



# Chapter 7

## **Upholding humanitarian principles in the age of echo chambers**



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# Contents

	<b>Introduction: Outpaced – humanitarian action in the era of instant narratives</b>	<b>259</b>
7.1	<b>Reaffirming and applying humanity in an age of distrust</b>	<b>261</b>
7.2	<b>Dehumanization in the digital age</b>	<b>262</b>
7.3	<b>Promoting tolerance in diverse and divided societies</b>	<b>264</b>
7.4	<b>Neutrality at a cost: The price of not taking sides</b>	<b>267</b>
7.5	<b>Patriotism and humanitarian principles</b>	<b>273</b>
7.6	<b>Independence as a condition for trust</b>	<b>274</b>
7.7	<b>Impartiality as a compass</b>	<b>275</b>
7.8	<b>Organizational integrity: Internal alignment with principles</b>	<b>276</b>
7.9	<b>A framework for applying humanitarian principles in the information age</b>	<b>282</b>
7.10	<b>Influencers: Connectors and dividers</b>	<b>290</b>
7.11	<b>Reaffirming humanitarian principles in the age of digital tools</b>	<b>292</b>
	<b>Concluding remarks: Principled action requires more than declarations</b>	<b>293</b>
	<b>Endnotes</b>	<b>297</b>

# Introduction: Outpaced – humanitarian action in the era of instant narratives

In an information environment distorted by rumour, manipulation and politically charged content, trust in humanitarian actors is increasingly fragile. Harmful information can undermine the perceived impartiality, neutrality and independence of humanitarian actors, fuel suspicion among communities and endanger staff, volunteers and the people they serve.

Humanitarian action now takes place in a contested information environment, one where trust is fragile and emotion often displaces fact. As TS Eliot cautioned, “When we do not know, or when we do not know enough, we tend always to substitute emotions for thoughts.” In the sentiment-driven economy of social media and now artificial intelligence (AI), principled humanitarian action is easily misunderstood or misrepresented – especially when it fails to align with dominant political or emotional narratives. In such settings, the consistent application of humanitarian principles becomes not only more difficult but more essential.

Information now competes not on the strength of accuracy, evidence or logic, but on its ability to provoke emotion – amusement, outrage and shock – and to change behaviours. Harmful content spreads rapidly and often unchecked, not because it is true, but because it feels true. Harmful information and distortion flourish where trust is already weakened. A single manipulated image, misleading headline or viral post can cast doubt on an organization’s motives or affiliations, reinforcing narratives that challenge principled humanitarian action and endanger humanitarian actors and the communities they serve.

This chapter begins with the principle of humanity – the foundation of all humanitarian work – and builds on [Chapter 2, on page 69](#) where the focus was on trust and the principle of neutrality. It explores a growing strategic vulnerability: humanitarian action is designed to be deliberate, impartial and context specific. Digital information, by contrast, is immediate, emotional and virally amplified. This creates a dangerous speed mismatch. Humanitarian actors generally take time to verify facts, assess needs and coordinate responses. Harmful narratives and outrage, by contrast, travel in seconds – unconcerned with humanity, neutrality, accuracy, proportionality or consequence.

Humanitarian responses – at least the visibility around them – often arrive *after* public narratives have hardened, reputations damaged and trust eroded. The cost of delay is that narratives are settled early, often by politicized, dehumanizing or false information – creating operational risks. The humanitarian sector’s commitment to accurate, non-political communication is too often misread as indifference, lack of empathy, evasiveness or even sometimes complicity.

Rapid, emotionally charged narratives can shape donor, community, media and influencer perceptions before humanitarian organizations can establish the facts. Deliberate delays in communication – once a safeguard to establish facts and engage – can now erode humanitarian space for communication. Principled, timely engagement in the information environment is essential. What was once considered caution may now be a liability: inaction in the information space can cause more harm than timely, principled engagement. This raises difficult questions: is the slow pace of visibility

around humanitarian action truly necessary or have organizations become institutionally over-cautious? Who is the audience for such communications today? Do some organizations still treat information as secondary to operations, even though it now shapes how operational success or failure is perceived?

As harmful narratives accelerate while communication about humanitarian action lags, the sector faces declining trust and shrinking operational space. Addressing this challenge requires confronting these dilemmas directly and adapting communication practices to keep pace with the evolving information environment.

## ◇ Fundamental and humanitarian principles

In 1965,<sup>1</sup> the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement proclaimed a set of ethical and operational principles to guide humanitarian work, especially in polarized and contested environments. The seven fundamental principles were adopted in the Statutes of the Movement by the International Conference in 1986: humanity, impartiality, neutrality, independence, voluntary service, unity and universality. Four of them – **humanity, impartiality, neutrality and independence** – have since become the foundation for international humanitarian action and are widely recognized as the **humanitarian principles**.

The principles are both hierarchical and complementary, providing an ethical and a practical framework. Humanity and impartiality are the two substantive principles. **Humanity** expresses the purpose of humanitarian action: to prevent and alleviate suffering wherever it is found. **Impartiality** ensures that this action is driven solely by needs, without discrimination based on nationality, race, religious beliefs, class or political opinions.

Neutrality and independence are operational tools – pragmatic means to secure access and maintain a protected space for humanitarian action in situations of armed conflict and violence. Both are designed to build trust or at least acceptance to act from all sides. **Neutrality** requires humanitarian actors to refrain from taking sides in hostilities or engaging in political, religious or ideological debates. **Independence** ensures that decisions, particularly around needs assessment and response, are made autonomously, free from external influence or agendas.

The humanitarian principles are not unique to the Movement, though they form its ethical and operational core. Over time, they have shaped global humanitarian norms, including UN General Assembly resolutions, such as Resolution 46/182<sup>2</sup> (1991) which affirms these principles as the foundation of UN-led humanitarian coordination, and several hundred NGOs have now adopted the Code of Conduct for the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and NGOs in Disaster Relief (1994).

## 7.1 Reaffirming and applying humanity in an age of distrust

### Fundamental principle

#### HUMANITY

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The International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, born of a desire to bring assistance without discrimination to the wounded on the battlefield, endeavours, in its international and national capacity, to prevent and alleviate human suffering wherever it may be found. Its purpose is to protect life and health and to ensure respect for the human being. It promotes mutual understanding, friendship, cooperation and lasting peace amongst all peoples.

If trust is rooted in vulnerability and expectation, humanity is grounded in respect and compassion. The principle of humanity is widely recognized as the foundational driver of humanitarian action. It is what compels humanitarian actors to act: to save lives, reduce suffering and uphold the dignity of people affected by crises. Among the core humanitarian principles, humanity is superior to the others because it captures the moral imperative, the core motivation and founding values of humanitarianism and underpins the other principles. In his 1979 *Commentary on the Fundamental Principles*,<sup>3</sup> Pictet described humanity as requiring not only the preservation of life and physical integrity but also a respect for individual personality and dignity. Pictet emphasized that the principle must evolve with ‘circumstances’. The information age is one such circumstance.<sup>4</sup>

Philosopher Jonathan Glover in his exploration of moral identity and psychological distance argues that **humanity is rooted in our human responses**: the capacity for respect and for sympathy, our ability to care about the suffering of others and to see them as fully human.<sup>5</sup> Yet these responses are inherently fragile and it is precisely this fragility that harmful information exploits across social media platforms and beyond. Glover observes that sympathy can be overwhelmed, weakened, narrowed or eliminated by psychological or physical distance, by tribalism and belief or through the normalization of dehumanizing language. He warns that distance narrows human responses, cutting people off from whole groups of other people, while remoteness makes it natural to think all this is not really happening: “This enables the propaganda of atrocity, often directed against the dignity of victims”.<sup>6</sup>

Harmful information thrives in such environments and it erodes empathy, undermines solidarity and legitimizes exclusion or violence. The result is not only a more hostile environment for humanitarian operations, but one in which suffering is selectively acknowledged and humanitarian response becomes politically contested. As humanitarian space narrows, as physical proximity to affected populations for principled humanitarian actors becomes more difficult, restricted and/or delegitimized, the principle of humanity itself is under growing threat.

## 7.2 Dehumanization in the digital age

Dehumanization is no longer confined to explicit hate speech or fringe ideologies. It is increasingly embedded in everyday language, imagery and digital behaviours. It surfaces in manipulated images, inflammatory headlines and algorithmically amplified narratives that distort, erase or deny an individual's humanity. In already fragile environments, the erosion of empathy is not just a side effect; it is often the intent. Dehumanization is not always overt. It can manifest subtly and systemically, including through digital profiling, unequal access to services or the commodification of personal data. At its core, dehumanization involves perceiving or treating someone as *less than human* – a denial of one or more elements of their humanity.<sup>7</sup> While people never cease to be human, failing to recognize their humanity has real and often violent consequences. This includes reducing individuals to group identities (such as 'migrant', 'refugee'), equating them with animals or vermin, or disregarding their legitimate human interests and agency. When such rhetoric goes unchecked, it not only diminishes empathy and compassion but also increases public support for exclusion, retribution or even violence. It undermines helping behaviours, obstructs reconciliation and fuels policies and practices that may violate international law.<sup>8</sup>

Dehumanizing language and imagery directed at humanitarian action pose serious risks. They can be used to justify or encourage the obstruction of aid, lead to the targeting of humanitarian organizations, criminalize humanitarian assistance and render entire populations invisible or undeserving in the eyes of the public or decision-makers. These risks are particularly acute when such rhetoric originates from official sources or when humanitarian access is framed as politically motivated or a threat to national security.



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### Extracts from 2024 Council of Delegates Resolution 5: Call for respect and support for principled humanitarian action

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“expressing deep concern for the safety and well-being of all people affected and for their ability to access life-saving assistance, and expressing sorrow for the number of lives of humanitarian workers and volunteers lost in the service of humanity.”

