

# Humanitarian law

**The principles of humanitarian practice aim to ensure the rights of those affected by conflict or natural disaster to protection and assistance, while minimising the potential negative impact or manipulation of such assistance and strengthening preparedness for future disasters.**

**International humanitarian law** comprises a set of rules which for humanitarian reasons, seek to limit the effects of armed conflict. Humanitarian practice is guided by humanitarian law and a **range of international standards and codes of conduct** including:

- Universal Declaration of Human Rights 1948
- Four Geneva Conventions of 1949 & additional protocols of 1977
- Principles of Conduct for the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and NGOs in Disaster Response Programmes
- The Sphere Project (2004) Humanitarian Charter and Minimum Standards in Disaster Response

**Humanitarian practice** includes the protection of civilians and those no longer taking part in hostilities, meeting their basic needs for food, water, sanitation, shelter and health care and assisting their return to normal lives and livelihoods. Humanitarian practice is guided by the following **principles**:

- **Humanity** – every individual's right to life with dignity and the duty on others to take steps to save lives and alleviate suffering.
- **Impartiality** – to act on the basis of need without discrimination.
- **Neutrality** – to act without preference for one group or another.
- **Independence** – to ensure the autonomy of humanitarian action from any other political, economic or military interests.

## Considerations for humanitarian practice in conflict:

- Risk of 'doing harm' or fuelling conflict through manipulation or diversion of aid supplies in exchange for concessions i.e. access.
- Risk of compromising human rights through withholding aid or conversely, negotiating with armed forces.
- Need for understanding of political, social and ethnic context.
- Value of advocacy or lobbying to raise awareness of rights abuses and promote the principles of good humanitarian practice.
- Value in collaboration with local organisations and social movements to apply pressure or assist in resolving constraints.
- Importance of conflict sensitive approaches in programming.

## Good humanitarian practice:

*Prevents or relieves human suffering*

*Is provided proportional to need*

*Is impartial & independent*

*Respects the diversity, rights & dignity of those affected*

*Is accountable to supporters & beneficiaries*

*Is flexible & appropriate to context*

*Facilitates participation of affected groups*

*Strives to reduce future vulnerability*

*Promotes self reliance & local response capacity*

### All In Diary CD Resources:

UN DMTP (1997) Disaster Management Ethics  
ICRC (2004) What is humanitarian law?

### Web links for further information

[http://www.undmtp.org/modules\\_e.htm](http://www.undmtp.org/modules_e.htm)  
<http://www.icrc.org/eng/ih/>

