



FRONTLINE
NEGOTIATIONS

CENTRE OF COMPETENCE ON
HUMANITARIAN NEGOTIATION

HUMANITARIAN PRINCIPLES IN NEGOTIATION

Embodying humanitarian principles: How humanitarian organisations put principles into practice

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

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Cover photo ICU nurse, Alessia Gaudenzi, and her team hold a meeting before the medical train arrives in eastern Ukraine where we pick up war wounded patients and transport them back to hospitals in western Ukraine.
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This research was commissioned by the Centre of Competence on Humanitarian Negotiation (CCHN) and undertaken by Rachel Sider, consultant.

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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Contents

FOREWORD	1
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY	3
METHODOLOGY	4
I. INTRODUCTION	5
II. OPERATIONALISING HUMANITARIAN PRINCIPLES	6
Principles are interpreted.	6
Principles are also performed.	6
Principles are also contested.	7
Incentive structures.....	8
What does this look like at the governance level?	12
What does this look like at the individual level?	12
III. ORGANISATIONAL TYPOLOGY	13
Type 1: The custodial organisation	14
Type 2: The reflexive organisation	14
Type 3: The stratified organisation	15
Type 4: The transactional organisation	16
IV. LEARNING AND BEST PRACTICES	18
V. RECOMMENDATIONS	21
VI. CONCLUSION	22

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

The Centre of Competence on Humanitarian Negotiation (CCHN) studied how principled action is enabled or constrained at the organisational level, investigating the systemic factors that reinforce, incentivise, and inhibit adherence to the four core humanitarian principles: humanity, impartiality, neutrality, and independence. This work takes place during a period of major recalibration across the humanitarian system, including the Humanitarian Reset and the UN80 Reform Process, and aims to contribute to both the CCHN's strategic engagement with partners and broader changes in the sector.

As the research revealed, operationalising the humanitarian principles is a relative and context-dependent process. Principles are interpreted differently across organisations and contexts, enacted when they visibly shape decisions under pressure, and continuously contested by actors at varying levels of authority and accountability. The gap between principled intent and institutional behaviour is most apparent in negotiations, where trade-offs cannot be deferred, and commitments are tested in real time. Key findings highlight that:

- Organisational governance – including where authority to interpret and apply humanitarian principles sits and how pathways to deliberate are structured – has direct consequences for organisational coherence;
- Leadership behaviour shapes whether principled performance is embedded and incentivised across organisations or treated as exceptional; and
- Boards do not consistently engage with principled performance as a governance matter, suggesting a structural gap that affects operationalisation at multiple levels.

Among many, three overriding incentives shape the operationalisation of humanitarian principles within organisations, and their influence varies by institutional time horizon and organisational type:

1. Recognition that principles enable access and staff safety;
2. The interest in protecting moral credibility and public identity; and
3. Access to funding and the reality that principled positioning is, for some, a key to donor support.

These incentives do not consistently align. In the current environment marked by declining aid budgets, heightened donor conditionality, and the growing relevance of donors who do not subscribe to the Good Humanitarian Donorship (GHD) principles, shorter-term calculations about operational continuity risk are increasingly displacing long-term organisational coherence and consistency, eroding the legitimacy that sustains organisational viability.

In light of these trends, the research identified four types of organisational behaviour distinguished by how an agency derives humanitarian authority and responds when principles collide with operational pressures, internally and externally:

- **Custodial organisations** treat principles as institutional heritage, generating legitimacy and reputational credibility in negotiations but risking conservatism when inherited frameworks struggle to accommodate new realities.
- **Reflexive organisations** routinely interrogate their own practices, equipping staff to hold complexity while presenting reputational risk in negotiations when internal deliberation is read as uncertainty by external counterparts.
- **Stratified organisations** exhibit a structural split between field-level principled commitment and headquarters-level inconsistency, resulting in unclear escalation pathways and limited backup for frontline negotiators.

- **Transactional organisations** retain principled language while deploying it instrumentally, often with short-term operational agility that conceals a longer-term erosion of trust in certain negotiation contexts.

Behaviour across these types is possible and arguably more likely under sustained financial stress, leadership turnover, and compliance-heavy cultures. The 2025 aid budget reductions risk accelerating the drift toward stratified and transactional forms across much of the sector, raising questions about organisations' ability to engage effectively with ethical dilemmas and to utilise negotiation as a tool. Organisations most effectively operationalise humanitarian principles when a range of practices reinforce one another: governance systems, red lines, and escalation pathways that structurally reinforce commitment to principles; leadership modelling and cultural embedding that translate architecture into observable behaviour; and preserving spaces for deliberation and feedback mechanisms that enable institutional self-correction.

The central challenge for the humanitarian community in the current period is ensuring that necessary adaptation does not erode principled humanitarian action. As financial pressures intensify and political engagement with states and armed actors remains a reality, the distance between an organisation's stated relationship to humanitarian principles and its operational one is increasingly consequential for affected populations, for frontline negotiators, and for the legitimacy of the humanitarian system as a whole. The findings presented in this report identify concrete leverage points in governance, leadership, and inter-agency architecture through which the humanitarian community can work to close the gap between aspirations and performance.

Methodology

This research was conducted through semi-structured qualitative interviews with 54 humanitarian staff, researchers, and donors. This group included senior representatives of the Red Cross and Red Crescent movement, NGOs, UN agencies, and donor representatives.

The data analysis was also 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.

I. Introduction

The humanitarian sector derives its legitimacy from the four core principles of humanity, impartiality, neutrality, and independence. While these principles are widely cited and consistently feature in the humanitarian narrative of actors ranging from local non-governmental organisations (NGOs) to the United Nations to the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, they are less often examined as lived practice. The assumption that humanitarian actors intuitively know and apply principles glosses over a deeper and more complex reality: principles are performed, interpreted, and contested through human behaviour, organisational processes, and donor-partner dynamics. The tension between the language of principles and the logic of their operationalisation has become increasingly visible across crises and within organisations, particularly when concerns of risk and compliance come into play.

Against this backdrop, the CCHN undertook a multi-phase inquiry into how the humanitarian organisations and humanitarian systems operationalise the humanitarian principles. This stage of the research examined how principled action is enabled or constrained at the organisational level; it considered the systemic factors that reinforce, incentivise and inhibit principled action (Series Two). It complemented a concurrent effort to explore how individual negotiators interpret and apply humanitarian principles in practice (Series One). 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.

