

## Roundtable Summary Report, Geneva, 5 November 2012

### Principled Humanitarian Action: What does it mean today?

On the occasion of the launch of the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC) report *Tools for the Job: Supporting principled humanitarian action*, prepared with the support of the Overseas Development Institute Humanitarian Policy Group, the European Union (EU) Delegation to the United Nations (UN) in Geneva, hosted a roundtable to review the meaning and application of the humanitarian principles in crisis situations today. The roundtable was the second in a series of events organised by the NRC as part of a broader *Strengthened Principled Humanitarian Action* project, which is supported by the EU (DG ECHO) and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Norway. See [www.principlesintopractice.org](http://www.principlesintopractice.org) and [www.nrc.no](http://www.nrc.no) for further information.

The primary objective of the roundtable was to engage a broad spectrum of diplomatic and humanitarian actors in a discussion on the continued relevance of the humanitarian principles in modern crisis. Taking into account the overarching framework for humanitarian action underpinned by international humanitarian law and reinforced in various UN Security Council and General Assembly Resolutions, the event provided an opportunity to reconfirm the significance of the humanitarian principles from the perspectives of humanitarian actors and states, and also to reflect upon possible areas of improvement, both in terms of policy and practice.

The panel, which was introduced by the EU Ambassador, Ms. Mariangela Zappia and moderated by Professor Gilles Carbonnier from the Graduate Institute of Geneva, included Ambassador Alicia Arango of Colombia, Ambassador Dilip Sinha of India, the Director General of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), Mr. Yves Daccord and the Secretary General of Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC) Ms. Elisabeth Rasmusson.

With over 90 participants - Ambassadors and diplomats from numerous missions, representatives of UN agencies, including OCHA, UNHCR WFP, FAO, UNDP, as well as ICRC/IFRC, ICVA, SCHR, various NGO's think tanks, research and academic institutions - the event confirmed the high level of interest in Geneva to engage in dialogue on the humanitarian principles, especially by states.

#### 1. PANEL PRESENTATIONS

The four panellists explored the meaning of the humanitarian principles of humanity, neutrality, impartiality and independence from their different perspectives and experience; the relevance of the principles today, and provided suggestions for moving forward. All panellists affirmed the importance of the principles for building acceptance on the ground, with the crucial defining aspect being trust. They also emphasised that enhanced coordination and transparency is required across humanitarian actors, agencies and states in order to achieve trust.

The **Secretary General of NRC, Ms. Elisabeth Rasmusson** presented the main findings and recommendations of '*Tools for the Job: Supporting Principled Humanitarian Action.*' Based on case studies in Afghanistan, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Pakistan, and South Sudan, with over 300 interviews conducted with humanitarian practitioners and other stakeholders, the report examines how humanitarian principles are applied by NGO actors in field operations, and how funding impacts implementation. Confirming the findings of the report, Ms. Rasmusson discussed

NRC's organisational experience with the principles, where they are not ideological dogma or theoretical concepts, but key commitments and tools utilised on a daily basis. She referred to the principles of humanity and impartiality being incorporated into organisational anti-corruption procedures, human resource policies and needs assessment methodologies, which tangibly enhances operational quality and the ability to navigate obstacles which may impede access to people in need. Similarly, being independent or perceived as neutral from security and political actors and policies are important for acceptance strategies and building trust with local communities and other stakeholders, including governments.

However, Ms Rasmusson stressed that the principles need to be applied by all, as when one actor compromises their application it impacts how all NGOs are perceived. Similarly, NGOs must match their commitment to the principles with delivering high quality, timely and relevant programmes. Communication with respect to the practical relevance of the principles and transparency must also be strengthened, including with States.

While NRC commends donor support for principled humanitarian action, as reflected for instance in the Good Humanitarian Donorship Principles and the EU Consensus on Humanitarian Aid, the report found a need to bridge the gap between objectives and action, and strengthen needs assessments and allocations based on needs. Funding, or the lack of it, is a key challenge for the application of principles by NGOs, as is overt administration, delays in funding disbursement, as well as the inclusion of humanitarian action in security and political strategies. Caution is required with respect to the relationship of humanitarian action with 'comprehensive approaches.' Ms. Rasmusson concluded by calling for increased dialogue with states and transparency in communications, with a view to upholding the acceptance of the humanitarian principles and reviewing their application. She expressed the hope that the roundtable will be followed by further consultations in the future.

In response **DG ECHO Head of Unit, Ms Henrike Trautmann** explained that the financial support provided by ECHO for the study is a strong recognition of the EU's political support for the continued role of humanitarian principles as a basis of humanitarian response. She also expressed the need to spell out these principles and emphasised that in order to avoid them becoming a mere buzzword, the concrete meaning of the humanitarian principles on the ground needs to be defined. She raised the concern that implementing partners can find it difficult to operationalise principles into action, and this problem requires further attention.

