

Do Humanitarian Principles Still Fit Their Purpose? Suggested Values for a New Global Environment

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ABSTRACT

International community's aid to those affected by various humanitarian crises has been described by four clear and succinct principles: humanity, impartiality, neutrality, and independence. These principles have been used not only to define the manner in which the international community responds to those affected by armed conflicts and humanitarian crises (natural and human-induced) but also to shape a more general public perception of the humanitarian system. While humanitarian principles were important and necessary at the time of their inception, they may require a re-evaluation at present due to the maturing of the humanitarian sector, along with the increasing complexity and intensity of humanitarian crises, transition from traditional episodes of armed conflicts, and increasing effects of climate change on vulnerable populations. If these four principles are no longer sufficient to guide and shape the international community's humanitarian actions, then we may need to consider augmentation or alternatives. Instead of proposing new principles, we suggest having a conversation on guiding humanitarian values. Thus, we describe four values that illustrate what may be considered: equity, solidarity, compassion, and diversity.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 23 January 2022

Revised 25 May 2022

Accepted 22 August 2022

KEYWORDS

Humanitarian principles •
Humanitarian aid • Equity •
Solidarity • Compassion •
Diversity

More than 400 major humanitarian crises occur annually, leading to the death of over 100,000 people on average and directly affecting approximately 120 million people (Active Learning Network for Accountability and Performance [ALNAP], 2018). These humanitarian crises include earthquakes, droughts, floods, cyclones, famines, and armed conflicts, or other civil strife that lead to displacement of communities. In response, the international community provides funds worth over US\$24 billion to assist those affected by such crises to rebuild and reconstruct their lives (GHA, 2020). These funds are expended through various modes, such as official government bilateral transfers and multilateral funding or privately-funded aid provided through international and local humanitarian agencies. Humanitarian response can be understood as an industry in itself, considering the tens of millions of people who are affected by these events, the hundreds of thousands of people who work on responses, and the billions of dollars spent on addressing the emergent needs.

Humanitarian crises demand a response with sophisticated international architecture owing to their regularity, size, and scope (United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs [OCHA], 2019). Over time, the industry standards and benchmarks for organizations and institutions involved in responses show concurrent development (see Sphere, 2019). Such evolution has likewise resulted in an emerging workforce characterized by high levels of training and education (Clarke et al., 2019). The aspect that has remained constant is the primary purpose of humanitarian response—protecting and saving lives. According to Slim (2015, pp. 2–3), “at its best, it is a very practical affirmation of the value of human life and its unique character in each human person.” However, the long-held principles that govern this affirmation of life may no longer adequately address the changing humanitarian landscape. If this is the case, then it might be argued that the humanitarian sector should consider modifications and improvements as the existing principles are no longer fit for their intended purpose.

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To cite this article: Clarke, M., & Parris, B. W. (2022). Do humanitarian principles still fit their purpose? Suggested values for a new global environment. *TRC Journal of Humanitarian Action*, 1(2), 25–38. <https://doi.org/10.55280/trcja.2022.1.2.0002>

The international community's aid to those affected by various humanitarian crises is guided by four clear and succinct principles. These principles have been used not only to define the manner in which the international community responds to those affected by armed conflicts and other humanitarian crises (natural and human-induced) but also to shape a more general public perception of the humanitarian system. The geneses of the four humanitarian principles (humanity, impartiality, neutrality, and independence) lie within Henry Dunant's account of the violent Battle of Solferino in 1859 (Dunant, 1959). This account directly led to the establishment of the Red Cross and subsequently to the first Geneva Convention, both of which eventually led to the emergence of these principles (Pictet, 1979)¹. These principles were born due to small-scale traditional battlefield conflicts. According to Slim (2015, p. 5), "the principles are an essential part of UN and international insistence on the necessity of humanitarian access and protection of civilians in armed conflict." While these humanitarian principles were conceived to guide the works of the International Committee of Red Cross/Red Crescent (ICRC) in responding to the needs of affected civilian populations in times of armed conflicts, they have since gained universal adherence within the humanitarian sector and have been used to justify action and inaction by those responding to crises, whether or not these are related to armed conflicts (Slim, 2015). These four principles were important and necessary at the time of their inception, and have been vital in the maturation of the humanitarian sector and global architecture during the 20th and 21st centuries. However, these principles may require a re-evaluation of their relevancy and usefulness owing to the increasing complexity and intensity of humanitarian crises, transition from traditional modes of armed conflicts, and increasing impact of climate change on vulnerable populations. The ICRC does recognize the need for such re-evaluation. On the 50th anniversary of the adoption of the Fundamental Principles of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, the ICRC published several papers on these principles and their ongoing relevance (see Gordon & Donini, 2016; Thompson, 2016; Fast, 2016; Schenkenberg van Mierop, 2016; Hopgood, 2019). If these four principles are no longer fit for guiding and shaping the humanitarian actions of the international community, then augmentations or alternatives may need consideration. Rather than recommending new principles, we suggest having a conversation on guiding humanitarian values, thus describing four of these values that illustrate such consideration: equity, solidarity, compassion, and diversity. Values differ from principles, as the latter are more action-oriented whereas the former describe high-level ideals on which subsequent actions are based and guided.

