



Norwegian Ministry
of Foreign Affairs

Guidance note

Ensuring respect for the humanitarian principles

2024–2029



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Background

One of the main goals of [Norway's Humanitarian Strategy](#) (2024–2029) is to ensure that people in need are given the necessary protection and assistance, in line with the humanitarian principles. This document provides guidance for our humanitarian partners on putting the humanitarian principles into practice. It is also intended to promote dialogue and greater understanding of the dilemmas that can arise when taking a principled humanitarian approach.

Box 1.1 The humanitarian principles

The [humanitarian principles](#) are derived from the Fundamental Principles of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and based on international humanitarian law. They form the basis for all humanitarian action in both conflict situations and natural disasters. The four principles adopted by the humanitarian community are:

Humanity

Human suffering must be addressed wherever it is found. The purpose of humanitarian action is to protect life and health and ensure respect for human beings.

Impartiality

Humanitarian action must be carried out on the basis of need alone, giving priority to the most urgent cases of distress and making no distinctions on the basis of nationality, race, gender, religious belief, class, or political opinions.

Neutrality

Humanitarian actors must not take sides in hostilities or engage in controversies of a political, racial, religious, or ideological nature.

Independence

Humanitarian action must be autonomous from the political, economic, military or any other objectives that any actor may hold with regard to areas where humanitarian action is being implemented.

The principles of humanity and impartiality are generally considered to be fundamental, ethical obligations, which define the objective of humanitarian action, while the principles of neutrality and independence are of a more operational nature.

While partners differ in their approaches to humanitarian assistance, the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (the Ministry) wishes to ensure a collective understanding of what is expected from our partners as regards adherence to the humanitarian principles. Partners are encouraged to use recognised standards in their work, such as [the Sphere standards](#), [the Core Humanitarian Standard on Quality and Accountability \(CHS\)](#), and [Professional Standards for Protection Work carried out by humanitarian and human rights actors in armed conflict and other situations of violence \(icrc.org\)](#). This document is intended to supplement recognised standards, as well as organisations' own standards, where applicable.

The guidance given here is divided into three parts, based on the three phases of the project/programme cycle: 1) design, planning and proposal; 2) implementation; 3) monitoring evaluation and follow-up (certain elements are relevant to more than one phase).

Box 1.2 Niger. Challenges to neutrality and independence by armed actors

Following the military coup in Niger in July 2023, the de facto government required some of the humanitarian actors to be escorted by the national security forces when travelling out of Niamey by road. This has created a dilemma in relation to the principle of neutrality. The local population may perceive the humanitarian actors as being associated with the government forces. The military can, in principle, control which areas around Niamey are open or closed for the humanitarian actors. This challenges the independence of humanitarian action, as it can determine what part of the population the humanitarian actors are able to access. The dialogue with the population may be affected by the presence of the military.

Design, planning and proposal

Context analysis

Partners must carry out a context analysis, showing how a proposed action will affect and be affected by the context in which it will take place. Where relevant, this should include a conflict analysis and a stakeholder analysis, including an assessment of contextual protection risks. The context analysis should be informed by the humanitarian principles. For partners with a dual mandate (i.e. also working in the fields of development or conflict prevention), any implications the dual mandate has for principled humanitarian action must be considered and addressed.

Ensuring a «do no harm» approach is another key consideration in the context analysis. This includes making sure that humanitarian assistance does not further expose people to hazards, violence, or other forms of rights abuse, or undermine the affected population's capacity for self-protection. Sensitive information must also be managed in a way that does not jeopardise the safety or security of individuals.

Any existing sanctions regimes or counter-terrorism measures that may affect the delivery of humanitarian action must also be considered. Such measures can pose a challenge to principled humanitarian action. Relevant humanitarian exceptions must be understood and relied on, and there should be procedures and strategies in place to mitigate the risks and effects of unintended breaches.

Beneficiary selection

The selection of beneficiaries should be guided by the principle of impartiality: it must be made solely on the basis of assessment of their risk, vulnerability and need, giving priority to the most urgent cases of distress. Partners must ensure accountability to affected populations (AAP) and take into account the protection needs of the population(s) concerned. The procedures to be used for selecting beneficiaries should be outlined in the proposal, and the necessary documentation should be provided.

