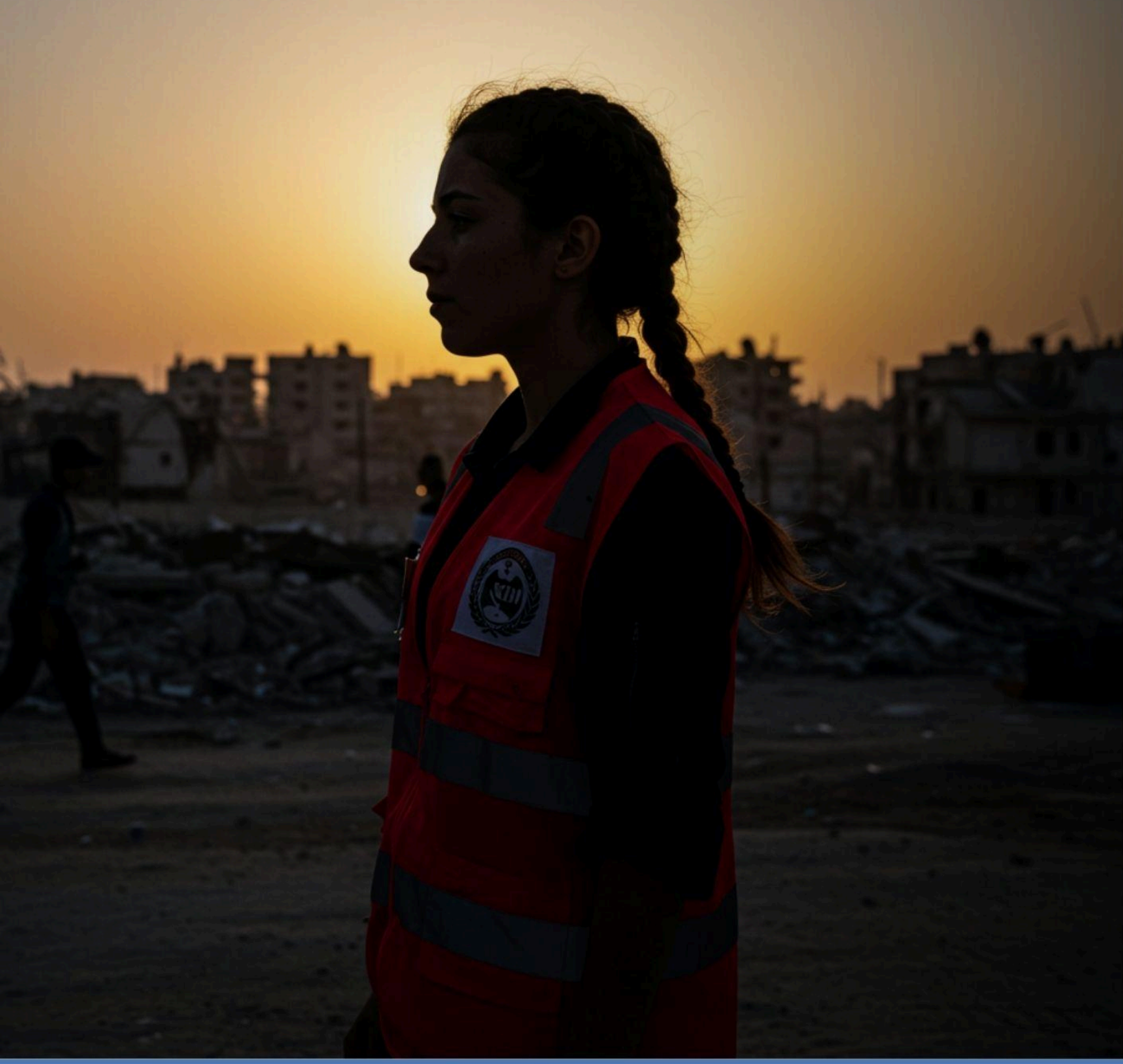

Front Line Focus | Quick Guides for 2025

Principles in Practice

Strengthening Humanitarian Ethics in Complex Crises

Humanitarian Assistance & Disaster Relief Institute

Feb 2025

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About the Humanitarian and Development Landscape Series

This guide is part of the **Humanitarian and Development Landscape** series, a collection of guides designed to supplement the HADR Institute's course. Each guide in the series delves into a critical aspect of humanitarian and development work, providing both foundational knowledge and practical insights. *Principles in Practice* illustrates how ethical frameworks guide decision-making in challenging environments. Together with other titles in the series, it supports a holistic understanding of the humanitarian landscape – from localisation and anticipatory action to protection and development linkages – as taught in the HADR Institute's courses. Participants in the **Humanitarian and Development Landscape** course and other practitioners are welcome to use these guides to reinforce learning, explore case studies, and engage with current best practices in the sector. This integrated series reflects the HADR Institute's commitment to advancing professional education and grounding it in real-world application.

About the HADR Institute

The HADR Institute is a not-for-profit humanitarian organisation dedicated to strengthening local capacity, enhancing disaster resilience, and supporting community-driven responses to crises.

Our mission is to equip individuals and organisations with the skills, knowledge, and resources needed to respond effectively to humanitarian challenges while upholding human rights and dignity

We operate across multiple regions, with a focus on the Pacific Islands and Asia, bridging the gap between policy and practice in humanitarian response. Through a combination of research, field programs, and training courses, we integrate localisation, anticipatory action, and community leadership into our initiatives.

By collaborating with local NGOs, community-based organisations, and international partners, we strive to advance humanitarian effectiveness and promote ethical, people-centred aid.

For more information about our programs and training opportunities, please visit our website at www.hadri.org or contact us directly at admin@hadrinstitute.org

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Introduction

In humanitarian emergencies, aid workers are not only challenged by physical danger and logistical hurdles, but also by profound ethical questions. This is especially true in **complex crises**, where natural disasters, armed conflict, and political instability converge. According to the United Nations, a complex emergency is *"a humanitarian crisis in a country, region or society where there is a total or considerable breakdown of authority resulting from internal or external conflict, and which requires an international response that goes beyond the mandate or capacity of any single agency"*[1].

Characteristics of complex crises include widespread civilian suffering and displacement, deliberate impediments to aid by warring parties, and high security risks for relief workers. In such environments, the **humanitarian imperative** – to save lives and alleviate suffering – must be pursued without doing harm and while navigating political and security constraints.