The humanitarian sector is neither stagnant nor immobile. It is self-critical and aware (Barnett & Walker, 2015). Its practices evolve based on the ongoing review of its performance and standards. Significant shifts in theory and practice within humanitarian responses include rights-based approaches (Darcy, 2004), new humanitarianism (Fox 2001, Schumer 2004), triple nexus (CIC, 2019), and localization (Fabre, 2017). According to van Voorst and Hilhorst (2017, p. 29), approximately one quarter of highly experienced humanitarian workers surveyed believe that aid agencies can only find legitimacy through "alternatives to the humanitarian principles as these are not realistic, nor necessarily relevant to recipients." Within complex environments, the legitimacy of humanitarian responses is vital.

Humanitarian actors are endogenous to the humanitarian environment and are part of the complex relationships that determine responses instead of existing independently. This involvement complicates how humanitarian principles are presented and actioned. Case studies that explicitly discuss humanitarian principles are rare (see the *When Disaster Meets Conflict* research program at Erasmus University as an exception). This complexity is described by Desportes et al. (2019) in terms of humanitarian actors having *frontstage* and *backstage* masks that allow them to present their work and approach to humanitarian crises as publicly aligned with humanitarian principles while simultaneously being more pragmatic and perhaps privately eschewing those principles to ensure effective responses. Research participants relay clear discrepancies between the humanitarian theater's frontstage, where disaster responders present an exemplary response, and its backstage, where they remove their frontstage masks and reflect on the information, decision-making monopoly of the state and the intrusion of conflict dynamics (Desportes et al., 2019, p. 32). As a result of this kind of dynamic, van Voorst and Hilhorst (2017, p. 16) argued that "there thus exists a duality between what might be called the public face of humanitarian actors—in which humanitarians partner up with the government and only run aid programs that are initiated or accepted by the government—and the covert face, in which they feel restricted by the government and apply strong self-censorship in public communication, while working 'under the radar' on more sensitive topics." This duality results in self-censoring at the site of the humanitarian event and, more generally, across the humanitarian sector. If this dissonance is common, should the current humanitarian principles be reconsidered?

¹ Instead of the 28 additional humanitarian Principles of Law, Dignity, Partnership and Stewardship, and Effectiveness that have also been adopted by the international community, this paper primarily addresses the four humanitarian Principles of Action.

The rest of this paper is organized as follows. Section 2 discusses the changing nature of the humanitarian environment and Section 3 questions the current humanitarian principles. Section 4 discusses four values that may be necessary to augment or revise the current principles and Section 5 presents the conclusion.

New Humanitarian Environment

The international humanitarian environment has changed significantly since the humanitarian principles were first proposed in response to the needs of civilian populations affected by armed conflicts (Pictet, 1979), whereas the humanitarian environment in which the current principles were formed was that of the traditional battleground armed conflicts. The current humanitarian environment (notwithstanding the current Ukraine conflict) is at present shaped equally, if not more, by far more external pressures, such as climate change and mass population displacement. A large portion of the humanitarian sector presently operates within this setting, and it is against this backdrop that the humanitarian principles must be assessed.

In its Fifth Assessment Report, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change concluded as follows:

... without protection 72 to 187 million people would be displaced due to land loss due to submergence and erosion by 2100 assuming GMSLRs [Global Mean Sea-Level Rises] of 0.5 to 2.0 m by 2100. Upgrading coastal defenses and nourishing beaches would reduce these impacts roughly by three orders of magnitude. Hinkel *et al.* (2013) estimate the number of people flooded annually in 2100 to reach 117 to 262 million per year in 2100 without upgrading protection (IPCC 2014, pp. 381–382).

The World Bank recently analyzed projections for three regions, namely, Sub-Saharan Africa, South Asia, and Latin America, and found that “climate change will push tens of millions of people to migrate within their countries by 2050... without concrete climate and development action, just over 143 million people... could be forced to move within their own countries to escape the slow-onset impacts of climate change” (Rigaud *et al.*, 2018, p. xix). Low-lying countries, such as Bangladesh, are particularly vulnerable, with one model predicting “between 3 and 10 million internal migrants over the next 40 years, depending on the severity of the hazards” (Hassani-Mahmoei & Parris, 2012, p. 763).

Although these climate migrations are predicted, mass population displacement is already occurring on a large scale due to unconventional civil strife. In 2019, approximately 79.5 million people (an increase of 8.7 million as compared to the previous year) were forcibly displaced due to persecution, violence, and human rights violations. These people include 26.0 million refugees, 45.7 million internally displaced people, and 4.2 million asylum seekers. Such statistics includes approximately 153,000 unaccompanied and separated children (UNHCR, 2020). In the same year, approximately 23.9 million people were displaced from their homes owing to weather-related disasters (Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre [IDMC], 2020, p. 1). The international community has responded to the growing concerns regarding the rise in mass population displacement with two new global compacts. Recognition of these new major drivers of increased cross-border migration of people in recent times highlights the long-term phenomena that are likely to increase in intensity.

Thus, the present humanitarian environment differs from that which existed immediately following the Battle of Solferino or during the first half of the 20th century when the humanitarian principles were first conceived. This changing environment questions whether the principles remain fit for their intended purpose or need to be augmented or revised.

Questioning the Humanitarian Principles

Humanitarian principles of humanity, neutrality, independence, and impartiality serve as a core component of the historical development of the humanitarian architecture and implementation. These principles have directly affected the approaches to humanitarian crises (Slim, 2015). Humanity, neutrality, and impartiality were adopted in 1991 in the United Nations General Assembly resolution 46/182 (1991), and “independence” was added in the General Assembly resolution 58/114 (2004) (OCHA, 2012, p. 1). These principles were necessary and appropriate at the time they were distilled from past experience, considering the manner in which the global community was geared toward responding to what might be termed “traditional” humanitarian crises. As a result of these principles, Slim (2015, p. 10) argued that “humanitarian action must always be responding to extreme life-threatening conditions and operate an ethic of protecting and saving human life.” Therefore, they should not be about societal transformation that others have dis-

cussed (see Donini, 2012). Yet, mass population displacement and climate change, for example, do require societal transformations, which can be facilitated by humanitarian responses. The socio-economic and political environments in which natural and human-induced humanitarian crises occur determine the severity of disasters (O’Keefe et al., 1976; Cannon & Muller-Mann, 2010). Given that this same environment determines vulnerability (Pelling & Dell, 2010), it also determines who has access to response resources (Olson, 2000). As such, humanitarian events and actions are social-economic and political outcomes.

Questioning the continuing relevance and suitability of humanitarian principles for the emerging humanitarian environment does not diminish their historical value in any manner. Acknowledging these principles as an artifact of a specific historical period and simultaneously suggesting that their ongoing relevance remains contingent on the humanitarian environment characterized predominantly by armed conflicts are highly plausible (see, for example Slim, 2015). If the defining characteristic of the humanitarian sector is no longer traditional battleground warfare, then to question if the principles that grew from this specific context remain fit for purpose is quite reasonable. Therefore, once this question is raised, posing alternatives is likewise reasonable. If the humanitarian sector is changing in scope and size, and climate change increasingly drives humanitarian events with effects ranging from weather-related disasters to drought-induced food shortages, then should the sector still be guided by principles of humanity, neutrality, impartiality, and independence? Based on this question, we examine each of the four current humanitarian principles in turn.

Humanity

Human suffering must be addressed wherever it is found. The purpose of humanitarian action is to protect life and health and ensure respect for human beings. (OCHA, 2012, p. 1)

Such an unequivocal statement of intent has been invaluable in setting the primary goal of humanitarian response and its boundaries. Giving the prominence to human suffering where such consideration was once lacking has been a core achievement of this primary humanitarian principle. Questioning the continued relevancy of humanity is not an argument against the principle *per se* but rather a recognition that presently wider considerations within this new humanitarian environment must be prioritized.

Anderson’s (1999) call to “do no harm” when responding during periods of conflict is relevant to all humanitarian situations. Within a changing humanitarian landscape, particularly one that is characterized by climate change and mass population displacement, previous styles of humanitarian response may risk compounding the ongoing human suffering. For example, humanitarian agencies are required to make very challenging and unpalatable choices if they wish to be effective and relevant to the evolving context in which they work. In extreme circumstances [,] this may well require them to walk away from traditional community-based development activities for those that are most vulnerable and will be most affected by climate change. However, the scale and intensity of predicted climate change will mean that continuing to work with such communities will not only be unsustainable, but delay a necessary adaptive response of evacuation that would otherwise occur. It could also be perceived as a waste of scarce resources that could be used more effectively and efficiently in communities that have greater chances of sustainably adapting to their existing environment. Failure to recognise the impact of climate change will result in a failure of current practices and a failure to do no harm by continuing to work with communities that may well not survive climate change (Clarke & Cruz 2015, p. 21).

Seeking to reduce human suffering requires alternative approaches to humanitarian work within this new environment, ultimately considering whether business-as-usual responses to long-term irretractable (environmental) disasters remain in the best interests of those affected (Clarke & de Cruz, 2015). This consideration does not suggest that affected communities should be left unsupported; rather, it suggests that a wider response be considered where the immediate focus on addressing human suffering (as Slim, 2015, puts it “*in extremis*,” p. 26) may simply condemn them to ongoing and repeated suffering within an environment that has irrevocably changed by climate.

