



International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies
Fédération internationale des Sociétés de la Croix-Rouge et du Croissant-Rouge
Federación Internacional de Sociedades de la Cruz Roja y de la Media Luna Roja
الاتحاد الدولي لجمعيات الصليب الأحمر والهلال الأحمر

Background information sheet

Principles and Rights in International Disaster Relief

The primary bases cited for the disaster relief activities of most humanitarian organizations are humanitarian principles and/or the rights of beneficiaries to receive relief. While there is no universal treaty in this area comparable to the [Geneva Conventions](#) of 1949, the standing of these principles and rights in the disaster setting is guaranteed by a series of disaster-related and human rights treaties, United Nations General Assembly resolutions and other authoritative documents.

Humanitarian principles

The core principles generally accepted within the international humanitarian community are the principles of humanity, impartiality and neutrality, derived in part from the development of the Red Cross Red Crescent Movement and the Geneva Conventions. The principle of humanity is the imperative to provide humanitarian assistance to all who need it on the basis of that need. The principle of impartiality requires that aid be given without invidious discrimination. The principle of neutrality requires that aid may not be used to further a particular political or religious viewpoint.

These are among the seven fundamental principles of the Red Cross Red Crescent Movement,¹ which are codified in its [statutes](#) and other documents with international legal standing within the Movement's structure. These include the

[Declaration of Principles for International Humanitarian Relief to the Civilian Population in Disaster Situations](#) and the

[Principles and Rules for Red Cross and Red Crescent Disaster Relief](#), both adopted by the 21st International Conference of the Red Cross in 1969. These principles have also been endorsed by the United Nations General Assembly (see resolutions [46/182](#) of 1991 (para. 2) and [57/150](#) of 2002 (pream. para. 6)), as well as by UN agencies.²

Moreover, these principles have been integrated into the most widely-used standards of humanitarian quality and accountability, including the [Code of Conduct for the Red Cross/Red Crescent Movement and Non-Governmental Organizations in Disaster Response Programmes](#) of 1994, the [Sphere Project Humanitarian Charter and Minimum Standards](#)



The principle of humanity is the core of disaster relief

Photo: Stacey Winston/International Federation

¹ The remaining fundamental principles are independence, voluntary service, unity and universality.

² E.g., [World Food Programme "Core Humanitarian Principles"](#), U.N. Doc. No. WFP/EB.2/2005/4-D/Rev. 1 (14 November 2005), para. 42.

[in Disaster Response](#) of 2000 (and as updated in 2004) and the [Principles and Good Practice of Humanitarian Donorship](#) of 2003 (see the Background Information Sheet on Quality and Accountability), as well as in various human rights instruments, such as the [Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement](#) of 1998 and the [Turku Declaration of Minimum Humanitarian Standards](#) of 1990.

Rights in disaster relief

A number of sources may be cited for the proposition that persons affected by disasters have a right to relief. The most explicit reference to the right in an instrument with inter-governmental character is article 2.1 of the [Principles and Rules for Red Cross and Red Crescent Disaster Relief](#) as amended by the International Conference of the Red Cross and Red Crescent in 1995: “The Red Cross and Red Crescent in its endeavour to prevent and alleviate human suffering, considers it a fundamental right of all people to both offer and receive humanitarian assistance.”

The right is also expressly asserted by other soft law documents,³ such as the Doha Declaration of the United Nations Decade of International Law Conference of 1994, a 2003 resolution on humanitarian assistance by the Institute of International Law, the International Institute of Humanitarian Law’s Guiding Principles on the Right to Humanitarian Assistance of 1992 (art. 1), the [Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement](#) of 1998 (principle 3), and the Mohonk Criteria for Humanitarian Assistance in Complex Emergencies of 1995.

While not expressly referring to the right to disaster relief, a number of widely-ratified human rights conventions guarantee the rights to life, dignity and to the basic necessities of life (such as food, water, shelter and clothing), as well as to adequate health services. See, for example, the [International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights](#) of 1967 (art. 6), [International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights](#) of 1967 (arts. 11–12), [Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women](#) of 1979 (arts. 12, 14), [Convention on the Rights of the Child](#) of 1989 (arts. 6, 24, 27), and also the [Universal Declaration of Human Rights](#) of 1948 (UDHR) (arts. 3, 22, 25).

Human rights instruments also guarantee a number of other rights of particular relevance in disaster relief settings. These include the rights to information (for example, UDHR art. 19), education (UDHR art. 26), property (UDHR, art. 17), access to a livelihood (UDHR, art. 23), freedom from discrimination (UDHR, art. 7) and arbitrary displacement ([Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement](#), principle 7).

While these instruments may not necessarily formally bind international humanitarian organizations, many have expressed their desire to inform their humanitarian work with human rights (see, for example, the 21st International Conference of the Red Cross and Red Crescent’s [Declaration of Principles for International Humanitarian Relief to the Civilian Population in Disaster Situations](#) of 1969, which asserts that “the fundamental concern of mankind and of the international community in disaster situations is the protection and welfare of the individual and the safeguard of basic human rights.”)

³ “Soft law” refers to international documents and standards that are not technically legally binding but that have an authoritative character above that of a mere political statement due to the format of their adoption (e.g., in a formal international conference), the standing of their authors (e.g., the International Law Association, a respected scholarly entity), or subsequent use and acceptance by states.

For more information

See the IDRL web site and online legal database at www.ifrc.org/idrl or contact us at:

International Disaster Response Laws, Rules and Principles programme

International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies

P.O. Box 372

1211 Geneva 19

Switzerland

+ 41 22 730 4222

idrl@ifrc.org

Last update of this page: 25 April 2006

© International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies