

CONFERENCE

CONNECTING WITH THE PAST

**THE FUNDAMENTAL PRINCIPLES OF THE INTERNATIONAL RED CROSS
AND RED CRESCENT MOVEMENT: A CRITICAL HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE**



ICRC

REPORT

This report summarizes the presentations and debates held at the conference “Connecting with the Past,” which took place at ICRC headquarters in Geneva on 16–17 September 2015. The conference was jointly organized by the ICRC, the Arts and Humanities Research Council in the UK and the University of Exeter. Except for the concluding remarks on p. 22, the report was written by Matt Shinn from Whole New Chapter Ltd., who was commissioned to do so by the University of Exeter. The views expressed in this publication are the participants’ and not necessarily those of the organizations that they represent.



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I – INTRODUCTION

On his appointment in 2012 as president of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), Peter Maurer observed that the 150th anniversary of the ICRC was an opportunity to reflect on the organization's future orientation. A historian by training, Mr Maurer views the long history of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement (the Movement) as an invaluable guide when it comes to meeting the challenges of the twenty-first century. An especially important challenge is to define and affirm "what neutral, independent, and impartial humanitarian action is."

As part of the efforts of the ICRC to reflect on the principles underlying humanitarian action, a conference was held in the Humanitarium, a conference venue at the ICRC's headquarters in Geneva, Switzerland, on 16-17 September 2015.¹ Jointly organized by the ICRC, and the Arts and Humanities Research Council and University of Exeter in the UK, the conference brought together historians of humanitarian action and practitioners from major humanitarian organizations from across the globe (see annex for a list of participants). The views expressed in this publication are those of the participants concerned, and not necessarily those of the organizations that they represent.

The aim of the conference was to provide a critical historical perspective on the Fundamental Principles of the Movement, and how those Principles have influenced – and been influenced by – the broader humanitarian sector, multilateral organizations and States. The main questions being asked were: Where did the Principles come from, and how have they been understood and applied in different periods? How have the Principles helped humanitarian organizations to navigate difficult environments, and what challenges have there been in implementing them? How have the Principles forged the identity of the humanitarian sector, influencing other humanitarian organizations and helping to shape international humanitarian law (IHL)? And crucially, what can we learn from the Movement's rich history and Fundamental Principles that may provide insights into current realities, and act as a guide for the future?

Reactions:

"When practitioners and historians get together, the historians say that the Principles are contingent and ambiguous. What are practitioners going to do with that? Practitioners need to find a way of functioning with the knowledge that the Principles involve inconsistencies, ambiguities and contingencies. Perhaps we all have to embrace the ambiguity of the Principles."

The Fundamental Principles of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement

In October 2015, the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement celebrated the 50th anniversary of the formal adoption of the Fundamental Principles. The origins of these Principles date back to the beginnings of the ICRC and the Movement, but they were not codified until 1965. Together the Principles of humanity, impartiality, neutrality, independence, voluntary service, unity and universality underpin the Movement's work in helping and protecting people in need.

Humanitarian action should be motivated by the sole aim of helping other human beings affected by conflicts or disasters (humanity); it should be exclusively based on people's needs and should avoid adverse discrimination (impartiality); it should be carried out without taking sides in hostilities, or engaging at any time in controversies of a political, racial, religious or ideological nature (neutrality); and it should be free from any economic, political or military interest (independence).¹

The Principles of voluntary service, unity and universality lay the foundations that ensure that the Movement is organized in such a way that it can consistently take impartial, neutral and independent humanitarian action. They make it possible for a National Society to be founded in each country and operate with a diverse volunteer base throughout the territory. In addition, these Principles ensure that

The International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement is the largest humanitarian network in the world. Its mission is to alleviate human suffering, protect life and health, and uphold human dignity during armed conflicts and other situations of violence. It is present in every country, and is supported by millions of volunteers. The Movement is made up of the International Committee of the Red Cross, the National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, and the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies.

¹ For more information on the conference, including some of the papers presented, please visit www.icrc.org/en/event/connecting-past.

National Societies are supported by other components of the Movement, including the ICRC, to address the needs of all those in conflict situations.

Fundamental Principles and humanitarian principles

The first four Fundamental Principles of humanity, impartiality, neutrality and independence have been widely adopted by the broader humanitarian community since the 1990s, including through Resolution 46/182 of the United Nations General Assembly in 1991. They are now commonly referred to as the “humanitarian principles.”

While these four principles benefit from a clearly accepted definition within the Movement, they are subject to diverse interpretations and varying degrees of commitment in the wider humanitarian sector. They have nonetheless become a cornerstone of modern humanitarianism, and embody what “principled humanitarian action” is understood to be.

Given the interconnections and similarities between the two, the terms “Fundamental Principles” and “humanitarian principles” were sometimes used interchangeably by participants at the conference, and this is reflected in this report.

II – PRINCIPLES ACROSS HISTORY: SUMMARY OF THE DEBATES

A historically conscious humanitarian sector?

According to Hugo Slim (ICRC), “when I started teaching humanitarian action in 1994, it was a real struggle to teach students the history of their profession. It’s been a joy in the last 20 years to watch the development of humanitarian history. It’s one of the great achievements of our profession that it’s now very historically conscious.”

The conference used the occasion of the anniversary of the Principles to take the long view. The Principles didn’t suddenly come from nowhere; rather, at the time of their adoption in 1965, they had already been evolving since the Red Cross was founded a century earlier.

The conference examined principled humanitarian action in five historical eras in the course of five panel discussions. It started with the period from the 1860s to 1914 (The birth of modern humanitarianism), followed by the steady extension and evolution of the humanitarian endeavour from 1918 to 1945. The changes and challenges marking the turbulent era of decolonization and the Cold War era were the theme of panel 3. Panel 4 assessed the question of whether the 1980s and 1990s were a golden age for humanitarian action. The last panel covered the geopolitical changes after the terrorist attacks of 9/11 in 2001 and their implications for principled humanitarian action.

1. THE BIRTH OF MODERN HUMANITARIANISM: THE 1860s TO THE FIRST WORLD WAR

The ICRC and neutrality before the First World War

Professor Irène Herrmann of the University of Geneva spoke about how neutrality was an ill-defined concept in the early years of the Red Cross, and became a declared Red Cross principle as late as 1921. The Swiss authorities claimed that the establishment of the Red Cross Committee in Geneva came out of the “natural human qualities” of the Swiss. Yet the history of the ICRC shows that neutrality has “never been an immutable principle.” It was not based on a “lofty notion,” but on the “reciprocal interests” of the Red Cross and Swiss government. In other words, it was the result of a conscious blending of the ideas of political neutrality and humanitarian neutrality.

According to Irène Herrmann, the Red Cross emphasized the “Swissness” of the term neutrality. A neutral Switzerland helped the Red Cross, and the Red Cross in turn helped Switzerland shape the perception of its own independence and neutrality.

In short, the principle of neutrality was defined through the interaction of the ICRC and its wider political context. Neutrality was never a fixed concept. It was a goal – often challenging, and sometimes controversial to apply, even among the members of the Committee, the governing body of the ICRC. Swiss and humanitarian neutrality influenced each other, “preserving national and organizational survival.”

Neutrality is now a Fundamental Principle, symbolizing the Movement as a whole. Yet the history of the idea of neutrality between 1863 and 1918 “makes it obvious that Principles are not timeless, but constantly evolving.”

“In the early years of the Red Cross, soldiers on some battlefields weren’t aware of what the Red Cross flag represented.”

