

Humanitarian action

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The aim of humanitarian action is to support people affected by conflict and natural disasters – to save lives, alleviate suffering and maintain human dignity during crisis.

Humanitarian action can take many forms and has been conceived in many different ways over time. As enshrined in United Nations (UN) Resolution 46/182 (1991), it is associated with a set of core principles: humanity (the provision of humanitarian assistance wherever needed and in a manner that respects the dignity and rights of the individual); impartiality (the provision of assistance without discrimination and according to need); neutrality (the provision of assistance without engaging in hostilities or taking sides in controversies of a political, religious or ideological nature); and independence (the provision of assistance autonomous from the political, economic, military or other objectives of other actors). These principles are intended to help establish and maintain access to crisis-affected people, especially in conflicts. In practice, however, adherence to them can vary widely. International humanitarian law (IHL) provides a framework not only for protection of civilians as part of humanitarian action but also for relief and assistance of other kinds.

A loose but interconnected set of recognised actors – including UN agencies, national and international NGOs, the Red Cross/Red Crescent movement, and governments – has coalesced since the mid-nineteenth century and now channels annual spending of approximately US\$16 billion. However, it is now widely recognised that this formal system is part of a much larger humanitarian landscape. This also takes in different political, private and civil society actors, and is shaped by Southern actors to a much greater degree than had previously been assumed or understood.



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Reforms attempt to address the functioning of the formal system. But the question remains of how the architecture of aid might better reflect the complexity of humanitarian engagement on the ground and expand to incorporate more inclusive mechanisms of coordination, cooperation and funding.

Readings

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Discussion questions

How are the politics of emergency relief affected by geopolitical context? Which trends in humanitarian action can be associated with recent geopolitical changes and which dynamics are more long-standing in the history of humanitarian action? How do recurring dilemmas and current politics interact?

How has the architecture of emergency aid been developed? What are the key structures and mechanisms in UN response and how do these interact with those of other actors, whether formal or informal? How might this system need to evolve in light of current challenges?

What is the operational role of principles in humanitarian action? Where might compromises be possible, useful, or unavoidable? And what does this mean for the relevance of humanitarian principles as a tool for working in crises?

What elements shape the range of contexts in which 'humanitarian' work takes place? What influences the allocation of funding and where does the majority of funding go? How do understandings of hazard, risk and vulnerability differ and what are their implications for programming?