Humanitarian ethics provide the moral framework that guides action in these high-stakes settings. At its core, humanitarian ethics asks: *What is the right way to help people in dire need, respecting their rights and dignity?* This encompasses questions of fairness (who gets aid first), respect (how aid is provided), and accountability (to donors, peers, and affected communities). In practice, ethical humanitarian action requires adherence to established principles and standards. It also requires reflection and judgment in novel dilemmas where rules may not clearly dictate answers, or where decisions need to balance principle, pragmatism and risk.

The importance of humanitarian ethics is not abstract – it directly impacts the effectiveness and legitimacy of aid. In the chaos of crises, **trust** is a precious commodity: affected people need to trust that aid workers will prioritise their well-being without hidden agendas; governments and armed groups need to perceive aid agencies as neutral and impartial to allow access; donors need confidence that assistance is delivered responsibly. A strong ethical framework helps humanitarian actors maintain trust and navigate the challenging "grey zones" which characterise all crisis response. As we will see, being **principled** is both an ethical obligation and a practical necessity. Conversely, ethical lapses – such as bias, exploitation, or complicity in harm – can cost lives, erode credibility, and even endanger staff and crisis affected communities.

This guide examines the foundations of humanitarian ethics, explores common ethical challenges in complex crises, and provides case studies from Myanmar and the Pacific Islands to illustrate how practitioners can uphold ethics in the face of adversity. It concludes with best practices and recommendations to strengthen ethical humanitarian action.

[1] unhcr.org

The Importance of Humanitarian Ethics

Ethics are central to humanitarian action because they define the **purpose** and **limits** of our assistance. Humanitarian work is driven by compassion and solidarity with those who suffer, but good intentions alone are not enough. Without ethical guidelines, aid efforts could inadvertently favor one group over another, undermine local capacities, or even prolong conflicts. When aid deviates from ethical principles, the consequences can be dire – from scandals of misuse of funds or abuse of power, to communities rejecting life-saving assistance due to mistrust. On the other hand, adherence to ethics enables access and effective aid delivery: field experience indicates that *being ethical and principled is the best, most proven way to protect the people we seek to help and aid workers themselves*, making it both a moral **and** practical choice.[2]

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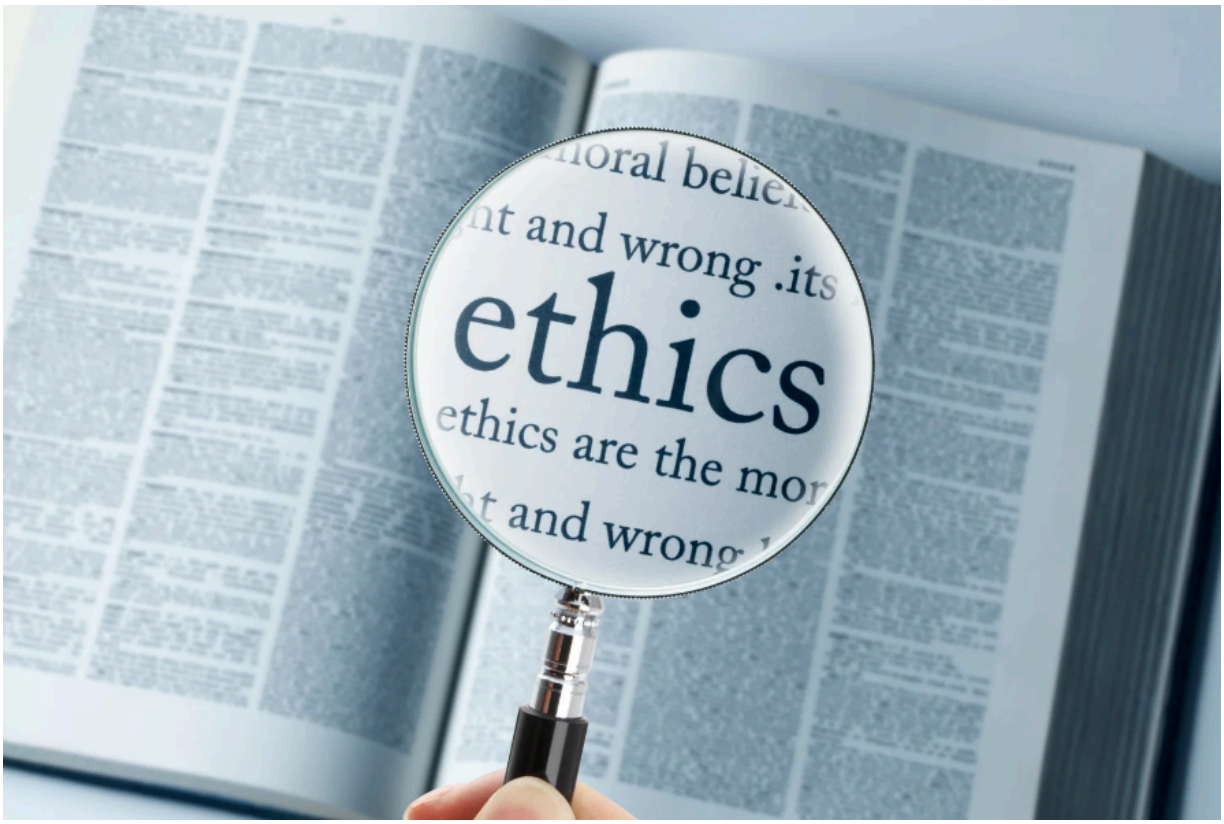

[2] O'Driscoll, D. (2018). Humanitarian Protection of Persons Affected by conflict - Evidence Mapping. https://core.ac.uk/download/237086594.pdf

Humanitarian principles encapsulate the core ethical commitments of the aid sector. These principles – humanity, neutrality, impartiality, and independence – have been endorsed by the United Nations and nearly all major humanitarian organisations

. They serve as a compass in complex crises:

- **Humanity** – to prevent and alleviate human suffering wherever it is found, protecting life and health and ensuring respect for persons. This principle reminds us that saving lives and alleviating suffering is the ultimate goal, and that all humans deserve dignity and assistance.

- **Neutrality** – to not take sides in hostilities or engage in controversies of a political, racial, religious, or ideological nature. Neutrality helps humanitarian actors gain the trust of all parties in a conflict, so that they can work safely and be allowed to reach those in need on all sides.

- **Impartiality** – to provide aid based on need alone, without discrimination between or within affected populations. Impartiality ensures fairness: the most urgent cases are prioritised, and factors like nationality, ethnicity, or politics should not influence who receives help.

- **Independence** – to act autonomously from the political, economic, or military objectives of others, so that humanitarian action is not subjugated to outside agendas. Independence allows aid organisations to make decisions solely based on humanitarian considerations, preserving the integrity of their work.