“expressing deep concern about the greater impediments to the ability of principled humanitarian actors to deliver assistance and protection to people who most need it, owing to increasing political and societal polarization, the politicization of aid, false characterization of the humanitarian principles of impartiality and neutrality as furthering the interests of an adversary ...”<sup>9</sup>

Upholding the principle of humanity in the digital era requires vigilance against the ways in which the information space and technology can unintentionally harm (online and offline), exclude or depersonalize. It demands sustained commitment to human presence and relational accountability – one reason why traditional humanitarian actors have long emphasized the importance of physical proximity and human connection to people in need.

Dehumanization not only challenges the principle of humanity, it also undermines impartiality, by denying the equal value of all people and the right to humanitarian response based solely on need. It casts suspicion on neutrality, framing humanitarian actors as aligned with or sympathetic to those who have been publicly stigmatized or discredited; it erodes perceptions of independence, as humanitarian intentions and affiliations are deliberately misrepresented.

The principle of humanity compels us to affirm the intrinsic value of every individual, especially when their dignity, rights and personhood are denied. Impartiality reinforces this imperative by requiring humanitarian action to be based solely on need. Neutrality and independence enable humanitarian actors to maintain focus on those people most affected, while navigating highly politicized environments and pressure to devalue or exclude individuals or groups. Together, they are not constraints but the basis for principled action, especially in complex contested spaces.

Yet even well-intentioned humanitarian actors can inadvertently replicate dehumanizing patterns if they are not actively mindful of the language they use or the power dynamics they reinforce. This is why principled humanitarianism must go beyond ethical commitments to uphold humanity: it must include deliberate efforts to detect and disrupt dehumanizing narratives, especially those normalized “in the undramatic episodes of the day-to-day”.<sup>10</sup> The antidote to dehumanization is not simply more information – it is recognition. It is the act of restoring visibility and dignity to those denied it and reaffirming – through words, images and action – that no one is ever less than human. **The humanitarian principles are not only capable of surviving today’s crisis of harmful information, they were designed to meet precisely this type of challenge.**

#### Contributor Insight 7.1



## Navigating harmful narratives in a migration hotspot

Since June 2023, the Italian Red Cross has been running the migrant reception centre (‘hotspot’) on Lampedusa. The hotspot plays a critical role in managing sudden migrant arrivals. Previously, the Lampedusa hotspot has been the target of numerous harmful information campaigns, particularly on social media. Misleading videos have also spread widely, including footage falsely portraying migrants lying on the ground and episodes of violence in the centre. These distortions, often amplified by sensationalist rhetoric, framed the situation as an ‘invasion’ and are frequently used to stoke fear. From the outset, our goal was to transform the hotspot into a hub of humanity. This initially presented serious challenges: to improve operational management, expand reception capacity and build a constructive relationship with the Lampedusa community, institutions and authorities.

From the very first days, we worked to adapt the centre and align its operations with the standards of the Italian Red Cross and the broader International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement. One of our first steps was to inform the media about the changes made – both to the infrastructure and the reception system. This allowed us to

communicate the improvements achieved and the increased care provided to migrants arriving at the hotspot.

Authorities, institutions and the local population quickly realized that there had been a significant shift in the way reception of migrants was managed on the island. In a short time, Italian media outlets began to report positively on our work at the hotspot. However, in some European countries where coverage of migrant hospitality is more negative, media engagement required a different approach. We developed tailored strategies for English and French language media to better convey our values. Media in Dutch, German and Arabic languages quickly highlighted the positive impact of the hotspot change of management approach.

Beyond operational and logistical improvements, we also launched a storytelling initiative centred on the emotions and lived experiences of the migrants arriving in Lampedusa. This helped shift the narrative – from one focused solely on numbers to one showing human stories and dignity. Over time, we have observed the media spreading false information or inaccurate numbers. Thanks to our strong relationships with newspapers, television and radio outlets, we have been able to position the Italian Red Cross as the most trusted source for migrant-related news on Lampedusa – and beyond. Today, more than two years since we began managing the hotspot, journalists continue to turn to us for data, updates and fact-checking. They regularly seek to verify news – often false – that they receive via social media or private messages. There have been particularly intense moments, such as during periods of overcrowding at the hotspot or the arrival of survivors from shipwrecks. Yet, our consistent presence and reliability have enabled us to navigate these difficult situations – delivering timely messages across both traditional and social media.

**Marco Ottaviani**

Head of Press Office and National President Spokesperson

Italian Red Cross

## 7.3 Promoting tolerance in diverse and divided societies

Over 20 years ago, the Movement acknowledged the pervasive problems of discrimination, intolerance and lack of respect for human diversity in many parts of the world through the 2003 Council of Delegates Resolution 9.<sup>11</sup> This called on all components of the Movement, within their respective mandates, to promote tolerance, non-discrimination and respect for diversity at the local, national and international levels. It outlined five critical areas for action:

- 1 Ensuring **openness and diversity** within the Movement itself, ensuring inclusive representation and internal practices that reflect humanitarian values.
- 2 Engaging externally to **build understanding and insights**, including building partnerships to foster dialogue and inclusion.
- 3 Promoting **public dialogue and advocacy** to foster social cohesion.

- 4 Strengthening **preparedness**, both proactive and reactive, for promoting tolerance and respect, with a focus on addressing the needs of marginalized and at-risk groups – supporting dialogue, **trust-building among communities** and coexistence.
- 5 **Learning from experience** and developing new initiatives both internally and with other organizations to identify best practices and foster collaboration in combating intolerance, discrimination and lack of respect for diversity.

Although adopted before the rise of today's digital information ecosystems, the resolution's relevance has only grown. What has changed – and now demands urgent attention – is the speed and scale at which harmful information spreads, rooted in the interplay between online and offline spaces. Digital platforms have become accelerants for harmful information – including intolerance, discrimination and lack of respect for diversity – that fuel division, mistrust and violence. These dynamics not only reinforce the very forms of intolerance the resolution sought to address, but they also directly undermine principled humanitarian action – distorting perceptions of neutrality, impeding access and putting humanitarian actors and communities at risk.

A renewed focus is therefore needed on how the Movement responds to these evolving challenges. Upholding the commitments of Resolution 9 today requires confronting the digital dimensions of intolerance and embedding the responses to harmful information into broader strategies for inclusion, protection and principled engagement – both online and offline. This is not only an internal imperative but also a necessary response to the broader information environment that shapes perceptions, access and the safety of humanitarian action.



**Can you think of anything like yourself, you know, where there was a big news event and it kind of impacted how you felt about the country or the community? Well, the one that's ongoing just now is there's a lot of news stories about immigration and that kind of thing. I just think, personally, it makes me feel that I think we're a little bit backward and not accepting them. And a lot of the stories that I'm seeing, especially on X (Twitter), for example, is anti-immigration, which I can't quite figure out because it's not a stance that I take. So, you know, it's trying to send me down a particular line or trying to influence my thoughts on it, or brainwashing me into thinking another type of way."**

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Community member, UK

## Contributor Insight 7.2

## 60 years of the fundamental principles: Urgent call to action

The 32nd International Conference of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, marking the 50th anniversary of the Fundamental principles,<sup>12</sup> was held in 2015 under the overarching theme: Fundamental Principles in Action. The Conference reaffirmed the central role of the Movement's leadership in fostering and strengthening these principles. It emphasized that this responsibility should be exercised through four key areas of focus: a) strengthening the legal and statutory basis of National Societies and reinforcing their auxiliary role to public authorities; b) establishing and maintaining a sustained dialogue with public authorities and also with external partners and the broader public; c) investing in (humanitarian) education and providing contextualized practical training on the fundamental principles; and d) promoting the exchange of good practices and peer-to-peer learning among all the components of the Movement.

In 2024, the IFRC's Global Think Tank on Fundamental principles affirmed that while the Movement's leadership continues to bear responsibility for their promotion, the environment in which this responsibility is exercised has changed significantly since 2015. In recent years, principled humanitarian action has come under increasing pressure from growing social and political polarization, the politicization of aid, the spread of harmful information and the rise of dehumanizing rhetoric. These trends have contributed to an erosion of trust in humanitarian actors and their work – one that has been further intensified by the COVID-19 pandemic and other ongoing crises and conflicts.

In many contexts, neutral and impartial humanitarian actors face abuse, threats and even acts of violence, seriously undermining the Movement's ability to help people in need. Upholding respect for principled humanitarian action is key to enable National Societies, as mandated local responders, to carry out their humanitarian mission effectively – both within their own country and in international contexts. It is also critical for the IFRC and the ICRC to fulfil their respective mandates.

To address these challenges and concerns, the 2024 Council of Delegates adopted **Resolution 5, 'Call for respect and support for principled humanitarian action'**, and an accompanying Appeal to States at the 34th International Red Cross and Red Crescent Conference in 2024. The resolution urges all Movement components to intensify their focus on the fundamental principles and to take concrete action in the following areas:

Enhancing knowledge and learning to foster behavioural competencies aligned with the fundamental principles.

Strengthening National Societies' legal base and auxiliary role.

Reviewing and revising National Societies' Statutes (in line with the Statutes guidance).

Strengthening integrity, accountability and trust, including through initiatives such as the recently launched Community of Practice.

Advocating to external stakeholders on the importance of principled humanitarian action.

The fundamental principles are the moral foundation and compass of the Movement, forming the ethical backbone of principled humanitarian action. While the primary responsibility of the Movement's leadership to uphold and promote these principles has remained constant, the global context has changed dramatically. As the Movement marked in 2025 the 60th anniversary of the fundamental principles, all components are called on to take urgent action based on Resolution 5. This is not only a reaffirmation of shared principles, but a necessary step to ensure that principled humanitarian action can be preserved and protected in the years ahead.

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Tank on Fundamental Principles

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## 7.4 Neutrality at a cost: The price of not taking sides

### Fundamental principle

#### NEUTRALITY

In order to enjoy the confidence of all, the Movement may not take sides in hostilities or engage at any time in controversies of a political, racial, religious or ideological nature.

