

## **“Humanitarian Principles – Discourse on Neutrality and Independence of Humanitarian Aid”**

### **Abstract:**

The past two decades have seen a significant increase in frequency and intensity of complex emergencies and natural disasters, leading to a rapid transformation in the policy and the institutional context of humanitarianism. Humanitarian assistance, which once covered a very narrow set of basic relief activities carried out by a small group of relatively independent actors, has expanded significantly to an ever-widening and much more complex range of rehabilitation work. This includes the definition of aid as being a starting-point for addressing poverty or being a tool for peace-building in internal conflicts. A growing diversity of “nonhumanitarian” actors in the field, such as various profit agencies, governmental and non-governmental armed forces, also changed the picture of humanitarian aid and the perception of its character. This transformation has created a broad variety of standards for performance in the field, and led to increasing uncertainties on the quality of humanitarian responses and its accountability.

Further, humanitarian assistance has always been a highly political activity, as it involves engaging authorities in conflict-affected countries or relying on financial support that can be driven by a donor’s political considerations. Nowadays, relief organizations seem to remain even less in control of their working environment due to expanding peacekeeping and “military-led” missions of the United Nations, regional organizations or major Western powers in armed conflicts. Furthermore, they are confronted with a growing scale of human rights abuses and the targeting of civilians, including humanitarian workers. However, the necessity to interact with armed groups started to blur the line between military policies and relief missions, making humanitarian action appear to be increasingly tied to the overall political response of donor countries to complex emergencies.

The humanitarian principles of humanity, neutrality and impartiality provide an ethical framework that defines and delineates the humanitarian space within which relief agencies are supposed to operate. But this working environment is making it difficult for relief organization to maintain their neutrality and to avoid political manipulation. Therefore, relief organizations must rethink these traditional principles and face the responsibility of getting more involved in the broader political arena to be able to take appropriate action, and to avoid longterm damages on a society.

The ‘Sphere’ project, which was launched to improve the quality of humanitarian action and to put relief aid on a legal basis as set forth by international law, acknowledges the dependence of humanitarian aid on external political decisions. Still, it emphasizes traditional principles and expresses agencies’ commitment to act in accordance with them. ‘Sphere’s actual value must therefore be seen in defining a common basis around which agencies, donors and governing authorities can potentially agree on. It provides a basis for defining core humanitarian responsibilities that recognizes the limits of humanitarian action, while setting an agenda for individual and collective action.