



OI Policy Compendium Note on Humanitarianism

Overview: Oxfam International's Policy on Humanitarianism

Oxfam is a key player in the global humanitarian system, working primarily alongside affected communities, directly where local capacity is insufficient, and through local accountable organisations, governmental bodies, as well as with other international agencies. Oxfam:

- *responds* to relieve human suffering in emergency situations created by war, violent conflict, drought, floods, earthquakes, and famine.
- *delivers* vital assistance in the form of safe water, sanitation, food security and emergency livelihoods, and shelter to reduce the incidence of death and disease.
- *follows* internationally-recognised guidelines for humanitarian response including the *Sphere Humanitarian Charter* and the *Code of Conduct for the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and NGOs in Disaster Relief*.
- *helps* to prevent loss of life in future emergencies and crises through reducing risks, and building up local preparedness capacity to respond to disasters as part of its development work.

Oxfam uses an integrated approach linking humanitarian, development and campaign/advocacy work to maximise its impact - to overcome poverty, suffering, and injustice. It believes the right to life, while taking precedence in an emergency, must be linked to other rights if people are to take control of their lives and raise themselves out of poverty. Underpinning all of Oxfam's humanitarian work is the **rights-based approach** and the belief that all people have the right to life and security.

Oxfam's humanitarian approach adds value to the work of the humanitarian system as a whole. It is certainly *not* the only valid humanitarian approach. A strong humanitarian movement is made up of distinct, independent actors. The actual roles of these actors in humanitarian response will differ, based on their core competencies and comparative advantages in a particular situation. Oxfam owes its primary responsibility – its moral duty – and **accountability** to those affected by disasters and conflict.

Oxfam is an impartial humanitarian non-governmental organisation, committed to meeting the needs of all those affected by disasters and conflicts, discriminating against none in genuine humanitarian need. It maintains an independent position vis à vis governments and other political organisations.

Oxfam is not a neutral agency. The rights based approach guarantees that it takes a firm stand on the causes of humanitarian need, and it is in support of a series of fundamental rights and values including gender equality, accountability, and humanitarian standards.

Oxfam's overall goal is to work towards a just world without poverty, and in the humanitarian field Oxfam will influence the performance of others, including national governments and the UN system, to provide greater assistance and better protection for affected populations. For this reason Oxfam's humanitarian work often incorporates programmes to rebuild livelihoods or to empower people to speak out, organise and have a voice in changing their situation.

1. Definitions – Oxfam Humanitarian Principles

Humanitarianism is the belief that all human beings deserve respect and dignity, and to enjoy their rights to assistance and protection. Humanitarians accordingly dedicate themselves to help provide that assistance and protection for everyone who needs them, irrespective of race, creed, religion, nationality or any other distinction. The obligation to save lives, alleviate suffering and promote human dignity in the middle of human-made or natural disasters is more important than any other principle or ideology. As Albert Schweitzer put it, “*Humanitarianism consists in never sacrificing a human being to a purpose.*”¹

Humanitarian Imperative: humanitarian assistance must be provided to meet the needs of those affected by the particular emergency, taking into account the local capacity already in place to meet those needs. No other consideration – such as favouring one particular community – should distort the provision of such assistance.²

Humanitarian assistance follows that imperative, and must be:

- **Impartial:** to all populations in need without adverse discrimination of any kind, regardless of the race, ethnicity, sex/gender, religion, social status, nationality, or political affiliation of the recipients.
- **Independent:** based on assessed needs, free from political control, and never presented as part of a political or military operation.

(Other relief assistance may be vital, but it is not ‘humanitarian’ without this clear motivation. Military forces providing relief, for example, to win ‘hearts and minds’ can never be humanitarian)

Humanitarian Agencies are different and diverse, complementing each other through a range of mandates and sectoral focuses. What unites them is the commitment to providing impartial, independent assistance based on needs alone.

2. Background

The foundations of humanitarian assistance rest on the fundamental principles codified in International Humanitarian Law (IHL) and other international law, and further defined in *the Code of Conduct for the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and NGOs in Disaster Relief*³ in the mid-1990s. In 1998, a *SPHERE Humanitarian Charter* developed these principles and set down *SPHERE* standards and accompanying indicators, updated in 2004.⁴ All these have been designed to help uphold the rights of people in need of assistance and protection. In particular the Humanitarian Charter champions the:⁵

- Right to Life with Dignity (International Human Rights Law)

¹ Schweitzer, Albert (1987), *The Philosophy of Civilization* (reissue). Buffalo, N.Y.: Prometheus Books

² A similar provision on needs-based assistance is articulated as Principle 2 in *The Code of Conduct for the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and NGOs in Disaster Relief*. The principle of non-discrimination is expressed in a multitude of human-rights instruments, including the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948; International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights of 1966; International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights of 1966.