This inquiry takes place during a period of significant system-wide recalibration, including organisational restructurings, the Humanitarian Reset, and the UN80 Reform Process. By examining the interplay between ethical reasoning and administrative accountability, the work seeks to inform the CCHN's strategic engagement with partners and to contribute to wider systemic change. The combined insights from Series One and Series Two aim to help the humanitarian community to better align principles, practice, and policy in the face of significant humanitarian needs globally.

This qualitative study specifically explored:

- How institutional structures, donor-driven systems, and organisational incentives influence the operationalisation of humanitarian principles;
- How these influences are reflected in institutional policies, donor and partnership agreements, organisational culture, and practices;
- Where tensions arise between ethical imperatives and management or compliance requirements, and where ethical reasoning is overtaken by bureaucracy; and
- The impact of these trends on the quality and nature of humanitarian assistance.

This report sets out key findings from Series Two, focusing on the factors that enable and constrain the operationalisation of humanitarian principles, with particular consideration for contexts of negotiation. It first breaks down how organisations approach operationalisation, then examines the key incentives that affect organisational practice. It then presents a classification of organisational types to illustrate the interaction among internal and external pressures, incentives and related dynamics. It concludes with examples of tools and approaches which can support organisations in upholding principles at various levels.

II. Operationalising humanitarian principles

Operationalising the humanitarian principles is an organisational process in which principles are interpreted, enacted, contested, and revisited as their meaning is shaped by context,¹ power, and institutional identity.² Understanding what organisations believe and how they adjudicate competing demands through their systems, cultures, and processes clarifies the stances they take toward certain constraints under conditions of pressure, especially in negotiations. These interrelated dimensions are outlined below.

Principles are interpreted.

Since the humanitarian principles are not self-executing rules, actors interpret them differently depending on their institutional role, proximity to operations, political context, and organisational culture. Two organisations operating in the same setting may reach different conclusions about whether to accept a particular access arrangement. Likewise, the same organisation may resolve a similar dilemma differently across contexts. This variability reflects the genuine complexity of applying principles articulated in a particular historical and geopolitical moment to contemporary operating environments marked by counterterrorism measures, a proliferation of armed and private actors, the erosion of humanitarian norms, and conditionalities that were not envisaged when the principles were codified.³

In addition, it reinforces the value of revisiting the original intent of the humanitarian principles as relevant first to the Red Cross Red Crescent Movement, “and subsequently diffused to humanitarian NGOs and the UN system,” and connecting with the historical context from which they emerged.⁴

What appears to matter is where authority for interpretation sits within an organisation. When different levels or functions of an organisation reach different conclusions, whose interpretation prevails? How are interpretations revised when context shifts outpace existing doctrine? These are governance questions. Organisations that invest in structured means of interpretation – such as tiered decision-making frameworks, escalation pathways for principled dilemmas, context-specific guidance notes, and formal processes for updating doctrine – are arguably better positioned to achieve internal coherence than those that rely primarily on individual judgment under operational pressure.

“It’s not just about having the principles written up and everyone signs them when you join the organisation. It’s also a process of translating commitment and knowledge into practical action.”

– International non-government organisation (INGO) representative

Principles are also performed.

Interpretation alone does not lead to operationalisation of the humanitarian principles. Principles only achieve operational effect when they shape organisational decisions in ways that are observable, especially when doing so is costly. As the literature on humanitarian negotiation and access repeatedly demonstrates, principles become most visible at moments when they constrain options, such as when they require an

¹ Hugo Slim, *Humanitarian Ethics: A Guide to the Morality of Aid in War and Disaster* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

² Michael Barnett and Thomas G. Weiss, *Humanitarianism in Question: Politics, Power, Ethics* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2011).

³ Sarah Collinson and Samir Elhawary, *Humanitarian Space: A Review of Trends and Issues*, HPG Report 32 (London: Overseas Development Institute, 2012).

⁴ Marina Sharpe, “It’s All Relative: The Origins, Legal Character and Normative Content of the Humanitarian Principles,” *International Review of the Red Cross*, No. 925 (April 2024).

organisation to withdraw from an access arrangement that compromises impartial needs assessment, resist pressure to share beneficiary data, or refuse funding which includes demographic earmarking.⁵

The gap between interpretation and performance is where many organisations appear to struggle. Principles are almost universally present in policy documents ranging from mission statements to codes of conduct, and statements of principles. However, the degree to which they shape resource allocation, negotiating behaviour, and risk tolerance when these come into tension with organisational survival or growth objectives varies significantly across actors. Where principled decisions require financial sacrifice, reputational risk, or contraction of programming, operationalisation depends on whether institutional norms and incentives support such decisions or render them exceptional acts of individual courage.

Operationalisation is, therefore, partly an incentive question. Are staff rewarded for defending principled positions that slow delivery or jeopardise funding? Are escalation pathways clear when a red line is crossed? Are decisions to withdraw, refuse funding, or publicly challenge interference institutionally backed, or are they absorbed at the field level, absent the support of senior management? Organisations that answer these questions consistently, having grappled in advance with likely trade-offs, demonstrate principled performance. Those that resolve tensions systematically in favour of operational scale, donor alignment, or reputational management illustrate a structural gap between principled intent and institutional behaviour – a gap characteristic of the stratified and transactional types described below.

“We've become into such a sort of compliance-heavy, due diligence, heavy sector that's inward and upward facing...Organisationally, even if you have people that are willing to take those risks, they don't, feel, or, in many cases, don't necessarily have the institutional backup or support.”

—Policy expert

Principles are also contested.

In many contexts, operationalisation of the humanitarian principles is neither static nor neutral. Principled commitments are continuously contested within organisations and across the humanitarian system. This contestation is not limited to acute, highly visible dilemmas or ideological divides between so-called “purists” and “pragmatists,” although that debate has long animated humanitarian exchange.⁶ More fundamentally, contestation is produced by varying roles, incentive structures, and lines of accountability within organisations.