**ICRC Director General Mr Yves Daccord**, explained that humanitarian negotiation and the capacity to provide humanitarian assistance/protection in territories affected by conflict are based on the capacity to develop some level of trust with the authorities in charge. For instance it took a while for the ICRC to gain access to Homs in Syria, and this achievement is the result of convincing all parties that the ICRC can be trusted because of its adherence to humanitarian principles. Yet, questions are being raised regarding trust in humanitarian actors. Mr Daccord identified several challenges for principled humanitarian action: the need to re-discuss the meaning of the principles (what is really behind the rhetoric); how to build a contextualised response; the need to address the gap between intention and action in humanitarian response; the ability of humanitarian actors to deliver on their promises; and the level of fragmentation of the humanitarian landscape. He indicated that the operational environment for humanitarian agencies guided by a principled approach has become more complicated over the past years and called for restoring trust across the different stakeholders, to stop this erosion. The latter also applies to the beneficiary population which through the use of modern communication technologies can easily track and verify the decisions and actions of humanitarian organisations.

Mr. Daccord mentioned as key challenges: (i) the need to spell out what is meant by a principled approach (a 'mantra') when implemented in the field; the four principles should be unpacked - do they fit together?; (ii) humanitarian organisations should focus more on action, and not only on intentions; and (iii) principled action in an increasingly fragmented and new political landscape.

As a way forward, Mr. Daccord emphasised (i) the need to go beyond words and to demonstrate principled action to the concerned populations who are now directly connected; and the importance of (ii) impartiality as the guiding humanitarian principle. While reconfirming ICRC's 'radical' support to the humanitarian principles, Mr. Daccord added that they cannot all be applied in the same way. Impartiality is a guiding element that will enable humanitarian actors to continue delivering on their mandate. He also emphasised the importance of independent needs analysis as a basis for sound humanitarian assistance.

**Her Excellency the Ambassador of Colombia Alicia Arango** provided insight into the situation in Colombia, as an example of a country that is open for international inspection. Despite this openness potentially making the country more vulnerable to criticism, Ambassador Arango emphasised the importance of this transparency, and that as a result, all of the four of principles have been on the agenda of Colombia. Ambassador Arango also referred to the concept of trust, and the need for trust to be gained by humanitarian organisations with all actors on the ground. She highlighted the (by definition) ideological nature of Governments, and as such, it is crucial for humanitarian organisations to remain neutral and impartial.

On a general note, the Ambassador stressed that the international community must not abuse the open nature of a society such as Colombia in order to justify a harsher stance as compared to more closed countries. She warned against 'ideological positioning' by humanitarian organisations, notably in a situation such as Colombia (or Mexico) where the distinction between opposition/guerrilla movements and criminal groups (narco traffickers) might not always be clear. Political and ideological confrontation with the authorities must be avoided; instead, a strategy of support in light of upholding assistance to those in need must be upheld. Overall, the Ambassador underscored the importance of states supporting humanitarian actors to uphold the humanitarian principles, especially in respect of transparency and trust.

**His Excellency the Ambassador of India Dilip Sinha** opened his presentation with a number of observations, namely that sanctions can create dilemmas in humanitarian contexts, the importance of multilateralism in humanitarian action and he raised the question of how to enforce impartiality. Ambassador Sinha commented that the most important principle for humanitarian actors is how they self-define success in a particular operation in light of deciding when it is appropriate to step out of a situation (and hand over to development organisations). The Ambassador called for enhanced awareness amongst humanitarian organisations with respect to the environment in which they operate. As the humanitarian community continues to be perceived as driven by western values, there is a need to uphold a principled approach, while increasing sensitivity for cultural and religious differences. The Ambassador also referred to the need for trust building amongst all stakeholders in a humanitarian emergency context. Assistance should be seen by the population as benefiting them.

Ambassador Sinha underlined that assistance, not intervention, should drive humanitarian organisations, in line with UN General Assembly Resolution 46/182 which spells out the role of the affected state in crisis response (hence the need for the international community to engage in capacity building). The need for humanitarian agencies to engage with Governments was mentioned several times.

## 2. OPEN DISCUSSIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

- The roundtable emphasised the importance of the humanitarian principles for building trust and the need for enhanced transparency and increased dialogue across the many different actors and stakeholders. The participants underlined the timeliness of the discussion and need to continue efforts to bring this issue to the forefront of the humanitarian discussions in Geneva.

