



# THE FUNDAMENTAL PRINCIPLES

OF THE INTERNATIONAL RED CROSS  
AND RED CRESCENT MOVEMENT



ICRC

IN BRIEF



Christoph von Toggenburg/ICRC

## THE FUNDAMENTAL PRINCIPLES OF THE INTERNATIONAL RED CROSS AND RED CRESCENT MOVEMENT

Humanity, impartiality, neutrality, independence, voluntary service, unity and universality: these seven Fundamental Principles sum up the Movement's ethics and are at the core of its approach to helping people in need during armed conflict, natural disasters and other emergencies.

These principles unite the components of the Movement – the ICRC, the National Societies and the International Federation – and enable them to provide effective, unbiased assistance to people in need. They are mandatory rules of

conduct that the Movement's components are required to follow at all times, and States must respect this necessity.

The Fundamental Principles are key to the Movement's identity. Adherence to these principles ensures the humanitarian nature of the Movement's work and brings consistency to the broad range of activities it undertakes around the world. The principles provide a common bond for the National Societies, which vary greatly in structure, culture and membership.



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Kate Hobb/ICRC

## THE FUNDAMENTAL PRINCIPLES

HUMANITY

IMPARTIALITY

NEUTRALITY

INDEPENDENCE

VOLUNTARY SERVICE

UNITY

UNIVERSALITY

## HUMANITY

**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 capacities – to prevent and alleviate suffering wherever it may be found. Its purpose is to protect life and health and to ensure respect for every human being. It promotes mutual understanding, friendship, cooperation and lasting peace amongst all peoples.**

This principle, which underpins all the other principles, encompasses several ideas:

- Suffering is universal and requires a response: it cannot be met with indifference.
- Respect for human dignity is paramount in everything the Movement does. It implies helping and protecting others regardless of who they are or what they have done.
- The Movement protects life and health by promoting international humanitarian law, preventing disaster and disease, and undertaking life-saving activities, from first aid to the provision of food and shelter.



## IMPARTIALITY

**The Movement 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 embodies three related concepts:

- **Non-discrimination:** Members of the Movement help people regardless of their religious beliefs, the colour of their skin, their political convictions, where they come from, or whether they are rich or poor.
- **Proportionality:** Whether treating the wounded or distributing food, members of the Movement must ensure that those in greatest need receive assistance first.
- **Impartiality:** Decisions must be made on a “needs only” basis and must not be influenced by personal considerations or feelings.

## NEUTRALITY

**In order to continue 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.**

The Movement must not take sides or be regarded as doing so, either in its speech or in its actions, at any time or in any place. This enables its components to reach people who need help in crises and to maintain a dialogue with those involved in armed conflict and other violence. The Movement’s neutrality helps assure parties to a conflict that assisting civilians and wounded or detained fighters does not constitute interference in the conflict. The Movement’s components must build a reputation for neutral conduct in peacetime, so that they have the confidence of all sides, and can act more effectively at the onset of armed conflict or during other situations of violence.



Ibrahim Malla/SARC

## INDEPENDENCE

**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.**

- It is only by being truly independent that the Movement can respect the principles of neutrality and impartiality.
- Although auxiliary to the public authorities in the humanitarian field, National Societies must retain their autonomy when making decisions so that they can work in accordance with the Fundamental Principles at all times and in all situations. This may mean turning down any requests that are in conflict with these principles, and taking care not to submit to any interference or pressure.
- The Movement's components should be permitted to conduct independent assessments and to talk freely with people in need of assistance.

## VOLUNTARY SERVICE

**The Movement is a voluntary relief movement not prompted in any manner by desire for gain.**

- The principle of voluntary service signifies the humanitarian motivation of all the people who work within the Movement, whether or not they are paid for it.
- Members of the Movement have no motive for offering assistance other than a desire to help: this is a powerful statement of solidarity.
- The Movement's extensive network of Red Cross and Red Crescent volunteers is unique and ensures that people throughout the world receive assistance. It is a source of initiative and of inspiration for many other humanitarian endeavours; at the same time, it provides invaluable information about local contexts and the most appropriate way to help people in need.
- Through its volunteers, the National Societies are rooted in local communities and help to strengthen and empower them.



## UNITY

**There can be only one Red Cross or one Red Crescent Society in any one country. It must be open to all. It must carry on its humanitarian work throughout its territory.**

This principle enables National Societies to serve as a unifying force in countries and communities, and to promote understanding and peace.

- The National Society must be the only one in the country and must conduct its humanitarian activities throughout the territory – in urban centres as well as in remote rural areas.
- It must recruit volunteers and staff, and members of its governing board, from all ethnic and social groups without discriminating on the basis of race, gender, class, religion, political opinion or any other criterion.

## UNIVERSALITY

**The Movement, in which all National Societies have equal status and share equal responsibilities and duties in helping each other, is worldwide.**

- The universality of suffering requires a universal response: National Societies exist in almost every country in the world and they have a collective responsibility to assist one another in responding to crises and to support each other's development in a spirit of solidarity and mutual respect.
- Regardless of size or resources, each National Society has equal voting rights in the Movement's governing bodies.
- The principle of universality also means that the failings or omissions of one component affect the entire Movement. The integrity and public image of the Movement depend on adherence by all to the Fundamental Principles.



## THE INTERNATIONAL RED CROSS AND RED CRESCENT MOVEMENT

The International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement is the largest humanitarian network in the world. Its mission is to alleviate human suffering, protect life and health, and uphold human dignity, especially during armed conflicts and other emergencies. It is present in every country and supported by millions of volunteers.

It is not a single organization. It is composed of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies and the 189 individual National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies. Each has its own legal identity and role, but they are all united by seven Fundamental Principles.

The ICRC's exclusively humanitarian mission is to protect the lives and dignity of victims of armed conflict and other situations of violence and to provide them with assistance. It directs and

coordinates the Movement's international relief activities during armed conflicts. Established in 1863, it is at the origin of the Movement.

The International Federation inspires, facilitates and promotes all humanitarian activities carried out by its member National Societies in behalf of those who are most vulnerable. It directs and coordinates its members' actions to assist the victims of natural and technological disasters, refugees and those affected by health emergencies. It was founded in 1919.

National Societies act as auxiliaries to their national authorities in the humanitarian field. They provide a broad range of services including disaster relief, and health and social programmes. In wartime they may assist the civilian population and support the medical services of the armed forces.



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