A country director facing a funding shortfall experiences the tension between principled coherence and organisational survival differently from a field protection officer negotiating access with an armed actor, a grants manager reviewing donor agreement clauses, or a communications officer crafting public positioning on a politically sensitive crisis. Each of these actors engages with principles under distinct pressures and with different exposure to the consequences of compromise. The field negotiator may bear the immediate security risk; the headquarters executive may bear fiduciary and reputational risks; the grants manager may face compliance penalties; the communications officer may face public legitimacy risks. These are not merely individual differences but can evolve into structurally embedded tensions in the absence of sufficient space for deliberation and resolution of dilemmas.

⁵ Claire Magone, Michaël Neuman and Fabrice Weissman (eds), *Humanitarian Negotiations Revealed: The MSF Experience* (London: Hurst & Company, 2011). Available at: <https://evaluation.msf.org/evaluation-report/humanitarian-negotiations-revealed-the-msf-experience>.

⁶ Michael Barnett, *Empire of Humanity: A History of Humanitarianism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2011). Available at: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7591/j.ctt7z8ns>.

Contestation becomes particularly visible at moments of acute dilemma, such as demands from authorities for staff lists; denial of access to a specific population; donor policies that explicitly exclude certain demographic groups; heightened compliance requirements under counterterrorism legislation; or intensified media scrutiny. Organisations that manage contestation only at these crisis points, rather than embedding structured deliberation into routine governance, risk becoming perpetually reactive. In such settings, principled decision-making becomes episodic rather than systemic.

Taken together, interpretation, performance, and contestation illustrate that operationalising the humanitarian principles hinges on organisational design. It depends on where authority lies, how incentives are structured, and whether systems exist to reconcile competing internal and external pressures. Negotiations, in particular, reveal whether commitments to principled action are institutionally backed or situationally contingent.

"There are the operational managers who feel Humanitarian Country Team meetings should be purely about operational decision-making, and discussing what principled action means is a waste of time because it takes time away from the actual job of life-saving and protection. I try to set an example by saying, yes, I agree that we are in the middle of a war, so we can't all take the time to have theoretical debates, but there needs to be a timeout for reflection."

– United Nations Humanitarian Coordinator

Incentive structures

Understanding the operationalisation of humanitarian principles requires closer examination of the incentive structures that drive or impede behaviour, the mechanisms through which principles are translated into practice, the organisational factors that enable or constrain that translation, and the ways in which principles can corrode – from governance failures through to staff attrition and system-wide norms erosion – when those mechanisms fall short. This section examines these dynamics and how principles are in turn interpreted, enacted, and contested at various levels of an organisation.

As consultations revealed, organisations are driven to operationalise humanitarian principles in three overriding ways that function at different levels and timescales within humanitarian organisations. Understanding each incentive – and the tensions between them – is core to understanding where and why commitment to or delivery upon principles breaks down.

1. The first incentive is **operational continuity**: the tacit recognition that principles function as enablers to accessing communities and maintaining relationships with affected populations, even if not always consciously acknowledged. Principles are applied when working to establish trust with communities and uphold staff safety, regularly giving humanitarian workers a distinct and defensible identity in high-risk, politically complex settings. This incentive is often expressed in response to realities and dilemmas posed to humanitarian organisations, forcing debate and difficult decisions. This incentive is highly contextual. As examples from Sudan, Gaza, and Ukraine illustrate, principles do not reliably guarantee access, especially where international norms are openly disregarded or where aid is

weaponised. The growing evidence that principled positioning does not necessarily deliver operational returns is a significant pressure on the sector's commitment to principles.

"We've had decades where following the humanitarian principles worked. It gave us access, including by not speaking up in certain contexts, and trying to stay neutral to try avoid blocking access. Now in Gaza today with the United Nations and now also others like Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) being told to leave, you start to wonder, what does principled action actually mean, when clearly trying to adhere to it does not give you the access that we always thought principled action would give."

– United Nations Humanitarian Coordinator

2. The second incentive is **organisational legitimacy**: the medium-term, organisation-wide interest in protecting and sustaining moral credibility and public identity as a humanitarian actor. Principles distinguish aid agencies from private contractors, military actors, and political entities; they provide the basis for public trust, long-term reputational capital, and the ability to engage with communities and donors over time. This incentive is structurally vulnerable to a specific form of breakdown, however: principles can be invoked as signals of legitimacy – such as in donor engagements, public communications, and staff onboarding materials – without being embedded in the systems and decision-making processes that make them deeply operational. When this happens, principled language persists while principled practice erodes, and the gap between the two becomes an organisational liability rather than an asset. In this way, the legitimacy incentive can sustain principled rhetoric long after it has ceased to drive principled behaviour.

"The fact that organisations are willing to self-censor, backslide and backtrack themselves is incredibly problematic. And I think as you say, now more than ever would be the time to hold the line and push further... if you're willing to compromise so much, call yourself a service provider, but you're no longer humanitarian."

—Policy expert

3. The third incentive is **access to funding**: the structural reality that some donors – particularly those aligned with the GHD principles – actively value and fund principled positioning.⁷ For organisations dependent on these donors, operationalising the principles is not only a moral commitment but core to business continuity, exemplified by those who lean into principles in funding relationships that drive operations. Nonetheless, these same funding relationships at times create simultaneous pressure in the opposite direction. Donor conditionality, geographic and sectoral earmarking, and the reward structures associated with scale, cost-efficiency, and value-for-money metrics all create incentives that conflict with principles, particularly impartiality. Some organisations report being reluctant to report certain operational risks, including security incidents, out of concern for future support. The entry of newer donors into the humanitarian landscape who do not necessarily subscribe to the GHD

⁷ Good Humanitarian Donorship (GHD), *Initiative, Principles and Good Practice of Humanitarian Donorship* (Stockholm: GHD Initiative, 2003). Available at: <https://www.ghdinitiative.org/assets/files/GHD%20Principles%20and%20Good%20Practice/GHD%20Principles.pdf>

ethos risks further diversifying the inventive environment, complicating organisations' efforts to uphold principled positioning.

"We provide core unearmarked funding to the humanitarian institutions precisely because they are active and embed humanitarian principles and they can do things as a result that we might not ourselves be able to do."

—Donor representative

As interviews suggest, these three incentives do not always point in the same direction, and their influence varies by organisation. This divergence produces the range of organisational types outlined in the Typology Section III below.