The birth of modern humanitarianism: Perspectives from the Red Cross Society of China, 1899-1937

Dr Caroline Reeves of Harvard University pointed out how salient the history of the Red Cross in China was, given the country's importance to humanitarianism today. The Red Cross Society of China was founded as early as 1904, mainly to help victims of the Russo-Japanese War. But the creation of the Red Cross was not so much a recognition of universal humanitarian principles as an expression of deeply rooted Chinese values, anchored in Confucianism and Taoism, and of the desire to join the international community. Similarly, China's signing of the 1899 Hague Treaty a few years earlier had been a reaction to peer pressure (a desire to avoid being "the only country not performing these good deeds"), and a seizing of the chance to join the Western club of nations, more than a mere expression of shared values. After 1904, the Red Cross in China grew rapidly, until there were almost 300 chapters by 1924.

For thousands of years, though, social welfare provision in China had been seen as the State's responsibility. According to Caroline Reeves, the Red Cross in China "became, and has remained, an arm of the State," and in the years prior to the Second World War, the ICRC was happy to encourage this "statist" model that had not yet been discredited by fascism. The story in China shows, in other words, that there can be "no universal, immutable understanding of humanitarian practice: the Principle of independence was only formally adopted in 1965, and it has clearly not always meant the same thing to the Red Cross."

The Boer War as humanitarian crisis

Dr Elizabeth van Heyningen of the University of Cape Town focused on humanitarian aid to civilians during the Boer War. That war, which was "a hybrid of a set-piece battle and a colonial war," became a touchstone of international morality, like the Spanish Civil War in the 1930s, and as such "it was the focus of aid, politically, militarily and philanthropically, which set it apart from most colonial wars."

The two Boer republics involved in the war had both signed the 1864 Geneva Convention, and both had Red Cross Societies. That of the Transvaal failed, through poor administration, and because it had little influence within the culture and society of the Boers, with its pre-industrial medical culture (ambulances were turned down as a "new-fangled invention"). But the Orange Free State Red Cross, by contrast, was more efficient, with greater medical professionalism, and it was not treated as a suspicious foreign organization. The war became an international cause, and was followed closely around the world, with many European countries sending their own Red Cross ambulances, and non-Red Cross personnel using the red cross emblem.

With images from the British-run "concentration camps" being widely circulated, humanitarian organizations sprang up all over Europe, though according to Elizabeth van Heyningen, "this was very much seen as a white man's war – a European war transferred to Africa. Black soldiers received very little medical or other humanitarian aid."

The European Red Cross Societies that descended on South Africa during the Boer War did so because of their overt sympathy for the Afrikaner cause, supporting the Transvaal and Orange Free State in their struggle against British imperialism. But once in the field, many of these Societies adhered in practice to the tenets of neutrality and impartiality.

"During the Boer War the Natal Indian Ambulance Corps was organized by Gandhi."

Similarly, in the Orange Free State, the Red Cross-run Identiteits Buro (which carried out tracing activities on behalf of the families of dead combatants) appears to have implemented the principle of neutrality, before it was actually formalized, by forbidding its staff to carry weapons. Again, this emphasizes the intuitive nature of the Principles when confronted with realities in the field.

The resonant issues from the Boer War, then, include the dynamics between different National Red Cross Societies, and the emergence of other humanitarian agencies (such as the Natal Indian Ambulance Corps) working alongside the Red Cross: in other words, it was an early sign of what was to become known as a growing "ecology" of humanitarianism.

Reaction:

“The Principle of neutrality may have been constructed out of a political imperative, based on the converging interests of Switzerland and the ICRC. But isn’t there also an operational imperative, since not taking sides in hostilities helps to guarantee safety and acceptance? At the operational level, isn’t it true that you can’t do your job unless the situation you’re in is neutralized? The Principles are *ex-post* constructions, with the Principle of neutrality evolving as a balance between operational and political imperatives.”

“Perhaps the clarity of the Principles is nevertheless useful, and there will always be a dance between the fixedness of the Principles and the ambiguities of history.”

“On neutrality there are differences of thought within the humanitarian profession: it’s not just an operational role, but a profoundly humane position, a disposition – it covers the whole spectrum from a political position to a personal virtue.”

Key takeaways:

- The term “neutrality” is best understood as a product of the political and operational environment and the interplay between the two.
- The Boer War illustrates how in the past it was possible for humanitarians to separate personal belief from institutional humanitarian practice, and, more to the point, how the Principles have enabled and upheld such a separation.
- The early years of the Red Cross Society of China, and the Boer War, demonstrate that the Principles are more than an expression of shared values: they are also instruments for seeking recognition in the international arena.
- Prior to the First World War, humanitarianism was particularly based on a strong-State-centric paradigm, including within the ICRC. But the intuitive nature of the Principles, when confronted with the realities of conflict, was already apparent.

2. CONSOLIDATION AND EXPANSION: FROM WORLD WAR I TO WORLD WAR II

During the period of political and social turmoil during the Twenties and Thirties, clashes between ideologies severely tested the ICRC’s commitment to neutrality.

When neutrality meets ideology: The ICRC in the Spanish Civil War

For Daniel Palmieri, the ICRC’s historical research officer, the ICRC tried to “shelter itself from partiality” during the Spanish Civil War. “It seems easy when you’re physically located in Switzerland, but neutrality in a civil war is more problematic. The Spanish Civil War was an ideological confrontation, where everyone had an opinion, and felt legitimated in getting involved.”

The Spanish Civil War was the first major civil war involving the ICRC. Was the Red Cross as neutral as it claimed? “The ICRC members during the period all came from the bourgeoisie, and while ICRC delegates in the Spanish Civil War were requested to be neutral and impartial, they were mostly officers in the Swiss army, which was a conservative institution. Some even said that they only wanted to work in the Francoist territories. Reports sent to Geneva were more critical of the conditions of prisoners of the Republicans, and this seems to be evidence of a right-wing mentality which favoured the Nationalists.” But for Daniel Palmieri, this impression of right-wing bias at the institutional level has to be qualified: “Physically far from the battlefield and the victims, the members of the Committee remained unmoved in their right-sided ideology, bringing tacit support to Francoism. But many delegates in practice left aside political opinions, to help alleviate suffering. So while some delegates were not really *a priori* politically neutral, they still managed to be impartial in their actions, helping everyone who was vulnerable. In so doing, they demonstrated that the link between neutrality and impartiality was not as strong as

was officially claimed.” And again, it seems to show the intuitive nature of some of the Principles, when confronted with realities in the field.

From imperial to political humanitarianism: Indian nationalist aid initiatives

Dr Maria Framke of the University of Rostock looked at the humanitarian aid initiatives of Indian nationalists during the Spanish Civil War and the Second World War. What were the motives and practices of the Indian nationalist movement in this period? How was humanitarian aid understood, and did the nationalists reflect its principles?

According to Maria Framke, “humanitarian aid is rarely apolitical, but that doesn’t necessarily foreclose the application of the Fundamental Principles. Political motivations were overt in this period: humanitarianism was a form of politics. The Indian Aid Initiative was organized in the UK in 1914, with the Indian Field Ambulance Training Corps under Gandhi’s leadership. And the idea of reciprocity was central to it: the aim was to demonstrate loyalty to the Empire in the hope of reward later.”

Humanitarian aid was seen as contributing to the legitimization of Indian nationalism. And it was a way of gaining some military training in a way that went against the British policy of restricting training to certain groups within India – the so-called “martial races.”