In today's volatile information environment, humanitarian organizations face growing challenges in communicating principled messaging. Even when grounded in facts and neutrality, such messaging is often drowned out, distorted or reframed as political or partial, especially on digital platforms. The polarizing comments and narratives that become attached to such statements, for example, in comment sections, leave little or no room for genuine engagement nor are they necessarily intended to. This dynamic shuts down the space for communication and engagement dialogue at precisely the time when it is most needed. This presents a serious perception gap: neutrality and impartiality are misunderstood, mistrusted or dismissed as detached or complicit. Meanwhile, silence or restraint in speaking out can be interpreted as moral indifference. Online dynamics, amplified by algorithms and public emotion, leave little room for nuance or principle-based explanations. As a result, neutrality itself can become controversial, ironically undermining its core purpose: enabling neutral humanitarian actors to "not take sides in hostilities or engage at any time in controversies of a political, racial, religious or ideological nature".

While neutrality is vital to preserving humanitarian space, it should not be invoked unthinkingly or at the expense of the most essential principle: humanity. Neutrality is often the bridge that allows the Red Cross and Red Crescent to operate where others cannot, yet at times it is applied without recognizing opportunities to raise a voice. Upholding both principles means navigating each decision carefully – balancing the

need to remain neutral with the responsibility to speak out when issues fundamentally affect humanitarian action, always weighing the consequences of each action.

### A deliberate hierarchy of principles

#### **Humanity is the highest imperative.**

Impartiality defines how to serve that goal. Neutrality and independence are the means to achieve it. Voluntary service, unity and universality are the enablers that make it possible. Each principle flows from the one before, in a deliberate hierarchy that begins – and ends – with humanity.

Critics often define neutrality by what it is not – failing to recognize that it is not neutral toward suffering. Neutrality is neither passive nor indifferent: it is a deliberate, principled stance aimed at building trust, protecting access and preserving humanitarian space. Refraining from engaging in ‘wars of words’ that could compromise acceptance, access and trust is very hard. Upholding neutrality today requires more than internal discipline; it demands careful management of perception, timing and consistency, as well as strategic decisions about where and how to communicate. At times, that may include disabling or disengaging with comment sections or stepping back from online engagement entirely, while deepening efforts offline in trust-building with affected communities.

Neutrality is a strategic and tactical tool that aims to enable humanitarian organizations “to enjoy the confidence of all.” The challenge today is that the “all” has become global, more immediate, more fragmented and increasingly polarized. **Public discourse often imposes binary frames: for or against, us or them, victim or aggressor, innocent or guilty.** These dichotomies flatten complex realities and place humanitarian actors under pressure to take such sides. For example,

- **“For or against”**: neutrality is often equated with complicity and any failure to publicly condemn is portrayed as a moral failing.
- **“Us or them”**: the expectation to align with a particular group’s narrative, perspective or cause undermines impartiality and oversimplifies complex situations.
- **“Victim or aggressor”**: humanitarians may face pressure to assign blame, but their role is to provide principled assistance and protection based on need, not judgement.
- **Innocent or guilty**: providing aid to those perceived as ‘guilty’ can be misinterpreted as support for their actions, posing a challenge to the principle of neutrality.
- **“Suffering or staging”**: humanitarian needs are often framed as exaggerated, fabricated, politically motivated or evidence that those suffering are a security risk or political tool, casting doubt on humanitarian responses and framing humanitarian actors as naïve, complicit or politically driven.

- **“Deserving or undeserving”**: this framing erodes empathy and casts suspicion on both affected populations and humanitarian actors, politicizing even the act of alleviating suffering.

In such binary framings, humanitarian needs are not simply acknowledged – they are scrutinized for motive. These narratives leave little space for neutrality and impartiality, which require humanitarians to act based on need, not affiliation, identity or perceived moral standing. Yet, articulating this is increasingly difficult in an information environment that discourages nuance, favours emotive soundbites and overlooks the operational consequences of alienating key actors or compromising access. Humanitarian actors, by contrast, must protect access to all sides, safeguard staff and volunteers operating in harm’s way and communicate in ways that do not endanger the very people they seek to assist. In this context, how suffering is framed – and by whom – has never been more difficult – or more consequential. These binary framings erode empathy and cast suspicion on both affected populations and the principled humanitarian actors who serve them. They undermine impartiality by implying that suffering must be politically justified or morally validated. Within such polarized discourse, even the act of responding to human suffering risks becoming politicized.

Nowhere is this more evident than in the suffering of Palestinian civilians in Gaza and of Israeli hostages and their families since the 7 October 2023 attack, including during the period of captivity. Public discourse was dominated by binary framings: ‘either you stand with the hostages or with Gazan civilians’; ‘either you condemn Hamas or you ignore Israeli suffering’; ‘either you speak out or you are complicit’. This narrative architecture leaves little space for nuance, and even less for neutral, impartial humanitarian action. Humanitarian actors who draw attention to the devastating toll of bombardments and the lack of food and other essentials for civilians in Gaza were accused of ignoring the suffering of the hostages and Israeli trauma. Conversely, those who spoke out about the plight of hostages may be seen as aligning with one side of the conflict. In both cases, humanitarian discourse and action are quickly politicized, judged not by adherence to humanitarian principles or operational impact, but by perceived allegiance.

This binary framing strikes at the heart of neutrality: it denies space for holding multiple truths at once with regard to human suffering – for example, that both the loss, deprivation and suffering caused by the taking, captivity and death of hostages from Israel and the loss, deprivation, suffering and death of civilians in Gaza are serious humanitarian concerns (each raising obligations of parties to armed conflict under international law). For humanitarian organizations, the imperative is not to choose sides, but to protect the dignity and rights of all affected people, irrespective of political narratives. Yet doing so, particularly in the public information space, requires careful navigation often with an emphasis on maintaining humanitarian access. Statements must be weighed not only for their content, but for how they may be received, misinterpreted or instrumentalized. In such contexts, neutrality does not mean silence; rather, it calls for speaking with clarity, precision and consistency, grounded firmly in principle, even when those principles risk being misrepresented.

## Contributor Insight 7.3



## Clarifying neutrality: Countering online distorted narratives

In recent years, particularly since the escalation of the crises in the Middle East, the Italian Red Cross has witnessed the spread of harmful narratives online concerning the role of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and the principle of neutrality.

Much of the disinformation and misinformation has focused on the role of the ICRC as a neutral intermediary, particularly in its facilitation of hostage release operations in the Gaza Strip. These narratives<sup>13</sup> have distorted public understanding of the principle of neutrality, and more broadly, of the roles of different Movement components during humanitarian crises. We have observed these distortions directly in user interactions on the Italian Red Cross social media platforms, as well as in articles published by prominent Italian media outlets.

In response, the Italian Red Cross organized a webinar in March 2025 on 'The Importance of Neutrality in the Current Humanitarian Landscape'. The event featured contributions from members of the Movement, academics and journalists. It was designed for all Italian Red Cross volunteers, with the aim of addressing and countering distorted narratives while deepening awareness of the operational dimensions of the principle of neutrality. To further clarify and support understanding, the Italian Red Cross also created a dedicated frequently asked questions (FAQs) page on its website addressing the principle of neutrality and the conflict in Gaza.

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## Contributor Insight 7.4



## Truth is the first casualty of war

Since the beginning of the armed conflict in Ukraine, the Ukrainian Red Cross Society has faced the life-threatening consequences of false information. In March 2022, a single picture ignited the war on information: a photo of a handshake between the former ICRC President and the Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs. It became the first – and tragically successful – attack on the neutrality of humanitarian aid in Ukraine. “The picture changed everything on the ground,” recalls Maksym Dotsenko, the Director General of the National Society, at a conference organized by the Ukrainian Red Cross Society. “Our staff stopped wearing the Red Cross vest because we were attacked at checkpoints. Everywhere across Ukraine, drivers in Red Cross vehicles were in danger.”

Strategically amplified false information framed the Red Cross as taking sides in the armed conflict, impacting trust, threatening staff safety and humanitarian work across the country. “Misinformation about the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement affects everyone. People don’t distinguish between a National Society, the ICRC or the IFRC and false information takes only 15 minutes to spread everywhere on social media”, says Dotsenko.

Lack of access and trust followed. To counter this, the Ukrainian Red Cross Society launched a massive information campaign across all levels: “I had to prove to members of the parliament, to neighbours and friends that we are purely humanitarian and not influenced by Russia,” Dotsenko recalls. “I called every member of the government and explained our mandate. We basically knocked on every door.”

The hybrid war in the digital space forced the National Society to develop new communication competencies. Experts joined the team, a monitoring system was established to track public and social media discourse, and 24/7 readiness became the norm to comment, influence or clarify information, if necessary.

Every one of its 200+ branches developed a social media presence with tailored, localized content, while communications were woven into operational decision-making at headquarters. A media person always has a seat at the table when key decisions are made. Speed proved critical. “If you don’t provide answers, an information vacuum is formed and someone else will fill it,” says Dotsenko. Quick, clear and comprehensive communication across all available channels became life-saving. “Supporting people is most convincing. Every communications strategy fails if people don’t see the help. So, in our case, the work supported the communication and proved our mandate.”

The Ukrainian Red Cross Society also emphasized internal trust-building to reach volunteers and staff across the country with information on international humanitarian law and the fundamental principles. “The principle of neutrality is the most challenging one in a hybrid war with a former neighbour,” recalls Dotsenko. “We needed to build a solid basis of understanding for our principled approach with everyone. The fundamental principles provide us with the key to humanitarian access; this is the core. They also provide us with the responsibility to protect our volunteers and staff. The question is how we explain the principles, how we live them. You can’t hide behind humanitarian principles. Every day we must prove that we use them for achieving better access, better security.”

From the communication perspective, this demands openness and accessibility. “Every inquiry by the public needs to be answered and addressed,” stresses Lesia Oliinyk from the communications team. To ensure coherence and aligned messaging, they are using “a Q&A crisis matrix covering 80 topics, used by all 200 branches and volunteers when they are talking to people.”