³ *the Code of Conduct for the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and NGOs in Disaster Relief*. Available at: <http://www.ifrc.org/Docs/idrl/I259EN.pdf>

⁴ *The Humanitarian Charter and Minimum Standards for Disaster Response*: <http://www.sphereproject.org/>

⁵ The Humanitarian Charter champions the following international law instruments as guidance for humanitarian response: Universal Declaration of Human Rights 1948; International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights 1966; International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights 1966; International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination 1969; The four Geneva Conventions of 1949 and their two Additional Protocols of 1977; Convention relating to the Status of Refugees 1951 and the Protocol relating to the Status of Refugees 1967; Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment 1984; Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide 1948; Convention on the Rights of the Child 1989; Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women 1979; Convention relating to the Status of Stateless Persons 1960; Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement 1998; and the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court.

- Distinction of Civilians from Combatants (international Humanitarian Law)
- Non-refoulement and the ban on forcible or coerced displacement (Refugee Law, the Internally Displaced Persons Guidelines, and International Human Rights Law)

The Code of Conduct for the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement & NGOs in Disaster Relief:

- 1: The Humanitarian imperative comes first
- 2: Aid is given regardless of the race, creed or nationality of the recipients and without adverse distinction of any kind. Aid priorities are calculated on the basis of need alone
- 3: Aid will not be used to further a particular political or religious standpoint
- 4: We shall endeavour not to act as instruments of government foreign policy
- 5: We shall respect culture and custom
- 6: We shall attempt to build disaster response on local capacities
- 7: Ways shall be found to involve programme beneficiaries in the management of relief aid
- 8: Relief aid must strive to reduce future vulnerabilities to disaster as well as meeting basic needs
- 9: We hold ourselves accountable to both those we seek to assist and those from whom we accept resources
- 10: In our information, publicity and advertising activities, we shall recognise disaster victims as dignified humans, not hopeless objects.

Humanitarianism does not belong to any particular religious tradition, culture, or civilization. Jean Pictet, in his commentary on The Fundamental Principles of the Red Cross points out that: *“The wellspring of the principle of humanity... can be summed up in a single sentence, Whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them. This fundamental precept can be found, in almost identical form, in all the great religions, Brahmanism, Buddhism, Christianity, Confucianism, Islam, Judaism and Taoism...”*⁶

Modern humanitarianism grew from the Red Cross Movement in the late 19th century. Oxfam was born as the Oxford Committee for Famine Relief, in Britain during the Second World War. This group of Oxford citizens collected money and campaigned for relief goods to be sent through the allied naval blockade to women and children in Nazi-occupied Greece. They met initial resistance from the British Government, on the basis that providing humanitarian assistance to the civilian victims of war would indirectly aid the Nazi enemy forces – an argument still heard frequently today. The contracted telex address (OXFAM) was adopted as the organisations name some years later.

Founded in 1995, Oxfam International is a confederation of 13 like-minded organisations, working with over 3,000 partners in more than 100 countries.⁷ These and other Oxfams have a long history of supporting WASH humanitarian programmes through thousands of local NGOs. Oxfam Great Britain is the largest water, sanitation and public health (WASH) humanitarian non-government agency in the world, one of the ten largest humanitarian agencies that deliver over 80 per cent of global humanitarian relief. Oxfam Intermon and Oxfam Australia are building their capacity in this same sector. Oxfam focuses its humanitarian assistance on:

- Water and sanitation
- Public health promotion
- Food security and emergency livelihoods
- Protection

⁶ Pictet, J. (1979). ‘The Fundamental Principles of the Red Cross: commentary’ available at: http://www.icrc.org/Web/eng/siteeng0.nsf/html/EA08067453343B76C1256D2600383BC4?OpenDocument&Style=Custo_Final.3&View=defaultBody3

⁷ **The thirteen Oxfam organisations** are based in: Australia, Belgium, Canada, France, Germany, Great Britain, Hong Kong, Ireland, The Netherlands, New Zealand, Quebec, Spain and the United States. A small Oxfam International secretariat is based in Oxford, UK, and the secretariat runs advocacy offices in Washington DC, New York, Brussels and Geneva.

