

Concept Note

Equipped for tomorrow's humanitarian challenges? The 20th anniversary of the Code of Conduct

Date: 5th December 2014

Time : 09:00 – 13:15

Venue: IFRC, 17 Chemin des Crêts, Petit-Saconnex, Geneva

Introduction

In the early 1990's a number of agencies came together to debate and ultimately agree the *Code of Conduct for the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and NGOs in Disaster Relief (1994)*. This was partially a response to concerns around the expansion of humanitarian response; a voluntary Code was seen as one way to press for improved humanitarian action, based on agreed humanitarian principles, and introducing notions of quality and accountability. The code was adopted by the 8 organizations of the Steering Committee for Humanitarian Response in 1994 and today the number of voluntary signatories has grown to 524.

Over the past two decades the humanitarian environment has significantly changed, marked by increased needs including record numbers of displaced populations affected by natural disasters and conflicts, the growing scope of humanitarian response, diversification of humanitarian actors, and higher risks – both physical and financial – of operating in complex emergencies. Humanitarian actors face mounting pressure to meet needs and navigate in complex environments. They also face increasing scrutiny from states, communities, and the media through communications and social media.

Many agencies, States and academic sources have called for a return to humanitarian principles as part of the answer to the concerns facing humanitarian agencies. The core humanitarian principles – humanity, impartiality, independence and neutrality – are grounded in international humanitarian law and reflect international agreement for limits in conflict.¹ When incorporated into agencies' decision-making, communications and procedures, humanitarian principles can offer staff guidance in the face of dilemmas facing aid agencies. Furthermore, in many cases, operating according to humanitarian principles can improve access to populations, by facilitating acceptance by all stakeholders including populations, warring parties and governments. Increasing attacks against aid workers are a worrying trend and make principled approaches all the more necessary.

Humanitarian principles, however, are not completely synonymous with the Code of Conduct, particularly as the principle of Neutrality is debated by some organisations and was ultimately not explicitly part of the 1994 Code. The past twenty years have seen many other attempts to improve humanitarian assistance, particularly in relation to coordination, *doing no harm*, and accountability to beneficiaries. At the same time, governments and affected populations and the wider public have demanded more transparency and effectiveness.

In 2014, available knowledge and resources within and for the humanitarian sector have never been greater, and there have been practical attempts to learn from the different field experiences to continue

¹ The Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement are required to operate according to seven Fundamental Principles, including the four mentioned above and also Voluntary Service, Unity and Universality.

to improve aid, yet the needs also continue to grow. Further purposeful dialogue is required, including with States, NGOs, national actors and members of the International Red Cross Red Crescent Movement, to enhance our understanding of the principles and how they assist organisations to realistically and effectively respond to growing needs.

The 20th anniversary of the Code of Conduct provides a good opportunity to take stock of the changing environment, of the relevance of the Code, and future actions required to improve principled action in the interests of those we seek to help. The event will particularly focus on the core humanitarian principles (humanity, impartiality, independence and neutrality) and how they can be used to better equip the humanitarian sector in delivering aid.

Rationale

This dialogue will gather signatories of the Code, other front line responders to humanitarian needs and States. While the primary responsibility for humanitarian response lies with States, there are times when they may be unwilling or unable to protect and assist their populations, which is where humanitarian actors come in. For this reason the agenda will also have significant portions dedicated to the perspectives and actions of States as Donors and Governments, as they clearly exert significant influence on humanitarian action, and without whom an exchange on the future of principled action, cannot be complete.

This event will build on earlier events by NRC who have engaged NGOs, the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, and States in a dialogue on the practical relevance and application of humanitarian principles since 2011. IFRC remains the depositary for signatories of the Code of Conduct.

Objectives

The aim of the dialogue is to foster a better and more nuanced understanding of the way humanitarian agencies practically apply humanitarian principles, and their implications, to identify potential common goals, practical solutions and also innovative approaches.

The dialogue is also expected to help to identify areas for complementary engagement to strengthen the application of the principles. Being operationally-focused and offering different perspectives across contexts, it will also provide a good opportunity to shape global processes aimed at improving the delivery of humanitarian aid, such as the 32nd International Conference of the Red Cross/ Red Crescent and the World Humanitarian Summit in 2016.

Methodology

This morning conference event will consist of mixed high-level panel discussions and interactive plenary discussions gathering States and NGOs.

Taking stock of the morning discussions, in the afternoon, there will be a separate NGO dialogue to explore areas of agreement and differences related to interpretation and application of principles (e.g. neutrality), including an exchange of real life experiences and lessons learnt related to implementation of the principles, access negotiation and improving accountability.

Participants

This event will gather approximately 80 participants, including representatives of States, NGOs, the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and the UN.