



# HEALTH EMERGENCIES IN LARGE POPULATIONS

## THE HELP COURSE

A TRAINING COURSE FOR MANAGING HUMANITARIAN OPERATIONS  
IN DISASTERS, CONFLICTS AND OTHER CRISES





# THE HELP COURSE

How can we effectively protect the lives and dignity of people affected by major disasters or armed conflicts, and promote their health? How do we analyse complex crises, evaluate needs, assess available resources and set priorities? How do we plan, manage and evaluate a response?

How do we prevent or respond to threats to public health, promote mental and social well-being and provide care in an effective, sustainable, respectful and ethically sound manner?

These are some of the complex issues that humanitarian personnel must tackle, often during emergencies.

# OUTLINE

Health Emergencies in Large Populations, or HELP, is a two-week course on humanitarian assistance during disasters, armed conflicts and other complex crises. It was created in 1986 by the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), in partnership with the World Health Organization (WHO) and the University of Geneva, to professionalize the delivery of humanitarian assistance during emergencies, and to promote professional ethics and humanitarian principles.

It is held every year at the ICRC's training centre in Geneva. Since 1990, the course has also been organized in other countries by the ICRC in partnership with a university, a National Red Cross or Red Crescent Society, and/or a public health institution active in the region. Over 200 courses have taken place in 25 countries. At present, ten HELP courses are offered yearly in nine countries.

The HELP course takes a broad view of contexts, needs and responses. To date, over 4,500 health professionals and aid workers from the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, United Nations agencies, non-governmental organizations, ministries of health, military medical services and academic institutions have attended the course.

# SCOPE

The course seeks to develop the knowledge, the skills and the approach – based on scientific evidence, best practice and professional ethics – that humanitarian workers will need to make effective decisions, ensure that their conduct is never less than humane and adapt their activities as needed.

The HELP course contributes to raising technical and ethical standards for humanitarian work, and to fostering collaboration between the academic and humanitarian spheres. Because of its focus on public health, the course is relevant to a broad range of professionals, including medical personnel, operational managers, technicians, logisticians, lawyers, policymakers and leaders of humanitarian organizations.

# OBJECTIVES

At the end of the course, participants should be able to tackle complex situations using a multidisciplinary approach that focuses on the needs and capabilities of affected people and communities, and the resources available to them. The humanitarian response takes into account measures to protect public health and the health of individuals, the provisions of international humanitarian law, human rights and professional ethics. More specifically, course attendees should be able to:

- describe the essential issues relating to public health, health care, management, law and ethics that are associated with humanitarian action, and methods to address them.
- analyse health and other humanitarian needs using a multidisciplinary approach that takes into consideration the perceptions, vulnerabilities and capabilities of the people affected.
- plan, manage and evaluate activities included in the response to major humanitarian crises.

# CONTENT

The HELP course explores the principles underlying the provision of humanitarian assistance in health emergencies and major health crises, and the methods of providing such assistance. Each section begins with an overview of the various stages of the planning process: assessing needs, analysing the context, selecting priorities, setting objectives, mobilizing resources, drafting plans, and implementing and evaluating activities.

Depending on the local context and current events, other topics may also be addressed: first aid in the field; mass casualty management; the management of dead bodies; pandemics; and responses to nuclear, radiological, biological or chemical threats.

The course introduces participants to different organizations involved in disaster response, helping to improve coordination during emergencies.





# OVERVIEW OF THE COURSE

## SETTING THE SCENE

An effective humanitarian response focuses on the affected people and communities and is based on a sound assessment and analysis of the situation. An integrated approach to health issues is needed that focuses on the physical and mental health of individuals and on public health: assessments and responses to address the health and dignity of people and their basic physical needs, and an emphasis on preventive care, curative care and rehabilitation.

## PROGRAMME MANAGEMENT AND DATA ANALYSIS

A public-health approach, such as the one adopted by the HELP course, provides a firm basis to assess needs, contexts and resources, define priorities, and plan and evaluate activities. The course will cover basic methods of collecting and analysing data, with a view to enabling participants to set up and use an effective health information system, and to understand and respond to health-related data.



