



Power of humanity

34th International Conference
of the Red Cross and Red Crescent

28–31 October 2024, Geneva

Commission II

Standing by our Fundamental Principles in responding to humanitarian needs and risks

Wednesday 30 October 2024

1) OPENING PLENARY

Date and time: Wednesday 30 October, 09:00

Chair: Mr Cosmas Sakala, Secretary General, Zambia Red Cross Society

Vice-Chair: Ms Anne Bergh, Secretary General, Norwegian Red Cross

Rapporteur: Ms Gina Penz, Youth Delegate, German Red Cross

(A) Executive summary

Commission II focused on the enduring importance of the Fundamental Principles in the context of emerging risks and vulnerabilities by exploring these issues through the lens of principled humanitarian action. The Commission discussed challenges and developed solutions in four spotlight sessions on climate change, respect for neutral, impartial and independent humanitarian action, migration and digital risks. To renew commitment to the Fundamental Principles and reaffirm their continued relevance in a changing world, an Appeal to States on respect for principled humanitarian action was presented.

(B) General observations and key highlights

A key focus of the Commission's opening plenary was the joint delivery by the ICRC and IFRC Presidents of the Appeal to States on respecting and supporting principled humanitarian action. The Appeal was annexed to the resolution "Call for respect and support for principled humanitarian action" adopted by the Council of Delegates on Sunday 27 October. The Appeal calls on States to take concrete actions to respect and support the adherence by the Movement components to the Fundamental Principles. It was supported by two State speakers from the delegations of Brazil and Australia, who also highlighted the unacceptable loss of life and risks faced by humanitarian workers and volunteers. The opening plenary concluded with the moderators of each of the four spotlight sessions for Commission II briefly "pitching" their topics and extending an enthusiastic invitation to the participants to take part in the discussions.

2) SPOTLIGHT SESSIONS

(A) Working together to reduce the impacts of climate change on communities, 10:30–12:00

The Climate Spotlight Session addressed the question of our common humanity in response to the climate crisis. Through a series of statements designed to stimulate discussion, the audience and panellists unpacked what more needs to be done to respond to the climate crisis, including in conflict settings, and how we prioritize our collective efforts. For example, participants strongly agreed with the statement *“Climate change is about humanity’s relationship with our planet and nature. In our response, we need to prioritize all life, not just human life.”* The panellists reflected on issues such as the role of National Societies in integrating nature-based solutions into disaster risk reduction and the need to work with a wider set of partners, including biodiversity and ecosystem management actors, to strengthen the climate resilience of coastal communities and small islands. There was an emphasis on the need to further drive the shift towards delivering on locally led action and to highlight the role of youth and volunteers.

Participants also pledged their commitment to take action, ranging from reducing our footprint and scaling up adaptation measures to developing early action protocols and increasing the integration of nature-based solutions into disaster risk reduction. It was emphasized that communities, governments and businesses all have a role to play, including in reducing emissions and investing more in community preparedness and adaptation.

(B) Respect for neutral, impartial and independent humanitarian action, 10:30–12:00

This spotlight session had two objectives: to share lessons learned from National Societies on their experiences in applying the Fundamental Principles and to build on our understanding of the Principles through a hypothetical scenario.

The National Society participants explained the importance of the Fundamental Principles in a variety of contexts. The Somali Red Crescent Society reflected on the challenges and opportunities posed by applying the Fundamental Principles in an armed conflict setting. The Mongolian Red Cross Society highlighted the importance of a strong legal base and well-defined auxiliary relationship and of ensuring diversified funding sources. The Austrian Red Cross, with the Austrian Government, used the example of the COVID-19 response to highlight the close cooperation enabled by the auxiliary relationship and the role of the Fundamental Principles in guiding and regulating such cooperation. A strong theme that emerged was that the *perception* that the National Society is acting in a principled manner is just as important as the reality of their work.

The spotlight session then explored the hypothetical scenario of a major earthquake occurring in a country affected by a non-international armed conflict. A key point was the need to build trust with governments, communities and other stakeholders before conflicts and emergencies occur through engagement, a track record of principled humanitarian action and the establishment of relevant partnerships, as this is invaluable to the perception of Red Cross and Red Crescent actors as reliable and independent partners during conflicts and other emergencies. The perceptions and actions of a National Society during an emergency may have a lasting impact on how the National Society is perceived in the future.