Then there was Indian humanitarian involvement in China, following the Japanese invasion in 1937. The Indian National Congress quickly sided with China, organizing its China Relief Fund, which was focused on the delivery of medical supplies. And, for Maria Framke, this brought political benefits: “Nehru was convinced that it would enhance the status of Indian nationalism on the world stage. By providing aid to another country, the Congress representatives were acting as *de facto* representatives of a sovereign state. Aid was viewed as a political instrument in other words, but the application of humanitarian principles (especially those of impartiality and neutrality) didn’t figure much.”

Quaker relief between the two World Wars

For Daniel Maul of Aarhus University, the Quakers are an interesting subject with regard to the question of the Fundamental Principles. Quaker humanitarianism long predates them, and so does Quaker engagement with some of the issues that the Principles raise: for example, concepts of humanity, relationships with governments, ideas of neutrality and impartiality.

According to Daniel Maul, the “Quakerly” approach to humanitarian aid emerged in interaction with the ideals and practices of other actors in the field. The American Friends Service Committee (AFSC) – the humanitarian branch of the Quakers – was founded following US entry into the First World War. It offered young male Quakers an alternative to military service, giving them a meaningful and patriotic role on the front lines. The AFSC came into close contact with the American Red Cross, and became part of a broader humanitarian movement.

After agreeing to work with the American Relief Administration, the American Friends Service Committee flew the American flag outside its feeding stations.

Then, after the war, the AFSC was invited to become part of President Herbert Hoover’s American Relief Administration, the American relief mission to Europe and post-revolutionary Russia, and so in effect to become an arm of US foreign policy. As Daniel Maul put it, “they took US government money, in effect, to be able to work on a bigger scale, including later in the Spanish Civil War, when they acted as unofficial representatives of the US government. This prompted a lot of soul-searching, and conflict between young people in the field, who were often idealistic and wanted to do something Quakerly, and AFSC headquarters, which sided with the American Relief Administration.”

But in practice, the AFSC worked on both sides of the Spanish conflict, and promoted the image of themselves as an impartial agency. For Daniel Maul, then, “the politics of neutrality drew from different sources. Certainly it reflected religious convictions, but it was promoted as being distinctly Quakerly – as such it was part of an invented tradition. The AFSC leadership had come to acknowledge neutrality as a unique selling point in an increasingly competitive humanitarian marketplace.”

Reaction:

“The history of the Spanish Civil War shows what happens when an individual is closer to the action: there are differences between working at the field level and at an organization’s HQ.”

“The Fundamental Principles have an appeal for every human being. They can be used in discussions with perpetrators and victims. They don’t exist in a vacuum, but in political reality. Are there limits to how far the Fundamental Principles can be appropriated?”

Key takeaways:

- The example of the ICRC in the Spanish Civil War demonstrates that members of organizations came to apply the principles of neutrality and impartiality quite spontaneously and these were imposed also by the realities of the (highly polarized) field that they were operating in.
- Instrumentalization of aid for political purposes – like legitimating a political cause or joining the “club of nations” – was already a reality of humanitarianism prior to the Second World War.

3. NEW CHALLENGES: DECOLONIZATION AND THE COLD WAR

The post-war period raised far-reaching questions about the relationship of international humanitarian organizations to State power, about the basis on which humanitarian needs were identified and prioritized, and about the interaction of humanitarians with non-State armed groups.

Against this backdrop, the Movement’s Fundamental Principles, which were adopted at this time, were intended to give new impetus to an organization that had been unable to mitigate some of the horrors of the Second World War, to help keep the Movement united in a world divided by the Cold War and shaken by decolonization, and to make a statement of the Movement’s ethics, values, goals and approach.

Humanitarian principles put to the test: Challenges to humanitarian action during decolonization

Professor Andrew Thompson of the University of Exeter spoke about decolonization, humanitarianism during the Cold War, new forms of globalization and the emergence of a world-wide humanitarian system, which increased the number and sheer diversity of voices that humanitarians needed to listen to. This was a time, he said, when “humanitarians were faced with situations for which they were ill-prepared. There were new types of armed struggle, with non-State armed groups, and unconventional, asymmetric warfare. There were blurred distinctions between combatants and non-combatants, and intense arguments about the types of victims that humanitarianism should apply to.” The balance of armed conflict swung towards wars within States, challenging the adequacy of IHL. The humanitarian landscape became larger, more visible and more varied, with aid agencies of all kinds looking to expand. This in turn raised questions about the proper limits of humanitarian action. Should it include those detained by their own States? And what kinds of aid should be given to liberation movements? This was a time when the very essence of humanitarianism was being actively argued over.

Andrew Thompson provided three snapshots of what happened to the Fundamental Principles during decolonization. The first was in relation to colonial counter-insurgency – looking at the involvement of National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies in Kenya, Algeria and Malaya, he said, raised some key questions: “When does compromise with colonial authorities descend into complicity and collusion? And what can be done when a National Society is prevented by its own government from working with impartiality?”

Andrew Thompson drew attention to the role of the United Nations: “The real torpedo that was launched against neutrality in this period is the UN’s Resolution 1514, the Decolonization Declaration: it led to an explicit instruction to the UN’s specialized agencies, and its Human Rights Commission, to give moral and material assistance to liberation movements.”

Second, there was political detention: “The question here for the Fundamental Principles is what happens when non-international armed conflict becomes the most prevalent form, but IHL poorly safeguards political detainees.” Drawing attention to the striking growth of the (largely neglected) history of ICRC visits to detainees, which he called a “quiet revolution,” Andrew Thompson made the case that such visits relied heavily for their justification on the Principles of independence, neutrality and impartiality, when many national authorities argued that they did not have a basis in international law.

“A quiet revolution.”

Finally, there was the rise of non-Western forms of humanitarian action, as manifested in the history of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement – especially in the global South. “The issue here,” said Andrew Thompson, “is the universality of the Fundamental Principles. At a time when there was a slew of new National Societies, many of them carved out of former colonies, would the Principles be viewed as Western constructs, which those in newly created nations had had no hand in creating?” For Andrew Thompson, the Fundamental Principles after 1945 served multiple purposes. They were “a strategy for securing access to conflicts poorly covered by IHL. But they were also a way of repurposing humanitarianism, framing the debate about the kinds of relief that humanitarians could legitimately provide, in what situations, and to whom. They provided a prism through which differences and disputes arising within the ICRC, and within the wider Movement, could be expressed. Ultimately only one of those Fundamental Principles – that of a shared humanity – had the capacity to counter the expression of opposing interests lying behind decolonization and the Cold War. Perhaps the Fundamental Principles do either stand together or not at all, and if their ultimate purpose is to produce exclusively humanitarian action, then the post-War era suggests that, facing the recurring challenges of each new era, it’s each generation’s renewed attention to the principle of a shared humanity that is the true basis for compassionate responses to suffering.”

Caught in a trap: Neutrality, advocacy and the influence of the Third World on British and Irish NGOs, 1968-1982

As Brian McKeown, Director of the Irish NGO Trócaire, put it: “You can’t be a full Christian without being political. It’s not enough to give alms; we also have to look at the causes of underdevelopment in Third World countries.” Quoted by Kevin O’Sullivan in the journal *Humanity*.

Dr Kevin O’Sullivan of the National University of Ireland, Galway, described the rapid growth of the humanitarian sector in the late 1960s and early 1970s, when a newly resurgent community of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) challenged the accepted boundaries of humanitarian relief. “Tired of the traditional model of charity and neutrality, and far from convinced of its effectiveness, from the mid-1960s a new generation of aid workers began to question the principles on which the humanitarian sector had hitherto been based, and to found their approach more on the principle of justice and right, rather than charity.”