The influence of these incentives also varies by institutional time horizons. Organisations that embrace principles as a long-term source of legitimacy, recognising that certain compromises today risk undermining donor trust and operational credibility tomorrow, have a different calculus than those for whom short-term financial survival is the dominant imperative. In the current environment – characterised by declining aid budgets, increasing competition for institutional funding, and forthright donor conditionality – the pressure toward the latter is intensifying. The risk is that short-term, existential calculations progressively displace coherence with principles, eroding the very legitimacy that makes long-term organisational viability possible.

The pressures described above are not only organisational: they reflect a system that has been progressively configured in ways that challenge the operationalisation of humanitarian principles through various means. The dominant incentives shaping the current humanitarian ecosystem risk bringing about a dynamic in which visible performance criteria, including scale, cost-efficiency, and donor alignment, become the overriding metrics for organisational success over principled action. Table 1 below illustrates these dynamics:

Table 1: Dominant incentives affecting interpretation and performance of principles

Dominant incentive	Effect on principles
Scale	Undermines impartiality, rewards reach over needs-based targeting
Cost-efficiency and market orientation	Undermines impartiality, replaces principled communication with market vocabulary
Donor conditionality	Undermines independence and impartiality
Impact metrics	Presents parallel performance standards which may come into tension with impartiality and independence
Funding diversification	Generates multiple and potentially competing standards across donor relationships
Productivity and delivery	Reinforces certain operational behaviours while systematically shrinking space for deliberation on ethics
Humanitarian imperative	Undermines impartiality, rewards reach over needs-based targeting

The clearest expression of this is the lack of efforts to assess principled performance in most humanitarian organisations. Principled performance is rarely measured, reported, or used as a basis for accountability with donors, Boards, or affected communities. Assessing the degree to which humanitarian principles are operationalised is absent from monitoring and evaluation systems, donor reporting requirements, and organisational performance management frameworks.

Case study: Decrees and dilemmas in Afghanistan

The Afghanistan experience reveals that operationalising humanitarian principles in highly restrictive environments requires organisations to engage in constant adaptation and creative reinterpretation rather than straightforward, linear adherence. The Taliban government, which issued a ban on non-government organisations employing female Afghan staff in December 2022 and extended it to United Nations agencies in April 2023, has created an operating environment that directly contradicts core humanitarian principles – particularly those requiring impartial access and non-discrimination (Human Rights Watch, 2024; OHCHR, 2023).

Rather than withdrawing entirely, humanitarian actors have pursued what Humanitarian Outcomes (2023) calls "workarounds and low-profile local negotiation strategies," capitalising on the decentralised nature of Taliban authority across provinces to secure localised exemptions and programmatic adjustments. These include establishing gender-separated office spaces and distribution points, covering *mahram* travel costs for female staff, training women community volunteers to reach women in their homes, and exploiting the informal tacit exemption for "health" and "education" work by negotiating expansive local definitions of those sectors.

Services for gender-based violence survivors have been especially difficult to maintain, having been "significantly reduced" (Congressional Research Service, 2024), with the August 2024 Law on Propagation of Virtue and Prevention of Vice now codifying restrictions that previously allowed humanitarian workarounds and closing critical loopholes available to negotiators at the local level (ACAPS, 2024).

This approach balances commitment to humanitarian principles with functioning within operational constraints, with the humanitarian principles guiding negotiations at the organisational and inter-agency levels. Organisations were challenged to consider how to interpret and reconcile differing interpretations of the principles in a context where, as Humanitarian Outcomes found, most agencies "lack frameworks for making these decisions, individually or collectively."

"In Afghanistan, it's all about negotiation. If you know how to convince authorities and explain your programme to them, and you have a good coordination with them beforehand as well, that's how you build trust. After investing in this, now we have the power. We have the power to push back on any requirements, ask them for any change."

– Local non-government organisation representative

As is reinforced in section II above, organisations operationalise principles differently even when facing similar incentive pressures. Two levels of organisational structure help explain this variation: governance-level factors that set the conditions for everything below them, and individual-level factors, through which human behaviour and organisational culture interact.

What does this look like at the governance level?

The most consequential and least discussed governance-level factor in the literature is the role of governance bodies. Boards are the institutional actors who should anchor principled architecture by holding management accountable for principled performance, protecting organisational mandate when funding pressures push toward scope dilution, commissioning regular principled self-assessment that management is unlikely to initiate independently, and ensuring that principled commitments are embedded in organisational governance documents rather than only in operational policy.

In practice, most humanitarian organisation boards focus on other functions. They rarely possess deep humanitarian expertise, rarely interrogate principled performance with the specificity required to surface organisational gaps, and typically treat principles as a reputational rather than a governance matter, reviewing them in the context of communications and public positioning rather than operational decision-making, funding deliberations, and organisational strategy. This is a structural gap in principled governance that no amount of field-level training or deliberative investment can compensate for, affecting an organisation's conduct, identity, and perception at every level.

What does this look like at the individual level?

The history and identity of an organisation — the values and principled commitments embedded in its founding, its early field experience, and its organisational culture — shape how principles are operationalised in ways that policy documents and training programmes cannot fully replicate. Organisations that were founded in response to specific principled crises, or that have built their institutional identity around principled independence, carry a form of principled culture that is difficult to intentionally construct but also difficult to maintain through growth, leadership turnover, and mandate expansion. As organisations scale and diversify, this founding principled culture is diluted through the recruitment of staff with different professional backgrounds and principled frames, the absorption of organisational cultures through mergers and partnerships, and the progressive institutionalisation of processes that were originally expressions of principled commitment but have become bureaucratic routines.

Leadership is the most powerful human-level factor in principled operationalisation, precisely because it operates both symbolically and structurally. Leaders who model principled reasoning – who acknowledge dilemmas publicly, who back field staff when principled positions cost the organisation operationally, who frame principled consistency as organisational success rather than operational constraint – activate principled commitment across the organisation in ways that formal training cannot. Conversely, leaders who resolve principled tensions quietly in favour of financial or operational interests, who communicate ambiguity about principled red lines, or who treat principled commitments as negotiable under pressure signal to the entire organisation that principled performance is aspirational rather than mandatory.

"Leadership behaviour is critical to achieving principled action. If leaders are not principled, then there's no incentive for people working for them or with them to do so... Leadership is also about openness to debate, but then also taking positions."