Halan/CRC

## ETHICS IN HUMANITARIAN ACTION

Showing due regard for all the affected people, and protecting their lives and dignity, are essential aspects of all relief operations. During disasters and armed conflicts, humanitarian workers are often confronted with difficult, and sometimes extremely delicate, ethical issues. In order to make and implement sound decisions in response to a crisis, humanitarian workers need to have a strong commitment to ethics and humanitarian principles and to ensuring equity, gender sensitivity and respect for fundamental rights.

## NUTRITION AND ECONOMIC SECURITY

Serious and complex problems such as malnutrition, lack of regular income and economic insecurity are very common in emergencies. Moreover, they are major threats to people's lives and livelihoods. In order to address some of these challenges, the course covers topics such as: nutritional assessments, means of restoring economic security and methodological guidelines for planning, implementing and monitoring activities relating to general and specific food-aid operations.



## PUBLIC HEALTH ENGINEERING

Human beings cannot survive without water; ensuring access to an adequate supply of safe water is an absolute priority in any emergency response. Poor hygiene, overcrowding and vectors of disease can have lethal consequences during emergencies. The course examines the impact of environmental conditions and the availability of water on public health. Basic methods of providing an emergency water supply, treating black water, disposing of waste, controlling vectors of disease, and providing emergency shelter and an energy supply are also explored.

## COMMUNICABLE DISEASE CONTROL

Controlling communicable diseases is particularly important during disasters, especially when large numbers of people are living in unsanitary conditions. The course covers topics such as outbreak preparedness and early warning systems for detecting disease, as well as methods of investigating and responding to outbreaks.





## EPIDEMIOLOGY

Epidemiology is an essential tool in relief operations. During an emergency, it is vital to document the results of the initial needs assessments, the monitoring of assistance activities, and the evaluation of the impact of relief operations. The course uses case studies and simulation exercises to explore some of the most common challenges encountered during emergencies.

## HEALTH-CARE SERVICES

Disasters and other crises create a great demand for medical and surgical care, and often for emergency treatment. Existing health services may be overwhelmed, and may need various kinds of support, such as expertise in different branches of medicine.

Measures to prevent disease and threats to public health are a key aspect of health care in emergencies. These activities should be incorporated into the medical services provided to affected people, with a particular focus on vulnerable groups such as women and children. Meeting people's reproductive health needs and managing childhood illnesses or chronic diseases are among the major challenges that humanitarian workers need to deal with during crises.

## **MENTAL HEALTH AND PSYCHOSOCIAL SUPPORT**

The mental health consequences of crises, and people's mental health needs, are now recognized as priorities during disasters and armed conflicts. These needs must be addressed in a professional and structured manner; the HELP course will teach participants to do so.

## **HEALTH SYSTEMS**

Health services in emergencies encompass primary health care, pre-hospital and emergency care, hospital care and specialized services, such as mental health and rehabilitation services. All of these components – which include community-based services and the international relief response – make up a comprehensive health system.

In particular, the course will focus on how these components interact, how to identify key requirements for improving the functioning of health systems in emergencies and how to provide support to existing healthcare services, all crucial aspects of ensuring the sustainability of health services after a crisis.

## **INTERNATIONAL HUMANITARIAN LAW**

This branch of international law regulates armed conflict. It protects people who are not, or who are no longer, involved in the fighting, and restricts the means and methods of warfare employed. Everyone involved in humanitarian work has a duty to understand the basic principles of international humanitarian law, to incorporate them into all humanitarian activities and to broaden awareness of those principles.

## **PROTECTION FOR PEOPLE AFFECTED BY ARMED CONFLICT AND OTHER VIOLENCE**

All relief activities, regardless of the circumstances, must ensure legal protection for people affected by armed conflict and other violence. Essential aspects of crisis response include promoting due regard for these people, ensuring their safety from threats and attacks, and preventing discrimination against them.