These principles are not just lofty ideals; they are operational tools. Compliance with them helps humanitarians gain **acceptance and access** in volatile environments[3]. For example, if a relief agency in a civil war distributes aid equally to all ethnic groups in proportion to their needs (impartiality) and avoids any political involvement (neutrality and independence), local communities and armed factions are more likely to permit and support its work. The UN General Assembly first codified humanity, neutrality, and impartiality in 1991 (Resolution 46/182), adding independence in 2004. Today, these principles are reinforced through various codes and standards. Nearly 900 organisations are signatories to the International Red Cross/Red Crescent and NGOs Code of Conduct, committing to uphold the humanitarian principles in disaster relief. Likewise, the Sphere Handbook's **Humanitarian Charter** and the Core Humanitarian Standard (CHS) reflect these ethical foundations, emphasising the right to life with dignity, the right to receive assistance, and the duty to avoid causing harm.[4]

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[3] unocha.org
[4] https://www.spherestandards.org/handbook-2018/

Beyond the core principles, humanitarian ethics encompasses additional important values and commitments:

- **Do No Harm:** Originating from medical ethics, “do no harm” means aid should not inadvertently exacerbate conflict, insecurity, or vulnerability. Humanitarian programs must be designed with an awareness of local tensions and power dynamics to ensure they don’t, for instance, spark competition or encourage dependency.

- **Accountability:** Humanitarian actors are accountable not only to donors and governments but crucially to the **affected populations** themselves. This means transparently informing communities, involving them in decisions, and being responsive to their feedback and complaints. As the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) notes, *“being accountable to the affected population is not only an ethical imperative, it also enhances the impact of our work”*, improving credibility with people in need.[5] Mechanisms like participatory assessments, community feedback hotlines, and independent evaluations help operationalise accountability.

- **Integrity and Honesty:** Humanitarian work requires a high level of integrity. Practitioners must act with honesty, avoid conflicts of interest, and steward resources lawfully and responsibly. The Australian Council for International Development (ACFID) Code of Conduct, for instance, highlights integrity—*“acting with honesty and guided by ethical and moral principles in all that we do”*
—and accountability—*“taking responsibility for our actions”*
—as fundamental to NGO operations. This reflects a broader sector commitment to ethical behavior and transparency.[6]

- **Respect and Cultural Sensitivity:** Ethics also involve respecting local customs, cultures, and the inherent dignity of individuals. Humanitarian agencies must obtain informed consent for interventions, protect people’s privacy, and ensure that aid (including how people are portrayed in fundraising or media) does not strip individuals of dignity. Cultural sensitivity helps avoid inadvertent disrespect or imposition of external values, thereby upholding the principle of humanity.

In summary, humanitarian ethics provide both **guidance and boundaries**: they inspire us to do the most good possible, while cautioning us against actions that could betray the trust placed in us. By internalising core principles and values, humanitarian practitioners build a professional culture that resists the corrosive forces of prejudice, panic, or political pressure. The next sections will delve into how these ethical principles are applied (and sometimes tested) in complex crisis scenarios, and what challenges often arise in practice.

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[5] blogs.icrc.org
[6] acfid.asn.au

Standards and Codes: Alongside these principles, the humanitarian and development sectors have developed standards and codes of conduct to translate ethics into concrete practices:

- The **Sphere Handbook** is one of the most widely recognised sets of humanitarian standards.[7] Sphere's **Minimum Standards** cover sectors like water, shelter, health, and food, ensuring that aid meets a basic level of quality and that the way aid is delivered is appropriate and respectful. Sphere's Protection Principles specifically include avoiding causing further harm and ensuring access to assistance without discrimination – directly reinforcing humanitarian ethics.

- The **Core Humanitarian Standard (CHS)** on Quality and Accountability is another key framework. It outlines Nine Commitments that organisations make to improve the quality and accountability of assistance. These include commitments to appropriate, effective aid; to communication, participation and feedback; to addressing complaints; and to coordinated, complementary action, among others. The CHS essentially operationalises ethical principles: for example, its focus on participation and feedback aligns with the ethical duty to be accountable and respectful to affected people.

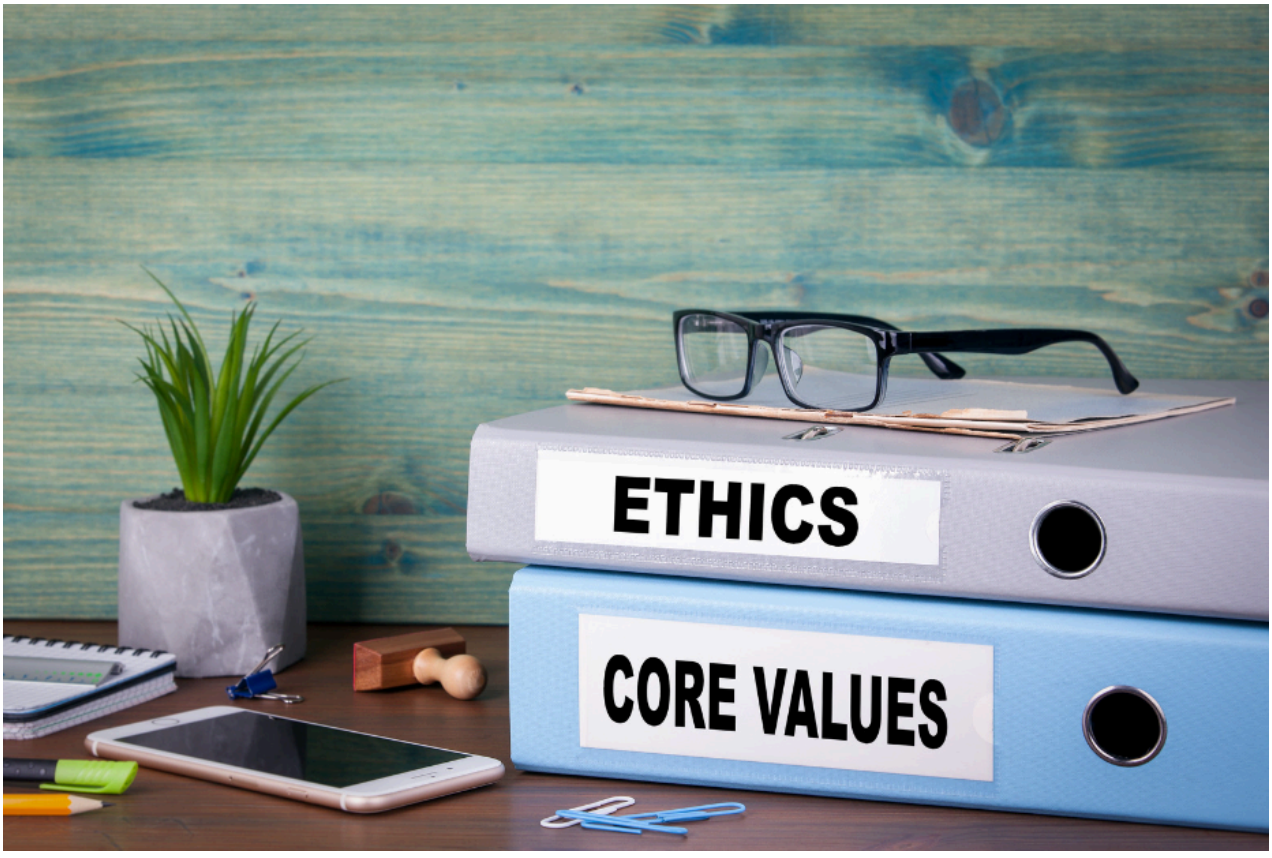
- **ACFID Code of Conduct:** For NGOs based in Australia working across international development and humanitarian sectors (and many international NGOs working globally), the ACFID Code of Conduct provides a comprehensive set of principles covering ethics, governance, financial accountability, and more. It requires NGOs to *"promote lawful, efficient and ethical practices"* and to prevent misconduct such as exploitation, fraud, or abuse of power. The code embodies values like **Integrity, Accountability, Transparency, and Respect**
  Members of ACFID, which includes many Australian humanitarian NGOs, particularly those within the DFAT Australian NGO Cooperation Program (ANCP), undergo regular compliance checks, signaling to the public and communities that these agencies are committed to high ethical standards.

- **International Humanitarian Law (IHL):** While not a voluntary code but rather a body of law (including the Geneva Conventions), IHL sets important ethical and legal parameters for humanitarian action in conflict. It protects civilians and aid workers, and it affirms the rights of the wounded and sick to be cared for. Humanitarian actors often invoke IHL when negotiating access, citing the obligation of parties to conflict to allow impartial relief for civilians in need. In essence, IHL and humanitarian ethics go hand-in-hand: IHL provides the legal backing to the moral claims that humanitarians make when insisting on access or protection.

[7] spherestandards.org

Putting it to Practice. Incorporating these principles and standards into daily operations involves training, organisational culture, and leadership example. Many agencies conduct **pre-deployment trainings** on ethics, require staff to sign Codes of Conduct (covering issues like sexual exploitation and abuse, corruption, etc.), and establish ethics boards or focal points to advise on tough decisions. For instance, if a field manager is faced with a dilemma – say, local authorities are demanding that aid trucks first offload 20% of supplies for the governor's office before allowing distribution – having a strong ethical framework helps the manager decide how to respond (e.g. politely refuse and explain principles of impartiality and accountability, even if it risks delays). They can reference their organisation's commitments and international standards to back up their stance.

In summary, the core principles (Humanity, Neutrality, Impartiality, Independence) and related standards (Sphere, CHS, Codes of Conduct) act as the **north star** for humanitarians in complex crises. They are widely endorsed across the sector, creating a common language of ethics. This shared ethical foundation enables coordination among different agencies – even if they come from different countries or cultures, they rally around these same principles when working together under the UN or Red Cross umbrella. However, applying principles is not always straightforward. The next section explores what happens when principles collide with reality – the ethical challenges and dilemmas that frequently arise in complex emergencies.



Ethical Challenges in Complex Crises

Operating in complex crises often means confronting situations where what is *right* is not immediately clear, or where all options carry some ethical cost. Humanitarians describe these situations as **ethical dilemmas** – scenarios where principles may conflict and every choice must be carefully weighed. We will discuss several common ethical challenges and how practitioners try to navigate them.

Balancing Principles with Pragmatism

In theory, the humanitarian principles are non-negotiable. In practice, crises force difficult **trade-offs**. For example, an aid group may need to negotiate with an armed group or authoritarian regime to reach civilians in need. This can create a tension between **neutrality/independence** and the imperative to deliver aid. If too many concessions are made to a belligerent (such as agreeing to channel aid only through government-approved partners), an organisation might appear complicit or lose its independence. However, refusing to engage at all could mean abandoning a population in distress.

A clear instance is in **active conflict zones** like parts of Syria, Yemen, or Myanmar: agencies sometimes must choose whether to work *with* a de facto authority controlling an area (risking association with that authority) or to stay out (leaving needs unmet). As noted in one humanitarian analysis, *"the fundamental humanitarian principles come into tension with one another, and the environment forces aid organisations to make compromises"*.[8] Any compromise – such as selectively adhering to a local power's conditions – is taken seriously because *"any breach of ethical standards or humanitarian principles poses a risk to the organisation being able to fulfil its mission of saving lives and relieving suffering"*.[9]

To manage this, many organisations adopt a **principled pragmatism** approach: they identify red lines (things they will not compromise, like delivering aid only to one ethnic group) and flexibilities (areas where they can adjust, like coordinating distribution through local elders if it doesn't undermine impartiality). They also use **risk management** – viewing compromises as risks that can be mitigated or accepted in a controlled way.

For instance, if paying a small informal "tax" at a checkpoint is the only way to bring medical supplies into a besieged town, an NGO might decide that the ethical imperative of humanity (getting the medicine in) outweighs the breach in ideal independence or neutrality. They would document this decision, attempt to mitigate it, and proceed lucidly. There is no easy formula. For the HADR Institute, we keep 'humanity and impartiality' central, while independence and neutrality we keep as a north star that may need to be risk managed in order for us to achieve the most impartial and humane humanitarian outcomes.

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[8] odihpn.org

[9] O'Driscoll, D. (2018). Humanitarian Protection of Persons Affected by conflict - Evidence Mapping. https://core.ac.uk/download/237086594.pdf

“Do No Harm” and Unintended Consequences

Humanitarian interventions can have unintended side effects. An ethical challenge is to constantly anticipate and minimise any harm that aid might cause – the principle of **Do No Harm**. In complex crises, societies are fragile. Aid can upset local economies (for example, free or subsidised international food aid might undercut local farmers), exacerbate social tensions (if one community perceives another is favored), or create dependency that leaves people worse off when aid ends.

One classic example is the influx of aid in conflict zones potentially fueling the conflict economy: relief goods might be diverted by armed groups, effectively feeding fighters or being sold to buy arms. Completely pulling out could abandon civilians, but staying requires smart strategies to minimise diversion (e.g., using vouchers or cash-based aid that is less prone to theft, or negotiating agreements with armed actors emphasising the aid is lifesaving for their own communities too).