According to Kevin O’Sullivan, this is particularly clear in the emergence of Médecins sans Frontières, which consciously rejected the Red Cross model. “Human rights organizations like Amnesty International were even more radical, focusing their attentions on the politics of humanitarianism in its broadest sense, and being determined to tackle the underlying causes of violence. The classical approach, embodied in the Fundamental Principles, had insisted that one cannot be at the same time the champion of justice and of charity: one must choose. But many NGOs didn’t choose: they fudged their lines, resulting in a complex and often ineffective response, an ‘organizational schizophrenia,’ frequently falling between the goals of being champions of charity or crusaders for justice. The tension between the search for justice and the idea of neutrality caught NGOs in a trap: between neutrality and advocacy, between campaigning and the traditional purity of humanitarian relief.”

For Kevin O’Sullivan, “NGOs had not yet come to organize themselves according to the clear division of labour that we see today. There was internal confusion in many NGOs, resulting from the sector-wide quarrel over whether they should act as radical conscience-stirrers, or play a cautious game. Many NGOs never resolved the issue, and have been living with the contradictions ever since. They also gave mixed messages to their supporters about what they stood for, for fear of losing support: there was a danger that being seen as too radical would undermine them. Arguably ever since, the NGO sector has been caught between commitment to justice, development and bottom-up change, and an equally deep-rooted belief in neutrality and impartiality in the delivery of aid.”

Instrumentalization, mediatization and commoditization of aid

Drawing on his own experience during this period, Dr Kamel Mohanna, founder and director of Amel Association, a non-sectarian Lebanese NGO, lamented the transition, after the end of the Cold War, from a humanitarian sector based largely on solidarity and commitment to one based on the market, with humanitarian action increasingly professional, technical, and business-oriented. He also highlighted the “mixed” motivations behind humanitarian action and the Principle of humanity: is it charity or a sense of solidarity and justice which influences the action of organizations? In this sense, Kamel Mohanna echoed Kevin O’Sullivan’s observation about the recurrence of the tension within the humanitarian sector, between a more neutral approach to humanitarian aid and a more politically engaged one, both deeply committed to the Principle of humanity.

Reaction:

“One of the biggest debates in the NGO community now, around advocacy and neutrality, relates to the question of denouncing violations among the parties to a conflict. Are such denunciations of rights abuses compatible with the Principles of impartiality, neutrality and independence? Does neutrality necessarily prevent the denunciation of violations, in practice? In the context of Apartheid in South Africa in the Sixties, the ICRC was accused in the headquarters of the United Nations of pulling its punches, and of inaction. For some, neutrality can sometimes be misunderstood as passivity, and the policy of confidentiality as collusion.”

“To what extent are we talking about a linear evolution of attitudes to the Principles or is this something more complex, where there’s an ebb and flow? As long ago as 1924, one of the founders of Save the Children, Eglantyne Jebb, was talking about the *rights* of children (leading eventually to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, the most ratified human rights instrument there is), rather than just charity. And if there are ebbs and flows in this, is the tide coming in for us, or going out?”

Key takeaways:

- This period shows that the Principles did not appear overnight, but emerged from the operational practice of the humanitarian sector. Before their adoption and formalization in 1965, the Principles of impartiality, neutrality and independence had already become a point of reference for a number of organizations.
- There has always been a dual motivation behind the humanitarian impulse, encapsulated in the Principle of humanity: one inspired by a spirit of “charity” and compassion, and one driven by a more militant thirst for justice.

4. A GOLDEN AGE: THE 1980S AND 1990S, INCLUDING LIBERAL INTERVENTIONISM

For Professor Sir Mike Aaronson of the University of Surrey (and the former director-general of Save the Children UK), the post-Cold War period brought many challenges to the Fundamental Principles. There were “complex emergencies,” with their combination of natural and man-made causes. Then, “humanitarian action was often a proxy for political action.” There was the growing doctrine of so-called humanitarian intervention: coercive, military intervention for an ostensibly or partially humanitarian purpose. “Sometimes it worked (Sierra Leone), sometimes it failed disastrously (Somalia).” Then there was the disaster of 9/11, and the subsequent “twin tragedies for humanitarianism” of Afghanistan and Iraq. This period saw “an increasing blurring of the boundaries between the political, military and humanitarian, encouraged by some politicians.”

Other trends included a drive towards greater professionalism and accountability among humanitarian organizations, and also a certain “pulling up of the drawbridge”: a growing sense of humanitarian exceptionalism, with attempts to define the territory, saying “we’re the humanitarians, and you are not.” During this difficult time, said Mike Aaronson, “we’ve all looked to the ICRC as the beacon, a fixed point, the guardian of the Principles, though even the ICRC was affected by these swirling currents, pushing the organization to reassert its principles of neutral, independent and impartial humanitarian action.”

Connecting with the past: Context and confluence

For Dr Randolph Kent of King’s College London, the starting point in this period was the decline of Soviet power, Fukuyama’s so-called “end of history” after the Cold War. This affected the world of NGOs in a number of ways: in the late 1960s, he said, many NGOs had closer relationships to their home governments, especially in countries of strategic interest like Viet Nam. “But in the 1980s and 1990s this was less the case. There was also a growth in the humanitarian sector, with increasing numbers of peacekeepers, plus the UN agencies, the World Food Programme and bodies like the International Labour Organization that saw themselves as humanitarian. There were far more outside organizations getting involved in vulnerable countries. And humanitarian organizations were becoming increasingly professionalized, using productionist models taken from industry (with cost-benefit analysis etc.). Many now had marketing departments, while the salaries of agency heads increased. The marketplace was changing, with huge numbers of NGOs in conflict areas.”

At the same time, the end of the Cold War had the effect of reinforcing a sense of Western dominance of the humanitarian sector: “This geopolitical transformation significantly reinforced Western assumptions about the dominance of its values, principles and capacities to influence,” and this was reflected in the ways that several key States in the West provided assistance.

According to Randolph Kent, “the Principles have to be seen in the context in which they’re applied: they’re profoundly about perception. They’re interpreted by aid providers in the light of their own organizational interests: in other words, context trumps principle.”

Old wars, new wars and the humanitarian space since the 1980s

“This was not a golden age for victims.”

Dr Marc-Antoine Pérouse de Montclos of Chatham House posed the question: Can we really call the 1980s a golden age for humanitarianism, as some do? Has the humanitarian space really contracted since then? Have the conditions of humanitarian involvement declined?

The problem in this regard is that “there are no clear indicators. What has really changed is the way that we perceive armed conflicts and humanitarian action – the way we frame it. Characteristics of humanitarian aid in time of war in the 1980s include the fact that much of the Communist world was off-limits: there was less access to victims. There were fewer humanitarian organizations in the field: this was not a golden age for victims. And it’s not true to say that there were no attacks on humanitarian workers in the 1980s – there were.”

With the 1990s, says Marc-Antoine Pérouse de Montclos, wars became more “irrational”: no longer easy to explain as products of the Cold War or wars of liberation. “Greed became more visible, as did violations of international humanitarian law. During the Cold War there had been fewer sanctions for violations, less reporting of them, and fewer organizations to monitor abuses. That means that, while some might think that we have fewer violations now, that’s not necessarily true. So we can’t say that the Eighties were really a golden age. Emergencies were not less ‘complex.’ Humanitarianism has always been politicized, but it’s easy to make false assumptions – we need better evidence before we can say that things were worse then or now.”