- The roundtable confirmed the importance of dialogue amongst different stakeholders engaged in humanitarian emergencies, especially with States.. A number of Ambassadors and participants agreed with the need to engage more countries in humanitarian policy discussions, notably the governments affected by crisis in order to enhance endorsement of the humanitarian principles. The panel welcomed such broader dialogue.
- Improved coordination amongst donors, including with 'newer' stakeholders was encouraged (reference was made to the dialogue with BRICS countries which Germany has launched in its capacity as the Chair of the OCHA Donor Support Group), including the need for improved joint needs assessments at all levels.
- Both ICRC and NRC acknowledged the need for context-sensitive approaches, explaining that their organisations endeavour to secure long-term engagement in conflict settings, notably to understand the context in which they operate and enhance acceptance for principle-based humanitarian response. ICRC and NRC emphasised that acceptance, understanding of the situation and effective aid delivery go hand in hand. In their view, impartiality is enhanced by engaging with all parties to a conflict, irrespective of political or ideological categorisations.

## Annex: Confirmed attendance

| <b>Mission</b>                               | <b>Names</b>  |
|--|---|
| Australia                                    | Leonie Oates-Mercier<br>Shireen Sandhu  |
| IFRC   | Josse Gillijns<br>Simon Eccleshall  |
| Mexico                                       | Victoria Romero   |
| Japan  | Toku Satoko   |
| Ireland                                      | Ambassador Mr. Gerard Corr<br>Mark Hanniffy   |
| Norway                                       | Ingerid Salvesen  |
| UNMAS  | Helene Ruud   |
| Romania                                      | Laura Streșină,   |
| Arab Republic of Egypt                       | Mohamed Negm  |
| Hungary                                      | Milán Magyar  |
| Germany                                      | Ambassador Dr. Hanns Schumacher<br>Sarah Költzow  |
| Netherlands                                  | Nathalie Kröner   |
| Greece                                       | Paraskevi Nakiou  |
| Czech Republic                               | Ambassador Ms. Katerina Sequensova<br>Jitka Brodska   |
| Bulgaria                                     | Boyana Trifonova  |
| United Kingdom                               | Ambassador Karen Pierce<br>James McLaughlin   |
| Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue             | Christine Sandström   |
| Cyprus                                       | Theodosia Pantazi   |
| The Sphere Project                           | Aninia Nadig<br>Cecilia Furtade   |
| Slovak Republic                              | Jan Plavcan   |
| IASC   | Arafat Jamal  |
| South Africa                                 | Tilana Grobbelaar   |
| Lithuania                                    | Fausta Šimaitytė  |
| Spain  | Adela Diaz Bernardez  |
| Denmark                                      | Marie-Louise Koch Wegte<br>Sacha Dyrdorf Kondrup  |
| Austria                                      | Michael Pfeifer<br>Eveline Jamek  |
| U.S. Mission                                 | Ben Moeling<br>Melissa Horn Albuja  |
| WFP  | Darlene Tymo  |
| Slovenia                                     | Andrej Žitko  |
| Geneva Call                                  | Tim Carstairss  |
| Caritas international                        | Floriana Polito   |
| Danish Refugee Council                       | Mikkel Erland Jensen  |
| Steering Committee for Humanitarian Response | Charles-Antoine Hoffmann  |
| ICRC   | Yves Daccord, Director General<br>Fabrizio Carboni<br>Pascal Daudin<br>Elena Ajmone Sessera |
| NRC  | Elizabeth Rasmusson, Secretary General NRC<br>Ingrid Macdonald<br>Kate Half                 |
| ICVA   | Ed Schenkenberg   |
| EU Delegation                                | Ambassador Mariangela Zappia<br>Patrick Dupont  |

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|---------------------------|---|
|                           | Nicoleta Birladianu<br>Mariat Imaeva  |
| DG ECHO                   | Henrike Trautmann   |
| India                     | Ambassador Dilip Sinha  |
| Colombia                  | Ambassador Alicia Arango<br>Carlos Carretero<br>Enrique Valencia<br>Bianca Duarte |
| Graduate Institute Geneva | Professor Gilles Carbonnier, moderator  |
| Belgium                   | Ambassador Bertrand de Crombrugghe  |
| UNHCR                     | Axel Bisschop   |
| HAP International         | David Loquercio   |
| Portugal                  | Ambassador Graça Andresen Guimarães   |
| UNDP                      | Tom Delrue  |
| Finland                   | Ville Lahelma   |
| Malta                     | Deborah M. Borg   |
| Croatia                   | Ivan Salopek  |
| IOM                       | Jordan Menkveld   |
| OCHA                      | Simon Bagshaw<br>Rudi Muller  |
| Canada                    | Ambassador Elissa Golberg<br>Joshua Tabah   |
| Russia                    | Alexey Uslugin  |
| Korea                     | Young-kyu Park  |
| Italy                     | Mauro Lorenzini<br>Elisa Volpi Spagnolini.  |
| Switzerland               | Marcello Cangialosi   |
|                           |   |