The trust-building package also includes transparency and honesty as a rule. Oliinyk is convinced that “telling the truth in complex situations including about the finances of the National Society has helped to avoid communications crises.” Research on public perceptions of the Red Cross confirms progress: 96% of Ukrainians recognize the Red Cross emblem and half understand its mandate. To reach the rest, it has diversified its communication channels and set up its own media production room producing podcasts and analyses. “We have created a humanitarian media hub which is a website where we collect all news on the humanitarian sector”, explains Oliinyk. “This has developed into an important platform during the war; we provide humanitarian analyses and even government ministries publish content there, which is of course clearly marked as such.”

At the state level, the Ukrainian Red Cross Society has a constant dialogue with the government on humanitarian issues and partnered with the Ministry of Defence on international humanitarian law dissemination for the armed forces. Like the armed conflict itself, the war on information moves in waves. But every information attack on neutral humanitarian aid has also created the opportunity to reach out and communicate humanitarian values. “Our biggest success is when fake news is not even shared anymore because people are already informed and know more”, says Dotsenko.

In June 2025, the National Society convened a high-level conference to share its experiences and lessons from responding to the dual challenges of armed conflict and harmful information.

This text is a conversation between Gabriela Poller-Hartig of the Austrian Red Cross and Maksym Dotsenko of the Ukrainian Red Cross Society, reflecting on the National Society’s journey in safeguarding trust. The Austrian Red Cross supports the National Society in branch development.

Gabriela Poller-Hartig

Head of International Relations

**Austrian Red Cross**

Humanitarian organizations can speak out publicly without taking sides if this is done objectively, on the basis of principles and standards that apply equally to all. Neutrality does not mean silence in the face of suffering or violations. Criticism of humanitarian actors for not publicly condemning violations or suffering is often less about the principle of neutrality itself and more about judgement – specifically, a perceived over-reliance on confidential dialogue and persuasion or a reluctance to speak out due to a fear of backlash.<sup>14</sup> In some cases, that criticism may be valid. In today’s polarized environment, this may require greater coordination among humanitarian actors in speaking out collectively and in carefully timing their communications.

Neutrality is also often burdened with connotations of distance and lack of empathy. Yet it does not imply an absence of feeling but rather **a means of conveying compassion for human suffering in a way that does not take sides**. Neutrality is also frequently misunderstood as requiring a perfect symmetry or equivalency in public statements or admonitions, even in situations of asymmetrical suffering or violations, particularly when there is mounting pressure for public condemnation. There are no easy answers and it takes courage to navigate this. Humanitarian organizations will continue to navigate neutrality differently depending on their mandates, modus operandi and the context. Avoiding the traps – especially in polarized environments – requires increased dialogue among principled humanitarian organizations, both to inform choices and to protect the space for action.<sup>15</sup>

Critiques of neutrality also often conflate all humanitarian organizations, overlooking that some are explicitly political while others are independent and guided by humanitarian principles. Failing to recognize these distinctions risks undermining trust in principled humanitarian organizations. Many humanitarian organizations address this by adhering to the *Code of Conduct for the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) in Disaster Relief* and other standards that reinforce the integrity of principled humanitarian action.

As humanitarian scholar Hugo Slim has observed: “the idea of political neutrality is not legally or semantically embedded in humanitarian aid, even if the last thirty years of international relations has tended to promote it as such. There are different ways to be humanitarian. Neutral humanitarians like the ICRC and the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement ... and non-neutral humanitarians. People suffering in war usually need both, and, if the world moves into a new era of binary political commitments that set liberal democracy against illiberal authoritarianism, then we can expect many people’s political convictions to render their neutrality impossible, and we will see a surge in non-neutral humanitarians around the world. Non-neutral humanitarians will rightly be saving lives and protecting people within social movements that are politically positioned as democratic, authoritarian, socialist, Islamist, or green”.<sup>16</sup>

Moving forward, humanitarian space must be preserved for both neutral, impartial and independent humanitarian action and non-neutral humanitarianism – keeping people in need at the centre. Those in need should not be reduced to political arguments, but recognized as individuals entitled to respect for their humanity, rights, legal protection and agency, including humanitarian response based on need.

## 7.5 Patriotism and humanitarian principles

National Societies are deeply rooted in their countries. They carry the name of the nation, use the emblem with national identifiers and serve as auxiliaries to their public authorities in the humanitarian field. Patriotism can be a powerful force – motivating people to volunteer, mobilize resources and foster local trust.

Yet in humanitarian action, patriotism must always be balanced with the Fundamental principles, particularly humanity, neutrality, independence and impartiality. On one hand, joining a National Society to serve one’s community can rightly be seen as an act of patriotism. On the other hand, in situations of armed conflict, adhering to neutrality and impartiality may be perceived by some as undermining patriotic duty. This tension becomes especially acute when National Society staff or volunteers are present on both sides of a frontline: if they embrace nationalistic rhetoric or sentiment over the fundamental principles, the unity of the National Society – and indeed the cohesion of the Movement – risks splintering.

Upholding the fundamental principles – especially in armed conflicts – will never be easy, but this commitment is essential to protect humanitarian space and the Movement’s ability to serve people in need, regardless of nationality, political affiliation or other status. In a polarized information environment, adherence to these principles also acts as a powerful safeguard against harmful information – reinforcing trust, credibility and the collective identity of the Movement.

## 7.6 Independence as a condition for trust

### Fundamental principle

#### INDEPENDENCE

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The Movement is independent. The National Societies, while auxiliaries in the humanitarian services of their governments and subject to the laws of their respective countries, must always maintain their autonomy so that they may be able at all times to act in accordance with the principles of the Movement.

The principle of independence is closely linked to neutrality. It requires humanitarian organizations to remain detached from political, military, economic or religious influence and from the strategic agendas attached to them. Independence is, in many ways, the practical demonstration of neutrality – a condition that enables principled action in highly politicized environments. In today’s interconnected and interdependent world, however, independence is not always absolute but it must be safeguarded and demonstrated in context-specific ways. Doing so is essential both to ensure impartial action and to maintain neutrality.

Narratives that undermine perceived independence include:

- “They’re just an arm of the government.” Humanitarian organizations may be portrayed as extensions of national policy, particularly when their governance is closely linked to state actors or operations that rely on government funding or infrastructure.
- “They follow donor agendas.” This narrative implies that aid priorities are driven by political or strategic interests of donors rather than humanitarian needs, casting doubt on organizational autonomy.
- “They cooperate with the military, they can’t be independent.” In complex emergencies or civil–military settings, any coordination with armed actors can be interpreted as complicity or co-optation.
- “They changed their position after pressure.” When an organization revises public positions, especially in response to criticism, it may be interpreted as the result of external influence rather than principled adaptation.

## 7.7 Impartiality as a compass

### Fundamental principle

#### IMPARTIALITY

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It makes no discrimination as to nationality, race, religious beliefs, class or political opinions. It endeavours to relieve the suffering of individuals, being guided solely by their needs, and to give priority to the most urgent cases of distress.

The principle of impartiality, like neutrality, is frequently misunderstood and the two are often conflated, yet they are distinct. Impartiality requires that aid be provided solely according to need, with priority given to endeavours to relieve the suffering of individuals, putting the “most urgent cases of distress” first.

Its ethical foundation lies in the equal worth and rights of all human beings. In practice, impartiality translates into two operational obligations: aid must be distributed without discrimination and relief must be proportional to the level of need – the greater the need, the greater the response.

Barriers to impartiality arise for example when authorities or non-state actors obstruct assistance to populations under the control of another party – whether out of ideological conviction, political calculation or fear that it may benefit the adversary. Famines have been deliberately caused through such obstructions. When examining impartiality in the context of harmful information, several narratives emerge that undermine it. Whether rooted in harmful information or misunderstanding, these challenge the understanding of the core principle of providing aid solely based on need. For example:

- “They are helping the enemy.” Humanitarian actors are accused of favouring one side, especially when assisting populations under the control of an adversary. This delegitimizes aid and is often used to justify blocking access.
- “They only show one side of the suffering.” When humanitarian communication focuses on particular groups or geographies they can be interpreted or distorted as evidence of bias, fuelling claims of partiality. At the same time, efforts to appear “balanced” risk creating false equivalence between situations of suffering or responsibility, further complicating perceptions of neutrality and credibility.
- “Donors dictate who gets helped.” The perception that humanitarian aid is driven by political or donor interests or priorities rather than humanitarian needs feeds scepticism about whether aid is truly impartial and needs based.
- “They’re part of the West’s agenda.” In polarized or post-colonial contexts, humanitarian organizations can be portrayed as aligned with foreign political or ideological goals.

- **“If they were impartial, why aren’t they helping us?”** Communities not receiving aid may assume bias, especially in the absence of transparent needs assessments or clear communication about operational decisions and constraints.

To uphold the principle of impartiality in the face of harmful information, humanitarian organizations must ensure proactive and sustained measures, including anticipating instrumentalized narratives that exploit perceptions of bias or selective aid, and preparing clear, principled communication lines in advance (including prebunking). Transparent communication is essential, particularly around how needs are assessed and how decisions about aid allocation are made. Internally, building digital and media literacy among staff and volunteers is critical to enabling early detection and effective response to accusations of partiality. At the same time, organizations must actively monitor information ecosystems to identify and counter distorted portrayals before they gain traction and erode trust. Impartiality requires that assistance be provided solely on the basis of need, without discrimination or political consideration – a principle that safeguards humanity itself and ensures that no one is left behind because of who they are or where they stand.

## 7.8 **Organizational integrity: Internal alignment with principles**

Upholding humanitarian principles begins with internal organizational coherence and credibility. Transparency, accountability and consistency are essential anchors that reinforce trust and legitimacy – both within an organization and in the eyes of the communities it serves. At the heart of this is integrity: the alignment of words and actions with humanitarian values, even when doing so is inconvenient or costly. Integrity is not just about avoiding misconduct: it is about making principled choices, maintaining ethical standards under pressure and resisting the temptation to compromise values for short-term gain.