Another “do no harm” consideration is **cultural and social impact**. After disasters, an influx of international aid workers and media can inadvertently undermine local authority figures or humiliate people. For instance, well-intentioned distributions of clothing in conservative societies need to consider local norms; handing out shorts or sleeveless tops in a community where modest dress is valued could be seen as offensive. Communicating impacts in complex environments, like in Myanmar, could compromise real privacy and security concerns. Similarly, aggressive media exposure of victims (for fundraising) might invade privacy or cause trauma. Ethical humanitarian action entails taking these sensitivities into account – often by consulting community leaders, employing local staff who understand context, and adapting aid to fit the culture.

In practice, agencies conduct **context analyses** to map out potential harms. Many use tools for conflict sensitivity to ensure aid does not feed into conflict fault lines. For example, in a multi-ethnic area, rather than setting up separate aid distribution for each group which might solidify divisions, agencies might promote joint community committees for aid – fostering cooperation. The Sphere Handbook and other guidelines emphasise continual monitoring of aid’s effects and seeking community input to catch negative impacts early.

Accountability to Affected People

Historically, humanitarian agencies were more accountable to donors than to the people they served, leading to a paternalistic dynamic. In recent years, there has been a sector-wide push to correct this, recognising that *ethical accountability* is owed first and foremost to those affected by crisis. This shift is embodied in the concept of **AAP (Accountability to Affected Populations)** and **PSEA (Protection from Sexual Exploitation and Abuse)** initiatives. The ethical challenge is to move from rhetoric to reality – ensuring that disaster-affected communities have a say in aid that affects their lives, and that their rights are safeguarded.

One challenge in complex crises is how to **include community voices** when normal structures are disrupted. For example, in a sudden onset disaster like a major cyclone, people may be displaced and disoriented. Setting up feedback channels (like suggestion boxes, community meetings, or SMS hotlines) quickly is crucial but logistically hard. In conflict zones, openly consulting people can even put them at risk if what they say is perceived as criticism by authorities. Yet, pushing through these difficulties is an ethical necessity. As the ICRC states, recognising and documenting ethical dilemmas and being transparent in decision-making is essential to accountability.[10]

Concretely, this means humanitarians should explain to communities why certain decisions are made (e.g. why aid convoys couldn't arrive this week due to security – rather than leaving people in the dark), and acknowledge trade-offs.

Accountability also entails **preventing exploitation and abuse**. Sadly, there have been cases where aid workers abused their position (such as exchanging aid for sexual favors, or harassment). Ethical agencies implement strict codes of conduct and reporting mechanisms to prevent and respond to such abuses. They provide training to staff on power dynamics and professional conduct. Many humanitarian organisations now have dedicated safeguarding officers. The challenge in a crisis is maintaining these standards when oversight is harder. Nonetheless, it is a non-negotiable ethical duty to do so – the principle of humanity includes protecting people from further harm, which certainly covers harm caused by those who are supposed to help.

A positive trend is that many humanitarian operations now routinely involve **community engagement** teams. For example, in some refugee camps, agencies set up community committees (with representation of women, youth, minority groups) that meet regularly with aid providers to voice concerns. In others, agencies have instituted policies like "your feedback, our action" where they publicly post what feedback was received and how they responded, to show accountability in action. This not only is ethically right – it also improves program quality (aid that aligns with real needs) and builds trust.

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[10] blogs.icrc.org

Local Context and Cultural Sensitivity

Complex crises often occur in countries with rich cultural traditions and social structures that might differ markedly from those of international responders. Ethical humanitarian action requires **respect for local context** and ideally a **localisation** of response – meaning supporting local responders and structures rather than bypassing or overwhelming them. The ethical challenge here is twofold: avoiding a neo-colonial "we know best" attitude, and ensuring that local partners are treated as equals in the humanitarian effort.

In the Pacific Islands case (as we will explore further in the case study), local communities have deep knowledge of their environment and have coping mechanisms honed over generations. For example, in Vanuatu during Tropical Cyclone Pam (2015), communities attributed the surprisingly low death toll in part to effective traditional practices – they relied on *"self-reliance and traditional knowledge"* such as reading natural warning signs and using traditional cyclone-resistant house designs.[11]

Acknowledging and valuing such local wisdom is an ethical stance: it respects the agency and dignity of the affected people. Ethical dilemmas can arise if international actors arrive with a pre-set plan that disregards local input. Not listening could lead to missteps (like delivering food that isn't part of the local diet, or building shelters that don't align with cultural living patterns).

Cultural sensitivity also plays into communication and program design. In many Pacific Island and Asian cultures, community leaders (chiefs, elders) have a formal role in decision-making. Humanitarian principles say aid should go to the most vulnerable, but if one ignores local protocols for consultation, the aid effort might inadvertently insult or sideline those leaders, causing community pushback. The ethical approach is to find ways to include traditional leaders **and** ensure the needs of marginalised groups are heard. This may require diplomacy and time – commodities in short supply during crises, which is why preparedness (relationship-building before disasters) is so important.

Another context challenge is **neutrality vs. solidarity** in highly politicised crises. Local staff or partners may naturally have sympathies – for instance, in a conflict, a local NGO might be from a particular ethnic community. International principles ask everyone to act neutrally, but from a local perspective this can be seen as cold or as tacitly tolerating injustice. An ethical conundrum arises: how to observe neutrality among staff when they or their families may be directly affected by the conflict? And is it ethical to ask someone to be neutral about their own oppression? There is no simple answer, but many agencies address this by providing space for staff to voice their concerns internally, by offering psychosocial support, and by ensuring diversity in teams to balance perspectives. Above all, they reinforce that the humanitarian mission is to help *civilians in need*, which often aligns with what local staff want to achieve as well. Again, applying practical considerations and placing humanity and impartiality central is key.

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[11] knowledge.aidr.org.au

Localisation as a broader agenda gained momentum after the World Humanitarian Summit (2016) with the Grand Bargain commitments. Ethically, localisation is about reversing power imbalances: it is simply more just for local organisations and governments to lead response when they have the capacity, with international actors in support roles. It also respects the principle of humanity by leveraging those who are closest to the crisis (often responding first) and who will remain long after internationals leave[12]. However, in practice international agencies sometimes struggle to let go of control – due to donor expectations, liability concerns, or trust deficits. True localisation often simply isn't part of the 'business model' that has developed around the humanitarian and development sectors. Our later guides, and course, will provide more exploration of localisation in action.

The ethical imperative is to overcome these constraints by investing in partnership, capacity sharing, and equitable funding. The Pacific and Myanmar contexts both illustrate how essential local actors are, and how international agencies must ethically navigate their role (we will see examples of this in the case studies).

Complex crises present a minefield of ethical challenges:

- **negotiating access vs. maintaining principles;**
- **doing good vs. avoiding harm;**
- **empowering communities vs. acting swiftly;**
- **upholding universal standards vs. honoring local norms**.

The humanitarian's task is to find a path that stays as true as possible to ethical commitments while delivering relief effectively. Often this requires creativity, consultation, and sometimes the courage to say "no" to actions that would violate core principles. In the following case studies, we'll see how some of these dilemmas played out in Myanmar, and what lessons can be drawn from those experiences.

[12] prio.org

Case Study: Myanmar – Navigating Humanitarian Ethics in a Politically Charged Crisis

Context: Myanmar, or Burma as it is also known, has faced decades of complex emergencies – from long-running armed conflicts between the central government and ethnic armed groups, to natural disasters like Cyclone Nargis, and most recently a nationwide political crisis and conflict following the 2021 military coup. Humanitarian needs in Myanmar are intertwined with sensitive political and ethnic tensions, making it a prime example of how ethical principles are tested.

Ethical Challenge 1 – Humanitarian Access vs. Sovereignty: In May 2008, **Cyclone Nargis** devastated the Ayeyarwady Delta, killing an estimated 140,000 people and leaving 2.4 million in need. Despite the massive humanitarian imperative, Myanmar's then-military government (the "junta") initially restricted international aid. Visas for relief experts were delayed, and foreign organisations were barred from certain affected areas.[13]

This presented an acute ethical dilemma: aid agencies had supplies and teams ready to save lives, but entering without permission would violate national sovereignty and could endanger staff or provoke government backlash. On the other hand, **waiting for approval** meant losing precious time for victims. Myanmar's authorities justified their hesitation with a mix of nationalist ideology and mistrust: a deeply entrenched *"self-reliance" doctrine* made the regime reluctant to accept foreign help, viewing it as a potential threat to their control.

Additionally, Cyclone Nargis hit just ahead of a sensitive national referendum on a new constitution, so the regime's priority was political stability and image, not international cooperation. They were suspicious that Western countries might use humanitarian aid as a cover for political intervention or espionage

Faced with this, humanitarian actors engaged in intense **ethical negotiations**. The UN and ASEAN brokered a compromise: a Tripartite Core Group (Myanmar, ASEAN, UN) that allowed coordinated aid under regional oversight, easing the junta's fears. This unlocked greater access after critical delays. The ethical tightrope was evident – to uphold **humanity**, aid agencies had to find a way in, but to respect **neutrality and independence**, they had to carefully avoid confrontation with the government. Some organisations quietly supported local civil society groups to carry out relief where foreigners couldn't go, prioritising humanity and impartiality over independence, neutrality and the interests of traditional sovereignty. The Cyclone Nargis response is often cited as a lesson in **humanitarian diplomacy**: sometimes working *with* a regime that has committed rights violations is necessary to reach suffering civilians. The ethical stance is that engagement is not endorsement; rather it's a lesser evil chosen to achieve the humanitarian imperative.

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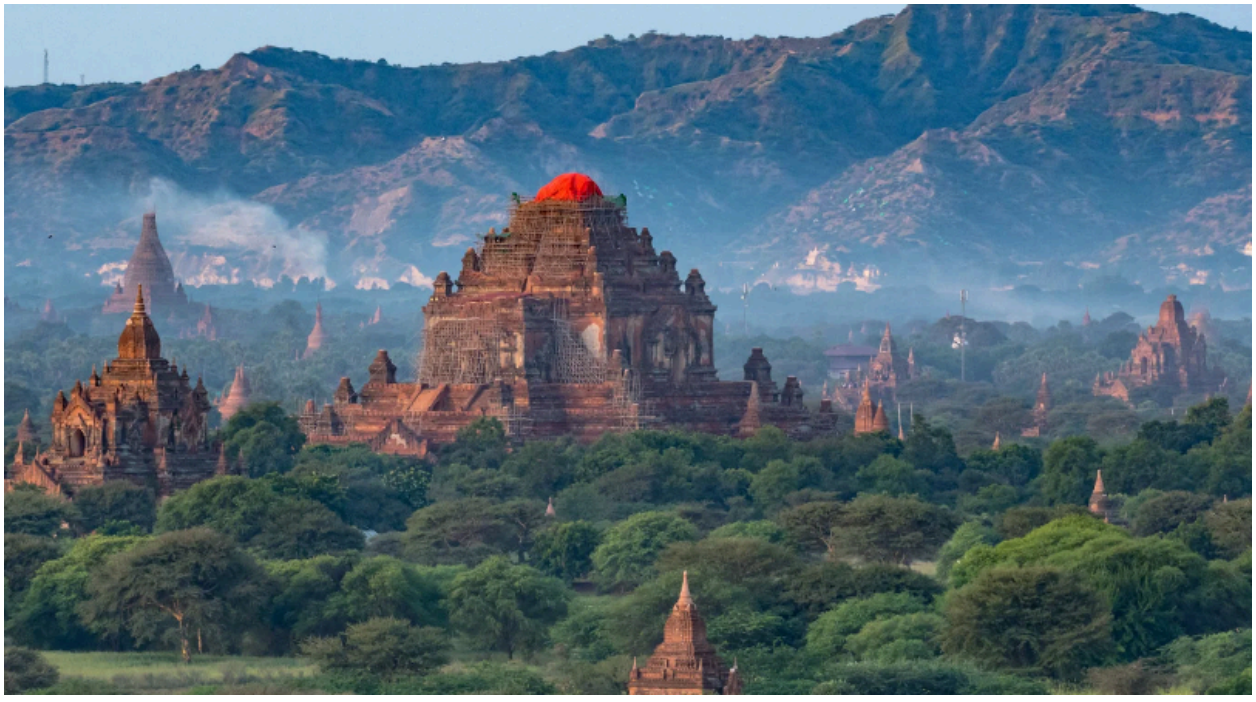
[13] odihpn.org