For example, countries with areas particularly vulnerable to repeated catastrophic weather events or semi-permanent inundation in the near future, such as parts of coastal Bangladesh, may require a “triage” approach. This approach can recognize the tragic reality that certain areas cannot be saved and that encouraging people to stay by patching up communities through repeated humanitarian interventions only worsens their circumstances—particularly in contexts with ongoing rapid population growth. Such tragic circumstances require durable long-term solutions involving noncoercive

relocation and resettlement to areas where humanitarian funds can help build a secure future, rather than investing money in areas that lack such viability. This approach requires long-range planning and preparation and an integration of humanitarian concerns with long-term developmental considerations. Focusing primarily on “humanity” to alleviate immediate suffering is no longer sufficient, as this may well reinforce settlement patterns that lead to increased suffering in the long term. In a similar vein, long-term refugee camps may result from an increase in mass population displacement demand response; however, current humanitarian responses may reduce pressure on the international community to fund significant relocation solutions, resulting in long-term or permanent displacement.

While it does seem counter-intuitive to argue that the principle of “humanity” and the immediate alleviation of short-term human suffering must not automatically drive humanitarian responses, the premise of this argument is on the changing nature of the humanitarian environment. This argument suggests that humanitarian aid agencies “cannot continue to provide assistance to communities in ways that do not recognise the scale of the contextual changes affecting these communities when resources could be utilized more effectively to influence change in other communities that they can influence more effectively” (Clarke & de Cruz, 2015, p. 31). Within this new setting, largely characterized by the challenges of climate change and mass population displacement, a short-term focus on addressing immediate human suffering in a reflexive, haphazard manner, without understanding the dynamic context may in fact lead to exacerbating the problem. Being driven to address human suffering presents the risk of limiting humanitarian responses to immediate contexts, thereby not allowing for more systemic responses that are increasingly being driven by environmental and political changes.

A further consideration is that in focusing primarily on humans, the humanitarian community is failing to seriously and sufficiently consider the interconnection of species and humanity’s utter dependence on the web of life. For instance, the preservation of ecosystems, such as mangroves and coastal wetlands, are known to provide protection from disasters, such as cyclones. Yet how many humanitarian projects include assistance for nonhuman species or for the rehabilitation and repair of destroyed ecosystems? Of course, compelling arguments can be made that certain “higher” species, such as apes, dolphins, and elephants, should be granted a degree of “personhood” owing to their superior intelligence and purported proximity to humans. Such arguments may help in a limited sense. However, the broader recognition that the well-being of human beings is inseparably linked to rich biodiversity and healthy ecosystems is much more important.

The Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Service Secretariat, 2019) estimated that more than one million species are at risk of extinction due to human activity. Does this not constitute a humanitarian emergency? This question arises not because of the current expansion of the definition of “humanitarian” beyond its original intent, but because we are finally recognizing that humans are inseparable from nature. If ecosystems collapse, then human “civilization” surely follows. Can there be a greater humanitarian emergency?

What might be involved in a humanitarian response to ecosystem collapse and species destruction? Such response certainly includes expanding the remit of humanitarian organizations and increasingly upgrading them in the areas of ecosystem health and biodiversity, as well as fostering greater cooperation with environmental agencies and scientists.

Neutrality

Humanitarian actors must not take sides in hostilities or engage in controversies of a political, racial, religious, or ideological nature. (OCHA 2012, p. 1)

Neutrality is an ethical principle that humanitarian organizations use to gain and maintain access to affected communities. According to Slim (2015), “military neutrality and ideological neutrality” (p. 68) is vital to access combatant casualties and affected civilian communities. However, does this principle remain necessary in humanitarian crises caused by climate or displacement? If not, does it remain valid as a guiding principle? Within the new humanitarian environment, must neutrality be a core principle for humanitarian organizations?

Peacekeepers play a vital role in protecting innocent lives. A small number of troops can prevent atrocities (Feil, 1998; Dallaire, 2003, p. 547). A legitimate argument is that being perceived to take sides in any conflict increases the risk for humanitarian workers. “Aid is increasingly politicised by all stakeholders: donors, governments, the military,

nonstate authorities ... This makes it impossible for agencies to adhere strictly to humanitarian principles: with or without knowing, they may contribute to conflict” (van Hoorst & Hilhorst, 2017, p. 28). According to Kisangani and Mitchell (2021), peacekeeping missions increase the likelihood of violent attacks on humanitarian workers who are caught between warring factions. Neutrality outside of conflicts mainly between regular armies of sovereign states is fraught with issues. In an age of irregular militias, we cannot presume that a single notion of neutrality is universally shared for three primary reasons.