– United Nations Humanitarian Coordinator

III. Organisational typology

The typology outlined below rests on two interrelated questions. First, how does an organisation derive its humanitarian mandate, and from where does it claim legitimacy as a humanitarian actor? Does its authority stem primarily from universal ethical principles, donor authorisation, consent of affected communities, or some negotiated combination of these sources? Second, what does an organisation do when its mission comes into tension with pressures linked to operational survival? When principles collide with threats to access, funding, scale, or institutional continuity, how does it adjudicate among them? Does it absorb the costs of fidelity – reduced access, lost funding, programme contraction – or does it recalibrate its interpretation of principles to preserve operational presence and institutional viability?

Taken together, these two questions generate a typology attuned to the present moment. They hinge on a conceptual axis organised around where principled authority resides within an organisation and how that authority is exercised, particularly under conditions of constraint and negotiation.

Negotiations are one of the clearest arenas in which these dynamics become visible. In contexts of negotiation – whether for access, staff safety, or protection outcomes – commitments to principles cease to be abstract and can become materially costly. Trade-offs cannot be indefinitely deferred, and real-time judgments must be made about what is non-negotiable and what can be adapted. These judgments, whether explicit or tacit, tend to convey something about the organisation behind the negotiator. Armed actors, government interlocutors, and community gatekeepers interpret and accumulate perceptions of organisational behaviour over time. They read patterns across encounters, forming assessments about what an organisation will ultimately concede, defend, or allow in the context of the wider humanitarian community. As a result, the type of organisation a negotiator represents shapes what is possible in ways that exceed individual skill, personality, or technical training. Negotiations thus function as a stress test. They expose the distance, if any, between an organisation's stated relationship to humanitarian principles and its operational one. In doing so, they reveal not only tactical preferences but deeper institutional orientations toward authority, legitimacy, and risk.

Incentives produce particular organisational pathologies

These typologies are directly linked to the primary incentives outlined in Section II above. For example, when operational continuity and legitimacy diverge, such as when field teams make pragmatic compromises to maintain service delivery while headquarters promotes a public posture of consistency with principles, the result is the stratified organisation described below. When scale, donor alignment, and financial survival dominate organisational decision-making at the expense of coherence towards principles, the transactional organisation emerges, retaining principled language while systematically hollowing out practice. When legitimacy is used as a substitute for genuine principled operationalisation, for instance, when principles are invoked to signal identity and protect reputation without being sufficiently embedded in systems and decision-making, the custodial organisation is especially vulnerable.

Type 1: The custodial organisation

In the custodial organisation, principles are treated as inheritance: something to be protected, transmitted, and embodied rather than continually rehashed. The organisation positions itself as a guardian of tradition – ethical, legal, and institutional – and coherence stems from commitment to that tradition across generations of staff and contexts. At its best, custodianship produces genuine principled commitment, institutional clarity, and reputational credibility that go beyond mere adherence to principles. Over time, this generates a recognisable organisational identity. Yet custodianship risks manifesting as conservatism when tradition is defended against internal challenge rather than reaffirmed. A central question, therefore, becomes: who holds custodial authority, and to what extent is that authority accountable to field realities rather than insulated from them?

In negotiation contexts, the custodial organisation's strength lies in its legibility. Because principles are treated as institutional heritage and publicly performed, counterparts often have a relatively clear sense of what the organisation will and will not do. This reputation precedes the negotiator into the room and carries its own currency. In protracted crises or in engagements with sophisticated armed actors, predictability can be strategic. An organisation with decades of consistent practice can draw on accumulated trust that is deeply intertwined with its custodial consistency.

Risks, however, emerge under novel pressures. When a context does not align with inherited frameworks – a non-state actor indifferent to international humanitarian law, blurred distinctions with private actors, or a government that treats neutrality claims as inherently suspect – the custodial organisation may struggle to adapt its principled framing without appearing to betray tradition. Staff can find themselves poorly supported when dilemmas fall outside established doctrine, particularly if the institution has invested more in transmitting principles than in cultivating the capacity to reason through their application in unfamiliar terrain. When established frameworks do not fit, the question of “who decides” becomes critical, and the answer is often less clear than the tradition suggests.

“It's in our DNA. I mean, we are principles. That's basically what we do...When we are preaching principles or when we are academic about principles, we will also easily be judged for failing. I mean, deep failure. We are not often judged based on our failure to address the principle of humanity or impartiality, even. But neutrality and independence.”

– Red Cross and Red Crescent (RCRC) Movement Representative

Type 2: The reflexive organisation

The reflexive organisation treats principles as living commitments rather than settled answers. Its staff turn its claims of principled action back on themselves, asking whether practice aligns with aspiration and discomfort is tolerated. Legitimacy is therefore derived not only from commitment to principles but from the willingness to interrogate how they are interpreted and operationalised. Reflexivity is productive, but costly, as it requires time, intellectual humility, and institutional space for disagreement. Under resource constraints, deliberation is at risk of being squeezed out. Equally, reflexivity can harden in that structures for consultation remain, but genuine challenge is filtered out by hierarchy, fatigue, or compliance culture.

In negotiations, reflexivity equips staff to engage complexity with candour. Staff who are socialised in ethical deliberation are often able to hold ambiguity, acknowledge genuine dilemmas, and reason through scenarios without either abandoning principles or applying them mechanically. With politically astute interlocutors, this

openness can build a distinct form of credibility grounded in intellectual honesty rather than predictability alone.

At the same time, reflexivity carries reputational risk. Counterparts who expect clearly articulated 'red lines' may interpret internal deliberation as uncertainty. Signals that an organisation is still working through a position can be read as an invitation to push harder. Moreover, because principles are treated as contextual and subject to interpretation, different negotiators may reach divergent conclusions in similar situations. Over time, this can erode external perceptions of an organisation's consistency – the very coherence that enables principled negotiation in the first place. The challenge lies in balancing genuine internal debate with sufficiently stable external positioning, a tension that becomes even sharper in inter-agency settings.

"Leadership is also about openness to debate, but then also taking positions... I err more in the direction of pragmatism, but within the boundaries of red lines."