Leadership plays a central role in modelling integrity and principled behaviour, setting the tone for inclusive, respectful and values-driven practices across all levels of the organization. When integrity is embedded in decision-making, communication and daily operations, it creates a culture of trust – one that is resilient in the face of scrutiny, harmful information and political pressure.

## Contributor Insight 7.5



## Rebuilding trust: Lessons from an institutional crisis and recovery at the Uganda Red Cross Society

In 2013, the Uganda Red Cross Society experienced a major leadership crisis that became the most significant reputational challenge in its history. The incident demonstrated how quickly public trust in a humanitarian organization can be undermined when information – whether accurate, incomplete or exaggerated – spreads in the public domain, and how much effort is required to rebuild it.

The crisis emerged following allegations of irregularities related to the clearance of a truck of aid goods at the Malaba border. As media scrutiny intensified, concerns about governance of the National Society were amplified through national media and public speculation grew rapidly. The unfolding situation created widespread perceptions of leadership misconduct. As the matter progressed, the consequences escalated, eventually resulting in the arrest of the Secretary General at that time. This series of events severely eroded public trust in the institution.

Internally, the impact was profound. Staff and volunteers were demoralized and faced difficult questions from their communities and even their own families. Externally, partners raised serious concerns over governance and accountability, with some suspending or withdrawing funding commitments. National-level operations were disrupted, several staff members resigned and some volunteers began to disengage. The credibility of the entire organization was at risk.

Volunteers and staff working closest to communities were among the most affected. In several areas, they encountered hesitation and suspicion from community members who were uncertain about the institution's integrity. Media outlets reduced or stopped covering National Society activities, wary of providing visibility to an organization perceived to be undergoing governance challenges. Restoring confidence required deliberate, coordinated and sustained effort across all levels.

With support from the IFRC, the Uganda Red Cross Society leadership initiated a series of decisive reforms. Key staff positions were restructured and official statements were issued to clarify the situation and reassure both partners and the public. The National Society Governing Board initiated internal reviews and introduced interim governance measures to safeguard operational integrity. New management and Board members were appointed to guide the institution through a comprehensive recovery and change process. Over time, the National Society strengthened internal accountability mechanisms, improved financial oversight and introduced rigorous leadership vetting and performance systems. It also underwent an Organizational Capacity Assessment that resulted in the development of 11 recovery pillars that guided institutional rebuilding.

A key lesson from this experience is the importance of strong crisis communication, transparent governance and rapid institutional response when trust is at risk. In the years that followed, the Uganda Red Cross Society prioritized rebuilding public trust by implementing stricter accountability systems and maintaining close engagement with

partners, communities and other stakeholders. The crisis underscored how leadership-related reputational issues can quickly erode trust and how recovery requires transparency, structural reform and sustained commitment.

For a humanitarian institution whose effectiveness depends heavily on public goodwill, trust is essential and cannot be compromised. Staff, volunteers and governance bodies receive regular training on their roles, responsibilities and the policies that reinforce institutional accountability. Today, the Uganda Red Cross Society operates with strengthened systems at all levels, including an active Integrity and Compliance Committee, a revised Constitution and robust policies that uphold a zero-tolerance approach to corruption. The National Society's communications and public relations functions play an important role in building public trust and managing institutional relationships, which in turn has a significant impact on resource mobilization.

**Irene Nakasiita**

Director, Communications, Resource Mobilization and Partnerships

**Uganda Red Cross Society**

Contributor Insight 7.6



## Q&A on principled action with the Russian Red Cross: Responding to a significant reputational challenge

### 1 What happened? What was the impact on trust and operations?

In February 2024, intense media scrutiny by foreign media led to accusations that the Russian Red Cross had violated the fundamental principles. Articles containing false allegations were published by media outlets across 11 European countries.

As a result, the IFRC had to evaluate the activities of the National Society, particularly its adherence to the fundamental principles.

### 2 Who was most affected? How did you respond?

Accusations against the Russian Red Cross – Russia's oldest humanitarian organization – threatened its resources, international reputation and ability to serve beneficiaries. The most affected were displaced people from Ukraine in Russia, the largest group receiving Russian Red Cross support.

After reviewing information provided by the National Society, the IFRC concluded that the Russian Red Cross' humanitarian services aligned with the principles and did not identify any violations. It identified some general IFRC policy standards that could be addressed and issued recommendations to strengthen these. The National Society adopted these reforms and adhered to these recommendations.

### 3 What was learned and changed?

The Russian Red Cross adopted reforms to safeguard its operations, reputation and reinforce accountability:

- a policy on good partnership to guide collaboration with others
- a policy on child safeguarding to conform to IFRC standards
- an updated Code of Ethics and complaint procedures, including protection for whistleblowers, victims and the option to involve external experts in investigations
- standardized training on partnerships and engagement for staff at headquarters and in regional branches.

These changes improved internal consultation and decision-making, with regional branches now proactively requesting guidance before launching partnerships or participating in public events.

This period also prompted reflection on applying the fundamental principles in times of crisis. The National Society had to carefully balance its auxiliary role to the government in the humanitarian field. This situation has taught us to think more and consider the consequences of each word and action from different perspectives. We had to explain that in times of crisis, activities such as providing assistance to families of military personnel and combat veterans and teaching first-aid skills to mobilized and military personnel are part of the Red Cross mandate.

**Lessons learned:** During crises, the Russian Red Cross recognizes we are under additional scrutiny and bias – so every word and action carries weight. It recognizes the need to anticipate reputational risks, communicate its mandate more clearly and adapt its operations to ensure that humanitarian principles are understood and upheld at all times.

**Anastasia Teneta**

Head of International Cooperation Department

*Russian Red Cross*

As information ecosystems continue to evolve, building digital literacy among staff and volunteers is increasingly vital. This includes the ability to identify and respond to harmful information, understand the dynamics of online narratives and engage responsibly on social media and in face-to-face engagements. When volunteers are equipped to navigate these spaces with confidence and integrity, principled humanitarian action is more likely to be consistently upheld – whether in person or online.

Maintaining volunteer motivation and trust requires clear, principled communication that resonates with shared humanitarian values. Volunteers are often the most visible representatives of an organization in their communities, thus how they communicate and behave directly shapes public perceptions of legitimacy and trust. Regular, open dialogue – grounded in the organization's mission and principles – reinforces their sense of purpose and belonging, particularly in complex or politicized environments.

Training, guidance and supportive leadership are crucial to ensure that all forms of engagement reflect neutrality, impartiality, independence and humanity, while also protecting staff and volunteers from becoming unintentional amplifiers of harmful information or targets of such campaigns. At the same time, there is an important duty of care when staff and volunteers are targeted by, or otherwise affected by, harmful information.

### Contributor Insight 7.7



## Q&A with the Honduran Red Cross: Fragile bonds between communities, volunteers and authorities

### 1 How does harmful information affect local relationships?

Harmful information represents a significant barrier that distorts community perceptions of humanitarian work, directly affecting relationships with local communities, volunteers and authorities. In the case of the Honduran Red Cross, we have encountered situations where rumours or misinformation have raised doubts about our impartiality and neutrality. When false information circulates linking our work to partisan interests or misinterpreting beneficiary selection, community trust is undermined and access to vulnerable areas becomes more difficult.

In response to these challenges, the Honduran Red Cross has strengthened its community communication approach by launching targeted campaigns through social and local media. These initiatives aim to reaffirm our humanitarian mandate, the fundamental principles and the neutral, impartial and independent nature of our work. Strengthening the Community Engagement and Accountability mechanism has also been essential for rebuilding trust with communities and maintaining the engagement of both volunteers and institutional partners.

### 2 What types of support, collaboration or guidance would help your organization address harmful information more effectively?

It is important to strengthen operational communication in communities and promote dialogue to clearly explain the scope and purpose of our actions. Greater investment is needed in communication and awareness-raising strategies. Local communities should be empowered to act in countering misinformation, reinforcing their role in protection and social cohesion. Active participation in local working groups is essential to ensure our actions are aligned with community needs.

### 3 What recommendations would you offer humanitarian organizations to address harmful information more effectively?

- Facilitate internal reflection spaces and training on strategic and operational communication within the Movement to share best practices for managing harmful information and humanitarian diplomacy.

- Involve community leaders, volunteers and trusted local figures as key actors in validating and disseminating reliable information, leveraging their legitimacy and close connection to the population.
- Implement ongoing and sustained communication campaigns – not only reactive ones – that highlight local impact stories and authentic community testimonies.

Honduran Red Cross

Contributor Insight 7.8



## Volunteer voices: Volunteers as trust brokers

Across the Americas, volunteers face not only the visible effects of disasters but also the hidden crises triggered by harmful information. Misinformation about neutrality, conspiracy theories around health interventions and confusion about affiliations with governments have all endangered their safety. In extreme cases, volunteers have been harassed or excluded from communities, restricting access to the people most in need. In violent areas, some volunteers avoid entire zones for their own safety. This is not just a humanitarian access issue: it is about protection.

Volunteers often act as ‘trust brokers,’ mediating between communities and humanitarian organizations. But when public trust breaks down, this role becomes difficult and dangerous. Disinformation undermines morale. Some volunteers describe feeling treated as ‘free labour’ when excluded from recognition or decision-making structures. Many leave not from fatigue, but from feeling unsafe or undervalued. Recognition, protection and participation are therefore critical. In the 2023 annual Volunteer Management Survey (used for IFRC Americas baseline studies), 84% of National Societies reported having a recognition system, while 57% had inclusion mechanisms at all levels and 30% at some levels. Just over two-thirds (68%) reported having a Solidarity Fund, and 95% provide psychosocial support after security incidents. Most also equip their volunteers adequately. When these mechanisms are missing, the operational consequences are clear: reduced presence in high-risk areas, reluctance to engage on sensitive issues (such as vaccination), growing volunteer turnover and weakened community engagement. Addressing these gaps requires not only stronger protection and training, but also investment in strategic communication, local advocacy and organizational resilience.

