

# Ensuring respect for the humanitarian principles

Guidance note for humanitarian partners  
of the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs



Norwegian Ministry  
of Foreign Affairs

02.09.19

## Background

One of the main goals of Norway's Humanitarian Strategy (2019) is to 'ensure that people in need are given the necessary protection and assistance, in line with the humanitarian principles'. This document provides guidance for our humanitarian partners on putting the humanitarian principles into practice. It is also intended to promote dialogue and greater understanding of the dilemmas that can arise when taking a principled humanitarian approach.

While partners differ in their approaches to humanitarian assistance, the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (the Ministry) wishes to ensure a common understanding of what is expected from our partners as regards compliance with the humanitarian principles. Partners are encouraged to use recognised standards in their work, such as the Sphere standards and the Core Humanitarian Standard on Quality and Accountability (CHS). This document is intended to supplement recognised standards, as well as organisations' own standards, where applicable.

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

### Box 1: The humanitarian principles

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

#### **Humanity**

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

#### **Impartiality**

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

#### **Neutrality**

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

#### **Independence**

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

At times it may not be possible to fulfil all the principles at once. The principles will need to be weighed against each other and balanced with other considerations, including accountability and the potential negative effects of assistance. The principles of humanity and impartiality are generally considered to be fundamental, ethical obligations, which define the objective of humanitarian action, while the principles of neutrality and independence are of a more contingent nature. As a result, in situations where there has to be a trade-off between the four principles, the principles of humanity and impartiality take precedence.

## Design/planning/proposal

### Context analysis

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

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

### Beneficiary selection

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

### Due diligence in working with local partners

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

sider local partners' practices in the areas of staff recruitment, beneficiary selection, etc. These practices must be in line with the principles.

### Risk management systems and strategies

The Ministry understands and accepts the fact that there is always a risk of non-compliance with the humanitarian principles in all humanitarian assistance. In their proposals, partners must identify and assess this type of risk in the same way as they identify and assess other forms of risk. They should clearly communicate the level of risk they are willing to take (their 'risk appetite') as well as the relevant risk management strategies they plan to implement to address the risk of non-compliance with the humanitarian principles.

### Deviation from standard procedures

In situations where there are constraints on the ability of a partner to apply its own standard operating procedures, this should be discussed with the Ministry at the planning stage (or at the earliest possible stage during implementation). Alternative procedures should be explicitly agreed on and included in the proposal/contract.

#### Box 2: A dilemma of principle in Ethiopia, 2018

A civil conflict in Ethiopia in 2018 caused over one million people to flee their homes. A partner of the Ministry was involved in the efforts to assist the internally displaced people in Gedeo and West Guji, and discovered that Government beneficiary lists were systematically excluding one particular ethnic group. The partner chose to suspend allocations to all beneficiaries until they could ensure the impartiality and independence of beneficiary selection, even though suspending allocations was not in line with the humanitarian imperative. The partner approached the Government with a proposed solution: a one-page guidance note setting out steps for the joint targeting and independent verification of beneficiaries. With the backing of donors, the country and area office conveyed a common message, and lobbied continuously at the local level until the proposed solution was adopted by the authorities, and later on used for humanitarian organisations at the national level.