– UN Humanitarian Coordinator

Type 3: The stratified organisation

In the stratified organisation, authority and practice are structurally split. Field staff carry the operational weight of principled action, while headquarters operates according to a different – or perhaps less defined – logic. Tensions are not accidental but produced by the organisation's geography, incentive structures, and, in multi-mandate institutions, by competing institutional drivers. This stratification creates conditions in which staff may be asked to perform a principled coherence that the organisation as a whole is unable to fully possess. The merits of this type lie in its contextual adaptability: the distance between organisational levels can allow tailoring to specific settings. Field practitioners often embody genuine principled commitment, enabling them to build trust with communities and armed actors to navigate difficult access negotiations. However, they risk operating with limited institutional backing when dilemmas escalate beyond delegated authority. This generates three acute risks.

First, negotiators may make principled commitments that headquarters is not prepared to uphold once the costs become significant or protracted. Failure to follow through – on interference, on responses to violations of international humanitarian law, on independence from donor influence – can damage credibility in ways that are remembered and recalibrated by difficult interlocutors. Second, escalation pathways are often unclear. When confronted with demands that cross institutional lines, such as data-sharing requests, constraints on impartial needs assessment, and politically conditioned targeting, the absence of internal guidance pushes problem-solving back onto field staff. Authority is concentrated upward, but responsibility is borne downward. Third, sustained exposure to this gap can generate moral distress, affecting staff wellbeing and morale. Staff leading negotiations absorb the tension between what the organisation claims and what it backs. Over time, this can take a toll on both individual resilience and institutional integrity.

"I think there's a lot of space in the organisation to bend principles but not break them...It's like buzzwords, you know. People will say buzzwords, but then really what it means for the organisation to uptake and make sure things are applied across the board. Even in senior management roles, what does that mean for them to do and say and communicate out across the organisation?"

– INGO representative

Type 4: The transactional organisation

In the transactional organisation, humanitarian principles are retained but function instrumentally. They are invoked when they serve organisational objectives and deprioritised when they generate friction with growth, efficiency, reputational, or funding imperatives. Principles become resources rather than north stars. This type is not entirely indifferent to principles; it uses them tactically, which makes it difficult to critique. In the short term, transactional flexibility can resemble effectiveness. Access is maintained, programmes continue, and needs are met. Staff often display operational agility in negotiations, crafting workable arrangements in contexts where more constraint-bound organisations might stall.

The longer-term risk lies in erosion of trust, however. Sophisticated interlocutors can quickly recognise when principles are negotiable. Once it becomes clear that thresholds are determined by cost-benefit calculations rather than by non-negotiable ethical commitments, pressure will be applied at those points: data sharing, recruitment, targeting, or public positioning. Over time, the organisation risks becoming easier to instrumentalise. Staff may find themselves defending compromises they privately regard as indefensible, with diminishing capacity to invoke principle as a binding limit.

“It could be a reputational risk. It could be a decision-making issue, not being able to make a decision or not wanting to take a decision because it might come with some consequences and they just resort to their comfort zone.”

– UN agency representative

Implications

In contrast to previous efforts to classify organisational approaches to the humanitarian principles (for instance, see Stoddard, 2003), these four types reveal the possibility of organisational drift. For instance, a custodial organisation can become stratified – not merely changing behaviour but altering its underlying identity with time. The question is what causes that shift: leadership turnover, funding concentration, creep into multiple mandates, loss of accountability to affected populations, or structural pressures associated with growth? Drift toward stratified or transactional forms becomes arguably more likely under sustained financial stress, generational turnover, and the rise of a compliance-heavy culture. As practice fragments, principles increasingly risk functioning as narrative justification or rhetorical reflexes rather than operative constraints.

A rising tide and organisations adrift

In 2025, widespread aid budget reductions triggered organisational restructuring across the sector. Leadership faced impossible trade-offs about which functions to preserve and which positions to eliminate. In many cases, teams responsible for safeguarding humanitarian principles, delivering training, supporting access and negotiation, and leading doctrinal reflection were downsized or folded into others.

As attention shifted toward organisational survival and business continuity, space for principled decision-making seemed to narrow. What remains one year on is a patchwork of approaches suggesting that field-level practice continues with diminished authority or coherence centrally within many organisations, suggesting a drift towards more stratified and transactional forms in light of the following trends:

- Leadership capacity for principled reflection diminishes;
- Field staff operate with reduced institutional backing;
- Decisions become increasingly ad hoc and resource-driven; and
- Principles are used tactically to justify constraints rather than to constrain behaviour

Even where leadership seek to preserve space for deliberation, institutional pressure can often frame principled debate as a luxury rather than a necessity. Drift begins at precisely that point: when dedication to principles is subordinated to organisational survival, and when compliance, due diligence, and inward-facing bureaucratic processes crowd out outward-facing ethical reasoning.

"My team is being reduced by 45% because of the cuts...Overall within the organisation we're cutting about 25 percent and then the emergency division has been about 30 percent reduced... Does that mean we have less dedicated capacity to address some of the challenges related to access and humanitarian principles? Yes, we do overall, as an organisation."

– UN agency representative

IV. Learning and best practices

In recognition of their organisational strengths and limitations, humanitarian agencies have developed a range of approaches to operationalise humanitarian principles, including in the context of negotiations. While no single approach fits all operational environments, these practices generally aim to support early recognition of dilemmas; promote consistency and coherence in responses across levels of the organisation; and guard against internal erosion of their commitment to ethics.

They invite further reflection on the right combinations of tools and approaches in addressing the underlying organisational type and its characteristic vulnerabilities. For example, a transactional organisation that establishes deliberation spaces without strengthening policy coherence may perform reflexivity without practising. A stratified organisation that invests heavily in field-level training without resolving headquarters accountability gaps may reinforce stratification rather than correct it. The examples below illustrate the kinds of tools that can help operationalise the humanitarian principles in the face of the incentives and factors outlined above.

"In the earlier part of my career, including with the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA), we invested enormous money into actual training around principles and principled action. I remember lots of workshops in my Red Cross days about the fundamental principles... But I rarely these days come across any investment into training... there's less and less investment."

– UN Humanitarian Coordinator

Architecture

The first set of approaches concerns the structural conditions that enable principled action. These include governance systems that explicitly anchor humanitarian principles in institutional policy; business models that protect independence at source; formal articulation of red lines and escalation pathways; and standardised procedures for translating principles into harmonised operational guidance. The existence of such systems is a necessary starting point; yet whether they are genuinely effective depends on how consistently they are applied and how well they withstand pressure.

