

Walking the walk: Evidence of Principles in Action from Red Cross and Red Crescent National Societies

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Abstract

Using evidence from nine different National Societies, this essay illustrates how the Fundamental Principles of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement are practically applied in today's diverse contexts. The research has found that the Principles are not just abstract concepts but are in fact practical tools for initiating and implementing a range of programmes, particularly in difficult situations. The Fundamental Principles are useful for increasing access in both conflict and peaceful situations. Strong leadership is an important factor to ensure that the Principles are applied, particularly when neutrality is challenged. Lastly, all seven Principles work together and give additional strength to programmes when working as part of the Movement.

Keywords: Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, Fundamental Principles, National Societies, application of the Principles, volunteers, leadership.

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Impartiality means you have to listen and observe, without making judgements. You don't have to give advice or try to change people. I use this a lot.¹

The extremists here don't accept humanity, the principle of humanity.²

The Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement (the Movement) is made up of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), the International Federation of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) and, at the time of writing, 189 National Societies. One aspect that ties its work together in all countries is the adherence to the Movement's Fundamental Principles. Agreed in Vienna in 1965, the seven Fundamental Principles are supposed to guide all of the Movement's work in natural disaster response, conflicts and other situations of violence, disaster preparedness, and in serving as an auxiliary to governments.³ The seven Fundamental Principles are humanity, impartiality, neutrality, independence, voluntary service, unity and universality. See Table 1 for the definitions of each of the Principles.

The wider humanitarian community – including non-governmental organizations (NGOs), United Nations (UN) agencies and humanitarian donors – has widely accepted the first four Fundamental Principles as humanitarian principles guiding its work: humanity, impartiality, neutrality and independence. These have been broadly agreed by a wide swath of stakeholders since they were adopted into the Code of Conduct for the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and NGOs in Disaster Response Programmes in 1994 (1994 Code of Conduct). They were also codified in UN Resolution 46/182 in 1991, UN Resolution 58/114 in 2004, the Good Humanitarian Donorship Principles in 2003,⁴ the Sphere Project⁵ and the European Consensus for Governments.⁶ A range of literature has been published in the last decade about humanitarian principles (and the Fundamental Principles; see below). However, the literature from the humanitarian and academic sectors is more about the challenges and alleged breaches of these principles than how they are applied and to what effect.

Much of the literature is about challenges resulting from the actions of governments, donor States, the UN Security Council, terrorists and counter-terrorism agencies.⁷ The relevance of humanitarian principles is mostly seen as an

1 Interview with Red Cross volunteer working in Social Care, Omagh, August 2014.

2 Interview with disaster management colleague working in Asia, location withheld, October 2015.

3 More information is available at: www.icrc.org/eng/resources/documents/red-cross-crescent-movement/fundamental-principles-movement-1986-10-31.htm (all internet references were accessed in July 2015).

4 The Good Humanitarian Donorship Principles are available at: www.worldhumanitarianism.org/node/434472.

5 See www.sphereproject.org.

6 Available at: http://ec.europa.eu/echo/files/media/publications/consensus_en.pdf.

7 For example, see the discussion in Sarah Collinson and Samir Elhawary, *Humanitarian Space: A Review of Trends and Issues*, Humanitarian Policy Group (HPG) Report No. 32, Overseas Development Institute (ODI), London, April 2012, p. 1; Antonio Donini (ed.), *The Golden Fleece: Manipulation and Independence in Humanitarian Action*, Kumarian Press, Sterling, VA, 2012, pp. 2–40; Sara Pantuliano, Kate Mackintosh and Samir Elhawary with Victoria Metcalfe, *Counter-terrorism and Humanitarian Action: Tensions, Impact and Ways Forward*, HPG Policy Brief No. 43, ODI, London, October 2011;

Table 1. *The Fundamental Principles of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement*