First, the “neutral” humanitarian work of reducing the suffering of a vulnerable population is also a classic counterinsurgency tactic, as it can reduce local sympathy and support for militant groups (Galula, 1964). Humanitarian work that reduces local grievances, dispels cross-cultural stereotypes, builds trust and understanding between former enemies, and fosters education and widespread literacy can directly oppose the interests of militant power-brokers. Second, considering that resources are generally fungible, humanitarian medical or nutritional support to one party in a conflict may free up resources to be used for combat elsewhere. Third, numerous “civilian” militant groups hold firmly to a doctrine that anyone who assists their enemies becomes an enemy, and thus, they are not hesitant about targeting other civilians. Neutrality is not possible without a shared understanding of its constituents.

Almost all humanitarian work is inherently political, affecting power relations. Approximately three quarters of experienced humanitarian workers surveyed by van Voorst and Hilhorst (2017) “indicated that INGOs have lost their neutral status of the last decade” (p. 13) but continue to publicly emphasize this principle while simultaneously hiding their funding sources. Resource distributions affect the relative popular appeal of different political actors; thus, the question arises as to how humanitarian agencies can be neutral? A humanitarian agency does not need to receive funds from a foreign government or cooperate with military forces, because their activities can be perceived by several militant groups as a serious threat similar to that of a military offensive. Although activities of a humanitarian agency may be perceived as being apolitical and neutral, they may also be viewed as highly political by other actors in a conflict environment. In humanitarian crises that do not involve armed conflicts, the importance of neutrality further fades.

Impartiality

Humanitarian action must be conducted on the basis of need alone, giving priority to the most urgent cases of distress and making no distinctions on the basis of nationality, race, gender, religious belief, class, or political opinions. (OCHA 2012, p. 1)

Two primary arguments question whether impartiality remains fit for its purpose as a humanitarian principle: First, it is obvious that impartiality has not been proven in practice. Certain regions and populations have received far more in terms of resources and assistance than others. When scarce resources need allocation, universality and nondiscrimination cannot be guaranteed. Realpolitik, strategic concerns, and sheer logistical challenges have caused uneven responses to humanitarian crises with political considerations playing an increasingly important role (van Voorst & Hilhorst, 2017). A few examples are listed below:

(i) Among 26.0 million refugees worldwide, 5.6 million comprise Palestinians under the care of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNHCR, 2020, p. 2). Several of these refugees have been waiting more than 70 years for a resolution to their plight, a prospect that seems to diminish with each passing year. Political considerations have led the United States to reduce US\$300 million from UNRWA’s budget in January 2018, which threatened “general education for 525,000 students, essential primary health care for 3 million patients and food assistance for 1.7 million refugees” (UN, 2018). While some other countries have stepped in to fill part of the shortfall, UNRWA has also been forced to reduce staff and programs.

(ii) China has undertaken a large-scale program of persecution and interment of approximately one million Uighurs, who are mostly Muslims, in its western Xinjiang province (BBC News, 2018). For apparent reasons, humanitarian response is limited and muted to what may be the largest forced interment of people since the Second World War. Being such a powerful state, China has simply instructed countries worldwide to refrain from interfering in its internal affairs. China has received encouragement from other nondemocratic countries, such as Saudi Arabia, which asserts that China has the right to combat “religious extremism” in whatever manner deemed to be fit by the country (Al-Jazeera, 2019).

Second, impartiality does not necessarily lead to the most efficient use of resources and relief of the greatest suffering. Impartiality has not adequately dealt with the trade-offs even in the absence of political considerations among donors. Logistical and geographical considerations indicate that assisting some displaced populations are more expensive compared with others. Slim (2015) argued that every individual must have an equal right to assistance; there is truth in this fact. However, strictly implementing this principle in practice implies that, given a limited assistance budget, fewer people can be helped compared with the adoption of a more efficient approach. Such an approach can inevitably lead to a greater focus on more concentrated displaced populations with fewer logistical challenges. With scarce resources, allocative decisions and trade-offs are necessary. Arguably, if impartiality results in suboptimal decisions, then alternative values may produce better allocations that have an immense impact. In such circumstances, impartiality may no longer be considered as relevant as it previously was, and thus, may no longer fit its purpose as a guiding principle of humanitarian action.

Independence

Humanitarian action must be autonomous from the political, economic, military, or other objectives that any actor may hold with regard to areas where humanitarian action is being implemented. (OCHA 2012, p. 1)

Similarly, if humanitarian responses are strictly independent, then victims of weather-related disasters, conflicts, and famines might anticipate having an equal chance of receiving aid, although there might be variations based on logistical costs of accessing victims in remote areas. However, innumerable examples show the lack of independence of humanitarian actions, due to factors such as strategic influences in the preferential treatment of allies, and perhaps most pervasively, the muting of political advocacy by humanitarian agencies due to a (not unfounded) fear of upsetting government grant-making agencies or donor constituencies. “Humanitarian actors’ activities are monitored and controlled by governments that may have different priorities from those of the international aid community” (van Voorst & Hilhorst, 2017, p. 16). Although Pictet (1979) desired independence for humanitarian agencies, they cannot have it considering the above circumstances.