Example: Code of Conduct for Employees of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), 2018

The ICRC's Code of Conduct forms a core element of the institution's governance architecture, translating its Fundamental Principles into binding standards of professional behaviour for staff and delegates. Crucially, it links these commitments to enforceable mechanisms: mandatory personnel acknowledgement, internal reporting channels, investigative procedures, and disciplinary measures.

All employees receive mandatory training on the ICRC Code of Conduct, and violations of its provisions can lead to formal disciplinary investigations and sanctions, including dismissal. In doing so, it embeds humanitarian principles not only as doctrinal commitments but as conditions of employment and operational authority.

Because ICRC delegates negotiate with parties to armed conflict under the protective umbrella of institutional neutrality and confidentiality, the Code reinforces the credibility of those negotiations by ensuring that individual conduct aligns with institutional doctrine. As such, it exemplifies "architecture" in practice: principled behaviour is structurally anchored in governance systems, oversight mechanisms, and accountability procedures rather than left to personal ethics or field-level improvisation.

Activation

The second set pertains to the practices that translate principled architecture into behaviour in real time: embedding principles in organisational culture and modelling them through leadership. Research shows that formal systems alone are insufficient; norms are sustained when they are socially reinforced and visibly enacted by senior management.⁸ Embedding principles begin with recruitment, induction, and training processes that signal the organisation's expectations regarding impartiality, neutrality, and independence. Leadership modelling then determines whether these expectations are normalised or sidelined when they come into tension with operational objectives in day-to-day aid delivery. Both are arguably necessary as cultural embedding contributes to long-term identity, while 'tone from the top' shapes immediate practice and sets precedent.

Example: Toolkit for Principled Humanitarian Action: Managing Counterterrorism Risks, Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC) (2020, updated 2024)

NRC's publicly available toolkit situates counterterrorism compliance within the framework of the humanitarian principles, explicitly recognising the risks such measures pose to impartiality and independence. It provides structured internal processes for principled risk analysis, deliberation, escalation, and documentation before accepting funding. The toolkit includes decision trees for assessing grant agreements against defined principled red lines and categorises risks across criminal, security, contractual, and operational domains. It is designed for use across headquarters and field locations, thereby aiming to institutionalise coherence across an organisation's systems rather than leaving interpretation to ad hoc judgement at the field level. The toolkit guides staff in identifying problematic wording in grant agreements, engaging donors in structured dialogue about counterterrorism clauses, and determining whether and how to proceed with funding opportunities that pose risks to principled action. In doing so, it reflects broader findings in the literature that structured internal processes can mitigate the chilling effects of counterterrorism regulation on humanitarian action.⁹

Example: Speaking out case studies (SOCS), Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) (2013, ongoing)

MSF's interactive learning tools examine past crises in which the organisation considered whether to speak publicly about violence, obstruction, or abuse. Each case study analyses the ethical and operational dilemmas involved in balancing neutrality, independence, and bearing witness. By dissecting trade-offs between silence and advocacy, the SOCS initiative builds institutional memory and encourages structured reflection on when public positioning protects humanitarian principles and when it may jeopardise access. The approach aligns with scholarship emphasising that humanitarian legitimacy depends not only on quiet access but also on moral credibility, particularly when silence risks complicity.¹⁰ The pedagogical format – case-based, iterative, and organisation-wide – demonstrates how activation can reinforce confidence and commitment to the humanitarian principles among staff and teams.

⁸ Global Public Policy Institute (GPPI), *Drivers and Inhibitors of Change in the Humanitarian System* (Berlin: GPPI, 2018). Available at: <https://www.calpnetwork.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/drivers-and-inhibitors-of-change-in-the-humanitarian-systemreport.pdf>.

⁹ The toolkit enables staff to identify problematic wording in grant agreements, engage donors in structured dialogue regarding counterterrorism clauses, and determine whether and how to proceed with funding opportunities that pose risks to principled action.

¹⁰ Fiona Terry, *Condemned to Repeat? The Paradox of Humanitarian Action* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2002).

Adaptation

The third set encompasses practices that enable organisations to interrogate their own principled performance and update architecture and activation efforts accordingly. This includes protected spaces for ethical deliberation and continuous learning mechanisms. Where architecture and activation largely operate downward – with institutional design affecting individual behaviour – adaptation enables upward and horizontal learning. Field practitioners surface dilemmas; communities of practice share lessons across contexts; structured deliberation feeds back into policy revision. Together, these processes allow institutional self-correction.

Established theory about organisational learning suggests that without formalised feedback loops, agencies tend to privilege short-term operational metrics over long-term normative coherence.¹¹ In humanitarian settings where dilemmas are recurrent and context-specific, the absence of protected spaces for deliberation can lead to tacit normalisation of compromises rather than collective learning.

Example: *No Easy Choice: A Humanitarian’s Guide to Ethical, Principled Decision Making, Humanitarian Outcomes* (2024)

This guide utilises an applied ethics framework to structure principled deliberation in high-pressure contexts. Recognising that humanitarian principles may themselves generate dilemmas, it walks practitioners through staged processes to map stakeholders, identify risks, weigh operational and organisational impacts, and incorporate monitoring and review loops. By embedding adaptation and feedback into decision-making, the guide reflects broader scholarship emphasising that principled action requires structured ethical reasoning rather than reliance on intuition alone.¹² It provides a concrete example of adaptation in practice: principled deliberation is formalised, revisited over time, and linked to internal learning.

Example: *Field Manual on Frontline Humanitarian Negotiation*, Centre of Competence on Humanitarian Negotiation (2019)

CCHN’s resource provides a structured, practice-oriented framework for humanitarian practitioners engaged in access negotiations with state and non-state actors. Developed through peer learning and field-based consultation, the manual translates humanitarian principles into a staged negotiation process tailored to high-pressure operational environments. Rather than prescribing fixed red lines, the manual emphasises principled pragmatism – encouraging negotiators to anchor discussions in humanitarian objectives while remaining attentive to relational dynamics and long-term acceptance. By formalising negotiation planning tools, scenario mapping, and debrief mechanisms, the manual strengthens agencies’ institutional capacity to support frontline negotiators and systematise learning across contexts. In doing so, it represents a clear example of structured activation and adaptation: principled negotiation is neither improvised nor purely intuitive, but scaffolded through shared methodology, peer exchange, and iterative review.

