



Principled Humanitarian Action And Advocacy

Definition

How Dunantist humanitarian principles are applied and negotiated is evolving.

Key insights

Humanitarian principles will be altered by the integration of non-Dunantist cultures and different perspectives on humanitarianism.

With the increasing role of non-traditional actors and donors, the role of Dunantist principles will be further minimized. The neutrality principle will be greatly eroded; the remaining humanitarian principles are likely to be complemented by alternative narratives of humanitarianism or new principles such as justice. Independence, impartiality, and humanity will continue to be part of the discourse but are more flexibly applied by a smaller proportion of actors in the space.

Private sector actors and the militarization of humanitarian action will challenge the application of humanitarian principles.

As the role for private sector and military actors grows in the humanitarian space, the relevance of the Dunantist principles and the safety that they provide INGOs will be continually undermined. Pragmatism will be prioritized (teleological reasoning over deontological), reframing how humanitarian agencies engage with these actors.

Country and regional programming and advocacy will no longer be directed from Europe/North America; there will be a decentralization of INGOs toward more federated structures organized through alliances.

Pushed by principles of subsidiarity, the governance structures of NGOs will become increasingly federalized, and the role of local NGOs will increase. Advocacy will be driven and articulated through alliances organized through shared approaches, principles, and priorities.



Changes by 2030

➤ **Increased complexity and decentralization: a challenge to universality of Dunantist principles**

The principles as recognized in the UN General Assembly Resolution 46/182 (1991) of humanity, impartiality, neutrality, and independence have been put forward as guiding principles to respond to the needs and vulnerabilities of affected populations. The General Assembly resolution reinforced the narrative that these principles, founded on the work of Henry Dunant, are universally applicable.

The challenge to the “privileged position”¹ granted to Dunantist principles is not new. Complex crises coming to the fore at the end of the Cold War, the move by states to see humanitarian action as an extension of their own power, and the professionalization of the system as a reaction to the questioned legitimacy and effectiveness of the humanitarian sector have underpinned the elaboration of competing narratives that intensified in the 1990s.

These challenges to the dominance of Dunantist principles, encapsulated by “new humanitarian”² approaches and driven by new styles of conflict and violence, will continue to underpin the debate between a deontological or teleological approach.³ In addition to the diversity of approaches taken by the largest northern-based INGOs, the narrative of humanitarianism will be advanced by non-Western-centric approaches as the sector decentralizes and the balance of power shifts closer to the areas of operations. Principles of non-intervention in India,⁴ the Confucian tradition embraced by Chinese NGOs, and a stronger Solidaristic tradition in Latin America⁵ indicate the breadth of the principles that will shape global humanitarian action.

¹ Gordon, S. and Donini, A. (2016) Romancing Principles and Human Rights: Are Humanitarian Principles Salvageable?, *International Review of the Red Cross* 97 (897/898), pgs 77–109, pg 78

² “New Humanitarians fuses together two common understandings of the word ‘new’: *contemporary* – ... some of the more recent entrants to humanitarian action and *originality* – their apparent reworking of the humanitarian practices and the principles of humanity, impartiality, neutrality and independence.” Sezgin, Z. and Dijkzeul, D. (2016) *The New Humanitarians in International Practice: Emerging Actors and Contested Principles*, Routledge pg 2

³ Gordon, S. and Donini, A. (2016) Romancing Principles and Human Rights: Are Humanitarian Principles Salvageable?, *International Review of the Red Cross* 97 (897/898), 77–109 pg 92

⁴ Roepstorff, K., *India as Humanitarian Actor: Convergence and Divergences with DAC Donor Principles and Practices*, in Sezgin, Z. and Dijkzeul, D. (2016) *The New Humanitarians in International Practice: Emerging Actors and Contested Principles*, Routledge pg 56

⁵ Gordon, S. and Donini, A. (2016) Romancing Principles and Human Rights: Are Humanitarian Principles Salvageable?, *International Review of the Red Cross* 97 (897/898), 77–109 pg 101



Representing the Differing Approaches of Classicists (or Dunantists) and Solidarists

	Classicists ↔ Minimalists ↔ Maximalists ↔ Solidarists
Engagement with political authorities	Eschew public confrontations ↔ Advocate controversial public policy
Neutrality	Avoid taking sides ↔ Take the side of selected victims
Impartiality	Deliver aid using proportionality and nondiscrimination ↔ Skew the balance of resource allocation
Consent	Pursue as sine qua non ↔ Override sovereignty as necessary

➤ **Justice or relief: the challenge of multi-mandated organizations**

Not only have the approaches of humanitarians to implement their mandate changed, but the scope of what humanitarians are expected to address has grown. The expansion of what is considered to be the prerogative of humanitarian organizations beyond “bed for the night humanitarianism,”⁶ which focused on the charitable provision of lifesaving care to victims, has embroiled many humanitarian actors in the political sphere that the Dunantist principles were established to avoid.