Vastly disproportionate sums are raised for high-profile disasters—especially those with dramatic video footage—compared with more gradual disasters in more obscure locations (see Feeny & Clarke, 2007). Local disasters in wealthy nations also usually raise more money than equivalent disasters in poorer countries (ABC, 2020).

A growing threat arises from what might be described as the privatization and corporatization of the search for durable solutions to persistent global problems, including humanitarian disasters. Giridharadas (2019) offered a critique of the global elite’s self-appointed role as providers of solutions to problems that they themselves have created. With states increasingly rescinding responsibilities to wealthy global elites and philanthropists, certain types of solutions are never entertained, such as significantly increasing taxes or strengthening environmental regulations, labor laws, or building codes. The presumption is that market solutions are always to be preferred. Humanitarian approaches originating from or dependent on this elite milieu are unlikely to be independent and to countenance solutions that in any way question or undermine the system supporting their power-base. Humanitarian responses in environments characterized by the realities of privileged or limited access and allocation of scarce resources are not independent (see Duffield, 2001; Donini, 2012).

If humanitarian actors are in effect self-censoring their responses to better position their public images and align with humanitarian principles, then the possibility arises that these same principles are perhaps no longer adequate. This scenario does not diminish their historical value but simply acknowledges that a changing humanitarian landscape requires reconsideration of the guiding principles. We contend that values may be a better alternative. In this paper, the suggested values are already evident in local and international humanitarian activities and indeed are implicit in the principles themselves. When considering these values, further prominence may further shape humanitarian action within the emerging context. In the same manner as current humanitarian action is not formally assessed against the existing principles (what would be the metrics for humanity, neutrality, impartiality, and independence?), to presume that alternate humanitarian values have associated metrics is not necessary. Rather, these values can serve as a lens through which action is planned and implemented. They also present an opportunity for those in the humanitarian sector to align their frontstage and backstage narratives that have become misaligned with the current principles (see Desportes et al., 2019).

Alternative Humanitarian Values

Do the guiding principles of the humanitarian system alter with the changing response to the rapidly evolving environment of more intense and frequent humanitarian crises driven by climate change and significant population displacement? Certainly, such changes are reflected in the recent professionalization of the sector. Although the humanitarian sector was established with a simple goal of responding to human needs, the increasing complexity of humanitarian disasters, coupled with significant resources expended within these humanitarian responses, require higher levels of accountability and professionalism (Walker & Russ, 2010). The need for donors to be assured that their funds are being effectively and efficiently used is increasing in importance (Walker et al., 2010).

As part of the ongoing evolution of the humanitarian sector, distanced from contexts characterized overwhelmingly by armed conflicts (notwithstanding the recent war in Ukraine) as described by Pictet (1979) and Slim (2015), toward those characterized by climate change-induced mass displacement, a more fundamental reconsideration of the premises of the sector may be necessary. If the humanitarian principles of humanity, neutrality, independence, and impartiality are no longer adequate, then to critique these long-held, powerful principles that until recently were thought of as immutable without offering alternatives is insufficient. In this paper, we present alternatives in the spirit of encouraging a debate, not ending an argument or providing definite answers. These suggested values are not offered as direct alternatives for the existing principles (i.e., humanity-equity and neutrality-solidarity, among others) but rather as how a different set of humanitarian principles may be conceived. To this end, we suggest the following set of values as an illustration of possibly useful alternatives, not as the only ones available but as suggestions to encourage a necessary debate. Thus, a set of guiding values such as those below may be obtained to supplement the principles, or a decision to revise the principles based on such values may be made.

Equity

Equity is a multidimensional, dynamic concept; we may distinguish between equity in opportunity versus equity in outcome; focus on current equity across genders, regions, or socio-economic classes; or consider intergenerational equity, which introduces concern for longer-term dynamic concepts, such as climate change and ecological sustainability. Equity can also be considered across different dimensions that affect vulnerability and resilience to disasters, particularly education, health, employment alternatives, and geographic locality. Clearly, a poor, illiterate girl with a disability in a remote community vulnerable to climate change faces vastly different prospects than a well-educated, professional man in an urban location. A disaster response that allocates resources equally to each of these examples is not equitable but may be “efficient” in a narrow, short-term, economic sense. The simple reason is that because assisting people from more privileged demographics in more accessible locations is likely to be cheaper and easier. As such, a trade-off commonly occurs between efficiency and equity, which makes it even more crucial to emphasize and consider equity as an important guiding principle so that it is not forgotten.

