

## Principled Compromises or Compromised Principles? A review of principled humanitarian response in Ukraine, March 2026

- Relief operations were mounted rapidly in a new and complex environment. At times, the pressure to deliver came at the expense of applying humanitarian principles.
- The focus on the principle of neutrality in the Ukraine context appears to have come at the expense of taking a broader look at the principles, and it has also detracted from the more operational role neutrality should play, ultimately in support of applying humanity and impartiality.

### Key take-aways

#### Leadership and coordination platforms

- Critically, the humanitarian principles are intended precisely to help navigate highly politicised environments, like Ukraine, and to address access restrictions and complex relationships. This implicates the role of leadership when it comes to applying a principled approach.
- As the principles help to define the identity and agenda of humanitarian actors, it is important that they are recognised and distinguished as such. In the course of the research, the review team heard of several examples of how the distinction between humanitarian and other actors risks becoming blurred and the relevance of maintaining the principle of independence, including notably e.g. the use of drone jamming equipment, military clothing, and vehicles.
- The key criterion in assessing the degree to which a response is principled is whether and how agencies have addressed the principles in setting priorities, taking decisions, managing compromises, and being open on concessions.

### Recommendation

- 1. Humanitarian coordination platforms, such as the HCT, should employ the humanitarian principles as the framework for their consultations**, whether these are general coordination discussions, or specifically devoted to principled issues, such as access. For example, discussions on prioritising those most in need are about impartiality, especially proportionality; and reaching them will rely upon neutrality and independence. This discussion requires operational actors to be more honest about their unique role in the response. Further to framing operational coordination within humanitarian principles, the HCT and other coordination platforms should hold regular in-depth consultations (e.g. at least quarterly) on the application of humanitarian principles, such as those that took place during the HCT workshop in November 2025. Where interagency documents, such as HNRPs, speak of principled humanitarian action, they should provide explanations as to what is meant in the Ukraine context; what issues must be navigated as a matter of principle, and require a balanced decision. Organisations such as the Centre on the Competence of Humanitarian Negotiations stand ready to assist operational actors in these discussions.
- 2. The HCT should undertake a periodic review of the use of the JOP through a principled lens.** The JOP should be expanded to include guidance on operationalising each of the four principles in Ukraine: defining their implementation, setting out red lines, and creating a framework for deliberating these issues. Specific attention should be paid to current issues such as the colours of vehicles and outfits, and the use of devices that detect drones. Devices that jam GSM signals of the drones should not be used by humanitarian organisations seeking to deliver a principled response. The legal analysis that the review team received should be widely distributed. For those actors providing relief and carrying out evacuations on frontlines, the humanitarian leadership should provide alternative options that help them to carry out their work in relative safety.

### Mutual learning:

- Impartiality must be a crucial factor in needs analyses and collective planning and coordination so as to ensure that special needs are well covered. It does not mean, however, that all organisations should respond in the same manner to the same priorities. It is precisely on this aspect that diversity within the humanitarian community can become an asset in terms of complementary approaches.
- Few key informants seemed to be aware of the relevant rules of IHL.

- 3. There should be concerted mutual learning efforts involving staff** of UN agencies, the International Committee of the Red Cross (and Red Crescent), INGOs, NGOs, local CSOs and volunteer networks to address the low levels of knowledge on IHL and to ensure that staff are up to date on what it means to apply a principled approach generally, and in this particular context. National and sub-national authorities and diplomatic staff in Kyiv should also be participants in such workshops.

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### Partnerships:

- It is very important to ensure that partnerships are underpinned by shared views on values and principles.
- There is a need for a more differentiated approach in understanding who is expected to apply what principles. It should be up to local civil society in these circumstances to determine what approach they want to follow, and whether they want to be part of a (traditional) humanitarian response. Openness and a frank dialogue are needed rather than a one-size fits all approach.
- Procurement and contracting practices of UN agencies and INGOs have often made the application of the principles part of their administrative checks and due diligence assessments. A procurement and/or administrative approach contradicts the nature of applying the principles, which requires dialogue and engagement rather than a regulatory administrative check grounded in (a suggestion of) compliance.

**4. Partnerships between international and Ukrainian organisations should involve dialogue on what it means to deliver a principled approach.** Requiring local organisations to subscribe to the four principles solely as part of an administrative and due diligence check in developing contractual and funding arrangements renders the principles meaningless. This issue should also be discussed by working groups tasked at the global level with improving the international—national interface, such as the Grand Bargain and pooled fund working group.

### Access negotiations:

- In the context of Ukraine, access is either discussed as a security matter, takes the form of notifications, or is framed as a matter of assisting populations in occupied territories. All these aspects have their merit, but what seems to be missing is an overall, strategic effort to engage in a humanitarian dialogue that covers unimpeded humanitarian access with the two parties to the conflict, by those higher up the chain.

**5. Member states and high-level UN leadership should engage in a dialogue with both parties to the conflict and end the asymmetry in humanitarian negotiations.** High-level efforts involving UN institutions and member states should be launched to ensure that humanitarian considerations, including unimpeded access, are part of any political settlement to the conflict. Russia's permanent membership of the UN Security Council is an opportunity to allow for discrete engagement at the New York level. These diplomatic consultations and negotiations on a peace settlement or truce should also be devoted to strengthening respect for IHL.

### Separation of forms of assistance:

- The combination of political and humanitarian support has implications for humanitarian organisations that are keen to stress their independence and neutrality. Even more so, it may impact the safety of humanitarian workers.
- There is no such thing as non-political humanitarian aid from donor governments, but this does not preclude a dialogue on the extent to which there should be a humanitarian carve-out to ensure a better separation between humanitarian and other forms of assistance in Ukraine.

**6. Donors and humanitarian organisations should engage in a dialogue,** such as the meetings of the Senior Officials Meeting (SOM), that discusses the extent to which governments and EU institutions can support principled humanitarian action by avoiding blurred lines between the various forms of aid and support to Ukraine. There should be a better separation between humanitarian and other forms of assistance in Ukraine.

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