Box 1.3 Myanmar. Locally-led response

Since the military coup in February 2021, Myanmar has faced an unprecedented political crisis. The country descended into a new civil war, which severely exacerbated the humanitarian crisis. In this very challenging context, a locally-led humanitarian response is the only way to reach the people who are in dire need in certain areas of the country. UN agencies and self-implementing international NGOs (INGOs) have had difficulty reaching the most vulnerable communities because they are actively being denied access by the military junta. However, some politically-engaged local organisations have been able to access the most conflict-affected areas.

Despite their partisan affiliations, these political civil society actors have had unique access to vulnerable populations and have been able to provide humanitarian assistance due to their ability to effectively cooperate with the local authorities, their in-depth knowledge of the local context, and the fact that they have the trust of the local communities.

Relations established between Norway's partners and the local organisations before and during the crisis were based on a deep sense of trust and shared values. This was essential in order to respond quickly and effectively and to implement the systems needed for remote management. It also facilitates the trust-based dialogue that is sometimes required when seeking to establish a principled response.

Due diligence in working with local partners

When humanitarian organisations work in partnership with local actors, a due diligence process must take place to ensure that joint activities can be carried out in line with the humanitarian principles and with recognised standards. As part of this due diligence process, proposals must consider how local partners are perceived in terms of their political, ethnic, religious, and other affiliations, how they interpret their mandates, and how they prioritise different activities (in particular when partners have dual mandates, see above). Proposals must also consider local partners' practices in the areas of staff recruitment, beneficiary selection, etc. These practices must be in line with the principles.

Risk management systems and strategies

The Ministry and Norad understand and accept the fact that there is always a risk of non-compliance with the humanitarian principles in all humanitarian action. There are also risks for the partners and affected communities when the response is not in line with the humanitarian principles. These risks should also be considered and communicated. In their proposals, partners must identify and assess this type of risk in the same way as they identify and assess other forms of risk. They should clearly communicate the level of risk they are willing to take (their 'risk appetite') as well as the relevant risk management strategies they plan to implement to address the risk of non-compliance with the humanitarian principles. The humanitarian principles are also important risk-mitigation tools. When understood and respected by humanitarian actors, communities, donors, and parties to conflict, these principles facilitate safe, rapid, and unhindered access to those most at risk and in need. They should therefore be included as such in the risk management systems and strategies implemented by partners.

Box 1.4 Afghanistan: engaging with de facto authorities – blurred lines between humanitarian action and development

The ability of international actors to operate in a principled manner and adhere to humanitarian principles in Afghanistan has been at the centre of the international community's discussion of the humanitarian response in the country since the Taliban takeover in August 2021. The humanitarian space in Afghanistan has been restricted by persistent interventions by the de facto authorities, including bans on female aid workers, requests for beneficiary information and demands regarding the selection of beneficiaries and staff. Most development assistance was suspended following the Taliban takeover and humanitarian actors in Afghanistan have expressed concerns that the lines between humanitarian and development interventions in the country are increasingly blurred. Humanitarian actors have taken over activities that were previously run by development actors in close collaboration with government authorities in order to fill the gaps in the delivery of basic services. Such activities include running hospitals and health care facilities, building community infrastructure and supporting primary education services. This service delivery requires humanitarian actors to coordinate efforts more closely with the de facto authorities at various levels and can diminish their perceived impartiality and independence.

Deviation from standard procedures

Where there are constraints on the ability of a partner to apply its own standard operating procedures, this should be discussed with the Ministry (for humanitarian policy and diplomacy purposes) and with Norad (for the implications for the grant management) at the planning stage, or at the earliest possible stage during implementation. Alternative procedures should be explicitly agreed on and included in the proposal/contract with the grant manager.

Implementation

Partner relations

In cases where Norway's partners implement their activities through local partners, it is important that they maintain an ongoing dialogue with the local partners on the application of the humanitarian principles. Full use should be made of the partners' respective strengths. For example, the local partner may have a more in-depth understanding of the situation on the ground and the needs and customs of local populations, while the international partner may bring its knowledge of humanitarian principles and standards, and experience of applying them, to the partnership. Joint implementation should contribute to an enhanced understanding of the humanitarian principles and address the challenges of maintaining a principled approach on all sides of a partnership. Local actors may not be politically neutral in all contexts but may still be able to deliver a humanitarian response in line with the principles.

Strengthening the dialogue with local partners is important in this regard. Clear guidelines for the partnership in terms of decision making, approval and documentation procedures should be in place. Appropriate monitoring systems should be established.