Organisations most effectively operationalise humanitarian principles when architecture, activation, and adaptation reinforce one another and are complemented by external accountability mechanisms. In addition to internal approaches, external accountability initiatives seek to make principled performance answerable to affected populations, peer agencies, donors, and the public. Mechanisms such as peer review processes, donor certification systems, and public transparency initiatives aim to reduce the gap between stated commitments and observable practice. Such mechanisms can discipline both individual organisations and the wider system

¹¹ Chris Argyris and Donald Schön, *Organizational Learning II* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1996).

¹² Donor requirements can also shape accountability dynamics. For example, eligibility conditions that require adherence to formal coordination structures or certification frameworks may reinforce baseline standards but risk privileging procedural conformity over contextual principled reasoning if not carefully designed.

by making principled performance, rather than rhetoric, the basis for assessment. Organisations with genuinely functional accountability systems are less likely to experience the persistent gap between principled rhetoric and operational behaviour that characterises stratified and transactional types described above. Donor requirements can also shape accountability dynamics. For example, eligibility conditions that require adherence to formal coordination structures or certification frameworks may reinforce baseline standards but risk privileging procedural conformity over contextual principled reasoning if not carefully designed.

"We require partners to adhere to the highest humanitarian standards, not the lowest. Only organisations certified by the European Union, signed up to joint operating principles, and part of formal coordination structures are eligible for funding."

– Donor representative

These sets of approaches map onto the four organisational types outlined above.

- The **custodial organisation** typically exhibits strong architecture and some activation – it has built the structures and embedded the culture – but may underinvest in adaptation, limiting its capacity to update policy in response to new forms of pressure.
- The **reflexive organisation** invests across all three but may struggle to sustain adaptation mechanisms when resources contract.
- The **stratified organisation** often demonstrates strong field-level activation, where practitioners embody principled commitment, but weak architecture and limited feedback loops between field and headquarters.
- The **transactional organisation** may possess formal architecture and surface-level activation (training, policies), yet adaptation mechanisms are hollowed out. Protected spaces for recognising dilemmas are limited, and learning loops fail to interrogate the gap between rhetoric and practice.

V. Recommendations

The following set of recommendations aims to support learning from this research and reinforce the best practices identified in Section IV.

1. Actively engage senior leadership and governance structures at the organisational level.

Work with Boards, senior leadership, and legal teams to anchor principled commitments in governance documents. Develop diagnostic tools to help organisations assess their own principled architecture and its impact on negotiations.

2. Reinforce and grow inter-agency spaces for principled deliberation.

Create protected spaces for senior practitioners to deliberate on dilemmas in real time across organisations. Support structured inter-agency dialogue and develop case-based learning from organisational dilemmas, not just individual ones.

3. Explore how organisational types can be better understood, monitored and mitigated.

Champion inclusion of principled performance in monitoring and evaluation systems, donor reporting, and organisational evaluation. Develop and pilot practical indicators that make negotiations visible and accountable to communities, donors, and Boards.

VI. Conclusion

As the Active Learning Network for Accountability and Performance (ALNAP) notes in its 2025 Global Humanitarian Assistance report, “we are entering a new era for international humanitarian response” in which declining donor budgets and overt politicisation of aid flows are fundamentally reshaping operational space.¹³ Ongoing contraction is creating an environment in which difficult decisions about presence, partnerships, and programme scope are increasingly unavoidable. Humanitarian actors are not only managing resource scarcity; they are also navigating more complex, politically charged negotiations with states, armed actors, and other powerholders over acceptance, access, and the conditions under which assistance can be delivered.

At the operational level, financial pressures have driven workforce reductions, organisational restructuring, and sharper prioritisation of where and how agencies engage. Previous ALNAP and Development Initiatives reporting has shown how funding volatility and earmarking practices incentivise short-term programming and can undermine strategic coherence.¹⁴ These shifts have direct implications for how principles such as humanity, neutrality, impartiality, and independence are interpreted and upheld in practice – particularly when agencies must negotiate trade-offs between positioning and operational reach.

At the systemic level, reform processes such as the Grand Bargain, ongoing “Humanitarian Reset” discussions, and broader United Nations reform initiatives have increasingly framed change in terms of efficiency, localisation, and redistribution of power.¹⁵ While these reforms respond to legitimate critiques of inequity and inefficiency in the system, they also raise questions about how humanitarian principles are operationalised when decision-making is devolved, resources are stretched, and negotiation remains central to security and preserving space for action. Decentralisation and localisation have the power to strengthen contextual legitimacy and accountability to affected populations,¹⁶ but they may also redistribute principled risk, placing frontline actors closer to political and military pressures without commensurate institutional backing.¹⁷ The design and delivery of these reforms, therefore, have the potential either to entrench existing patterns of compromise or to strengthen architectures that reinforce positive incentives dynamics.

A central challenge for the coming period is ensuring that necessary and ongoing adaptation does not erode principled humanitarian action. This is particularly acute in contexts where engagement with political and military actors is unavoidable and where negotiation outcomes shape not only access but also targeting, data protection, and accountability to local populations. As Hugo Slim argues, “Good humanitarian action requires not just good intentions but good systems, good governance, and good incentives. The humanitarian community has been long on good intentions and short on the rest.”¹⁸ The research presented here builds on that insight by identifying a set of concrete leverage points in governance structures, decision-making systems, organisational culture, leadership practice, and inter-agency architecture through which the humanitarian community can work to close the gap between aspirations and performance.

¹³ ALNAP, *2025 Global Humanitarian Assistance Report* (2025). Available at: https://alnap.hacdn.io/media/documents/GHA_Report_1408v1.pdf

¹⁴ ALNAP, *The State of the Humanitarian System* (2018); Development Initiatives, *Global Humanitarian Assistance Report* (2022).

¹⁵ Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC), *Grand Bargain Annual Independent Report* (various years); United Nations, *Our Common Agenda* (2021).

¹⁶ ICVA, *Localisation Examined* (Geneva: ICVA, 2021). Available at: <https://www.icvanetwork.org/uploads/2021/08/ICVA-Localization-Examined-Briefing-Paper.pdf>

¹⁷ ODI, *Localisation: A Literature Review* (London: ODI, n.d.). Available at: https://media.odi.org/documents/Localisation_lit_review_WEB.pdf


¹⁸ Hugo Slim, *Humanitarian Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

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