Humanity	The International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, born of a desire to bring assistance without discrimination to the wounded on the battlefield, endeavors, in its international and national capacity, to prevent and alleviate human suffering wherever it may be found. Its purpose is to protect life and health and to ensure respect for the human being. It promotes mutual understanding, friendship, cooperation and lasting peace amongst all peoples.
Impartiality	It makes no discrimination as to nationality, race, religious beliefs, class or political opinions. It endeavors to relieve the suffering of individuals, being guided solely by their needs, and to give priority to the most urgent cases of distress.
Neutrality	In order to continue to enjoy the confidence of all, the Movement may not take sides in hostilities or engage at any time in controversies of a political, racial, religious or ideological nature.
Independence	The Movement is independent. The National Societies, while auxiliaries in the humanitarian services of their governments and subject to the laws of their respective countries, must always maintain their autonomy so that they may be able at all times to act in accordance with the principles of the Movement.
Voluntary Service	It is a voluntary relief movement not prompted in any manner by desire for gain.
Unity	There can be only one Red Cross or one Red Crescent Society in any one country. It must be open to all. It must carry on its humanitarian work throughout its territory.
Universality	The International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, in which all Societies have equal status and share equal responsibilities and duties in helping each other, is worldwide.

Source: www.icrc.org/eng/resources/documents/red-cross-crescent-movement/fundamental-principles-movement-1986-10-31.htm.

expression of universal values rather than as practical tools. However, the case studies in this article will show that National Societies are using the Fundamental Principles on a day-to-day basis in their work. These principles are crucial in gaining access, in ensuring that efforts remain focused on the most vulnerable, and in motivating staff and particularly volunteers for very difficult work.

Sorcha O’Callaghan and Leslie Leach, “The Relevance of the Fundamental Principles to Operations: Learning from Lebanon”, *International Review of the Red Cross*, Vol. 95, No. 890, 2014, p. 9.

The British Red Cross Principles in Action project

For a number of years, the British Red Cross (BRC) has spearheaded a project entitled Principles in Action.⁸ The aim of the Principles in Action project is to better document the ways in which the Fundamental Principles are applied, in order to further encourage their use and understanding. The project seeks to examine where the Principles have been useful for increasing humanitarian access and improving reach and the quality of humanitarian response. In the process, the BRC aims to learn from the creative and innovative ways in which National Societies are using the Fundamental Principles to augment their humanitarian responses and their access to vulnerable populations.

The project was initiated because there was a lack of systematically gathered examples of what is meant by applying humanitarian principles, and the Fundamental Principles in particular. Also, the Movement lacks the crucial evidence base built up to share with policy-makers of how the Fundamental Principles are working. It is repeatedly asserted in specific crises and in global platforms that the Principles are vital for gaining access and protecting humanitarian work.⁹ They are intended to be tools for humanitarian action, but the application and particularly the consequences of applying them have not been well understood. Perhaps the Movement has not been very proactive in providing robust and evaluated evidence of *how* the Fundamental Principles work, *why* they work, and *what actually happens* when they are used. One of the purposes of this article is to establish some lessons learned from the experience across a range of Red Cross and Red Crescent National Societies. The author builds on the earlier Movement case studies of the Lebanese Red Cross and the Somali Red Crescent conducted by Sorchá O'Callaghan, Leslie Leach and Jane Backhurst.¹⁰

Building an evidence base: The methodology

This article and the Principles in Action project supporting it use qualitative techniques to build up more evidence about the application of the Fundamental Principles. The type and quality of the evidence varies. Some of the work has been previously published and peer-reviewed, such as the case studies of Lebanon¹¹ and Somalia.¹² Other evidence comes from evaluations of project work

8 More information is available at: www.redcross.org.uk/About-us/Who-we-are/The-international-Movement/Fundamental-principles/Why-the-principles-matter-to-millions.

9 For example, see this statement signed by twenty-nine humanitarian organizations in February 2015: www.medair.org/en/stories/medair-signs-joint-statement-on-humanitarian-principles-endorsed-by-30-huma/.

10 Lebanon Case study: S. O'Callaghan and L. Leach, above note 7. Somalia case study: Sorchá O'Callaghan and Jane Backhurst, *Principles in Action in Somalia*, BRC, 2013.

11 S. O'Callaghan and L. Leach, above note 7.

12 S. O'Callaghan and J. Backhurst, above note 10.

from different National Societies, such as from Kenya¹³ and Uganda.¹⁴ Still more evidence comes from interviews with practitioners in the Red Cross and Red Crescent National Societies, such as the research from Canada, Sweden, Australia and Northern Ireland. In these cases, the approach was guided by a set of questions. An iterative process followed, allowing researchers to explore local variations of approaches.