Humanitarian principles as a factor of security?

Michaël Neuman of Médecins sans Frontières (MSF) drew attention to the many statements that have been made about humanitarian space shrinking in the late 2000s, and about how humanitarian action has become more dangerous, with a blurring of the lines between the political and the humanitarian. But for him, “talking about a golden age for humanitarianism in the 1980s and 1990s is a complete denial of the difficulties of humanitarian action in that period. It was more like an age of apocalypse, with violence against civilians, and threats to and casualties among humanitarian personnel. Calling it a golden age is to neglect very recent history.”

“It was more like an age of apocalypse.”

Many of the founding members of MSF had been marked by the Red Cross’s experience in places like Yemen and Biafra, and were aware of the danger that humanitarian actors faced. But for Michaël Neuman, “that’s not to say that MSF was created out of disagreement with the Red Cross,” or indeed that MSF seriously questioned the notion that the Principles provided protection. The Principle of neutrality, in particular, was understood. But in practice, MSF delegated much of its security in this period to armed groups, and became “embedded” with them. As a result, it often found itself *de facto* neither neutral nor impartial. When it was only able to work on one side of a conflict, MSF did not stop its mission: “Not being neutral was mostly an operational decision, not an ideological one.”

Recursive humanitarianism: Enacting humanitarian principles in a participatory age

Dr Michal Givoni of Ben-Gurion University of the Negev focused on “recursive humanitarianism.” This is the idea that humanitarian practitioners need to pay attention to the political conditions in which their actions take place, if Principles such as neutrality and universality are to mean anything. She looked at the way in which aid agencies manage the perceptions of their supporters and donors as a way of gaining acceptance for humanitarian action, with such acceptance (built up by nurturing relations with local individuals and groups) vital for the safety of NGO personnel.

For Michal Givoni, the task now includes “having to *show* that you’re neutral, impartial and independent. The message coming through is that adherence to the Principles is not enough: humanitarian organizations have to display and embody the Principles, in a readily legible way. The issue was not whether the Principles themselves were sound, but whether organizations such as MSF lived up to them.”

Reaction:

“How do you hold humanitarian actors accountable when their actions go wrong? A lot of work has been done to develop standards around humanitarian action, but is this enough?”

“Do we need to be more sensitive to the way that people perceive their own principles: ‘We have principles too – ours begin with justice?’”

“As a practitioner, we do focus much more now on perception. The internet has radically changed the environment for humanitarians: in the 1990s what you did at the local level didn’t end up at the international level, but now it can do so instantly.”

“It’s important to bear in mind that more and more multinational businesses are now claiming to be humanitarian. Aren’t humanitarian organizations playing with fire when they speak the language of markets and enter into partnerships with businesses? Don’t some humanitarian organizations weaken the very Principles they’re supposed to defend, by contributing to the confusion about who is who?”

Key takeaways:

- While recurring challenges to humanitarian action characterize this period – such as using aid for political purposes – it also saw the progressive emergence of new trends, including an increasing sense of the distinctiveness and “exceptionalism” of the profession, characterized and bolstered by a discourse more and more centred on humanitarian principles.
- As the humanitarian sector becomes increasingly professional and bureaucratic, it develops a greater awareness of the importance of State and public perception of humanitarian action for the acceptance of aid agencies, which reinforces in turn the need not only to live up to the Principles, but to be seen to live up to them.

5. 9/11 AND ITS AFTERMATH: OPERATING IN A NEWLY CONSTRAINED ENVIRONMENT

How have the Principles fared in the last 15 years, with a proliferation of NGOs that face new types of pressure?

From “benign infidels” to “agents of Western imperialism”: The changed perception of mainstream aid organizations

“I’m not very optimistic about how good we are at learning from the mistakes of the past.”

Independent consultant Dr Fiona Terry, looking in particular at aid operations in Somalia and Afghanistan since 2001, asked why humanitarian action was rejected by some belligerent groups: Can we blame it all on the “Global War on Terror,” or do aid agencies share responsibility for the erosion of trust in their stated humanitarian commitments? And if so, could a more genuine application of the Principles of independence, impartiality and neutrality help to regain some lost trust?

Fiona Terry conceded: “I’m not very optimistic about how good we are at learning from the mistakes of the past.” In Somalia, for example, she noted that many of the actors that aid agencies have to deal with today are the same as 20 or 30 years ago, but that they are less well understood now than they were then. In Somalia and Afghanistan many aid organizations have also had a long-term presence: this allows us to track key developments over time. Fiona Terry singled out three such developments. First, there’s been the phenomenon of reduced access, with groups attacking aid organizations, denying them free movement or being unable to give guarantees of safety. Then there’s the “criminalization of aid” by Western governments, with anything more than the most basic provision of relief to populations under the control of non-State groups being treated with suspicion. And then there are changes among NGOs themselves: “I’ve seen how initiatives are [implemented] in the field: NGOs are more risk-averse now.” In terms of changes in how belligerents see aid organizations, for Fiona Terry “it’s important to remember that in Afghanistan after 9/11, most NGOs sided with the Coalition forces. There was a real rejection of neutrality on all sides, with most aid agencies on the ground only paying lip service to the humanitarian principles.”

“I’m now a real believer in neutrality.”

Having seen the ICRC in action in Afghanistan and Somalia, and its strict application of the Fundamental Principles, Fiona Terry concluded, “I’m now a real believer in neutrality. It’s not an ‘open sesame’: it doesn’t provide security. But it provides an important thread of consistency, coherence and predictability across different contexts. And today, what you do in one context will be known in others.”

Who needs the humanitarian principles?

For Dr Catherine Bragg of University College Dublin, who is a former UN deputy emergency relief coordinator, “it’s an oft-repeated mantra that adherence to the humanitarian principles is necessary for acceptance, and that acceptance is necessary for access. But there’s very little evidence for this.”

From the beginning, she said, the principles were part of a “deal”: the belligerents in a conflict would acknowledge the humanitarian principles, and the humanitarian actors would not interfere in the conflict. But in the twenty-first century, the nature of conflict and conflict management have changed, and there are many more actors offering humanitarian aid. There are some organizations for whom the humanitarian principles are not central – such as Syrian diaspora groups and Muslim charities – but who are seen nevertheless to have better access in certain circumstances. So why the enduring resonance of the humanitarian principles – who needs them?

According to Catherine Bragg, the principles are “extremely important for self-identification, which requires long-term consistency in behaviour. In the ethical calculus of everyday life, they offer guidance, but they also enable us to separate our operational compromises from our claims to be who we are. Another reason why they still seem to resonate is that they give us a distinctive form of aid, which is altruistic and not instrumentalized, being based only on the alleviation of human suffering. Ultimately humanitarian aid has to ensure that when all else fails, when no-one else sees any reason to intervene, no group is left helpless. Humanitarian effectiveness in its most basic form is to maximize the chances of someone in acute need receiving aid. Principled humanitarian action, provided by those who do identify with the humanitarian principles, should be the floor below which we do not fall. So I thank the Red Cross Movement for gifting us with the Fundamental Principles, which continue to give us clarity.”

“Principled humanitarian action should be the floor below which we do not fall!”