“Humanitarian endeavor and political action must go their separate ways if the neutrality and impartiality of humanitarian work are not to be jeopardized.”⁷

Though this political engagement is antithetical to Dunantist principles, the trend toward multi-mandate agencies (those that work on both relief and longer-term development) is well established. Such agencies look beyond the initial response to “development, conflict

⁶ Rieff, D. (2002) *A Bed for the Night: Humanitarianism in Crisis*, Vintage, London in Gordon, S. and Donini, A. (2016) *Romancing Principles and Human Rights: Are Humanitarian Principles Salvageable?*, *International Review of the Red Cross* 97 (897/898), pgs 77–109, pg 82

⁷ Cornelio Sommaruga, president of the ICRC, in his speech to the UN General Assembly, in November 1992 in Chandler, D. C. (2001) *The Road to Military Humanitarianism: How the Human Rights NGOs Shaped a New Humanitarian Agenda*. *Human Rights Quarterly* 23 (3), John Hopkins University Press, pgs 678–700, pg 680



resolution, human rights and rehabilitation tasks,”⁸ creating inevitable conflict between their objectives as they try to manage this alongside their emergency response.⁹ Engagement in the political sphere to address the underlying causes of human vulnerability requires a focus on longer-term, more political objectives and, usually, the adoption of a rights-based narrative with a focus on justice and/or equality.

➤ **New types of actors: diversification**

A consequence of private sector actors increasing their role in the field¹⁰ will be a significant weight added to the teleological schools of humanitarian principles, the result being that the discourse of consequentialist-based ethics could reinforce the challenges to the inefficiencies of NGOs in favour of private firms. The legitimacy of private sector actors who operate outside of the Dunantist principles would dramatically increase if “the legitimacy and value of humanitarian action is based strictly on deliverables and producing measurable outcomes – saving lives at the cheapest price.”¹¹ Private sector actors and social entrepreneurs could drive innovation to improve the efficacy of assistance. Given the attitude of many donors that there is a need for greater efficiency and the push for NGOs to justify their position as primary implementers, the growth of the private sector will erode the principled approach that has defined the main actors in the sector.

The increasing role of private actors for whom principled action is not a strong or defining characteristic of their engagement in the sector will undermine the rationality and applicability of having guiding principles. Broader understandings of intention and consequentialist arguments of efficiency, scale, and reach could provide an added strand to the humanitarian narrative.

⁸ Sezgin, Z. and Dijkzeul, D. (2016) *The New Humanitarians in International Practice: Emerging Actors and Contested Principles*, Routledge pg 3

⁹ Obrecht, A. (2014) *“De-Internationalising” Humanitarian Action: Rethinking The “Global-Local” Relationship*, French Institute for International and Strategic Affairs (IRIS)

¹⁰ Action Against Hunger, French Institute for International and Strategic Affairs (IRIS), Futuribles (2016) *The role of Private Companies & Foundations Tomorrow, 2030: Humanitarian Sector Outlook Insight Files*

¹¹ Hopgood, S. *Keepers of the Flame*, in Barnett, M. (2005) *Humanitarianism Transformed, Perspectives on Politics* Vol. 3/No. 4 723–740 pg 733



➤ **Advocacy as a prerogative of NGOs**

The weight given to advocacy¹² in an NGO is tied to its understanding of humanitarian principles. Exclusive advocacy organizations, such as Amnesty International, are a minority of the voice in the sector, as agencies that also implement programming are increasingly investing in this space, leveraging their programming to ground the legitimacy of their advocacy interventions. Advocacy can be used, as epitomized by organizations such as Oxfam, to advocate on behalf of the poor,¹³ to draw attention to injustices and attempt to tackle the deficiencies in the underlying socio-economic structures that result in vulnerability, or it can be tailored to focus exclusively on dimensions of access, as accords with a narrower humanitarian mandate. For international NGOs the weight accorded to advocacy could increase as their percentage share of direct implementation decreases; however, for those that continue to prioritize access and confidentiality over developing a more public voice, this trend could be less evident.

Advocacy will be a driving force toward a stronger networked approach from NGOs to increase the level of influence that can be wielded by the sector. Engagement in these networks will depend on the interest of NGOs and the degree to which shared advocacy objectives resonate with their mandate. Advocacy networks will be increasingly transversal between local, national, regional, and international NGOs.

Controversies and debates

There is significant controversy over the need for a debate in humanitarian principles. While many organizations routinely affirm their commitment to Dunantist principles, others question their relevance for the sector, given the huge variation in their interpretation and application. In particular, the ability of agencies to be neutral is highly questioned. While it has never been expected that humanitarian agencies apply Dunantist principles universally and without some compromise, the ability of multi-mandate NGOs to claim to abide by Dunantist principles at all is disputed, given the level of influence that agendas distinct from a purely

¹² Advocacy is defined as efforts “directed at governments, to effect policy change, and at the general public, to educate and build constituencies behind certain values and ideas” Stoddard, A. (2009) *Humanitarian NGOs: Challenges and Trends*, Humanitarian Policy Group, Overseas Development Institute pg 30