Ethical Challenge 2 – Impartiality in a Divided Society: Myanmar's complex emergencies are frequently characterised by **communal and ethnic tensions**. In Rakhine State, for example, humanitarian agencies have assisted both Rakhine Buddhist communities and Rohingya Muslim communities, who view each other with deep distrust. In 2017, a brutal military crackdown on the Rohingya led to over 700,000 Rohingya fleeing to Bangladesh. Inside Rakhine, aid groups still attempted to help those Rohingya who remained as well as other affected groups. They were caught in a storm of accusations: some Rakhine nationalists alleged that international aid "favored" the Rohingya, essentially challenging the **impartiality** of aid. Humanitarian staff were harassed and offices attacked in earlier years (2014) over similar claims. Aid organisations had to constantly communicate that aid was based on need, not ethnicity, and expand programs for all communities to counteract perceptions of bias. The ethical principle of impartiality was their guide, but implementing it required **courage and transparency**. It also required negotiating with the government and military, who themselves were hostile to the Rohingya and at times impeded aid to them. Workers had to make hard choices, such as whether to speak out publicly when access was blocked (advocating for the victims but risking expulsion from the country) or to stay quiet and work behind the scenes (maintaining access but perhaps appearing complicit with an unjust situation). Different agencies took different approaches, reflecting how ethics can lead to varying strategies: some (like Médecins Sans Frontières) prioritise témoignage (witnessing and speaking out) as an ethical duty, while others (like the ICRC or UN) often prioritise quiet negotiation to uphold **neutrality** and continue operations. Both choices carry ethical weight and consequences. For the HADR Institute, these considerations are realities today that demand *principled pragmatism.*



Ethical Challenge 3 – Neutrality vs. Speaking Out: In the aftermath of the **2021 military coup** in Myanmar, the operating environment for humanitarians became even more fraught. The military junta, widely condemned for violence against protesters and civilians, took control of state institutions. Humanitarian needs (due to conflict, natural hazards, COVID-19, and economic collapse) skyrocketed, but working under the junta's oversight posed ethical questions.

- Could agencies trust needs assessments or beneficiary lists provided by a junta that might favor its loyalists?

- How to ensure aid doesn't get appropriated by the military?

- Some local humanitarian groups emerged aligned with the Civil Disobedience Movement, effectively opposing the junta – should international agencies partner with them, or would that compromise neutrality?

When the junta imposed restrictions (e.g., requiring travel authorisations that they often denied arbitrarily), some agencies considered cross-border aid (supporting networks from Thailand or India into Myanmar) as an alternative. This approach, however, could be deemed illegal by the junta - while some agencies recognise the authority of defacto authorities (often ethnic armed organisations) due to their effective jurisdictional control of an affected population, over the authority of the junta who overthrew the democratic government.

Aid organisations often have to **diversify strategies**: maintain a presence and provide aid in junta-controlled areas, while also discreetly supporting assistance into areas controlled by ethnic armed organisations or resistance groups. Throughout, they have to clearly separate humanitarian aid from the political struggle, even as individual humanitarians empathise with the cause of democracy. It is an ongoing ethical balancing act – the principles of **independence and neutrality** are important, as agencies reassure all sides that they are not taking a political stance but simply addressing human suffering and humanitarian needs.

In private, humanitarian leaders also engage in advocacy, reminding the military authorities of their obligations under IHL to let aid reach people in need, effectively using the **principle of humanity** as a moral argument. Again, the HADR Institute takes the position in these contexts to be deliberate about using the humanitarian principles as a north point; always keep humanity and impartiality central with accountability to affected communities and people. Neutrality and independence are clear objectives that should be strived for however there is unlikely to be a clear way to achieve this ideal perfectly while ensuring humane assistance in complex environments.

Best Practices and Lessons from Myanmar:

Despite the daunting challenges, Myanmar's crises have imparted valuable lessons on ethical humanitarian practice:

- ***Humanitarian Negotiation:*** **I**nvesting in negotiation capacity (often through skilled local staff or intermediaries) is essential. The Nargis experience showed that respectful dialogue, cultural understanding, and finding face-saving solutions can open access. Aid agencies learned to frame requests in terms that resonate locally, for example appealing to the Myanmar value of communal help and the reputational benefit of allowing aid.

- ***Impartial Targeting:*** Agencies refined tools for impartial aid allocation. In Rakhine, some organisations used **evidence-based vulnerability criteria** (such as malnutrition rates, shelter damage, etc.) to decide aid distribution, and published these criteria to prove objectivity. Transparency in criteria helps defend against allegations of bias.

- ***Local Partnerships:*** In highly restricted contexts, empowering local actors is both a practical and ethical solution. Local humanitarian workers in Myanmar often had better access and acceptance. International groups increasingly provided funding, training, and remote support to local NGOs, faith-based groups, and community volunteers who could reach areas foreigners could not. This **localisation** not only overcame access barriers but also respected the local communities' right to help themselves – an ethical win-win. The HADR Institute's own work, for instance, involves collaborating with local CBOs in Myanmar's border areas to support displaced people with water and sanitation aid. HADR Institute sees that there is an ethical argument to focus on underserved communities, particularly where access is restricted for official channels of aid.
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- ***Accountability under Constraints:*** International agencies in Myanmar improved efforts to be accountable to communities even when direct contact was limited. They utilised technology (like feedback through SMS in local languages) and worked with community representatives to understand if aid was delivered fairly. This helped maintain trust. Notably, being accountable also meant admitting when they could not reach certain populations and advocating for those left behind.

- ***Staying Principled under Pressure:*** Perhaps the overarching lesson is that the humanitarian principles remain a reliable guide even in murky situations. Agencies that consistently communicated their neutral, impartial stance – and behaved accordingly – maintained better access over time. Trust, once broken, is hard to regain in Myanmar's close-knit society. Thus, strict codes of conduct (for example, no staff engaging in political demonstrations while representing their agency, to preserve neutrality) were enforced.

Myanmar’s case underscores that ethical humanitarian action is not easy, but it is possible even amid suspicion and conflict. By being consistent in principles, creative in approach, and humble in learning from mistakes, humanitarians have managed to assist millions in Myanmar over the years. The work remains dangerous and difficult – and ethical questions are never far from daily decision-making – but the collective experience has built a rich practice of principled humanitarianism that informs responses worldwide.

Best Practices for Ethical Humanitarian Action

Drawing from global standards and the specific insights of the Myanmar and Pacific case studies, we can outline key best practices that humanitarian practitioners should follow to uphold ethics in complex crises. These actionable guidelines serve as a checklist for designing and implementing responses that are both effective and principled:

1. **Adhere to Core Humanitarian Principles:** Use the principles of humanity, neutrality, impartiality, and independence as the north point in decision-making. In every major choice (whom to assist, how to engage authorities, etc.), consider these principles. For example, before accepting funding that might be politicised, ask: Will this compromise our independence or neutrality? If yes, rethink the approach or consider whether it is critical to achieve a humane and impartial program. Principles are protective: maintaining them helps secure access, trust and the greatest impact.[14]
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2. **Conduct Context Analysis:** Invest time in understanding the conflict dynamics, power relations, and cultural norms of the crisis context. Map out who the key groups are (e.g., ethnic communities, political factions, local leaders) and anticipate how aid could affect those dynamics. Use tools like conflict sensitivity analysis to avoid exacerbating tensions. Continuously monitor the impact of your aid – if an action is found to be causing harm (even unintentionally), be prepared to adjust or halt that activity. It's better to pause and recalibrate than to blindly continue a program that might be fueling conflict or resentment.