Humanitarian work after 9/11

Dr James Kisia, executive director of the International Centre for Humanitarian Affairs and deputy secretary-general of the Kenyan Red Cross, drew on his experience of efforts to implement the Fundamental Principles in Kenya. Terrorist attacks (of which many have taken place in his country) have led to increasingly hard-line positions among governments, resulting in an increased securitization of aid and attempts to move humanitarian aid from humanitarian organizations into the hands of government. Governments, according to James Kisia, have been able to restrict access by NGOs by “reducing the humanitarian space.” And “humanitarian actors have increasingly had to prove a negative,” showing governments that they are not on the side of “terrorists,” and showing non-State armed groups that they are not on the side of the government. This pressure is all the more significant for local and national actors, who are often in a position where asserting their neutrality and independence is more complicated. Still, for James Kisia, “the Principles remain the best way to secure access and create humanitarian space” and, depending on the circumstances, local actors can be empowered to assert their neutrality and independence.

“Humanitarian actors have increasingly had to prove a negative.”

Whither humanity in the quest for security? Humanitarianism in the post-9/11 environment

Dr Larissa Fast of the American Association for the Advancement of Science took as the subject of her paper the “humanitarian expansion,” post-9/11, into increasingly dangerous environments. “Violence against aid workers is not a new phenomenon,” she said. “But we’ve seen an increase in securitized aid, with the whole idea of the humanitarian bunker, humanitarians operating behind walls, and aid compounds that closely resemble military ones.”

“We’ve tended to privilege technical over contextual knowledge.”

Then there’s the professionalization of aid: “In this we’ve tended to privilege technical over contextual knowledge – knowledge, for example, of the local actors who we need to understand, to conduct humanitarian negotiations.”

And there’s the idea of humanitarian exceptionalism, which for Larissa Fast “derives in part from the Principles, as an unintended consequence of the ideas of neutrality, impartiality and independence that set humanitarians apart from the contexts in which they operate. What I argue for instead is a more humanity-based, relational approach that sees humanitarians as embedded within their environment.

We rarely go into what humanity is, as an operational principle and not just an abstract, but we need to return to a more humanity-based humanitarianism. One that is not just about providing assistance, but thinking about *how* you do it. Something that doesn't reduce people to their needs, but that affirms local context and capacity. Something based on valuing face-to-face interaction, proximity and presence."

Reaction:

"The Fundamental Principles have been put on a pedestal, as being fundamental for self-identification. Is it time to kill this myth: to put humanity and impartiality at the centre, but concede that neutrality and independence might not be for everyone, while still of paramount importance for some?"

"Perhaps subsidiarity needs to emerge as a new Principle: making decisions at the local level wherever possible, and so affirming local context and capacity."

"Is there a danger that the Fundamental Principles will become like human rights, with us only adding to them, until they become like a shopping list?"

Key takeaways:

- With the expansion and professionalization of the humanitarian sector over the past 20 years, this period has also seen a growing discourse of "exceptionalism" within the sector. The Principles have become a means of self-identification and, in consequence, have been increasingly invoked as a mantra.
- The increased reference to and use of the Principles by many organizations in recent decades reflects their success. But is it also a double-edged development? Is there a tendency to take the Principles for granted, rather than critically reflecting on their meaning and application?

III – TRANSCENDING THE STUBBORN REALITIES: FROM HISTORY, THROUGH THE PRESENT, INTO THE FUTURE

History does not always yield lessons. Rather, to quote a conference participant, “good history is when we use it to help us ask better questions about the present and the future, not simply looking to it for answers.”

Gaining a critical historical perspective on the development of the Fundamental Principles, and the challenges they have faced in the past, is of the essence. But how do we then translate that historical perspective into something that is relevant and resonant for the way the world works *now*? How do we distil its meaning for today? How do we help humanitarian practitioners make sense of the “stubborn realities” of humanitarian action – problems that have arisen time and again across the generations? Conference participants addressed some of the big issues that are likely to affect the Principles in the future during a public event at the end of the first day of the conference – an event that featured ICRC President Peter Maurer, Oxfam Humanitarian Director Jane Cocking and three other panellists, with the ICRC’s Assembly members in the audience. This event was live-streamed, and a recording of it can be viewed at www.icrc.org/en/Fundamental-Principles-Historical-Perspective.

Humanity as “first among equals”?

Is humanity the most fundamental of all the Fundamental Principles? The one with the greatest capacity to counter violently opposed interests? Conference participants took different views on the relationship between the Fundamental Principles, and whether we can talk about a hierarchy among them.

For Mike Aaronson, “perhaps it’s important to assert the principle of humanity now, because it’s threatened. We’re living in an age of drone strikes and ‘bugsplats.’ If we wanted to do something really radical, we could question whether we need all of the Principles in the same basket: there is a hierarchy between them. It might help to assert humanity more effectively if we concede that other Principles might vary over time.”

“It’s the humanity, stupid.”

For Hugo Slim, also, there are differences between the Principles: “Humanity and impartiality represent basic goods, and they’re the goals of what we do. They’re qualitatively different. Independence and neutrality are much more about the means.”

According to ICRC President Peter Maurer, “each period ponders which Principle is the most important and relevant to it. I agree that the Principle of humanity has a different dimension to the others.” For another participant, though, “it’s not the case that one Principle is fundamental, and the others come afterwards. We needed independence, neutrality, etc., otherwise it would have been impossible to act.”

Diversity within the humanitarian “ecosystem”

Is there a need to recognize that humanitarian organizations have different values and roles, and possibly different readings of how to apply the humanitarian principles? Some of the Fundamental Principles, for example, may not have the same meaning and purchase for those outside the Movement.

Jane Cocking from Oxfam spoke about not having “the burden or the blessing of being the custodian of the Principles, so we have a choice in relation to the core Principle for humanitarians, namely humanity.” Rejecting the Principle of neutrality, and taking on more of a campaigning and advocacy role, is a response to the idea that “there are no humanitarian solutions to humanitarian problems – only political ones.”

“We in the ICRC have chosen an ethics of ‘principalism.’ But it’s not the only one.”

For Peter Maurer, though, there’s the question of burden-sharing: “We don’t necessarily have to be the ones who find the political solutions. Our role can be to bridge the gap between the problems we see on the ground, and the political arena. Methodologically we may disagree: we advocate for political solutions, but we don’t often talk in public about what we say to politicians about the humanitarian consequences of their actions. We create a space for confidentiality.”

The Principles and their application

Is it a good thing that the humanitarian principles are quite loose and fluid? Perhaps since 9/11, with perception having become more important, it’s not so important that humanitarian organizations claim or invoke the Fundamental Principles in their public discourse, but rather that they are consistent, as individuals and organizations, in doing what they say they’ll do.

Peter Maurer spoke of being “enthusiastic about the concept of fluidity, recognizing that the Principles aren’t well defined, and taking on the task of trying continuously to shape consensus around their concrete meaning. We can’t just preach principles,” he concluded, “they must be demonstrated in action.”

And as Mike Aaronson puts it: “You can’t put the humanitarian principles on a pedestal, and polish them occasionally. They’re there as a guide, but you can’t look at them in isolation. The desirability of humanitarian action rests on a consensus that it is morally desirable, and that it should be supported. If that consensus isn’t there, then talk of the Principles is irrelevant.”

This means that there is also a vital task of *explanation* when it comes to the Principles, of “spreading the word,” and of making States and non-State armed groups understand not just what the Fundamental Principles are, but what they actually do. Posing the counterfactual of “where would we be without the Principles?” is a part of this process.