Y. Perea/CRC

## **PROTECTION FOR HEALTH-CARE STAFF AND MEDICAL SERVICES**

During disasters or armed conflicts, wounded or sick people and medical workers and facilities are often at risk of harm, directly or indirectly. They may face threats or attacks; people may be killed, and facilities destroyed. The fundamental provisions of humanitarian law and human rights law, and the basic principles of ethics, govern the provision of medical and other humanitarian assistance during emergencies. Everyone involved in humanitarian work must know, respect and spread awareness of these rules and principles.

## **SAFETY AND WELL-BEING OF HUMANITARIAN WORKERS**

Humanitarian workers have a duty to ensure their own safety and that of their colleagues in the field. They must be able to deal with stress and ensure the well-being of others.

## **COORDINATION OF THE HUMANITARIAN RESPONSE**

Professionals involved in relief operations need to know how the humanitarian response to a crisis is organized and coordinated. In most crisis situations, many agencies – working at the local, national and international levels – are involved. Coordination mechanisms are essential to ensure that the immediate needs of all affected people are met.

# TEACHING APPROACHES AND METHODS

The course emphasizes problem solving and hands-on teaching and learning; analysis of situations and group discussions are key elements. Teaching methods include lectures by experts, class discussions, selected readings, group work and simulations. In some places, distance-learning modules allow participants to prepare for or supplement the residential course.

## PRACTICAL INFORMATION

Information on course dates, registration fees and credits is available on the course website, and from the ICRC HELP courses unit (see contact details at the end of this leaflet).

### WORKING LANGUAGES

The course is given in the following languages:

- English: in Geneva (Switzerland), Tehran (Iran), Beirut (Lebanon), Delhi (India), Baltimore and Honolulu (USA), and Tokyo (Japan)
- Spanish: in Havana (Cuba)
- French: in Ouidah (Benin)

### PARTICIPANTS

The course is intended for professionals involved in humanitarian work who have field experience and hold decision-making positions, in particular health professionals such as doctors, nurses or nutritionists, public health officers and epidemiologists; water and environmental engineers, legal or policy advisers; and people with strategic and managerial responsibilities.

Candidates working in countries affected by humanitarian crises are given special consideration.

A certificate of attendance is issued to every participant at the end of the course.

The average number of participants per course is 25 to 30.

The registration fee ranges from 1,500 to 2,000 US dollars depending on the venue.





# A JOINT EFFORT

The course is organized by the ICRC in partnership with academic institutions, the WHO, National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies and other institutions involved in relief operations. At present, HELP course partners include:

## **In Geneva, Switzerland:**

- Geneva Centre of Humanitarian Studies, Geneva University
- WHO headquarters

## **In Baltimore, Maryland, USA:**

- The Center for Humanitarian Health at Johns Hopkins University

## **In Honolulu, Hawaii, USA:**

- The Centre for Excellence in Disaster Management and Humanitarian Assistance
- The University of Hawaii

## **In Tokyo, Japan:**

- The Japanese Red Cross Nursing College
- The Japanese Red Cross Society
- WHO Regional Office

**In Ouidah, Benin:**

- Institut régional de santé publique
- WHO Regional Office

**In Tehran, Iran:**

- The School of Public Health at the Tehran University of Medical Sciences
- The Red Crescent Society of the Islamic Republic of Iran

**In Beirut, Lebanon**

- The Lebanese Red Cross
- Lebanese University
- WHO

**In Havana, Cuba:**

- Escuela Nacional de Salud Pública (ENSAP)
- The Cuban Red Cross

**In New Delhi, India:**

- International Institute of Health Management Research
- WHO Regional Office
- The Indian Red Cross Society
- The National Institute of Disaster Management (NIDM)

# CONTACT

For further information on the HELP course, please contact:

**International Committee of the Red Cross**

Assistance Division, HELP courses unit

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1202 Geneva

email: [help@icrc.org](mailto:help@icrc.org)

Please visit our webpage [www.icrc.org/helpcourse](http://www.icrc.org/helpcourse) to find information on individual courses, contacts and dates.



The ICRC helps people around the world affected by armed conflict and other violence, doing everything it can to protect their lives and dignity and to relieve their suffering, often with its Red Cross and Red Crescent partners. The organization also seeks to prevent hardship by promoting and strengthening humanitarian law and championing universal humanitarian principles.

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