



Knowledge, evidence
and learning for
development



Reading Pack

Humanitarian Action

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November 2020

The screenshot shows a video player interface. At the top, there's a dark bar with icons for YouTube, search, and other controls. Below it, the K4D logo is prominently displayed on the left, followed by the text "Knowledge, evidence and learning for development". The main title "An Introduction to Humanitarian Action" is centered below the logo. A subtitle in a smaller font reads: "Any views and opinions expressed in this video do not necessarily reflect those of FCDO, K4D or any other contributing organisation." At the bottom of the video player, there's a progress bar showing "0:05 / 17:01" and some playback controls.

In this video Hugo Slim provides an introduction to the topic, click [here](#) to view the video on our YouTube feed. © Crown copyright 2020.

The purpose of humanitarian action is to support people affected by armed conflicts and disasters by helping them to save their lives, alleviate their suffering, maintain their dignity, assist their recovery and increase their resilience.

Today's global humanitarian system is a major achievement in modern international relations. It has created and sustained strong humanitarian norms, laws and operational agencies. These now ensure that the great majority of people in desperate need because of war and disaster throughout the world are likely to receive some form of aid and protection from its global reach.

Law, rights and principles

This humanitarian urge to protect and assist people in trouble is ancient and universal. In the last 200 years, it has been formalised by institutions such as the United Nations (UN), the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, and many national and international non-governmental organisations (NGOs). It has also been formalised by states in international laws and human rights treaties such as the Geneva Conventions governing armed conflict, the 1951 Refugee Convention, and the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Everyday operational practice of humanitarian action is governed by four humanitarian principles: humanity; impartiality; neutrality and independence. Originating with the International Red Cross and Red Crescent

Movement, these principles are now adopted by the UN and most of the humanitarian sector.

> **Humanity** is the goal of all humanitarian action: "*To prevent and alleviate human suffering wherever it may be found. Its purpose is to protect life and health and ensure respect for the human being.*"¹ Embedded in this principle is a dual concern to assist people to ensure their physical survival and to protect them from inhumane treatment. These fundamental objectives create two main operational approaches of humanitarian action: **protection** and **assistance**.

> **Impartiality** is the principle of fairness in humanitarian action to ensure that it: "*Makes no discrimination as to nationality, race, religious beliefs, class or political opinion. It endeavours only ever to relieve suffering, giving priority to the most urgent cases of distress.*"² It is a commitment to have no political or social preferences and to allocate protection and assistance on the basis of need alone.

> **Neutrality** is the principle of political and military abstention: "*In order to enjoy the confidence of all, to not take sides in hostilities or engage at any time in controversies of a political, racial, religious or ideological nature.*"³ This is the most controversial of humanitarian principles. Many NGOs and faith-based organisations reject "full neutrality" and retain the right to express their political and religious opinions in a conflict. Many non-neutral organisations also deliver important – and still impartial – humanitarian work.

¹IFRC. (2020). *Fundamental Principles of the Red Cross and Red Crescent*. The International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC). Retrieved November 9, 2020, from <https://media.ifrc.org/ifrc/who-we-are/fundamental-principles/>

²Ibid.

³Ibid.

> **Independence** is the principle of autonomy. Humanitarian agencies must “*always maintain their autonomy so they can act in accordance with their principles.*”⁴ Here, the objective is to avoid being unduly influenced so that an agency can retain operational freedom to make its own judgement and decisions about needs and priorities. This principle is also challenging because agencies often feel “donor driven” or heavily pressured into decisions by warring parties, authorities, and communities themselves.

There is a **hierarchy of principles** with humanity and impartiality being absolute imperatives in humanitarian action, and neutrality and independence being less binding operational principles.

The *Code of Conduct for the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and NGOs in Disaster Relief* (ICRC, 1994) is the most authoritative source of guidance on the best way to work with people in crisis. The *Code of Conduct* commits agencies to ensuring people’s participation, local empowerment, proper accountability and the sustainable impact of humanitarian programmes wherever possible.

Standards

The humanitarian sector has also worked hard to set standards of practice for itself. The *Sphere Handbook*, which is regularly updated, specifies operational principles, good practice and technical standards in the main humanitarian activities (like health and water) and with particular groups of people (like children and older people). Sphere’s “Core Humanitarian Standard” is a system of nine institutional commitments to improve organisation-wide quality and accountability.

All these principles and standards are voluntary and self-regulated. There is no formal international mechanism to judge an agency on its principles or its technical performance.

The humanitarian system

These laws, organisations and principles form an international “humanitarian system” which responds globally to crises and is loosely coordinated by the UN at the global or country level (notably by the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs [OCHA]) and involves the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and NGOs. It spent \$31.2 billion of aid in 2019, more than double that of \$15.1 billion in 2009, and aimed to reach 215 million people in 31 countries.⁵

This system is mainly funded by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) member states and is essentially a Western system of humanitarian assistance with major support from Gulf states in recent

years. Major powers like China and India stand apart from this system. They prefer to fund their own bilateral aid systems of “South-South Cooperation” and focus on disaster response for their own enormous populations. There is also a huge system of Islamic aid which operates equally independently and with little financial visibility.