The spotlight session illustrated that the measures taken to ensure adherence may vary in different contexts and that flexible solutions may sometimes be required. The discussion also

showed that the Fundamental Principles are a point of commonality that enable humanitarian discussions to take place across different stakeholders and contexts.

(C) Navigating pressing challenges in the context of migration: The importance of a principled humanitarian approach, 13:30–15:00

The spotlight session provided the Movement, States and other key stakeholders with the opportunity to highlight the key role and added value of the Movement's principled humanitarian action in the field of migration, including its local presence and global reach. National Societies are key local actors, and their proximity to migrants, including refugees, and their auxiliary relationship with authorities are critical to ensuring access to migrants and engaging in effective humanitarian diplomacy.

The discussion concluded that the Fundamental Principles are now more important than ever. They allow the Movement to be a strong and trusted actor supporting migrants and to remain a credible partner externally. They allow the Movement access to the most vulnerable in countries of origin, transit and destination and ensure that our work to provide humanitarian assistance and protection to migrants, including refugees, along migratory routes remains needs-based, irrespective of people's status and their reason for migrating.

The importance of the Movement working in complementarity and cooperation with other actors in the field of migration was also emphasized. The Movement's newly adopted Migration Strategy 2024–2030 will guide coordination and partnerships. With this strategy, the Movement will seek to ensure that in the face of growing needs and challenges, migrants are safer, treated with dignity and able to thrive in inclusive societies and participate meaningfully in decisions that affect their lives.

(D) Raising awareness about emerging challenges: Humanitarian protection risks in an increasingly digitalized world, 13:30–15:00

The spotlight session focused on current digital risks, such as disinformation and misinformation, artificial intelligence (AI), connectivity restrictions and shutdowns, data governance in the digital space, cyber risks, data protection and information risks. People can be affected in diverse ways, including in terms of their mental health, security, online safety, data protection and physical and economic wellbeing.

The spotlight session further explored how these risks impact humanitarian access to crises and affect neutral, impartial and independent humanitarian action. Harmful information amplifies vulnerabilities and undermines the trust individuals and communities place in humanitarian actors. Connectivity in times of crisis is crucial for access to information and essential services. Restrictions on connectivity may have reverberating effects on people, their family life, financial services and humanitarian services, among other things. Social media and ICT companies play critical roles and must engage with humanitarian actors to address these risks. Communities must always be at the centre of efforts to address infrastructure, data and information risks.

AI is used in weapon systems and targeting in military operations, but also in delivering emergency responses and enhancing clinical care for patients. Risks associated with AI include over-automation, biases, hallucinations and false positives. Potential mitigating measures to avert these risks include implementing fail-safe solutions and improving machine learning practices and related safeguards. It is essential to maintain human control and not rely on machine calculations to take decisions that affect human lives.

When we talk about digital technologies, we are almost always referring to data. This is the case whenever we depend on collecting and processing data to deliver services. However, data collection and processing comes with significant risks linked to data breaches and potential misuse of people's information in violation of data protection principles. Data must not become the currency of exchange for the protection people need.

While digital technologies offer great opportunities for humanitarian action, they can also exacerbate risks to people affected by humanitarian crises.

3) RECONVENING PLENARY: CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

At the reconvening plenary, the moderators of the four spotlight sessions reported back on the outcomes of their sessions. State speakers from Cameroon and the United Kingdom expressed their strong support for the Appeal to States and stressed the importance of the relationship between the government and the National Society, and its limits, in ensuring that the latter can operate in compliance with the Fundamental Principles.

We all benefit if the Fundamental Principles are respected, and we all lose if they are not. At a time when there are more than 120 armed conflicts around the globe, unprecedented numbers of people on the move and a plethora of pandemics and natural disasters, our common task as the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement is to abide by our Fundamental Principles, which Commission II has strongly confirmed as the Movement's moral and operational compass.