This scenario raises the question of the extent to which an equity-oriented humanitarian response in an immediately post-disaster setting must be cognizant of and seek to redress previous inequities. Such a case may not even be possible. Yet in circumstances where it is possible, should it be a consideration? A simpler answer is “No.” Declaring “Yes” entails potentially difficult resource allocation decisions, practically and logistically, but perhaps most of all, politically. Much depends on the influence of different levels of government and their degree or responsiveness to local communities and their needs. However, poor, illiterate girls with disabilities can be safely assumed to not have a strong political constituency anywhere, and thus, are likely to be neglected in a post-disaster setting just as in normal times.

Intergenerational inequity is most accurately felt in terms of climate change and ecosystem destruction. In models of the economic impacts of climate change, damage estimates tend to hinge crucially on the choice of “discount rate,” that is, the rate chosen to discount the future. As the discount rate increases, the value for future generations decreases. Several economists dispute this reading, arguing that the choice of discount rate must be guided by estimates of future economic growth; therefore, the future can be discounted as we assume those generations to be much richer than the present generation. However, the plausible temperature increase of anywhere between 3°C and 5°C in the next 100 years will produce a different planet, more like that during the Eocene Period around 40 million years ago. With a geologically instantaneous planetary warming, there is no reason to expect that future generations will enjoy rates of economic growth similar to those of the recent past. Stern (2016, p. 408) warned as follows:

Most current models of climate change impacts make two flawed assumptions: that people will be much wealthier in the future and that lives in the future are less important than lives now. The former assumption ignores the great risks of severe damage and disruption to livelihoods from climate change. The latter assumption is ‘discrimination by date of birth’. It is a value judgement that is rarely scrutinized, difficult to defend and in conflict with most moral codes. (see also Stern, 2013)

Solidarity

Solidarity conveys our collective obligation to address the needs of others. This value does not place a barrier between “us” and “them” but insists on a separation and absence of ethical reflection on the circumstances in which others find themselves. As such, we do not need to artificially distinguish different modes of solidarity (i.e., political vs. humanitarian) similar to others (see Scott-Smith, 2016). A lack of solidarity hinders us from taking an active stance in assessing the actions of others. Such a position not only minimizes the responders’ ability to act morally but also helps identify those who violate the rights of others in such a manner that they would not be held accountable for their actions. This context undermines the ethical norms of the environment that requires a humanitarian response, most specifically in cases when humanitarian emergency results from human actions, such as conflict or famine.

Humanitarian workers have always held a self-appointed mandate for action and response. Perceiving this mandate in terms of solidarity with victims further strengthens the role of responders in humanitarian crises. Having solidarity can provide them with the responsibility to assess the causes of a humanitarian crisis and therefore shape their response. Solidarity permits a greater range of styles and modes of response. As illustrated by the German government’s response to the 2015 refugee crisis², solidarity requires action and precludes inaction. Action based on critical reflection in solidarity with victims of a disaster can more likely address the causes of problems rather than just symptoms. Such solidarity entails advocacy and direct action on behalf of those affected for a clearer and more explicit component of humanitarian responses. Additionally, it provides greater justification and motivation for assessing the accountability of those responsible for such humanitarian crises.

Solidarity is also required while recognizing the challenges that resettled refugees and asylum seekers may face in new countries with extremely different cultures. In this context, this value requires resources and nuanced resettlement and support strategies from host countries, and in turn, a willingness among refugees and asylum seekers to honor the norms and laws of the new countries they are residing.

Compassion

Compassion is a powerful human emotion, acknowledged to be closely aligned to that of humanity. Recognizing the difference between these two concepts is essential. Rather than focusing on the relief of human suffering, compassion is when we feel the suffering of others (see O’Callaghan, 2019), necessitating an empathy with their pain. As such, compassion connects one human to another on an extremely personal level. This value requires an active and human response rather than a programmatic reaction. In a hostile environment with increasing natural and man-made humanitarian crises, compassion becomes a foil against disinterest, lethargy, or fatigue. Compassion drives the humanitarian response at an individual level; without it, the humanitarian response becomes weaker and more likely to be reduced to a transaction.

Compassion also lays bare the myth of neutrality. Where neutrality seeks to suspend judgment or involvement, compassion insists on revealing interests and forming associations. Where a veneer of neutrality denies an emotive response, compassion delivers the freedom to actively engage. The cultivation of compassion in donor and resettlement countries also becomes essential aspects of durable solutions to humanitarian crises.

A compassionate response does not imply a disengagement from professional standards. Those acting compassionately do so out of genuine human love, not because of real or perceived obligations or responsibilities. Compassion considers gender, abilities, socio-economic level, education, qualifications, race, and occupation. Apart from transcending boundaries, this virtue exists in all major religious traditions. Given that 85% of the world’s population self-professes religious beliefs (Pew–Templeton, 2020), this unifying emotion strengthens the ability of compassion to guide humanitarian responses.