The global humanitarian system operates as a global ecosystem with a wide diversity of humanitarian actors, including the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, UN agencies, national governments, local governments, international and national NGOs, community-based organisations, secular organisations, faith-based organisations, military forces, international, national and local businesses, and a global research and educational network in universities and think tanks.

Humanitarian expansion

The UN humanitarian system is now facing increasing needs and rising budgets for four reasons:

- > A rising number of conflicts and “protracted conflicts” marked by the fragmentation of warring parties, deliberate targeting of civilians, problems of humanitarian access, and continuous development reversals in an increasing number of states affected by fragility, conflict and violence that are home to 2 billion people.
- > The increasing incidence and severity of disasters caused by natural hazards, pandemics, climate change and rapid unplanned urbanisation. The COVID-19 crisis alone looks set to see needs rise dramatically.
- > The elaboration of humanitarian response which has graduated from a basic approach to food, water and medical supplies to recognise human rights protection, social protection, livelihoods, cash, mental health, education, infrastructure support, digital engagement and climate risk reduction as basic humanitarian needs.
- > The annual costs of maintaining large humanitarian bureaucracies.

The financial and operational expansion of humanitarian action has been exponential in the first 20 years of this century and it remains to be seen if this growth is sustainable in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic and the possible refocusing of Western governments towards domestic aid.

Major humanitarian policies

The Western system is grappling with ten main sector-wide policies which are widely agreed but whose implementation is still patchy.

⁴Ibid.

⁵Thomas, A. & Urquhart, A. (2020). *Global Humanitarian Assistance Report 2020*. Development Initiatives. Retrieved from: <https://devinit.org/resources/global-humanitarian-assistance-report-2020/>

Protecting people from violence of various kinds continues to be the biggest strategic policy and practice challenge. Protection is the primary responsibility of states and parties to conflict. Achieving real and consistent humanitarian influence to prevent deliberate attacks on civilians, sexual violence, forced displacement, unlawful detention, and inhumane treatment continues to be problematic.

The system's grandest ambition is its policy to work more strategically in a **nexus of humanitarian, development and peace objectives**. This is to reduce the risk of donor budgets and operational organisations "working in silos" and to align cooperation on overlapping objectives, economies of scale and shared expertise towards meeting the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

The system is trying to become more **people-centred** and **enable resilience** in communities, markets and essential services. This recognises that most people save themselves and know how best to do this. **People's agency** is key to their survival and aid should not be imposed upon them but be designed with them through better "community engagement" and "accountability to the affected population". The major uptake in the use of direct **cash transfers** to people in recent years is a deliberate effort to increase people's agency by putting resources and decisions into their own hands.

Significant effort is being invested to improve **anticipation and risk management** in crises at national, community and household levels, and in markets and services. This combines early warning and early response to see a crisis coming and release targeted funds to mitigate its worst effects.

There is a major effort to improve **evidence and impact assessment** across the humanitarian sector. This is at the heart of the sector's drive towards greater professionalism, standard setting, transparency and accountability.

Another policy ambition is the greater **localisation** of humanitarian action so that more funds go directly to national and local government and NGOs in an effort to empower national capacity and reduce the transaction costs of working through UN agencies and international NGOs.

In an urbanising world, disaster and conflict increasingly take place in **urban environments**. The humanitarian sector is having to evolve fast from a traditionally rural pattern of response to developing new policy and practice to support the majority of vulnerable people who now live in towns and cities, and in informal human settlements like slums and camps for displaced people.

The sector is **digitalising humanitarian action** by leveraging digital technology to reach people with key information, protect them better, predict crisis and transfer resources like cash and vouchers.

Many humanitarian organisations are starting to prioritise **climate action** which means greening their organisations and ensuring their programmes help people to mitigate and adapt to climate risks. The challenge is to become "climate smart" in their operations.

Finally, all agencies are working to **prevent sexual exploitation and abuse** in their own organisations and their partner organisations.

Reforming humanitarianism

Humanitarian action has many critics. It has a long tradition of self-criticism from reflective humanitarians which plays out in continuous efforts at "humanitarian reform" that characterise the system. Humanitarianism is also under fire from critical academics, some civil society leaders in the Global South, and conservative nationalists who share elements of an anti-aid perspective.

The most recent **UN-led reform agenda** from within the system emerged in 2016 in the World Humanitarian Summit's *Agenda for Humanity* and in the Inter-Agency Standing Committee's (IASC) *Grand Bargain* on humanitarian financing. These focused above all on making a stronger nexus of links between humanitarian, development and peace objectives, setting clear targets for greater transparency, people's participation, localisation, increased use of cash, and joint inter-agency assessments.