The BRC Principles in Action project also draws on internal documentation within the Movement from workshops, consultations and training materials. Some of the research derives from the Safer Access project, including its context analysis methodology.¹⁵ The evidence from the Movement is prefaced by a short literature review from the wider humanitarian sector and academia wherein evidence was shared about practical approaches to applying humanitarian principles.

This article brings together the lived experience of staff and volunteers with other evidence to argue the following points:

- The Fundamental Principles are practical tools for gaining access and initiating programmes with new groups of vulnerable people, and they are useful because they are practical. They are not abstract, but lead to different kinds of actions and decision-making. They make the Movement distinct, and also present unique challenges when faced with real-world pressures.
- The Fundamental Principles are not just useful in conflict-affected situations. They prove to be useful for every National Society, whether dealing with violence, immigration issues, prison visits or disaster risk reduction, or just in how they introduce the National Society to a new community.
- Leadership matters to an extremely strong degree when it comes to organizing a National Society along the lines of the Fundamental Principles, particularly when neutrality is challenged. “Walking the walk” and making decisions along the lines of the Fundamental Principles is very important, with dramatic results possible in terms of access and acceptance.
- All seven of the Fundamental Principles work together. The Movement is in many ways defined by the principle of voluntary service. Some 17 million volunteers carry out the majority of the actions that define the Movement.¹⁶ The Fundamental Principles work to inspire volunteers, and to link their actions to the wider Movement and history of the Movement, with positive effects.

13 Feinstein International Center, Kenya Red Cross and Nairobi Peace Initiative – Africa, *Conflict Management and Disaster Risk Reduction: A Case Study of Kenya*, 2013; Steven Hogberg, *Final Project Report: Kenya Community Violence Prevention Project – Tana Delta*, Canadian Red Cross, 2014; Gurvinder Singh, *CRCS Support for Violence Prevention in Tana Delta, Kenya*, Canadian Red Cross, 2013.

14 Amelia Kyazze, Paula Baizan and Sam Carpenter, *Learning from the City: British Red Cross’s Urban Learning Project Scoping Study*, BRC, 2013. See also Alexandra Galperin, *Final Evaluation: Election Preparedness Program 2010/2011, Uganda*, BRC, 2011.

15 The research from Lebanon and South Africa consists of specific case studies from the Safer Access project. The Safer Access Framework is a tool and approach used by Red Cross and Red Crescent National Societies to increase their acceptance, security and access to vulnerable people and communities. See www.icrc.org/saferaccess.

16 IFRC, *Global Review on Volunteering*, 2014, available at: www.ifrc.org/what-we-do/volunteers/global-review-on-volunteering/.

- Working as part of the Movement matters – many great initiatives or difficult situations have been navigated by Movement partners working together or preparing ahead of time, acknowledging each other’s comparative advantages and weaknesses. This is the principle of universality in action.

Literature in the humanitarian sector about applying principles

There have been some recent attempts in the literature from the UN, NGO and academic sectors to capture some lessons learned from applying the four humanitarian principles, if not all seven of the Fundamental Principles. For example, the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) commissioned a study in 2011 to examine approaches that enable staff to remain present and maintain access rather than evacuate in difficult humanitarian operations. In interviews with over 1,300 humanitarian practitioners, national staff and policy-makers, the authors found that humanitarian principles do make a difference in operational terms, according to those who deliver operations. Some 94% of those interviewed stated that there was a very real impact of the perception of neutrality on operational security, and they “strongly agreed on the effectiveness of humanitarian principles as operational tools to enhance their own security”.¹⁷ Lack of respect for humanitarian principles was found to be the third-largest contributor to insecurity, in the opinion of the interviewees.¹⁸

The report concludes that humanitarian principles remain the basis for acceptance for warring parties to be convinced to allow humanitarian access in times of conflict. The authors add that there is significant value in training local and national staff in humanitarian principles and understanding their operational value, and also communicating this internationally.¹⁹

Yulia Dyukova and Pauline Chetcuti authored a piece exploring Action Contre le Faim’s (Action Against Hunger, ACF) experiences applying humanitarian principles in conflict. The organization explicitly buttresses its commitments to the four humanitarian principles with reference to the ACF charter and its list of operational principles, including non-discrimination, free and direct access to victims, professionalism and transparency. The authors explore different challenges to these principles, such as maintaining neutrality in conflict, ensuring independence from donor political agendas, and standing firm in the face of opposition from local power holders.²⁰ Such an examination of challenges and the actual actions taken in response are useful for other agencies to digest and see how their organization would cope in similar circumstances.