A continuous assessment of the risks of joint implementation is needed, especially in situations where international partners have limited access to the areas of humanitarian operations and hence limited opportunity to maintain close contact with local partners and monitor their activities.

Partners are encouraged to include explicit references to the humanitarian principles in their agreements (Memorandums of Understanding – MOUs – or similar) with authorities (national authorities or other actors) in the areas where they operate.

Box 1.5 Sudan. Local actors mobilising

In April 2023, following the eruption of violent clashes between the SAF and RSF forces in Khartoum, Sudan rapidly descended into full scale civil war, marked by brutal ethnic violence. This led to the withdrawal of most national and international aid organisations. There was massive displacement and a surge of humanitarian need across the country. International humanitarian actors were unable to deliver assistance to the most conflict-affected areas. Sudanese civil society organisations and grassroots neighbourhood actors that had been actively engaged in driving the pro-democracy movement before the fighting mobilised to provide assistance to those in need at a local level. Some of Norway's partners were able to support the humanitarian efforts of these political actors turned first responders. In this case, the perceived lack of neutrality of the local responders did not pose an obstacle to their ability to deliver impartial humanitarian assistance, in a trade-off between access to populations in need and full compliance with the humanitarian principles

Communication of incidents and dialogue on dilemmas

Delivering principled humanitarian assistance is a matter of operationalising the principles in a particular context, often with one or more of the principles being challenged or not respected by authorities or parties to a conflict. As noted above, the principles of humanity and impartiality are fundamental, while neutrality and independence are more operational. There is no single definitive answer as to what constitutes principled

humanitarian action and at what point the principles are no longer respected. A continuous dialogue based on transparency and trust between partners and Norway, as well as with local partners, is essential to find solutions that are appropriate to the specific situation and context. Norad should be notified as early as possible if there are situations that threaten to undermine principled action. The identification of 'red lines' (indicators of situations which result in the discontinuation of activities) in connection with risk evaluation and mitigation strategies can be a useful tool for partners. These should be adapted to the context in question and should include any developments that would prevent a principled approach from being maintained. The Ministry and relevant Norwegian diplomatic missions should also be kept informed and consulted about challenges to principled humanitarian action.

Box 1.6 Red lines

Examples of red lines could include:

- a change in activities so that the project no longer addresses the needs of the original target population (e.g. because of interference in the project by a party to a conflict);
- part of the target population (such as women or members of a specific ethnic group) being prevented from receiving assistance;
- Norway's partner organisation losing access and/or no longer being able to monitor project activities in accordance with the proposal;
- enforced direct payments to access beneficiaries; or
- organisations being instructed to recruit staff who have a certain political or ethnic affiliation or gender.

Communication

In order to safeguard and enhance understanding of the humanitarian principles, it is important that NGO partners make clear why assistance is planned and implemented the way it is and explain the rationale behind principled action and the challenges involved. They should communicate this to the affected population, the local partners, the authorities, and the Ministry and Norad, as well as to the public, where appropriate. However, NGO partners must bear in mind the possible repercussions this could have for local partners and project beneficiaries.

Advocacy

Advocacy to promote adherence to the humanitarian principles may be intrinsically linked to operational humanitarian response, where it can help to ensure protection and assistance for those in need. In situations of conflict, certain partners may be well-placed to speak out on issues and actions that are harming the affected population, without siding with any of the parties involved.

Monitoring, evaluation and follow-up

Monitoring systems

Monitoring systems should be able to detect any changes in the context that could have an impact on principled humanitarian action, for example relating to access to key operational areas and target groups, the local perception of partners, incident reporting etc. Indicators should elucidate whether strategies to mitigate possible risks, including to the humanitarian principles, have been effective or whether mitigation gaps remain.

Risk management and mitigation strategies

Risk management and mitigation strategies, including in relation to the humanitarian principles, should be assessed as part of any internal or external reviews or evaluations of the project.

Our expectations of partners' reporting

Reports on humanitarian action funded by Norway should include a description of the challenges/dilemmas faced in ensuring respect for the humanitarian principles, as well as any lessons learnt. This can be a topic for discussion in annual meetings with the Ministry and Norad, in order to strengthen future cooperation and identify ways to address these risks.

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Coverphoto: Forcibly displaced civilians on their way from Gaza City to southern Gaza Strip during the temporary ceasefire in November 2023.
Photo: © ICRC/Abed Zagout

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