3. **Engage and Empower Local Stakeholders:** Ethical practice means valuing the people affected as partners, not passive beneficiaries. Wherever possible, involve local authorities, community leaders, and civil society organisations in planning and delivering aid. Support local response mechanisms – they are often faster and more in tune with community needs. In practical terms, this could mean providing grants to local NGOs to lead projects, or forming joint assessment teams that include community representatives. Ensure that credit is shared and that local responders are visibly leading, to reinforce their legitimacy. Localisation is not just an efficiency agenda; it's a moral one about respect and justice in humanitarian work.[15]

[14] unocha.org
[15] prio.org

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4. **Ensure Participation and Accountability:** Create avenues for community members (including women, youth, and marginalised groups) to voice their needs and feedback. Hold community meetings, set up help desks at aid distribution sites, and use technology (SMS, radio call-in programs) for two-way communication. Critically, **act on the feedback** – demonstrate that complaints or suggestions lead to changes or explanations. Adopt a transparency policy: be open about your criteria for aid, your limitations, and your plans. When people understand why decisions are made, they are more likely to trust the process.[16]
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5. **Implement Strong Safeguarding Measures:** Protect crisis-affected people from exploitation, abuse, and corruption. This includes rigorous training and enforcement of codes of conduct for all staff and volunteers. Establish confidential reporting channels for any misconduct (whistleblower systems, community focal points for complaints about aid worker behavior). Pre-deploy clear policies on PSEA (Protection from Sexual Exploitation and Abuse) and make sure everyone knows that even in the chaos of an emergency, these rules remain in force. Ethical organisations also conduct background checks and don't hesitate to discipline or remove staff who violate ethical standards, putting victims first. Remember, one abusive incident can cause enormous harm and shatter an organisation's credibility, so prevention is key.

6. **Plan for Ethical Dilemmas:** Anticipate scenarios that might force compromises – for instance, a demand from armed actors for a share of aid, or government pressure to omit certain populations. Develop an **ethical framework or decision tree** in advance if possible. Many organisations find it useful to have an ethics committee or focal point to consult when dilemmas arise. Use precedents and guidelines (such as the ICRC's approach to negotiations, or IASC papers on humanitarian negotiation) to inform these tough calls. Document your decision-making process for transparency – if you decide to deviate from a usual practice (like using armed escorts, or limiting media transparency for security reasons), note the justification and revisit the decision regularly to see if it still holds. Ethical action is often about choosing the lesser of evils; doing so methodically and with accountability helps maintain integrity.

[16] blogs.icrc.org

7. **Coordinate and Collaborate with Peers:** Humanitarian ethics is a collective effort. Engage in coordination forums (cluster meetings, NGO consortia, etc.) to ensure a coherent and fair approach. If one agency starts doing something unethical (even under pressure), it can have security implications for all (e.g., if aid is seen as biased). Thus, speak up in coordination bodies to establish common red lines. Share information about access negotiations or context analysis so that all can benefit and align. Present a united, principled front to authorities when needed – this prevents "forum shopping" by governments or others to find a less principled actor to exploit. Collaboration with organisations like the UN OCHA, which is tasked with upholding humanitarian principles in coordination, can amplify ethical standards across the response.

8. **Build Staff Capacity and Care:** Train your teams in humanitarian ethics and their practical application. Scenario-based training can help staff think through dilemmas in advance. Topics should include cultural sensitivity, anti-bias training, and personal behavior standards. Moreover, caring for staff welfare is an ethical duty of organisations (duty of care) – ensure that staff, especially those in dangerous and high-stress environments, have access to psychosocial support, rest, and are not pressured into unsafe situations without backup. Stressed or burnt-out staff are more prone to make ethical mistakes or misjudgments. An ethical operation values its people and recognises that how we treat our staff reflects our humanitarian principles internally.

9. **Respect Human Rights and Advocacy**: While humanitarians are neutral, they should still strive to ensure that the human rights of those affected are respected. This might mean quiet or public advocacy for access, or reminding authorities of their obligations. It could also mean facilitating the affected people's own advocacy – for example, supporting forums where disaster survivors can speak about their needs to policymakers. Advocacy must be done carefully to maintain neutrality (often focusing on needs and law, not politics), but it remains an important tool to address root causes and prevent abuses. The **ethical use of voice** is part of being in solidarity with affected communities, as long as it doesn't cross into partisanship.

10. **Learn and Adapt:** After each operation or during protracted crises, conduct ethical reviews or lessons learned exercises focused on dilemmas encountered. What could have been handled differently? Are there patterns of bias or blind spots? Organisations that are self-critical and open to change will improve their ethical performance over time. Share lessons with the broader community (without compromising sensitive details) so that collectively, humanitarian actors grow in ethical maturity. In the dynamic landscape of modern crises – from Myanmar's conflict zones to the disaster-prone Pacific atolls – continuous learning is vital to uphold principles amidst new challenges like digital privacy, misinformation, or climate-induced migration.

Conclusion

Humanitarian work in complex crises will always involve hard choices and pressures that test our ethics. There will be moments when adhering to principles feels like a hindrance or when cutting corners seems tempting in the rush to help. Yet, time and again, experienced practitioners have found that **ethics and effectiveness go hand in hand**. Principles like impartiality and neutrality are critical; they are the bedrock of being able to reach people in the most difficult circumstances and to ensure consistent trust across parties - while the very heart of humanitarian work is found in the principles of humanity and impartiality. Upholding dignity, engaging with communities, and acting with integrity create the trust that is essential for any humanitarian operation to succeed.

For humanitarian practitioners, maintaining a professional ethical standard is not just about avoiding wrongdoing; it is about proactively doing what is right and just. This guide has emphasised actionable insights that translate ethical theory into practice. The **Humanitarian and Development Landscape** course, of which this guide is a small part, encourages you to internalise these lessons and apply them in your work. Ethical humanitarianism is a journey, one of continual reflection and improvement. By committing to that journey, each practitioner contributes to a more accountable and compassionate humanitarian system.

Perhaps the best way to judge our humanitarian actions is to view them through the eyes of those we aim to help in impossible situations. We may not always be able to follow every principle flawlessly, but by striving for principled pragmatism—respecting local context while adhering to fundamental ethics—we honor the trust placed in us. Through reflection, collaboration, and a commitment to human dignity, we can advance a more accountable and compassionate humanitarian system.

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