17 Jan Egland, Adele Harmer and Abby Stoddard, *To Stay and Deliver: Good Practice for Humanitarians in Complex Security Environments*, OCHA, 1 March 2011, pp. 3, 46.

18 *Ibid.*, p. 47.

19 *Ibid.*

20 Yulia Dyukova and Paula Chetcuti, *Humanitarian Principles in Conflict – Ensuring Humanitarian Principles are Respected in Armed Conflict and Other Situations of Violence: ACF’s Experience and Position*, Action Contre le Faim International, 2013.

Ingrid Macdonald and Angela Valenza carried out a series of field research visits to Afghanistan, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Pakistan and South Sudan for the Norwegian Refugee Council, to explore whether and how humanitarian principles are applied.²¹ They found that applying humanitarian principles did increase access, according to interviewees, particularly when used to emphasize non-discrimination (neutrality) and attention towards the most vulnerable (impartiality). Interviews identified that the humanitarian principles supported negotiations and acceptance strategies by helping to negotiate community and stakeholder politics; helping to draft agreements to build trust with governments and local authorities; providing a basis for negotiations with armed groups that control territory; and helping to mitigate against the diversion and misappropriation of aid.

The authors conclude that organizations could significantly improve their consistent application of principles with clear and simple internal guidance, improved and relevant training, and integration of the principles into monitoring, evaluation and compliance frameworks. They also strongly recommend strengthening both individual and collective agencies' needs assessments.²²

As far as evidence provided from within the Movement regarding the application of Fundamental Principles is concerned, in addition to the work cited above by Sorcha O'Callaghan and colleagues, there is the work by Fiona Terry looking at the ICRC's application of the principle of neutrality in its work in Afghanistan.²³ Terry describes how the ICRC managed, after a tragedy, to renegotiate access by maintaining prison visits to advocate humane treatment. In addition, the maintenance of a series of health posts through a network of taxi drivers was paid for by the ICRC. Later on in the programme, first-aid training for people living in areas controlled by opposition fighters and negotiations for hostage operations further expanded the humanitarian space in which the ICRC could operate. While not without its daily security challenges, Terry concludes that "[r]emaining neutral in conflict is not a moral position but simply the most effective basis found to date on which to negotiate access to people in need of humanitarian assistance, wherever they are."²⁴

Red Cross Red Crescent Societies' application of the Fundamental Principles²⁵

We're working on understanding what it means to be the Red Cross in a divided society.²⁶

21 Ingrid MacDonald and Angela Valenza, *Tools for the Job: Supporting Principled Humanitarian Action*, Norwegian Refugee Council and HPG (ODI), October 2012.

22 *Ibid.* The report also has a significant number of recommendations for donors and governments about improving principled humanitarian response, or not impeding such a response.

23 Fiona Terry, "The International Committee of the Red Cross in Afghanistan: Reasserting the Neutrality of Humanitarian Action", *International Review of the Red Cross*, Vol. 93, No. 881, 2011, pp. 173–188.

24 *Ibid.*, p. 187.

25 This article does not explore in any depth the application of the Fundamental Principles by the ICRC. For this, please see the article by Jérémie Labbé and Pascal Daudin in this issue of the *Review*.

26 Interview with Red Cross recruitment manager, Derry/Londonderry, August 2014.

The Fundamental Principles as a practical starting point

As a basis for all Movement responses, the Fundamental Principles provide the starting point for engagement. As demonstrated in the interviews below, the Principles provide a culturally neutral and reliable language. They are the platform from which to explain the identity, purpose and priorities of a National Society, with a view to gaining acceptance and access to the most vulnerable. This is particularly important when this is a new community that the National Society is approaching.

In interviews with colleagues from Canada, Australia, Britain and Kenya, it has emerged that the Fundamental Principles are often part of the first discussions with a community or the authorities. The Fundamental Principles are a key aspect of the identity of any Movement actor. This allows the organization to initiate important work based on new assessments of vulnerability. It also can ensure that volunteers and staff adhere to certain standards of behaviour.