Volunteers must be prepared with digital literacy, crisis communication and conflict-sensitive engagement skills. Encouragingly, the 2023 survey shows all National Societies offer continuous learning, either through the Stay Safe programme or their own initiatives. Yet inclusion remains uneven: while 89% of National Societies integrate volunteering into their organizational plans, only 63% have volunteer-specific strategies. Around 70% conduct research on volunteering, signalling a growing shift toward evidence-based approaches. Volunteers are more than service providers; they are agents of change and the Movement’s human face. When trust falters, their ability to serve is compromised. Rebuilding that trust

begins by listening to their voices, valuing their insights and equipping them to navigate today's complex information environment.

**Andrés Morales**

Thematic Lead, Volunteering Development and  
Youth Engagement, Americas Regional Office

IFRC

## 7.9 **A framework for applying humanitarian principles in the information age**

Building on the 1979 Pictet commentary on the fundamental principles and the 2013 *World Disasters Report* matrix on the seven fundamental principles, the following updated framework highlights how these principles are upheld – or challenged – in the context of harmful information. It reflects the growing intersection between harmful information and humanitarian values in today's digital and information-saturated environment. The framework acknowledges both the evolving threats and opportunities posed by today's information landscape. It underscores the imperative for humanitarian actors not only to uphold the four humanitarian principles – and within the Movement the seven fundamental principles – but also to apply them in adaptive and context-specific ways that respond to the specific challenges posed by harmful information.

**Table 7.1 Fundamental principles in the context of harmful information**

<b>Fundamental principle</b>	<b>Components</b>	<b>Contemporary relevance in harmful information age</b>	<b>Underlying humanitarian values</b>
<b>Humanity</b>	<p>Alleviate and prevent suffering</p> <p>Protect life and dignity</p> <p>Respect and protect individuals</p>	<p>Harmful information can endanger lives and increase suffering by undermining trust in humanitarian action, humanitarian actors and emergency information.</p> <p>Combating it requires proactive, people-centred communication and engagement that protects dignity and well-being.</p>	<p>Human dignity</p> <p>Compassion</p> <p>Well-being</p> <p>Solidarity</p> <p>Mutual understanding</p> <p>Respect</p> <p>Sympathy</p> <p>Cooperation</p>
<b>Impartiality</b>	<p>Non-discrimination</p> <p>Needs-based action, proportional response to degree of suffering</p> <p>Prioritized on basis of urgency</p> <p>No individual action or decision on the basis of prejudice or personal preference</p>	<p>Harmful information can skew perceptions of who deserves humanitarian response, fuelling discrimination.</p> <p>May shape funding and media attention, potentially sidelining less visible crises. Countering this helps reinforce equal access and fairness.</p>	<p>Equality of rights</p> <p>Respect for diversity</p> <p>Objectivity</p> <p>Acceptance</p>

Fundamental principle	Components	Contemporary relevance in harmful information age	Underlying humanitarian values
<b>Neutrality</b>	<p>Not taking sides in armed conflicts</p> <p>No engagement in controversies of a political, racial, religious or ideological nature</p>	<p>Harmful information campaigns can portray humanitarian organizations as partisan or politically biased.</p> <p>Strategic silence or lack of response may be misinterpreted.</p> <p>Neutrality requires active narrative management and trusted community engagement.</p>	<p>Trust and confidence</p> <p>Self-control</p> <p>Discipline</p> <p>Freedom of action</p> <p>Objectivity</p>
<b>Independence</b>	<p>Autonomy from political, economic, social, religious, racial or ideological influence</p> <p>Autonomy from donor influence</p> <p>Auxiliary role to public authorities for National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies but with operational freedom and independence</p> <p>Autonomy to act in accordance with the fundamental principles</p> <p>Autonomy to act in accordance with the humanitarian principles</p>	<p>Accusations of being too close to governments or too detached from communities are common in harmful narratives.</p> <p>Maintaining perceived and actual independence is essential for credibility.</p>	<p>Accountability</p> <p>Operational integrity</p> <p>Cooperation</p> <p>Freedom of action</p>

Fundamental principle	Components	Contemporary relevance in harmful information age	Underlying humanitarian values
<b>Voluntary service</b>	<p>Freely accepted commitment</p> <p>No desire for material gain</p> <p>Selflessness</p>	<p>Volunteers may be targeted by harmful information or face reputational risks due to their association with organizations.</p> <p>Support mechanisms to cope with and respond to harmful information must be built into digital volunteer engagement.</p>	<p>Altruism</p> <p>Spirit of service</p> <p>Solidarity</p> <p>Initiative</p> <p>Discipline</p>
<b>Unity</b>	<p>One National Society per country</p> <p>Open to all</p> <p>Active across the whole country</p>	<p>Harmful narratives may amplify internal divisions or portray humanitarian action as favouring certain groups, undermining collective identity and coherence in the Movement.</p> <p>Ensuring consistent messaging, transparent communication and inclusive engagement across all components helps preserve unity and reinforce shared purpose.</p>	<p>Cohesion</p> <p>Inclusivity</p> <p>Diversity</p> <p>Trust</p> <p>Common purpose</p> <p>Acceptance</p>
<b>Universality</b>	<p>Equal status of National Societies</p> <p>Solidarity and mutual support worldwide</p> <p>Universal vocation</p>	<p>Harmful information spreads rapidly across borders, shaping perceptions and reputations far beyond where a crisis occurs.</p> <p>Upholding the principle of universality requires coordinated responses, shared learning and solidarity across the Movement to maintain global trust and integrity.</p>	<p>International cooperation</p> <p>Mutual assistance</p> <p>Global solidarity</p> <p>Openness</p>

7.9.1

## Decision-making framework: Responding to harmful information while upholding humanitarian principles

To respond effectively to the challenge of harmful information, organizations must be equipped to act in ways that minimize harm while upholding the humanitarian principles of humanity, neutrality, impartiality and independence. This decision-making framework offers a structured approach to guide analysis, reflection and principled, context-specific action.

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### Step 1: Pre-crisis preparedness

- Train teams in proactive monitoring, including rumour tracking, perception tracking and narrative mapping.
- Build trusted local partnerships before a crisis to enable credible community-led amplification and establish feedback loops.
- Identify trusted voices and credible messengers within communities, as well as potential threat actors or sources of harmful information, and map their influence.
- Develop internal protocols for responding to harmful information anchored in humanitarian principles, 'do no harm', accountability and context sensitivity, while recognizing the importance of timeliness.
- Ensure governance, leadership, staff and volunteers at international, national, district and branch levels have the knowledge, skills and tools to identify and promote principled humanitarian action.
- Identify priority contexts where serious risks or gaps in principled humanitarian action exist and integrate this awareness into preparedness planning.

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### Step 2: Assess the nature and impact of harmful information

Use guiding questions to understand the type of harmful information and its potential consequences (impacts and harms), for example:

- Is the information factually false, misleading or harmful by implication?
- Who is the primary audience (e.g., affected communities, state actors, donors, media)?
- Who are the key voices shaping the narrative – trusted messengers or potential threat actors – and what influence do they hold?
- What is the likely or observable impact (e.g., reduced access, threats to staff, rejection of aid, reputational damage)?

**Output:** Categorize the risk and/or threat level (e.g., low-risk rumour, operational disruption, challenge to access, legitimacy or safety).

### Step 3: Evaluate the ethical and operational stakes

Assess the key tensions between action and inaction. For example:

- Would responding compromise neutrality or risk being perceived as politically motivated? How can this be mitigated?
- Would remaining silent undermine humanity or allow harm to escalate?
- What are the potential safety implications for staff, volunteers and communities?
- How might either response or lack thereof affect trust with communities, partners and stakeholders?

**Table 7.2 Example matrix to map trade-offs between response and potential harm**

<b>Response</b>	<b>Principles it supports</b>	<b>Principles it risks being perceived as violating</b>	<b>Potential harm</b>
<b>Public response</b>	Humanity Independence	Neutrality Impartiality	Political backlash Misperception Escalation of tensions Reputational damage
<b>Silence or bilateral engagement</b>	Neutrality	Humanity	Mistrust Disempowerment Perception of complicity
<b>Community-led response</b>	All principles (if done well)	Impartiality	Uneven messaging Potential fragmentation of trust

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## Step 4: Consider the messenger and the method

Guiding questions:

- Who should respond and how?
- Should the organization respond directly or should trusted local actors take the lead?
- What channel(s) or format(s) are most appropriate (e.g., social media, bilateral/in-person dialogue, third-party endorsement)?
- Could the response unintentionally amplify the harmful narrative?
- Would a third-party or coalition message reduce perceptions of partiality or strengthen the response?

**Tactical options:** Quiet correction through community liaisons; co-produced content with local influencers or respected community voices; fact-based public statements using neutral, non-confrontational language; silence (accompanied by internal documentation and monitoring) recognizing this may backfire.

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## Step 5: Align with the context and dynamics

Ensure responses are sensitive to the broader sociopolitical environment:

- What are the political sensitivities or risks of backlash in the context?
- Are there power asymmetries (e.g., post-colonial legacies, racial, gender-based dynamics) influencing how responses are perceived?
- Could engagement in information correction reinforce perceptions of organizational arrogance?

Principled reflection:

- Are the same standards and principles being applied equally based on need across different groups or communities?
- Is the response informed by local knowledge and trusted relationships in the community?

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## Step 6: Decide, act, document and reassess

Make an informed and principled decision:

- Choose the course of action that causes the least harm and best aligns with humanitarian principles.
- Act with consistency, humility and clarity.

- Document the decision-making process for accountability and institutional learning.
- Reassess regularly, especially if new actors emerge, narratives shift or risks escalate.
- Measure impact on trust.