For Peter Maurer, “the Principles are not simply enacted: we can’t just roll them out. If you’re going to have Principles, you’re going to be involved in a struggle to embody them as best you can. In any moral system where you have a range of principles that are valuable to you, you’re going to have to balance, interpret and make a trade-off between them. Compromise is inevitable, but we aim to find principled compromises, compromises we can live with. The Principles didn’t fall from heaven. They evolved within an organization that was responding to real problems – of acceptance, access, intercultural understanding. You have to reconstitute consensus around them in each period and each context.”

According to Jane Cocking, meanwhile, “unless we’re contesting the Principles, almost crashing up against them in our day-to-day work, we’re not pushing ourselves enough as humanitarians. We have to wrestle loudly with the Principles, partly so that we can draw in other cultures and other perspectives, to understand what common humanity means.”

As a conference participant pointed out, former ICRC Vice-President Jean Pictet in his analysis of the Fundamental Principles advocated a non-dogmatic approach. He emphasized the need to maintain dialogue, rather than rejecting National Societies that are unable to apply the Fundamental Principles strictly because of the political situation that they find themselves in. “Pictet didn’t see the Fundamental Principles as unchangeable, which I take as encouragement to have a genuine view on them.”

For Andrew Thompson, meanwhile, “among the insights that can be drawn from the post-war period is the idea that the crafting of compromise is integral rather than antithetical to a principled approach. Principles express lofty ideals, but they must also be operationally relevant, providing a firm basis for taking difficult decisions in the field. And secondly, fidelity to any form of humanitarian principles has always been predicated on an understanding of the political frameworks into which humanitarians have to insert themselves. In the Cold War period the Movement often found itself embedded in conflicts where its principal weapon wasn’t just its perceived neutrality or impartiality, but its ability to interpret events, and see the bigger picture.”

Humanitarian exceptionalism – fact or fiction?

Have humanitarian organizations damaged their own cause by insisting on their exclusive right to operate? For Mike Aaronson, “if you think about it, there are no humanitarian actors, there are only humanitarian actions – a soldier can be a humanitarian. Anyone can be.”

Who can be a humanitarian? Hugo Slim made the point: “We’re lucky in English to have two adjectives: ‘humane’ and ‘humanitarian.’ Perhaps it’s ‘humane’ that anyone can be – it’s the adjective of our species, after all.”

A reason for this exceptionalism seems to be the growing professionalization and bureaucratization of the humanitarian sector, especially since the 1990s. Yet, as one participant asked, is greater professionalism necessarily a bad thing? Haven’t many organizations grown as a response to the Principle of humanity, just becoming bigger response mechanisms, able to react to greater need in more places?

However, if any lessons can be drawn from history, isn’t there a risk associated with the professionalization of the sector if it means less proximity to affected people and more time spent behind a computer for reporting purposes, for drafting contracts with implementing partners, or for sheltering behind concrete walls in “bunkerized” compounds? Indeed, isn’t there a risk that humanitarian actors will lose sight of the intuitive nature of the Principles when confronted with field realities, therefore lessening the value of the Principles?

The danger of instrumentalization

How can the Principles help to counter the instrumentalization of aid, i.e. aid being used as a tool by States, non-State groups and others to serve their own interests, and its politicization?

For Peter Maurer, “instrumentalization of humanitarian aid has increasingly become a part of warfare over the last century. War in the nineteenth century occurred in defined spaces. The victims were wounded and dying soldiers on the battlefield, and civilians were less directly targeted. But today, conflicts are no longer confined to particular spaces. They have become in this sense increasingly totalitarian, and humanitarians are naturally among those who are instrumentalized. What do you do if there’s no recognition that those on the other side are humans as well – is there no space for humanitarianism? What surprises me is our relentless ability in practice to negotiate that space. In this regard the Fundamental Principles have been crucial in creating a minimum space of humanity.”

But then, as Hugo Slim pointed out, “instrumentalization is always seen as one way, with us as the instrumentalized community. Maybe we should ask: ‘Who are *we* instrumentalizing?’ I’ve been amazed at how much we’ve persuaded the military, businesses and governments to come with us, and pursue humanitarian objectives.”

The universality of the Principles

Humanity has always seemed to be a given, the starting point, the obvious one, an undisputed consensus. But there have been different understandings of what humanity means. What do we do when notions of humanity are perverted by those who think in terms of hierarchies of civilization, and who restrict the term “humanity” to those from certain ethnic or religious groups: in other words, when a sense of *shared* humanity is distinctly lacking?

History matters: if we’re using terms such as “intervention,” “professionalization” or “imperialism,” we have to put them in historical perspective. Use of the term humanity can be ambivalent too.

History shows that humanitarianism can grow in very different ways across different environments: there is, inevitably, variety. The ICRC itself has grown from having a very narrow concern with wounded soldiers to encompassing civilians, prisoners and so forth. So the Principles may change, or be given different weight. But has the “humanitarian community,” historically consisting mostly of Western organizations, sufficiently understood the need to embrace other actors from different geographies? Is it still too much of a close-knit club of the usual suspects?

“Managing dependencies can be the best way of staying independent: you have to talk to all stakeholders, all the parties with any form of influence.”

For Andrew Thompson, when faced with the question of whether the Fundamental Principles can transcend cultural differences, this is not only a question of the substantive content of the Principles but, critically, of “walking the talk,” of adhering to them in the field. For example, during the period of decolonization, “newly independent states weren’t first and foremost concerned with trying to make substantive changes to the Principles.” Rather, the criticism coming from independence and liberation movements was often not about neutrality – non-engagement in controversy – itself, but that “the rhetoric around the Principles was belied by the reality.”

Mike Aaronson wondered, though, whether “we’re having this debate in a bubble of our own making. How would things be different with a representative of the government of China, or of Hamas, or of Boko Haram in the room? Are we saying these people have no humanitarian principles? I think the Red Cross’s achievements over the last 150 years are among the greatest in the history of civilization. But let’s be honest, they emanate from a particular culture, a particular geography, a particular point in time. Henry Dunant was born in Europe in the middle of the nineteenth century; we’re now in a global society. In the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Museum in Geneva there’s a powerful display of different statements of principles throughout history: you’ve got the Geneva Convention, but also a quote from Confucius, a quote from Magna Carta, a quote from the Qur’an. Principles are much bigger than our 150 years. The challenge facing us is to find a way of connecting our bubble, and everything we want to preserve, with that wider world of humanitarian principles.”

IV – UNPACKING THE HISTORY OF PRINCIPLED HUMANITARIAN ACTION

Summing up the five panel discussions and the public event that made up the Connecting with the Past conference, Andrew Thompson (who was not only a speaker, but also a co-organizer of the conference) spoke about the need for the humanitarian sector to constantly guard itself against what might be called the “arrogance of the present”: the idea that things are so different now from the way they were in the past that history has nothing to say and is no longer a guide; or that things are so much better now than they were in the past that history is best consigned to the archive.

It was the American novelist, William Faulkner, who said “the past is never dead. It is not even past.” For Andrew Thompson, “what Faulkner said of slavery is equally true of humanitarianism: the past is very much something whose consequences are still with us.”

The major geopolitical shifts of the second half of the nineteenth century, and of the twentieth century, are still unfolding and unravelling. History matters for the Fundamental Principles, indeed for any form of humanitarian principles. Why? Because, in the absence of a critical historical perspective, we can’t plot a future for humanitarian principles from their past.

Picking out some recurring themes from the conference, Andrew Thompson spoke about what might be called the “principles paradox,” whereby compromises are seen less as a dilution or betrayal of principles, and more a *sine qua non* of a principled approach. Yet this immediately begs the question: What are the limits to compromise? What are the criteria for judging which compromises are acceptable and which are unacceptable? And, to make a reality of the Fundamental Principles, what, if anything, needs to lie beyond them? What more is necessary beyond the Principles, in order to operationalize them?

