



Report on the work of Commission A: The Fundamental Principles in action

9 December 2015, 3:45 p.m. – 5:45 p.m. and 10 December 2015, 9:30 a.m. – 11:30 a.m.

Chair: Dr Werner Kerschbaum, Secretary-General, Austrian Red Cross

Rapporteurs: Ms Rebecca Dodd, International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, and Mr Jérémie Labbé, International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC)

Panellists:

- Mr Yusuf Hassan Mohammed, President, Somali Red Crescent Society
- Dr Amal Imam, volunteer, Egyptian Red Crescent Society
- Ms Nan Buzard, Executive Director, International Council of Voluntary Agencies (ICVA)
- Dr José Benjamín Ruiz Rodas, President, Salvadorean Red Cross Society
- H.E. Mr Carlos Alfredo Castaneda Magaña, Deputy Minister for Foreign Affairs, El Salvador
- H.E. Mr Thomas Hajnoczi, Ambassador and Permanent Representative, Austrian Permanent Mission to the United Nations Office at Geneva

Panel discussion

Dr Kerschbaum introduced the commission by presenting the Reaffirming the Fundamental Principles initiative by the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and some of the initiative's key findings, as described in the background report to the commission. He then outlined the commission's three objectives: (1) demonstrate that the Fundamental Principles contribute to effective humanitarian action, (2) highlight the ongoing initiatives and good practices related to the application of the Principles, and (3) explore States' perspectives and the critical role they play in ensuring greater respect for the Principles.

In his presentation, Mr Yusuf Hassan Mohammed demonstrated how the Principles, in particular neutrality and independence, had proved instrumental in enabling the Somali Red Crescent Society to operate continuously throughout more than two decades of conflict. Using the example of the Keysaney Hospital in Mogadishu, he described how consistent application of the Principles had allowed his National Society to be accepted by warring parties and the communities. Abiding by the Principles – including by implementing the Safer Access Framework, a structured approach to fully applying the Principles – also significantly improved the safety and security of staff and volunteers. Dr Amal Imam strongly echoed these points by sharing the experience of the Egyptian Red Crescent Society during the demonstrations in Egypt in 2011. She insisted on the importance of internalizing the values underpinning the Principles, not just institutionally but also individually. She also stressed the value of the International Federation's Youth as Agents of Behavioural Change initiative. Although being neutral was key to gaining trust and being accepted by all during the demonstrations, it did not come naturally, because it could go against one's personal values

and beliefs. The objective and neutral mindset needed to be nurtured, including through training.

Ms Nan Buzard highlighted the powerful influence of the Fundamental Principles – especially humanity, impartiality, neutrality and independence – on the broader humanitarian sector. Workshops on humanitarian principles and the *Code of Conduct for the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) in Disaster Relief* carried out by the ICVA in cooperation with the ICRC had demonstrated the principles' universal appeal and relevance. She pointed out, however, that the humanitarian principles continue to be perceived as Western, not least due to the gap in some humanitarian organizations between rhetoric and practice, which at times fuels suspicions. Looking at current and future challenges to principled humanitarian action, Ms Buzard insisted on the importance of demonstrating the humanitarian principles through our acts and engaging all actors in a dialogue on the principles to foster ownership and a deeper understanding of their operational usefulness.

Finally, Dr José Benjamín Ruiz Rodas and His Excellency Mr Carlos Alfredo Castaneda Magaña discussed the privileged partnership between governments and their National Societies, which is built on a common understanding of the Fundamental Principles developed through constant and consistent dialogue. Again during the conversation between Dr Kerschbaum and Mr Thomas Hajnoczi, the added value that National Societies can bring to governments was highlighted. Even when States have a well-developed emergency-response system, they cannot always meet needs, as illustrated by the migration crisis that affected Austria in 2015. Having an auxiliary but autonomous nation-wide organization in the humanitarian sector helps governments meet their responsibilities vis-à-vis their population. Yet this autonomy must be nurtured through continuous dialogue, which is necessary to create the space and understanding for the organization to act in accordance with the Fundamental Principles.

Discussion highlights

Approximately 30 participants representing a variety of States, National Societies and a few observers took the floor during the discussion. The key takeaways were:

- Participants strongly reaffirmed the continued relevance of the Fundamental Principles for effective humanitarian action, including for the safety of volunteers and staff.
- Tailoring the Principles to each and every situation is crucial and requires careful analysis of the context. Consistency, perseverance, courage and creativity were mentioned as key attributes for putting the Principles into action.
- The Principles have a universal appeal and influence that extends beyond the Movement, including to local and international organizations that have adopted the principles of humanity, impartiality, neutrality and independence.
- Embedding the Principles and the humanitarian values underpinning them into the institutional culture is important but participants also emphasized the importance of leaders, staff and volunteers internalizing the principles – incorporating them into their personal values and behaviour in their daily lives.
- Participants welcomed the opportunity to share experiences and exchange examples of good practice between Movement components. Good practices included activities that raise awareness of the Principles to people within the Movement and outside it, as well as initiatives such as the Safer Access Framework and Agents of Behavioural Change.
- Particular emphasis was placed on the importance of humanitarian education programs that include the Fundamental Principles. For some participants this was particularly relevant in light of rising xenophobia and racism in their countries.

- The importance of strong and values-based leadership was emphasized.
- The Principles have a role to play in bringing people together in the name of humanity, as something that can bind people regardless of race or religion.
- Emphasis was put on States' key role in ensuring respect for the Fundamental Principles: raising awareness of the Principles outside the Movement so that they are familiar, understood and respected by all, and creating an environment conducive for National Societies to carry out their auxiliary role in the humanitarian field.
- Some States pointed out that a healthy tension can and should exist between National Societies and governments, in which they can agree to disagree, keeping the Fundamental Principles in mind. In that respect, constant dialogue is vital.
- States identified various areas where National Societies add value, from disaster preparedness and emergency response to raising awareness of international humanitarian law and contributing to policy-making through their field experience and expertise.
- The chair of the commission encouraged participants to seize the opportunity to take concrete steps to strengthen the application of and respect for the Principles, in particular by considering proposed pledges on:
 - humanitarian education
 - enhancing the dialogue between States and National Societies and
 - strengthening the legal and statutory basis of National Societies, which was brought up during the commission by the chair of the Joint ICRC/International Federation commission on National Societies' statutes.
- Several participants mentioned specific ongoing commitments and pledges made in this regard.

Conclusion

The commission unequivocally reaffirmed the importance of the Fundamental Principles to gain trust, acceptance and safe access, which are necessary to work in proximity with affected communities and to deliver effective humanitarian action. The Principles must be well understood and embedded at both the institutional and individual levels so that they can be applied consistently and persistently and be tailored to each context. In that respect, experience-sharing and training on the Principles and the humanitarian values underpinning them is crucial, as is raising awareness of them among a broader outside audience, including through humanitarian education programs. Finally, States have a crucial role to play in promoting respect for the Principles and enabling their National Societies and other humanitarian organizations to act in accordance with the Principles. Constant and consistent dialogue is essential in that regard, and States are also responsible for creating a space for such dialogue to happen.