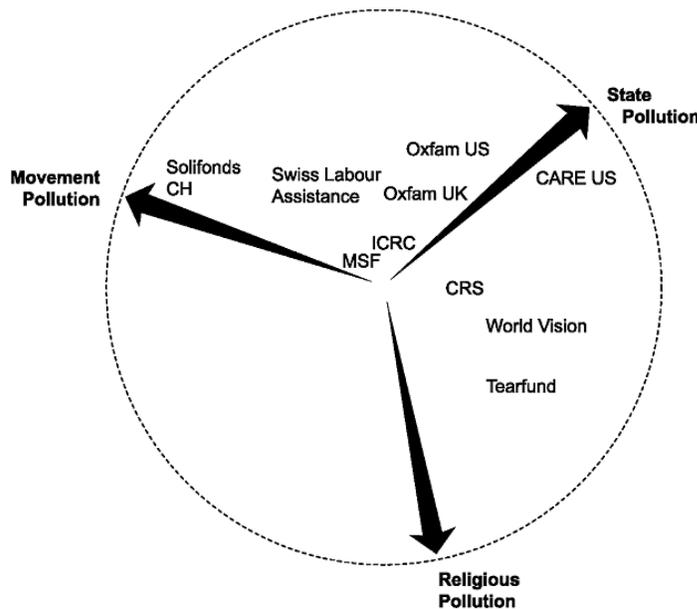
¹³ Stoddard, A. (2009) *Humanitarian NGOs: Challenges and Trends*, Humanitarian Policy Group, Overseas Development Institute pg 30



humanitarian motive have on many organizations.¹⁴ Competing agendas can be grouped into three areas: the agenda of particular social movements that sponsor NGOs (e.g. trade unions), the agenda of states in advancing their political agendas through NGOs (e.g. a pull to a more Wilsonian approach), and the agenda of religious groups aligned with faith-based NGOs, each of which demonstrate some distortion in the system.¹⁵

Whether Dunantist principles will hold their primacy over a broader understanding of what constitutes principled humanitarian action that reflects the different agendas and approaches in the humanitarian sector is yet to be seen.

Purity and Pollution in the Humanitarian Field
Pollution describing the impact of another agenda on the ability of an organization to purely apply the Dunantist principles. The purest application of Dunantist principles would place an agency at the center of



Source: Barnett, Michael (2005) Humanitarianism Transformed, Perspectives on Politics Vol. 3/No. 4

¹⁴ Obrecht, A. (2014) *"De-Internationalising" Humanitarian Action: Rethinking The "Global-Local" Relationship*, French Institute for International and Strategic Affairs (IRIS)

¹⁵ Krause, M. (2014) *The Good Project, Humanitarian Relief NGOs and the Fragmentation of Reason*, University of Chicago Press pg 126



Tomorrow is already here

- A Grand Bargain – continued controversy: There has long been controversy on the humanitarian/development nexus as to whether it is possible to align different strands of work, given the perception that there needs to be a greater distinction between the principled approach taken for solely needs-based interventions and more political and “state-centric development action.”¹⁶ At the World Humanitarian Summit, a Grand Bargain was signed by 15 donors and 15 aid agencies. This elucidated the commitments that had been made toward reforming the humanitarian sector. One such commitment was to improve the link between the humanitarian and development fields to “use existing resources and capabilities better to shrink humanitarian needs over the long term with the view of contributing to the outcomes of the Sustainable Development Goals ... This will need to be the focus not only of aid organisations and donors but also of national governments at all levels, civil society, and the private sector.”¹⁷ This highlights the continuing controversy surrounding the application of principles.
- The Wilsonian agenda: The intersection of foreign policy with the humanitarian sector has in many ways already eroded the notion of aid based on need alone and the impartiality of actors implementing programming. Since the primary funding streams for humanitarian aid are through institutional donors, funding regularly comes with conditions that align to the priorities of the funding states. The investments of international donors are seen more through the perspective of what is strategic for donor states rather than principled action. This is exemplified by the focus of funding in Afghanistan after the coalition invasion in 2001:

“In 2002 nearly half of all funds given by donor governments to the UN’s 25 appeals for assistance went to Afghanistan. If funding decisions were based solely on need, then places like Sudan, Congo, northern Uganda, and Angola would leapfrog to the top of the list.”¹⁸
- Advocacy networks: There are numerous groups, such as START in London and Interaction in Washington, D.C., as well as NEAR in Nairobi, that operate as networks for coordinating advocacy and serving as links between local and international NGOs.

¹⁶ Pontiroli, A. et al, (2013) [Losing Principles in the Search for Coherence? A Field-Based Viewpoint on the EU and Humanitarian Aid](#), *The Journal of Humanitarian Assistance*

¹⁷ Parker, B. (2016) [Is the Grand Bargain a Big Deal?](#), IRIN, 24 May 2016

¹⁸ Barnett, M. (2005) Humanitarianism Transformed, *Perspectives on Politics* 3 (4), pgs 723–740, pg 731