More than twenty years ago, the Canadian Red Cross conducted a vigorous vulnerability and capacity assessment across the country which uncovered that aboriginal populations in Canada were underserved by the authorities and ranked very high in a number of indicators of vulnerability – for example, in terms of high exposure to flooding and snow emergency risk, low knowledge of swimming and self-protective measures, high levels of alcoholism, higher exposure to violence and harm, health problems, and high levels of children taken into care institutions relative to the rest of the population.

The management decided to hire new staff to work on improving the access of aboriginal communities to the work of the Canadian Red Cross, particularly its violence prevention methodology.²⁷ In addition, the curriculum and training packages for staff and volunteers were completely overhauled to improve relevance and acceptance with these communities.

Shelley Cardinal, the national aboriginal adviser of the violence and abuse prevention programme, describes the Fundamental Principles as integral to introducing the Canadian Red Cross to communities:

My mission is the Fundamental Principles. I use them so that people can know clearly what to expect from me. I introduce the Principles and also say that these are the guidelines by which I work. I talk about neutrality, and people are very interested. It's one of the big questions that come up. People want to hear about neutrality. I think this is because so much of aboriginal affairs with the State is characterized by political opposition; this is a new idea and clearly sets us apart.²⁸

27 The Canadian Red Cross uses a prevention education and capacity-building programme called Respected in order to address situations of violence and abuse. For more information about this approach, see: www.redcross.ca/training-and-certification/course-descriptions/violence-bullying-and-abuse-prevention-courses.

28 Interview with Shelley Cardinal of the Canadian Red Cross, September 2014.

In introducing the Canadian Red Cross to these communities, Cardinal utilizes a tool that shows the Fundamental Principles as threads, tying into accepted aboriginal principles (see [Figure 1](#)). This shows that the Fundamental Principles are part of a virtuous spiral of moral principles that agree with and support each other, but also remain distinct.

Used in this way, the Fundamental Principles directly support access and acceptance with vulnerable communities. Over the past twenty-five years, of the approximately 750 aboriginal communities nationwide, the Canadian Red Cross works with nearly half: some 300 communities.²⁹

The Fundamental Principles are not just useful in conflict-affected situations

The literature from outside the Movement largely refers to the application of humanitarian principles in conflict situations, or when there is a risk of conflict.³⁰ However, for the Movement, the Fundamental Principles are useful in both conflict and non-conflict situations. In fact, they prove to be useful for every National Society, whether dealing with violence, immigration issues, prison visits, disaster risk reduction or various other issues. They also prove to be useful when articulating the distinct approach and unique position of a National Society. They serve to tie in any particular programme to the wider Movement, with its history, approach, and reputation for impartial and neutral humanitarian action.

The Australian Red Cross has been monitoring conditions in immigration detention facilities in Australia for more than twenty years. It provides independent humanitarian monitoring of conditions and conducts confidential advocacy with the Department of Immigration and the Australian government to ensure respect for the dignity, health and well-being of people held in detention. The aim is to reduce harm and increase resilience among people in detention, especially those who are particularly vulnerable.

The Australian Red Cross is the only independent organization to visit all detention facilities on at least a quarterly basis. Based on this monitoring, the Australian Red Cross raises issues of humanitarian concern, whether individual or systemic, with the authorities. In order to discuss sensitive issues openly and constructively, the Australian Red Cross's engagement with the authorities is confidential.³¹

A former Australian Red Cross staff member described the Fundamental Principles as being very relevant to how one introduces the work of the Australian Red Cross; they serve to explain why the Red Cross is visiting immigration detention centres while not taking a political position. Without the

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ For example, see I. MacDonald and A. Valenza, above note 21.

³¹ See www.redcross.org.au/immigration-detention-monitoring.aspx.