- Emergency shelter

3. Oxfam International's humanitarian approach

Above and beyond the basic humanitarian principles listed in section 1, Oxfam is committed to:

A rights-based approach

All people have the right to life and security. This means that all women and men affected by natural disasters or conflict will get the protection and assistance they need, regardless of who they are. In its work, Oxfam seeks to promote the full range of rights: the right to a decent livelihood, to essential services, a voice in decision-making and an identity free from discrimination.

Gender equity: Humanitarian assistance must be provided in a way that responds to the expressed needs of women as well as men, girls as well as boys. It must do nothing to reinforce unjust power relations between men and women. Indeed, humanitarian assistance that is distributed equitably can help to challenge gender inequality.

Protection: All civilians affected by conflict and disasters should be protected from the threat of violence, coercion and deliberate deprivation. Humanitarian action should contribute to civilians' greater safety through programming to reduce vulnerability and reinforce the capacity of civilians, and advocacy to the governments and others with the *Responsibility to Protect* civilians from genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity.

Humanitarian Access to Vulnerable Populations: Humanitarian agencies must maintain their ability to obtain access to all vulnerable populations in all areas of the emergency in question, and to negotiate such access with all parties to a conflict. Particular care must also be taken to ensure that access is sustainable. Coordination with the military should be considered to the extent that it facilitates, secures, and sustains – rather than hinders – humanitarian access.

Distinction between combatants and non-combatants: At all times, a clear distinction must be maintained between combatants and non-combatants – i.e. between those actively engaged in hostilities, and civilians and others who do not or no longer directly participate in the armed conflict (including the sick, wounded, prisoners of war, and ex-combatants who are demobilised). For humanitarian agencies, this means that they should *not* provide assistance for combatants.

Minimising Harm: Humanitarian agencies should strive to 'do no harm' and to minimise the harm that may be inadvertently done by being present and providing assistance (e.g. where aid is used as an instrument of war). Humanitarian negotiations, and any agreed outcome between humanitarian organisations and armed groups, should at a minimum not cause harm or result in reduced protection of civilians.

Prevention of Sexual Exploitation and Abuse (PSEA) by humanitarian workers: Oxfam affirms that sexual exploitation and abuse by humanitarian workers constitutes a gross and intolerable abuse of people, and of the uneven power relationship between suppliers and recipients of aid. Oxfam trains aid workers and recipient groups in identifying and reporting such misconduct, and has an organisational zero-tolerance to any such misconduct in the workplace.

An integrated approach

Oxfam integrates humanitarian, development and campaign work to maximise its impact – to overcome both poverty and suffering. It believes the right to life, while taking precedence in an emergency, must be linked to other rights - such as social, economic, civil and political rights - if people are to take control of their lives and raise themselves out of poverty. For this reason

Oxfam's humanitarian work often incorporates programmes to rebuild livelihoods or to empower people to speak out, organise and have a voice in changing their situation.

Influencing others: A key element of Oxfam's humanitarian work is to influence the performance of others, including national governments and the UN system, to provide greater assistance and better protection for people affected by natural disasters and conflict. We try to mobilise the public to bring about change, for example lobbying donor governments to fulfil their aid pledges, or pressing governments of disaster-affected countries to ensure that women's rights are respected.

Risk reduction: Oxfam aims to reduce the future vulnerability of communities to disasters by integrating risk reduction strategies into its long-term development work. This may include conflict prevention programmes, initiatives that build communities' resilience, including giving them a say in decisions that affect them and training them to be emergency responders, and disaster preparedness work, such as planting trees to reduce the risk of flooding and landslides, or building cyclone shelters. Oxfam seeks to address the underlying causes of vulnerability from the outset of an emergency response and so inform the design of rehabilitation and development work. Oxfam's work to tackle poverty recognises that poverty is one of the key root causes for disasters.

Accountability

While Oxfam always endeavours to be accountable to its donors, it believes that ultimately its primary responsibility is to those it is assisting. Being accountable to the affected communities makes humanitarian work more effective. This entails involving disaster-affected people in the design, implementation and evaluation of programmes, consulting them on decisions that affect them and providing complaints mechanisms.

