



ICRC

ECOSOC-HAS Side-Event

Principles in Action: How do Neutrality and Independence
Contribute to Humanitarian Effectiveness?

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Your Excellencies, Distinguished guests, Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a pleasure to welcome you to the Humanitarium for this side event of the 2015 ECOSOC Humanitarian Affairs Segment. Today's event is entitled "Principles in Action: How do Neutrality and Independence Contribute to Humanitarian Effectiveness?"

It is co-organized by the International Committee of the Red Cross and the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, and is also held under the umbrella of ICRC's Research and Debate Cycle on Principles Guiding Humanitarian Action.

The year 2015 is particularly important for our Red Cross Red Crescent Movement, as we celebrate the 50th anniversary of the adoption of the seven Fundamental Principles of the Movement.

These Fundamental Principles were officially adopted in 1965 and have been instrumental to the larger humanitarian community, which has widely espoused the first four principles of humanity, impartiality, neutrality and independence as the principles guiding humanitarian action.¹

These principles did however not appear suddenly in 1965. They emerged from one century of humanitarian action and reflection, starting with the vision and action of a man – Henry Dunant, founder of the ICRC – on the battlefield of Solferino in 1859. Dunant had been horrified by the scale of the carnage and mobilized volunteers in surrounding villages to care for all the wounded soldiers without discrimination and regardless of the side they belonged to.

Dunant's idea of non-discriminatory, needs-based humanitarian assistance is encapsulated in the principle of Impartiality and was later enshrined in international humanitarian law.² Humanity and impartiality thus provide the bottom-line for humanitarian action and are essential in defining the humanitarian gesture.

Now, as for neutrality and independence – which we are discussing today – they have been developed out of decades of field experience in conflicts and natural disasters. For the ICRC and for the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, these two operational principles (of neutrality and independence) are essential to gain acceptance from all, and therefore to get access to populations in need in some of the most adverse circumstances.

Today, more than ever, these two principles remain crucial in our view to deliver effective humanitarian action; that is humanitarian action carried out in proximity to affected people, relevant to their needs, and timely.

This firmly neutral and independent humanitarian approach is what enables the ICRC and its Movement partners to be, more often than not, among the few humanitarian actors present across all lines of modern battlefields in Ukraine, Syria, South Sudan, Yemen or Afghanistan.

¹ Notably through UN General Assembly resolution 46/182 in 1991.

² Which recognizes the responsibility of states to facilitate relief that is "humanitarian and impartial in character and conducted without any adverse distinction" Article 70 AP 1

Afghanistan is a case in point in that respect. ICRC's staunch neutral and independent action was at times criticized. In the post-9 /11 context, the prevalent discourse was that all actors should have joined up efforts to stabilize and reconstruct the country, and win the heart and minds of the population. ICRC's principled approach may have been a contrasting one, but it delivered.

As a number of long-time observers of humanitarian action in Afghanistan have noted,³ the consistent application of these principles has enabled the ICRC to remain one of the few actors operating in some of the most contested areas of the country and, among other activities, to ferry sick and wounded people across frontlines.

This approach even benefitted other actors. ICRC's acceptance and recognition as a **neutral intermediary** enabled it, for instance, to obtain safe passage for polio vaccination teams, on behalf of the Ministry of Health and of the World Health Organization.⁴

This is our view and experience on these two Principles, but we want to hear today from others whether Neutrality and Independence contribute to humanitarian effectiveness in all circumstances, and for all humanitarian actors or not.

I will now turn to my colleague from the International Federation, Joelle Tanguy, Under-Secretary General for Humanitarian Values and Diplomacy, who will introduce our panelists and facilitate this discussion.

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³ Fiona Terry and Antonio Donini in particular.

⁴ F. Terry, "The ICRC in Afghanistan: Reasserting the Neutrality of Humanitarian Action", *IRRC*, March 2011, p. 183 : <https://www.icrc.org/eng/assets/files/review/2011/irrc-881-terry.pdf>