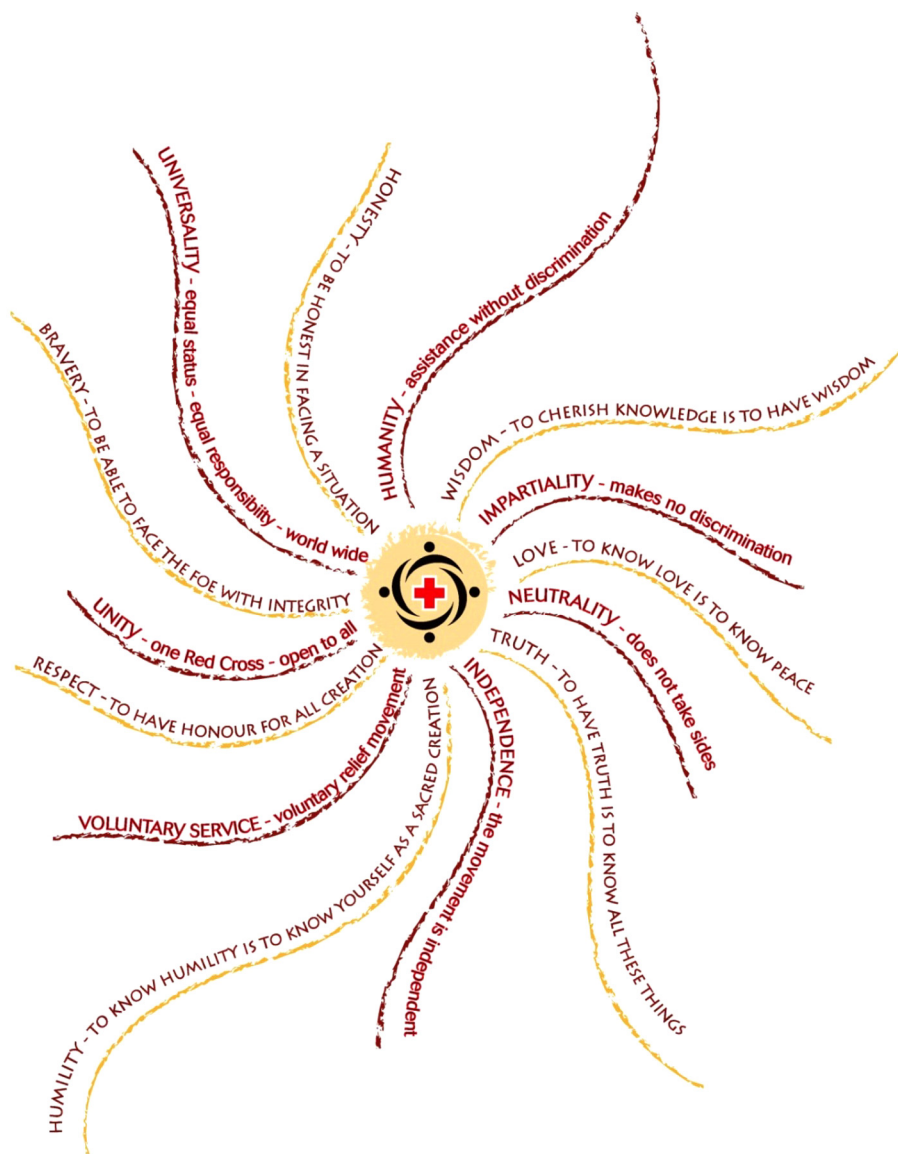


Fig. 1 - Colour online, Colour in print

Figure 1. Fundamental Principles and aboriginal principles. Source: Canadian Red Cross, RespectedED project brochure.

Fundamental Principles, the information gained from these prison visits would potentially be susceptible to bias.

We are different to others who visit immigration detention facilities to provide legal, pastoral or advocacy support. We speak to everyone – people in detention and the staff. We remain independent and neutral, focusing on the health, well-

being and dignity of people in detention ... you have to keep your analysis independent. The Fundamental Principles are what ground you and help you to take the most appropriate action in the circumstances. It reduces any individual's ability to influence you.

The emotion of the situation can be very challenging. The Fundamental Principles enable you to be more objective and more constructive. In my experience the Fundamental Principles help in a context that can be political and emotional.³²

This positioning allows the Australian Red Cross to have continued access to detention facilities while regularly raising concerns about individuals or about systematic issues. No other organization has this access or unique position.