Respect for Culture and Custom.⁸ Respect and sensitivity must be maintained towards the culture, structures, and customs of the communities and countries where humanitarian activities are carried out. Where possible and to the extent feasible, ways shall be found to involve the intended beneficiaries of humanitarian assistance and/or local personnel in the design, management, and implementation of assistance, including in civil–military coordination.

Learning: Oxfam is committed to improving its own performance to deliver better quality humanitarian assistance and protection.

Complementarity

A strong humanitarian movement is made up of distinct, independent actors. The actual roles of these actors in humanitarian response will differ, based on their core competencies and comparative advantages in a particular situation. The national government is primarily responsible for humanitarian assistance to its citizens.

Upon their request the UN should play the central role in providing leadership and coordination of international humanitarian action. Coordination should lead in the direction of maximising the strengths of all implementing humanitarian actors in contributing to a collective effort, rather than ensuring that all actors, including NGOs, are moving in lockstep toward a particular political outcome.

Working with others: With local people usually the first to respond to a crisis, it is a fundamental principle for Oxfam to work with local or nationally operating partner organisations and affected communities wherever possible. It seeks not only to build their capacity to respond to future disasters and so promote sustainable development, but also to learn from communities and

⁸ For example, see Principles 5 and 7 of The Code of Conduct for the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and NGOs in Disaster Relief. Available at: <http://www.ifrc.org/Docs/idrl/I259EN.pdf>

partners that have adapted to challenges such as climate change, and disseminate these lessons.

4. What Oxfam International will do

Oxfam will:

- **Strive to ensure that populations vulnerable to humanitarian emergencies attain their right to humanitarian assistance.**
- **Implement in its work the *SPHERE Humanitarian Charter* and the *Code of Conduct for the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and NGOs in Disaster Relief*.**
- **Strive to deliver high quality support and aid** not only in order to relieve suffering, but also to increase the capacity of people affected by humanitarian crises, by working with and through local organisations.
- **Incorporate gender perspectives** within its assessments and responses.
- **Be accountable** to, among others, the local population, and the beneficiaries of its support. Oxfam will evaluate and assess its humanitarian response efforts against the SPHERE Humanitarian Charter and the Code of Conduct.
- **Work within its capacity in a timely, efficient and effective manner and to commit itself to continuous learning.**
- **Actively promote humanitarian principles** with Governments, the UN, international organisations, and local and international NGOs.
- **Base its responses in an understanding of the wider political context**, accessing expertise that understands the political, economic and cultural context of the situation, whether natural disaster or violent conflict, in order to have a sound background to decision-making.
- **Increase its impact** by combining its field programme responses, in a contextually appropriate way, with advocacy, communications and fundraising.
- **Analyse the humanitarian threats from global processes** such as global warming and ensure communities/countries are supported to adapt rapidly to emerging stresses that have the potential to trigger humanitarian emergencies.
- **Contribute to protecting civilians** in its own programmes, and by promoting the principle of the Responsibility to Protect, which confirms that there is a collective international responsibility to prevent genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing, and crimes against humanity.⁹
- **Continue to financially support the work of independent humanitarian and human rights agencies**, and support their ability to monitor and criticise governments' human rights adherence.
- **Lobby the international community to continue its work in operationalising international agreements** such as the Good Humanitarian Donorship principles and the Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness,¹⁰ and ensure that development and humanitarian policy is premised on the needs of vulnerable populations, not narrow interpretations of national interest.
- **Reduce vulnerability to future disasters**, and put energy into its own and others' preparedness for humanitarian response.
- **Work towards effective international, regional and state mechanisms to control the trade and use of arms**, including an Arms Trade Treaty, and the disuse of weapons systems that do not effectively discriminate between civilians and combatants, such as cluster munitions and landmines.

⁹ The principle endorsed through paragraphs 138 and 139 of the 2005 World Summit Outcome Document (<http://www.un.org/summit2005/documents.html>) and Security Council Resolution 1674 (<http://domino.un.org/UNISPAL.NSF/361eea1cc08301c485256cf600606959/e529762bafa456f8852571610045ebef!OpenDocument>)

¹⁰ Paris Declaration (www.oecd.org) and Good Humanitarian Donorship principles (www.goodhumanitariananddonorship.org)