² This response is acknowledged to be short-lived, reversed after 12 months, and did not gain traction with other European Union members. However, this case does demonstrate that such a value can elicit a positive response, albeit also demonstrating that maintaining solidarity as a motivation is not without difficulty.

As a humanitarian value, compassion provides space for human-to-human connection following a humanitarian crisis. While not minimizing the value and importance of professionalizing the humanitarian sector and codifying the knowledge required for effective and efficient responses to disasters, the value of compassion reasserts the primacy of the personal. Immediately following a humanitarian crisis, those who respond first are from the affected communities. They address the immediate needs of their families, neighbors, and communities in a heartfelt manner without hesitation. Common images of survivors include those scrambling over broken buildings, digging through rubble with bare hands, and searching for their loved ones. Their instinctive compassionate response can serve as an important guiding value for more professionalized responses of the humanitarian community.

Diversity

Unlike other suggested values, diversity is perhaps the most challenging. With limited resources, the primacy of humans over nonhumans has been easy to justify. Diversity as a value of humanitarian action extends responsibility to aid beyond humans. Considering the interdependence of the global ecosystem, the protection of all species cannot be neglected within humanitarian responses. Scarce humanitarian resources may support human flourishing and resilience even if expended on the needs of nonhuman species.

Diversity reflects the differences in human populations as well as refers to those between human and nonhuman species (Narayanan & Bindumadhav, 2018). Consideration of diversity is a necessary humanitarian value as it forces the appreciation and proper accounting of the differences within society. Diversity requires varied inputs, processes, evaluations, and mechanisms for involvement and decision-making. This value requires a more nuanced approach to respond to humanitarian crises, considering a wide range of differences, such as in gender (including transgender), sexuality, physical abilities, mental health, age, nationality, language-group, ethnicity, religion, employment, and economic conditions. In contrast to the existing principle of humanity, which has the primary goal of protecting life and health and alleviating suffering wherever it may exist, diversity celebrates the differences between humans and requires that differences should be highlighted to drive responses.

Presently, the principle of a vague and generalized “humanity” can neither provide a cover for overlooking the diverse needs of different cohorts within an affected society that require varied responses (which must explicitly address inequities) nor exclude a consideration of the needs of nonhuman species. The principle of diversity challenges conventional humanitarian practices; however, it ensures that individuals who are less visible or are actively marginalized are given equal preference.

Diversity between human and nonhuman species is increasingly discussed on the basis of questions regarding the elevation of humans over nonhuman species (Cochrane, 2013; Kymlicka, 2018). The binary of humans and nonhumans that results in a human-centric hierarchy must be reconsidered. The value of diversity insists that this existing approach should be reassessed as the understanding of interactions and dependency between human and nonhuman species become increasingly evident. In humanitarian responses, the principle of humanity has limited the response to the alleviation of human suffering, not allowing for (or expecting) active and purposeful interventions to alleviate the suffering of nonhuman species. This limitation is inappropriate within a system with humans at its epicenter, as it fails to recognize the interdependence of humanity on the biosphere and becomes even more questionable when diversity beyond the human species is part of the humanitarian remit.

Conclusion

Since 1859, a lot has changed. The international community at present has a sophisticated humanitarian architecture that can respond with varying degrees of success to the 400 significant humanitarian crises affecting over 120 million people annually. The manner in which the international community responds to these events has been shaped by the four humanitarian principles: humanity, neutrality, impartiality, and independence. The near universal acceptance of these principles shows evidence of their value and resonance within the sector. Emerged during conflicts (Pictet, 1979), their ongoing relevancy to the humanitarian sector must be questioned as the current forecasted humanitarian crises are not primarily caused by traditional armed conflicts, despite their continued occurrence. The historical value of these principles is not questioned. However, whether they remain adequate to guide future challenges must be open for consideration. Principles that have emerged from of an earlier context may have limited applicability in the new and rapidly evolving environment. Therefore, new values may be necessary.

This paper suggests that the humanitarian environment has started to change significantly in recent years, largely as a result of dramatic increase in mass population displacement and social, political, economic, and environmental consequences of climate change. These emerging forces are expected to drive and characterize humanitarian crises in the near future. As a consequence, the principles that underlie and motivate humanitarian responses must be questioned. Based on this fact, the paper illustrates four possible supporting values. These suggestions are expected to be contested and expanded by others. Such a debate is welcomed. Similar to individuals who witnessed the carnage of the Battle of Solferino and demanded reform in how the world responded to such events, we—as witnesses to the new humanitarian environment—should demand a reconsideration of the humanitarian principles to drive future humanitarian responses.

Ethical approval

Ethical approval is not applicable, because this article does not contain any studies with human or animal subjects.

Authors' contribution

All authors contributed equally to this manuscript.

Peer-review

Externally peer-reviewed

Funding

This research received no external funding.

Disclosure statement

The authors report no conflict of interest.

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