To effectively counter harmful information, humanitarian actors must shift from a reactive to a proactive stance and also from defensive to offensive approaches, if appropriate. This shift begins by integrating information preparedness into operational preparedness – anticipating harmful narratives, pre-positioning factual content and empowering field teams and volunteers to communicate swiftly when needed. A key component is the decentralization of trusted voices: building the capacity of local volunteers and other actors and communities to speak first, faster and more credibly. These actors are often more trusted than international organizations and better positioned to respond in real time. At the same time, humanitarian organizations must define what constitutes ‘principled speed’ – ensuring that urgency and timeliness do not come at the expense of neutrality, accuracy or trust.

Establishing clear thresholds for when, where and how to engage can help ensure that rapid responses remain both defensible and ethical. Finally, lasting impact requires strengthening the understanding of principled humanitarian action in information ecosystems by engaging proactively with digital platforms, technology actors, media and civil society to shape the environments in which information circulates – rather than reacting only after harm has already occurred.

## 7.9.2

### From principles to practical measures – community engagement and accountability

Upholding principled humanitarian action requires shaping how humanitarian organizations engage with communities, particularly in environments affected by harmful information. Drawing on the IFRC’s community engagement and accountability approach, the following measures are essential to translating principles into meaningful practice:

- **Contextualizing approaches:** Develop strategies to reflect local dynamics and information landscapes.
- **Ensuring inclusion, including women, youth and older people:** Involve local actors from the outset, invite participation and create safe spaces for dialogue in all stages of engaging with communities.
- **Prioritizing communication and transparency:** Plan how information will be shared. Share information regularly in accessible formats and languages, using channels trusted by the community.
- **Designing responsive feedback systems:** Provide timely, safe and confidential ways for people to share concerns or report abuse, including mechanisms for handling sensitive issues separately and confidentially. These should leverage existing local feedback mechanisms and be timely.

- **Embedding accountability:** Build community participation – including with the most marginalized and socially excluded groups – into programme design, monitoring and evaluation. Learn from feedback and allow space to process it and adjust policy and programming accordingly.
- **Reinforcing community engagement and accountability:** Make this a non-negotiable part of recruitment, performance, reporting and partnership standards.
- **Sharing information openly:** Affected populations should have access to clear details on how decisions are made, what resources are available and how aid is being delivered, including partnership arrangements, response actions, targeting criteria, funding levels and other issues that affect them.

## 7.10 Influencers: Connectors and dividers

Factors that influence communities can act as both connectors and dividers and must be carefully analysed as part of any engagement strategy. Understanding how these forces interact – and how community engagement can either reinforce or mitigate them – is essential to designing and adapting approaches that are context sensitive and ethically sound.<sup>17</sup>

A connector is an individual, group or structure that helps build bridges across societal divisions. Connectors contribute to local preparedness and response efforts by fostering relationships, promoting trust and generating positive interactions between different parts of a community. They enhance social cohesion and resilience and can amplify the reach and legitimacy of humanitarian efforts.

In contrast, a divider has a vested interest in preserving tension, exclusion or conflict. Dividers exploit or exacerbate societal fractures – such as those based on ethnicity, political affiliation, gender or religion – resulting in mistrust, harmful information and polarization. Their actions can pose serious risks to staff, volunteers and the integrity of humanitarian action.

Community engagement strategies should be designed – and continuously re-evaluated – based on a clear understanding of how connectors and dividers<sup>18</sup> shape perceptions and behaviours. This is critical to applying the ‘do no harm’ principle in practice (Chapter 4: section 4.3 on page 150). Engagement that inadvertently strengthens dividers or bypasses connectors can undermine humanitarian objectives and cause harm to the very populations it seeks to support.

The connectors and dividers framing is especially relevant today in the context of influencers – whether online personalities, community leaders, media figures or local authority figures – because of their significant power to shape public perception, amplify narratives and influence behaviour at scale. In today’s hyper-connected information environment, influencers can function as either connectors or dividers, depending on their intent, messaging and the trust they command.

Influencers who promote social cohesion, accurate information, inclusion and empathy can serve as powerful connectors. When aligned with humanitarian values, they can:

- help bridge divides between humanitarian actors and communities
- dispel rumours and misinformation
- encourage trust in organizations and public health measures
- support local peacebuilding and solidarity efforts
- amplify marginalized voices and foster dialogue across communities.

For example: a local TikTok creator addressing harmful information about aid eligibility, a respected community leader countering hate speech online or a youth influencer explaining humanitarian principles in relatable terms.

Conversely, influencers who spread harmful narratives, reinforce stereotypes or exploit community tensions can act as dividers. They may:

- fuel mistrust toward aid agencies or certain groups
- amplify harmful information, xenophobia or conspiracy theories
- increase polarization or fear, especially in conflict-affected settings
- undermine community cohesion or cooperation with humanitarian efforts
- pose security risks to humanitarian workers or volunteers.

For example, a social media figure spreading conspiracy theories about humanitarian motives or a local community leader or official framing aid as biased or politically motivated.

In the age of harmful information, principled humanitarian action depends not just on what is done, but on how transparently, inclusively and accountably it is carried out. In contested spaces where narratives clash and principles are often misunderstood, trust must be earned through consistent demonstration of humanitarian values and effectiveness in practice.



## Transforming humanity in Bolivia: Lessons from the IFRC-Disaster Response Emergency Fund Flood Project

At the beginning of the project activities, needs assessments were conducted in coordination with local authorities and community leaders. These assessments identified priority sectors for the distribution of cash and voucher assistance, kits, water purification tablets and jerry cans, in line with the humanitarian criteria established for the project's Disaster Response Emergency Fund (DREF) Action Plan. During project implementation, it became evident that community leaders had not provided sufficient information to the targeted population. Some residents reported that only families 'aligned' with certain neighbourhood organizations – referred to as affiliates – were participating.

In addition, part of the local population receiving assistance was unaware of the work of the Bolivian Red Cross. Lacking knowledge of our mission, principles and working methods, some community members suspected that the Bolivian Red Cross surveys were being conducted for political or economic gain – particularly given the climate of widespread speculation in the country. As a result, some individuals refused to take part in the surveys or to accept the assistance offered. During the cash and voucher assistance distribution process, a call centre was established. However, some people contacted to receive their codes feared the calls might be part of a telephone scam – an occurrence that is relatively common in the country.

Luis Juaniquina Navia

National DREF Coordinator

**Bolivian Red Cross**

### 7.11 Reaffirming humanitarian principles in the age of digital tools

The humanitarian principles have long served as an essential compass in navigating complex operational and political environments. Far from being static ideals, they provide a dynamic framework that has guided humanitarian organizations in their responses across diverse crises and contexts. In the digital age – particularly amid the rise of harmful information – these principles are more relevant than ever. The sector's credibility depends on effectiveness, transparency, clarity and visible adherence to humanitarian principles, underpinned by accountability to affected people and coherence across actors. Humanitarian actors must be able to explain the objectivity with which needs and responses are assessed and prioritized, as well as the proportionality of the response to existing needs.

Today, digital platforms are increasingly creating distance between humanitarians and the people they serve. In some cases, they are replacing direct human engagement altogether, which is especially troubling in settings where empathy, understanding and trust are essential. This tension is heightened with the use of AI which, by design, seeks to replicate or replace human judgement. As technology mediates more interactions, the risk increases that the fundamentally human connection of humanitarian work – listening, understanding and respecting dignity in complex realities – may diminish. **Empathy cannot be automated and should remain human, not machine driven.** As AI evolves to emulate the human, the human proximity must remain and not be sidelined. Dignity – central to the principle of humanity – is lived, subjective and recognized only through human presence and interaction. It cannot be predefined or interpreted by algorithms.<sup>19</sup>

This makes the responsible and principled use of digital tools all the more critical. Drawing on a mapping in the 2013 *World Disasters Report*, the benefits and risks of digital technology to the fundamental principles can be adapted to the specific challenges posed by harmful information. This would provide a practical framework for:

- **planning** and designing programmes aligned with the fundamental principles
- **advocacy** on principled digital transformation
- **policy-making and risk analysis** for reliable information
- **training** humanitarian actors on how to use digital tools to strengthen trust, reduce exposure to biased narratives and protect affected populations.

This provides insights for how humanitarian organizations can leverage digital tools to better identify needs, empower communities and enhance accountability – while actively mitigating the risks of harmful information.

## Concluding remarks: Principled action requires more than declarations

Declaring adherence to the fundamental and humanitarian principles is not enough. Access to affected populations and acceptance of humanitarian actors must be continually earned. They depend on humility, principled behaviour, operational effectiveness and impact, and timely, transparent engagement and communication. Words must align with actions. Without this alignment, safe and sustained access – essential for principled humanitarian action – becomes increasingly difficult to secure.

Upholding humanitarian principles today means more than silent adherence. It requires actively promoting, explaining and embodying them in every context – including the digital sphere, where harmful information and politicized narratives quickly erode trust.

In an era of accelerating technology, human responses such as empathy, respect and moral restraint are more critical than ever. As philosopher Jonathan Glover observed, these moral resources help people exercise self-restraint, respect the dignity of others

and care for their suffering and well-being. He described them as “the tendency to respond to people with certain kinds of respect – as members of our community, as human beings” and as “sympathy – caring about the miseries and the happiness of others, and perhaps feeling a degree of identification with them.”<sup>20</sup>

Today, harmful information is not a communication challenge; it is a threat to humanitarian action and requires a whole-of-society and whole-of-organization approach. Where humanitarian communicators once focused on facilitating information sharing with affected communities and on engaging donors, they are now increasingly tasked with detecting, responding to and trying to mitigate harmful content. Yet many organizations remain underprepared for the scale and sophistication of today’s information threats.