The Fundamental Principles provide staff and volunteers with the language and rationale needed to keep a programme focused on the most vulnerable, despite tensions or pressure to do otherwise. In Kenya, the emergency response work of the Kenya Red Cross Society is well known throughout the country and internationally. In the Tana Delta District (Coast Province), farming ethnic groups live alongside nomadic groups in a semi-arid land that is prone to drought. Conflict over the use of land and water resources in August and September 2012 led to nearly 200 people being killed and ninety injured. More than 34,000 people were displaced.³³ The Kenya Red Cross carried out emergency response operations, but Red Cross staff and volunteers realized that more was needed to bring the society back to peace. Outside academic observers have documented that the Kenya Red Cross is seen as an "honest broker" to help decrease communal violence.³⁴

The Fundamental Principles were the starting point for new programming in violence prevention and conflict resolution. It was essential to ensure that divided communities saw that neither group was favoured:

All the sessions started with an introduction to the mission of the Red Cross and the Fundamental Principles. Volunteers at the grassroots level do the dissemination in local language, using local concepts. As much as possible, we provide equal services based on need.

Also, if people want favours or special treatment, you come back to the Fundamental Principles. As the Kenyan Red Cross, there are things we cannot do. We are a humanitarian organization. We are based on these Fundamental Principles. They are what guides us. We cannot go against them.³⁵

In this way, the Fundamental Principles provide answers for staff and volunteers to give when challenged. The final project report for the Kenyan programme concluded that the project as designed – based on the Fundamental Principles – was quite successful in mitigating the key driving factor for conflict in the community.³⁶

32 Interview with former Australian Red Cross humanitarian observer, London, January 2015.

33 S. Hogberg, above note 13; G. Singh, above note 13.

34 Feinstein International Center *et al.*, above note 13.

35 Interview with Kenyan Red Cross staff member, September 2015.

36 S. Hogberg, above note 13.

Challenges to neutrality

Neutrality is very difficult. You have to work like crazy to establish it and maintain it.³⁷

There remain grim situations in current humanitarian crises where national or local actors attack aid workers, conduct human rights violations among the population, or restrict humanitarian relief for their own gain. The Fundamental Principles continue to be a practical basis on which to establish, maintain and regain neutral humanitarian space in operations.

Examples from National Societies show that it's not just talk; walking the walk, and making decisions along the lines of the Fundamental Principles, is very important. With the right approach, dramatic results are possible in terms of access and acceptance.

In Somalia, the Somali Red Crescent (or Ururka Bisha Cas) is the only national organization with reach across all of the country. This wide presence ensures that there is no preferential access for any political groups or particular clan. The Somali Red Crescent has a strong reputation for reach and impartiality, which was established during the 1990s. This is when, working with ICRC, it was providing food aid to over a million people, as well as cooked food provision to another 600,000.³⁸ Today's work includes rapid humanitarian response as well as health provision, promotion of international humanitarian law (IHL) and tracing, and disaster risk reduction. Impartiality is reinforced by proactively ensuring a balanced clan make-up within its leadership and staff.

The work to promote the Fundamental Principles is captured in a document known as "Biri-ma-Geydo", which means "Spared from the Spear". This is used by the ICRC and the Somali Red Crescent to disseminate IHL and the Fundamental Principles. It has inspired dramas, roundtables and debates, particularly aimed at young people and those who may be directly involved in armed clashes.

One example of the Fundamental Principles being challenged occurred at the Keysaney hospital in Mogadishu. The Somali Red Crescent has worked hard to ensure its neutrality despite very challenging years of conflict and upheaval. On one occasion, the roof was used as a military post for twenty days and patients could not all be evacuated. Somali Red Crescent staff stayed with the patients despite very high risks. They also worked to ensure that no military searches of patients took place despite great pressure from the warring parties. Advertising about the neutrality of the hospital on the radio increased the confidence of the community and brought people to seek treatment. As control of Mogadishu changed hands repeatedly in the mid- to late 2000s, the neutrality of that hospital was consistent, but hard-won.³⁹

37 Former IFRC disaster management staff, Geneva, December 2014.

38 S. O'Callaghan and L. Leach, above note 7.

39 *Ibid.*

Fig. 2 - Colour online, Colour in print

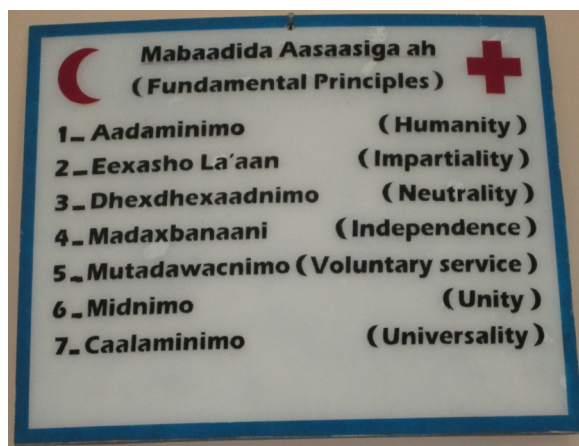


Figure 2. The Fundamental Principles in Somali. Source: Sorcha O'Callaghan, British Red Cross.

