarian principles could be challenged or applied/reinforced in this scenario.

2. How would you describe the principles in relation to your work: a compass, a red line/boundary marker, a negotiation tool, an institutional tool, an ideal (feel free to add/pick more than one). Please elaborate on why.

3. Where did you acquire your knowledge of humanitarian principles (i.e., through trainings organised by your organisation, personal interest, experience on the ground… more than one can apply).

   Do you feel your ability to understand and apply principles in your work has changed over time? What has affected this change?

PART III - Application and challenges

4. Do you feel that your organisation engages counterparts (armed groups, local authorities…) on humanitarian principles? If not, why? / If yes, how? And how do you think counterparts perceive this? Feel free to answer with examples from your own experience.

5. Could you tell me about a time when appealing to humanitarian principles during a negotiation worked?

   Why do you think it worked?
   How did your counterparts engage in this situation?
   Do you feel like you had to adapt the language of principles (i.e. adapt into cultural/religious terms)? Why, and if yes – how?

6. Could you tell me about a time when appealing to humanitarian principles during a negotiation did not work?

   Why do you think it didn't work?

How did your counterparts engage in this situation?

Do you feel like you had to adapt the language of principles (i.e. adapt into cultural/religious terms)? Why, and if yes – how?

What other approaches do you think might have been or were more helpful in this situation?

7. Were you ever in a negotiation where you/your organisation had to compromise on one or more principles? Can you tell the story (how was this justified, what was the outcome...)?
8. If you could choose to change any/all of four core principles of the humanitarian sector, would you do that? What would you add/remove and why?

Annex II - Examples of principles operationalisation and language

Principle	Most common definitions	Ways of explaining them	Practical explanations that 'usually' work	Who it usually works with?	Example
Humanity	Alleviating human suffering, saving lives, leaving no one behind; linked to dignity, do no harm, human rights, compassion.	Framed through shared human values (mercy, empathy, family ties), and religious references (e.g. Quranic verses); focus on relieving suffering, moral duty to save lives.	Emphasising urgent, life-saving assistance for all civilians regardless of affiliation; appealing to dignity; using personal, human-centered framing.	Authorities and communities across contexts; especially effective where religious/cultural frames are strong (e.g. Afghanistan, Chad, Tigray, Yemen).	Principles act as '*a constant reminder of staying focused on the needs of the vulnerable people and away from any other agenda*'. *'The human being is part of one body. If one part is suffering, all the other part should not feel safe'.* Mullana Jallaludin Balkhi
Impartiality	Serving according to need, non-discrimination.	Explained via vulnerability-based targeting, transparent selection processes and field assessments; fairness, equal	Emphasising beneficiaries' vulnerability-based prioritisation; making adjustments (if situation requires) to	Communities and authorities across contexts when negotiators can demonstrate transparency in selection criteria.	*'Impartiality is making decisions and providing support based on need and facts, without bias, favoritism, or discrimination'.*

		treatment based on needs.	beneficiary list while keeping needs-based logic central.		
Neutrality	Not taking sides in conflict; avoiding actions that could be interpreted as political; humanitarian facilities and staff not aligned with any party.	Explained as engaging all parties solely to secure safe access to populations in need; refusing military presence or use of assets in humanitarian sites; stressing humanitarian, non-political role.	Explaining that the organisation works with all parties to reach those in need; emphasizing that humanitarian assets cannot be used for military or political purposes; focus on organisational mandate.	Authorities/armed groups often when the organisation has a strong, long-term principled reputation (e.g. ICRC, MSF); occasionally communities when reasons are explained with transparency.	*'Neutrality enables presence and access, while impartiality is the ethical logic guiding who receives assistance and why. In simple terms, neutrality is what allows us to stay in the room, while impartiality is what justifies what we do and how we do it while we are there.'*
Independence	Organisational autonomy in decision-making, free from political, economic or military influence; control	Framed as being bound by humanitarian mandate, and organisational rules; rejecting	Being bound by internal regulations; offer alternative solutions to	Authorities to some extent/depending on situation; donors when arguing from point of view of	*'Governments may try to dictate how you distribute assistance, which staff you hire, in which area you should operate, which partner or ministry you should*

	over operations and priorities.	authorities' and donors' interference in operations and staffing matters.	preserve authority while addressing counterparts' concerns (e.g. authorities could monitor distributions instead of conducting them); preserving access to beneficiary lists (particularly protection databases).	principled stance point and protection risks.	*coordinate with, or to impose armed escorts requirements just to make money out of it. Fundings could also be linked to political objectives. How to reinforce independence in these situations? By taking decisions based on humanitarian needs only, remaining clear from political priorities, declining logistical support from military actors if that affects independence, communicate clearly to authorities from all sides our humanitarian mandate.'* *'Independence should not imply isolation from coordination or local ownership'.*

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