

Principles and accountability

Responding quickly to disasters while adhering to a range of humanitarian principles is challenging. Humanitarians face practical and moral dilemmas in balancing these obligations.

Effective and ethical humanitarian action needs to:

- be guided by established humanitarian principles while recognising that at times there are dilemmas in putting them into practice
- reflect the needs, concerns, interests and capacities of all stakeholders to whom an agency is accountable

Key accountability relationships

NGOs are accountable in several ways:

- upwards to donors, government or foundations
- downwards to beneficiaries, local partners, clients
- horizontally to other NGOs to uphold sector standards and reputation
- internally within the organisation

Maintaining '**Accountability to Affected Populations (AAP)**' is vital through offering community feedback mechanisms and engaging the affected population in the design, delivery and evaluation of programmes.

Ethical dilemmas

The principles guiding the conduct of humanitarian agencies and staff are set out in the Code of Conduct and supplementary guidelines. Take time to analyse the issues before taking action. Doing nothing should also be considered.

Guiding principles

Examples of ethical or moral dilemmas

Core principles:

- **Humanity**
- **Impartiality**
- **Neutrality**

- When does working with parties to a conflict move from practical negotiation e.g. around access, to condoning violence or rights abuses?
- Should agencies provide assistance for IDPs or refugees when this contributes to or perpetuates conditions that violate their rights? E.g. forced displacement, restrictions on movement etc.

Other principles:

- **Independence**
- **Participation**
- **Empowerment**
- **Respect and dignity**
- **Accountability**
- **Sustainability**

- How might the interests of donors influence the nature of humanitarian assistance provided?
- When does meeting food aid needs undermine efforts to protect livelihoods and sustain local markets?
- Should an agency highlight rights or other abuses if this may lead to expulsion and even greater suffering amongst those it is seeking to help?
- When does using images of misery and suffering undermine the principles of humanity and dignity?
- When should international principles and values take precedence over local cultural practices and norms?

Effective accountability and responsible use of power requires:

- Decision-making which involves those affected by the decisions being taken
- Communication systems that engage and inform those affected by decisions, proposals and actions, considering technology limitations and language requirements
- Processes that give equal access and consideration to all groups in raising concerns or giving feedback, and in seeking redress or compensation

Additional resources on All In Diary website

Challenging Operations: An Ethical Framework to Assist Humanitarian Aid Workers in their Decision-making © PLOS 2014
 Toolkit for mainstreaming Communicating with Communities (CwC) © Shongjog /ACF

Web links for further information

<http://www.elac.ox.ac.uk/HumanitarianEthics>
<https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/AAP>