Humanitarians have long been aware of the **unintended consequences** of their aid and action on the wider political dynamics of a conflict or disaster. A precautionary commitment to "**do no harm**" runs as a policy throughout the sector along with efforts to improve humanitarian monitoring and evaluations and to adopt adaptive management in fast-moving crises.

Humanitarian aid and agencies are challenged for their **inherent racism** by a movement to "decolonise aid" and stop the neo-colonial system of humanitarian aid which sees most humanitarian power in the hands of white-dominated Western organisations. Efforts to increase localisation and adopt anti-racism initiatives are the main response to this critique.

Bureaucratisation and vested interests in humanitarian organisations are additional charges levelled against the large government aid departments, the UN, the Red Cross and NGO agencies that dominate humanitarian spending and operations. People enduring conflicts and disasters as survivors, government officials, and local humanitarians often report that these big organisations define needs in their own interests, push out or poach local talent, and pay themselves far too much in the process. The drive to more participatory, people-centred and localised aid aims to correct this.

Reading and resources

The history of humanitarian action

- > Davey, E., Borton, J. & Foley, M. (2013). *A History of the Humanitarian System: Western Origins and Foundations*. HPG Working Paper. ODI. London. Retrieved from: <https://www.odi.org/sites/odi.org.uk/files/odi-assets/publications-opinion-files/8439.pdf>

The humanitarian system today

For global financing and spending patterns in Western humanitarian aid:

- > Thomas, A. & Urquhart, A. (2020). *Global Humanitarian Assistance Report 2020*. Development Initiatives. Retrieved from: <https://devinit.org/resources/global-humanitarian-assistance-report-2020/>

For a global review of trends, progress and performance:

- > ALNAP. (2020). *State of the Humanitarian System 2018: Summary*. ALNAP. London. Retrieved from: <https://www.alnap.org/help-library/the-state-of-the-humanitarian-system-2018-summary>

Principles and standards in humanitarian action

- > ICRC. (1994). *Code of Conduct for the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) in Disaster Relief*. ICRC. Retrieved from: <https://www.icrc.org/en/doc/assets/files/publications/icrc-002-1067.pdf>
- > OCHA. (2012). *OCHA on Message: Humanitarian Principles*. OCHA. Retrieved from: https://www.unocha.org/sites/dms/Documents/00M-humanitarianprinciples_eng_June12.pdf
- > Sphere. (2018). *The Sphere Handbook: Humanitarian Charter and Minimum Standards in Humanitarian Response* (4th ed.). Sphere Association. Switzerland. Retrieved from: <https://www.spherestandards.org/handbook/>

Localisation, nexus and climate

- > Ali, D. & Murphy, M. R. (2020). *Black Lives Matter is also a reckoning for foreign aid and international NGOs*. Open Democracy. Retrieved from: <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/transformation/black-lives-matter-also-reckoning-foreign-aid-and-international-ngos/>
- > IFRC and Red Cross Red Crescent Climate Centre. (2020). *What is climate smart programming and how do we achieve it?* Climate Centre. Retrieved from: <https://www.climatecentre.org/downloads/files/What%20is%20climate-smart%20programming%20-%20MAR2020.pdf>
- > Start Network. (2017, December 8). *A new way to think about localization in humanitarian response [Video]*. Retrieved from: <https://youtu.be/kvkEoTkImr0>

About this report

K4D professional development Reading Packs provide thought-provoking introductions by international experts and highlight the emerging issues and debates within them. They aim to help inform policies that are more resilient to the future.

This publication is a new edition of this reading pack. The 2014 edition was written by Sara Pantuliano for GSDRC as part of the DFID-funded PEAKS programme. This edition was revised in 2020 by Hugo Slim as part of the FCDO-funded K4D programme.

K4D services are provided by a consortium of leading organisations working in international development, led by the Institute of Development Studies (IDS), with the Education Development Trust, Itad, University of Leeds Nuffield Centre for International Health and Development, Liverpool School of Tropical Medicine (LSTM), University of Birmingham International Development Department (IDD) and the University of Manchester Humanitarian and Conflict Response Institute (HCRI).

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Acknowledgements

We thank the following experts who voluntarily provided suggestions for relevant literature or other advice to the author to support the preparation of this report. The content of the report does not necessarily reflect the opinions of any of the experts consulted.

- Chris Porter, Jennifer Scott and Deborah Baghole
– FCDO

We would also like to thank Alice Shaw (editorial coordination and proofreading), Lewis Small (copy-editing) and Lance Bellers (design) for their work on this publication.

Suggested citation

Slim, H. (2020). *Professional Development Reading Pack: Humanitarian Action*. K4D Reading Pack. Brighton, UK: Institute of Development Studies.

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