

**2024**  
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A GLOBAL NGO NETWORK  
FOR PRINCIPLED AND EFFECTIVE  
HUMANITARIAN ACTION

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2024



**Rethinking Coordination**  
Credibility and Trust in Principled Humanitarian Action

**Session 1**  
The Erosion of Trust and  
Principled Humanitarian Action



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SESSION 1

SUMMARY REPORT

## Introduction

Session One explored the importance of trust between NGOs to develop and agree approaches to humanitarian dilemmas and upholding the humanitarian principles, and how these very approaches can build or erode trust. The session used survey software to engage the audience on a variety of questions with 157 humanitarian leaders providing responses.

The panel comprised of representatives of the ICVA convened [Principled Humanitarian Action Steering Committee \(PHASC\)](#). The PHASC meets regularly to explore how to better support NGOs and coordination mechanisms to navigate humanitarian dilemmas and reach principled decisions to achieve the best possible humanitarian outcomes. They are working on tools and approaches to improve decision-making and trust. The PHASC's work is inspired by research on how agencies think about and apply the humanitarian principles in [Iraq](#), [Yemen](#) and [Afghanistan](#). The Steering Committee links with initiatives by Humanitarian Outcomes, WFP and Peace Research Institute Oslo and draws heavily from experiences and existing work by ICVA and PHASC members.

## Ten Takeaways for Humanitarian Leaders

- 1. Trust is the foundation of all successful human endeavours** - including humanitarian response. Building trust within the humanitarian system can help improve outcomes for affected populations, as we work more effectively together, share critical information, and find solutions to complex problems.
- 2. Upholding the humanitarian principles builds trust.** The principles are the basis of our integrity and help us be consistent and predictable, which are key components of trust-building. The principles establish a clear humanitarian identity that helps you know yourself and helps others know and trust you. 87% of respondents agreed that “adhering to the humanitarian principles is the best way of building trust and acceptance with all stakeholders”.
- 3. How we navigate dilemmas can build or break trust.** Dilemmas are situations in which difficult choices must be made between two or more options with no ideal outcome. Some degree of compromise often has to be made to the humanitarian principles, which can impact on humanitarian outcomes. Trust between humanitarian actors can be most at risk when dilemmas arise, particularly if we have publicly agreed to a common position and then breach it without informing other NGOs.
- 4. We all want to make the most principled decision, but there isn't just one principled approach to resolving a dilemma.** Different organizations can and often need to resolve dilemmas differently. Acknowledging and respecting this diversity is important for collaborative efforts and for achieving the most principled outcome for crisis affected populations.
- 5. We all have made mistakes navigating dilemmas.** Owning up to them is a good thing: 93% of the leaders in the room agreed that “they are impressed when an NGO admits a mistake: It shows accountability and leadership”.

## 6. Our ability to resolve dilemmas and uphold the principles is challenged by:

- **Our lack of fluency and understanding of the humanitarian principles:** Only 35% of the humanitarian leaders in the room were able to correctly identify the principle of Impartiality. This aligns with previous ICVA findings. There is no judgement here: It is easy to confuse the principles, or to misunderstand them. But we need to build a culture of being principled: Having frequent discussions on how the principles apply to our work improves fluency and builds trust and engagement.
- **Existing incentive structures:** The need to spend donor funding quickly, ensure compliance and be accountable to a multitude of stakeholders, can impede our ability to make principled choices. Furthermore, the system doesn't reward principled decision-making – performance is not measured based on how we resolve dilemmas, how we champion the principles, whether we've learned from our mistakes and evolved as a leader, or how we have collaborated with others.
- **Our tendency to be self-righteous:** There is a human tendency to believe that only our decision is the right decision. The audience rated their own agency's adherence to the principles higher than their perception of other agencies' adherence. Many of the audience members have experienced judgement and shame for the decisions they took in the face of dilemmas. We also admitted that many of us have judged others for their decisions. If we look at someone's decision without looking at the context in which the decision is made, it's easy to pass judgement. We need to practice empathy and seek to understand each other's rational, or we risk becoming polarised and people disengage.
- **Risk transfer:** We are often aware of the risk transfer from donors to NGOs, but frontline staff are carrying huge risks when trying to navigate dilemmas that leaders might not be aware of. We often don't ask frontline staff what dilemmas and challenges they are experiencing. We expect them to resolve dilemmas and possibly enter negotiations without an explicit mandate, positions or clear red lines.
- **We hold ourselves and others to impossible standards at times:** We hold ourselves to "Do no harm", but this is impossible in the contexts we work in. We can only aim to do the least harm. We create joint operating protocols and a plethora of red lines, which are not always widely agreed or disseminated. One red line is more effective than ten. We need to spend more time discussing our red lines and ensuring they are realistic and have buy-in.
- **The absence of safe spaces to discuss the application of the principles:** Few organisations have established spaces for lively debates on the application of principles. These safe spaces need to include staff who are experiencing the dilemma and not just be assigned to an ethics committee. It's critical that organisations clarify what decisions can be taken by staff and what needs to be escalated. However, when a dilemma is escalated, we need to keep the staff affected involved in that decision making process, otherwise they will be poorly engaged with implementing the solution.

**7. There is overwhelming belief in the value of collective action for upholding humanitarian principles 96% of the audience agreed.** However, trust in Humanitarian Country Teams is rare and discussions on the principles even rarer. Trust between NGOs also needs investment: just 42% of respondents indicated their organisations encouraged them to engage other NGOs to discuss dilemmas. Just 36% of respondents stated they are willing to share sensitive information with other NGOs. We don't have to share everything with everyone – trust is also built through maintaining confidentiality and signalling clearly what can and can't be shared.

**8. Creating safe spaces for dialogue across organizations is vital.** Collectively we may find better solutions to dilemmas than we can individually. If we are divided our counterparts exploit our differences. Having common methodology and language on navigating dilemmas will help improve conversations, but we also need to invest in building trust. This is a two-way process: We need to give trust and risk what is vulnerable to us, in order to be trusted. We need to incentivize staff to be open, transparent and trusting.

**9. You don't have to do this on your own.** Many of the audience and panellists have felt lonely and isolated when navigating a dilemma. Humanitarian leaders in the room overwhelmingly indicated they are willing to help other NGOs if they experience difficulties (81%), so perhaps we need to take each other up on that. We are often frightened or ashamed to admit we are struggling with resolving a dilemma and we are worried we that we'll be judged negatively. If we are feeling isolated after taking a particular decision it signals we need to engage more internally and externally to get clarity on support for the decision.

**10. NGOs are not the same, but we have the same overarching goal.** NGOs ranked their number one priority as “the long-term outcomes for affected communities”. Interestingly, we rate the impact on other humanitarian agencies as the lowest consideration out of all our stakeholder groups and yet, other NGOs have the same overarching goal as us – to save lives, reduce suffering and promote the dignity of affected populations, even if their activities are different. NGOs are not a team of synchronised swimmers, we are more like a football team: We each have our own individual roles and responsibilities, but all with the overall aim and responsibility for improving humanitarian outcomes. Reflecting more openly and strategically on the impact of decisions and dilemmas with other NGOs could help us all better meet the needs of affected people and reach the common goal.



*Results of Ranking Exercise by Humanitarian Leaders*



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