Technology can undoubtedly streamline humanitarian operations, but it also raises difficult questions about whether it risks dehumanizing humanitarian action – replacing listening with automation or judgement with algorithmic logic. Writing in 1999, long before today’s digital transformation, Glover presciently concluded in his book *Humanity*:



It is too late to stop the technology. It is to the psychology that we should now turn.”<sup>21</sup>

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Glover is saying that the danger lies less in the machines themselves than in how human psychology responds to the power they give us. The survival of humanity depends not on stopping technology, but on understanding and strengthening the moral psychology that restrains its misuse. Just as Glover emphasizes that moral restraint and psychology are central once technology cannot be stopped, the Movement Appeal to States underscores that humanitarian principles – humanity, neutrality, impartiality and independence – serve as psychological and ethical safeguards in complex and high-pressure environments. In a polarized information landscape, where narratives can manipulate perception and inflame divisions, adherence to these principles acts as a moral and operational compass, guiding actors to resist pressures, make impartial decisions, and maintain trust. Essentially, **while we cannot control the speed or reach of harmful information (the ‘technology’), we can rely on principled humanitarian action (the ‘psychology’)** to ensure that responses remain ethical, impartial and focused on human need. In today’s landscape, where trust is fragile and harmful information can undo principled efforts in moments, Glover’s call is more urgent than ever.

The Movement has enormous capacity to act as a force amplifier for engagement through its staff and volunteers. National Societies seek to serve as trusted influencers who, by modelling the same positive behaviours online as they do offline in their communities, can help build healthier societies and shape norms of participation and response in the digital space.

# Asks, aims and recommendations

## Asks

Safeguard the fundamental and humanitarian principles – humanity, neutrality, impartiality and independence – across digital and offline spaces through collective action that protects access, safety and trust in humanitarian action, including the security of staff and populations in need. This includes respecting the legal and auxiliary roles of National Societies and ensuring that restrictive laws, sanctions or counter-terrorism measures do not undermine principled humanitarian action.

## Aims

Defend humanitarian principles from erosion by harmful information or politicized narratives and societal or political polarization.

Protect humanitarian access, safety and security by visibly upholding impartiality and neutrality and by advocating for humanitarian exemptions in legal and regulatory frameworks.

Reinforce community trust by co-creating narratives that reflect humanitarian principles, values and ethical practice, and by demonstrating the proportionality and objectivity of responses.

Advocate for responsible digital ecosystems – including algorithms and AI – that promote tolerance, strengthen social cohesion and reduce harmful information.

Support leadership and staff capacity to uphold the fundamental principles through training, codes of conduct, social media guidance and peer-to-peer exchanges.

Strengthen humanitarian diplomacy and engagement with states, authorities, media and civil society to safeguard principled humanitarian action, counter harmful information and reinforce the credibility and operational effectiveness of the Movement.

## Recommendations

### States and policy-makers

- Safeguard humanitarian space in legislation, regulation and preparedness frameworks, ensuring the fundamental and humanitarian principles are respected in both digital and offline contexts.
- Avoid instrumentalizing humanitarian actors in partisan or political agendas.
- Publicly reaffirm and support the independence,

impartiality and neutrality of humanitarian organizations.

- Ensure humanitarian exemptions in sanctions, counter-terrorism and regulatory measures that might impede principled action.

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## Technology platforms

- Monitor and prevent harmful information targeting humanitarian action, with safeguards that respect fundamental rights.
- Ensure transparency, tools and crisis protocols that enable principled humanitarian engagement online.
- Act rapidly to address harassment and harmful information targeting humanitarian staff, volunteers and people in need.

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## Humanitarian actors

- Develop guidance for principled engagement in contested digital and online spaces, anticipating instrumentalized narratives and preparing clear communication lines in advance.
- Reaffirm and communicate fundamental and humanitarian principles across platforms, avoiding partisan or political alignment.
- Model adherence to the fundamental principles in words, behaviours and actions across all Movement components.
- Equip staff and volunteers with digital security training, psychosocial support and information and media literacy to detect and respond to harmful narratives early.
- Place renewed focus on addressing evolving challenges of intolerance<sup>22</sup> across the Movement.
- Foster reflection and learning on communication and humanitarian diplomacy, embedding humanitarian principles in responses to harmful information.
- Involve community leaders and volunteers as validators and messengers, running sustained campaigns that highlight local impact and principled humanitarian action rather than relying only on reactive responses.

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## Communities and local leaders

- Act as trusted intermediaries reinforcing impartiality and bridging divides.
- Identify polarized spaces and harmful information that threaten humanitarian access, trust and safety.
- Co-create and amplify local narratives that reflect humanitarian values, ensuring humanitarian action remains responsive to community needs.

# Endnotes

- 1 International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement. Proclamation of the Fundamental Principles of the Red Cross. Adopted by the 20th International Conference of the Red Cross (1965). [https://disasterlaw.ifrc.org/sites/default/files/media/disaster\\_law/2024-07/IC%2020%20%281965%29%20English.pdf](https://disasterlaw.ifrc.org/sites/default/files/media/disaster_law/2024-07/IC%2020%20%281965%29%20English.pdf)
- 2 UN General Assembly. Resolution 46/182: Strengthening of the coordination of humanitarian emergency assistance of the United Nations (1991) <https://docs.un.org/en/A/RES/46/182>
- 3 Pictet, J. *The Fundamental Principles of the Red Cross: Commentary*. (ICRC, 1979)
- 4 Devidal, P. 'Lost in Digital Translation? The Humanitarian Principles in the Digital Age,' *International Review of the Red Cross* 2024:106(925), 120–154
- 5 Glover, J. *Humanity: A Moral History of the Twentieth Century*. (1999) p.22
- 6 *Ibid*, p.407–408
- 7 Deffenbaugh, N. 'De-Dehumanization: Practicing Humanity.' *International Review of the Red Cross* 2024:106(925) <https://international-review.icrc.org/articles/de-dehumanization-practicing-humanity-925>
- 8 *Ibid*, pp.56–89.
- 9 Council of Delegates of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement. Resolution CD/24/R5: Call for Respect and Support for Principled Humanitarian Action, adopted 28 October 2024. <https://international-review.icrc.org/articles/reports-and-documents-selected-resolutions-of-the-2024-council-of-delegates-927>
- 10 Deffenbaugh, N. 'De-Dehumanization: Practicing Humanity.' *International Review of the Red Cross* 2024:106(925) <https://international-review.icrc.org/articles/de-dehumanization-practicing-humanity-925>
- 11 Council of Delegates of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement. Resolution 9: Promote Respect for Diversity and Fight Discrimination and Intolerance, adopted 30 November 2003. [www.icrc.org/sites/default/files/external/doc/en/assets/files/other/anglais-cd-2003-resolutions.pdf](http://www.icrc.org/sites/default/files/external/doc/en/assets/files/other/anglais-cd-2003-resolutions.pdf)
- 12 International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement. Proclamation of the Fundamental Principles of the Red Cross. Adopted by the 20th International Conference of the Red Cross (1965). [https://disasterlaw.ifrc.org/sites/default/files/media/disaster\\_law/2024-07/IC%2020%20%281965%29%20English.pdf](https://disasterlaw.ifrc.org/sites/default/files/media/disaster_law/2024-07/IC%2020%20%281965%29%20English.pdf); International Conference of the Red Cross and Red Crescent. 32nd International Conference of the Red Cross and Red Crescent: Fundamental Principles in Action – 50th Anniversary of the Proclamation of the Fundamental Principles. Conference report (2015) <https://rcrcconference.org/about/previous-conferences/32nd-international-conference/>; International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement. Resolution 5: Call for Respect and Support for Principled Humanitarian Action, adopted by the Council of Delegates, 28 October 2024, accompanied by an Appeal to States at the 34th International Conference of the Red Cross and Red Crescent (2024) <https://international-review.icrc.org/articles/reports-and-documents-selected-resolutions-of-the-2024-council-of-delegates-927>
- 13 One case which generated a flow of posts online is: ANSA. 'DIGOS probing anti-NGO graffiti.' 27 January 2025. [www.ansa.it/english/news/politics/2025/01/27/digos-probing-anti-ngo-graffiti\\_d0aac4d7-5a6e-43f6-80ca-d6e2f589581c.html](http://www.ansa.it/english/news/politics/2025/01/27/digos-probing-anti-ngo-graffiti_d0aac4d7-5a6e-43f6-80ca-d6e2f589581c.html). Others were comments and messages to the Italian Red Cross posts accusing us or the ICRC of being partial and non-neutral. These have been removed. Italian journalists referred back to ICRC 'faults' at the time of the Holocaust, thus intending to cast a malicious light on the Red Cross as a whole.
- 14 Harroff-Tavel, M. 'Neutrality and Impartiality: The Importance of These Principles for the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and the Difficulties Involved in Applying Them,' *International Review of the Red Cross* 1989:29(273), 536–552.
- 15 *Ibid*
- 16 Slim, H. *Solferino 21: Warfare, Civilians and Humanitarians in the Twentieth-Century* (Hurst Publishers, 2024), p.242.
- 17 IFRC. *Applying Better Programming Initiative – Do No Harm*. (2016) [www.ifrc.org/sites/default/files/2021-08/2016\\_ApplyingBPI-DoNoHarm.pdf](http://www.ifrc.org/sites/default/files/2021-08/2016_ApplyingBPI-DoNoHarm.pdf)
- 18 The notion of connectors and dividers is referenced in IFRC. *Better Programming Initiative: How to Do Conflict-Sensitive Context Analysis* (2021) [www.ifrc.org/document/better-programming-initiative-how-do-conflict-sensitive-context-analysis](http://www.ifrc.org/document/better-programming-initiative-how-do-conflict-sensitive-context-analysis). This highlights that good programming and effective community engagement require a solid understanding of the local environment, as well as of the role – both actual and perceived – that organizations play. This applies whether work takes place in contexts marked by social instability, violence and conflict or in more stable and predictable settings.
- 19 Devidal, P. 'Lost in Digital Translation? The Humanitarian Principles in the Digital Age,' *International Review of the Red Cross* 2024:106(925), 120–154.
- 20 Glover, J. *Humanity: A Moral History of the Twentieth Century*. (Yale University Press, 1999) pp.22, 24–25.
- 21 *Ibid*, p.414
- 22 Upholding the commitments of Resolution 9 (2003) today requires addressing the digital dimensions of intolerance and integrating responses to harmful information into broader strategies for inclusion, protection and principled engagement – both online and offline.