Second, there’s the critical question of the origin of the problems that we encounter through a principled approach to humanitarian action. Do these contradictions stem from the Principles themselves: are they internal and intrinsic? Or do they rather stem from the wider political environment, from the “humanitarian ecosystem” that surrounds the Principles and exerts pressure on them? The Fundamental Principles don’t exist in a vacuum: they shape, and are in turn shaped by, the positions taken by States and non-State armed groups, and by other major humanitarian actors.

Third, there is the question, which was raised repeatedly during the conference, of generational perspectives: the idea that the Fundamental Principles must be reviewed, reinterpreted and reaffirmed by each successive generation, and that such a process is essential for the Principles to be relevant and resonant for the age in which we live. For Andrew Thompson, as for Peter Maurer, “a key question then emerges: how do you create consensus around the meaning and value of the Fundamental Principles, which is necessary for the ICRC and the Movement to move forward?”

Finally, Andrew Thompson described what he called “the most important thing of all: what Pascal Daudin, the ICRC’s senior policy adviser, referred to as the ‘battle of narratives’ between humanitarians and other actors in conflict. We should never underestimate the power of the narratives that humanitarianism is ranged against.” For now, they include the “language of terror,” which “seeks to create categories of victims, and to evoke ideas of deserved and undeserved suffering, the good and bad victims. Nothing could be more dangerous or damaging to a principled humanitarian approach.”

Reaction:

“For a sense of shared humanity to survive, the key questions facing the humanitarian sector today, as much as in the past, are: first, what forces are destabilizing the claims to universalism upon which the very concept of humanitarianism is based? Then, what can be done to counter and contain those forces? And lastly, what role do the Fundamental Principles (or any other type of humanitarian principles) play in that task?”

V – CONCLUDING REMARKS: HOW RELEVANT ARE PRINCIPLES TO TODAY’S AND TOMORROW’S HUMANITARIAN REALITIES?

By Pascal Daudin, Markus Geisser and Jérémie Labbé²

The exploration of 150 years of principled humanitarian action by the Connecting with the Past conference excavated lesser-known chapters of humanitarianism (see pages 5 to 16) and examined well-known dilemmas faced by practitioners since the Battle of Solferino in 1859. Same questions, same answers?

Not quite, but responding to the needs of humanity in the midst of armed conflict and other situations of violence has long been a rough ride. In the first half of the twentieth century, the industrialization of warfare led to destruction and suffering on an unprecedented scale. After 1945, non-international armed conflict posed challenges to a body of law designed for international armed conflict. After 1989, a series of so-called “humanitarian interventions” increased the confusion between political and humanitarian action. Today, the risk is that the humanitarian sector will become part of States’ toolbox to manage crises and that a heightened level of exploitation and manipulation of aid will hamper principled humanitarian action.

Navigating these rough seas requires some sort of moral compass to buffer aid agencies from external forces and limit the unintended impacts that aid can have on societies. Have the Principles provided that compass?

For 150 years, the Principles have brought the accumulated insights derived from the past into the present, illuminating not only the path behind but that which lies ahead. They span the generations to ensure that the Movement remains true to its founding ideals, yet acutely attuned to the circumstances of the day. Fifty years after their formal codification in 1965, the Fundamental Principles have proved so enduring precisely because they focus on what is universal and essential. They provide both ethical guidance and operational tools.

This does not mean, however, that the future of these Principles can be taken for granted. On the contrary, for the Fundamental Principles to remain relevant they must continue to be discussed, questioned and challenged. The eagerness with which the Principles are debated confirms their relevance. The worst scenario would be the absence of debate. History is littered with long-dead controversies. The primary danger for the Principles is not that they are considered right or wrong, but that they enter an age of indifference and that aid organizations merely pay lip service to them.

A further risk for the Principles is that of different actors and agencies interpreting them in contradictory and conflicting ways. Take the Principle of humanity. It ought to be the most accepted and consensual of all of the Principles – in the words of Jean Pictet, the “spark which ignites the powder.” But a critical historical perspective suggests that humanity, far from being a stable and singular concept, has possessed different meanings at different times and for different actors. Speakers at the conference also highlighted two impulses behind humanity: a “charitable” impulse, justifying a more apolitical approach, versus a “solidarity” impulse, more partisan and rights-based, aiming at wider transformations. While these two visions are arguably equally necessary, they are sometimes in tension, especially in highly politicized environments. The challenge for the humanitarian sector, past and present, is to ensure a co-existence (or “friendly avoidance”) between “charity” and “solidarity,” in the midst of the worst forms of suffering and most egregious violations of rights.

² The authors of these concluding remarks work for the ICRC in Geneva and London. They were chiefly involved in the organization of the Connecting with the Past conference. The views expressed in these conclusions, like those in the rest of the report, are those of the individuals concerned, and not necessarily those of the organization that they represent.

Throughout history, major global transformations have influenced how humanitarian action is conceived and delivered. More recently, they have put a premium on collaboration: the most important part of what you can do as a humanitarian is often that which you do with others. The last few decades have proved particularly challenging on this score. Humanitarian action is no longer dominated by the “traditional” system comprising mostly Western actors and agencies. Increasingly, emerging donor governments, regional organizations, and non-governmental organizations from the South, Middle East and Far East are demanding to be recognized and are increasing their investment in global humanitarian action.

To hold all these parties together with a shared sense of purpose requires them to first agree on shared values and principles. The search for better procedures and structures will otherwise mean little. Humanitarianism’s past suggests that a common understanding of the Fundamental Principles is part of the answer to a more diverse humanitarian sector. This is the (necessarily) optimistic view; otherwise the humanitarian world will be increasingly divided and polarized and struggle to rise to the challenges it faces.

Compared to the vision of the delegates who met to formalize and codify the Principles in Vienna in October 1965, today’s vision of what constitutes humanitarian action has changed radically. We live in an era of transition, a multipolar world, where interconnectedness is intensifying and where a new geopolitical order is emerging, the consequences of which remain unclear. These evolutions will necessarily put the Principles to the test, again and again. This is only the beginning. This conference – a voyage through the history of principled humanitarian action – demonstrated that there is something deeply intuitive about the Principles. Whatever the impulse behind the humanitarian gesture, confronting field realities, and being close to victims of conflict, calls for Principles. This explains why the Movement and other humanitarian actors reached for these Principles long before they were fully conceptualized, let alone formalized.

“Humanitarian principles remain the floor below which humanitarians should not fall.” This was the verdict of a leading practitioner at our conference. If they are not to fall below that threshold, however, humanitarians may have to redouble their efforts to explain the value of the Principles, not simply through diplomacy but through their day-to-day actions in the field. As the humanitarian sector becomes more professionalized and more bureaucratic, there is a real danger of today’s generation of humanitarians losing contact with – and being less well understood by – the very people they serve. The power of the Principles lies not only in what they are, but what they do – and are seen to do. If their 50th anniversary is to leave a legacy, what better legacy than to generate greater appreciation of the vital role the Fundamental Principles continue to play in making space for humanity in the most unpromising of circumstances. To borrow the words of the Bengali poet Rabindranath Tagore, our “refuge” and “spiritual shelter” more than ever reside in a shared sense of humanity. The ultimate purpose of the Principles, we might add, is to help guide our way there.



ICRC