Interviews with staff, volunteers and other Red Cross members operational in Somalia show that the leadership of the Society, based on the Fundamental Principles, is a key element of its ongoing success. With leadership made up of a diverse and balanced membership from a range of clans, the principle of neutrality is reinforced even if conflict actors test the boundaries. In addition, strong and representative national leadership is linked to local and well-connected branch managers, all united by the Fundamental Principles. This allows the organization to brand itself as “a national organisation which is politically neutral ... and, as such, distinguish itself from all other humanitarian organisations in Somalia”.⁴⁰ This enables the Society to acquire and maintain access with a wide variety of groups across the country, unlike any other national organization (Figure 2 shows the Fundamental Principles in Somali including their English translation).

Another example of how the Fundamental Principles are helpful when neutrality is challenged comes from Uganda. In that country, in 2009, two Red Cross ambulances were attacked by angry mobs.⁴¹ Analysis after the event led to a conclusion that perhaps the mob either perceived the Ugandan Red Cross as being part of the government, or for some other reason did not consider the protection of ambulances, and the Red Cross emblem, as valid.⁴²

In the months and years following the incident, the leadership of the Ugandan Red Cross made distinctive efforts to strengthen dissemination and communication of the Fundamental Principles and the Red Cross mandate. They also focused on building the capacity of the Society to deal with situations of potential violence in the face of future elections and conflict. They developed significant analytical capacity for looking at political “hotspots”, and invested in

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 18.

⁴¹ See www.icrc.org/eng/assets/files/2013/safer-access-selected-experience-uganda.pdf.

⁴² Every National Society has an obligation to promote the protection of the Red Cross emblem. For more information, see: www.redcross.org.uk/About-us/Who-we-are/The-international-Movement/The-emblem.

recruitment and training staff and volunteers in the Fundamental Principles, conflict analysis and scenario depiction. Communications were pitched to communities, authorities and local political leaders. Hospital staff were singled out as very important for dissemination as they could ensure that referrals would proceed with impartiality, focusing on those in most critical need of care.⁴³

The Society stepped up its public information efforts, including the use of television and radio, aiming to transmit clear information about the Fundamental Principles, the purpose of the Ugandan Red Cross, and the unique and protective function of the emblem. These programmes aimed particularly to communicate with the range of people who might participate in violence, or those who moved amongst political activists. As one colleague described it, “we found you need to target people who travel, and people who talk... like motorcycle drivers. If you persuade a few, you persuade many, if you get your messaging right”.⁴⁴ A final evaluation of this programme found that this communication campaign did enable the Ugandan Red Cross to ensure safe access and to work largely unimpeded by attacks or any confusion about its role.⁴⁵ The campaign – based on the Fundamental Principles – brought about a reversal of the earlier lack of respect and protection, and allowed the Ugandan Red Cross to access those most vulnerable during the violence.

The Fundamental Principles are useful for any National Society that has to recalibrate or adjust in the face of challenges. In some countries, this will take an intentional strategic shift towards clarity, based on the Fundamental Principles. In Sweden, the leadership of the Swedish Red Cross have embarked on a Society-wide initiative about the Fundamental Principles. This work and the Society’s reinvigorated approach to the Principles were tested by an incident in April 2014, when a volunteer for the Society was caught on camera treating a customer to the Swedish Red Cross shop disrespectfully, based on the customer’s perceived ethnic background. The video was made public on social media and there was an outcry against the organization. However regretful the volunteer’s actions, the leadership of the Society are not unhappy that this has come out into the open; it has served as an important impetus to refocus on the Fundamental Principles and what they mean for staff and volunteer behaviour.

The new five-year strategic plan for the Society is structured by the Fundamental Principles, and so they directly shape all domestic and international programmes for 2016–2019.

The leadership of the organization want to ensure that the Swedish Red Cross serves as a safe, neutral and impartial space. This flies in the face of rising xenophobia and public expressions of anger towards refugees and migrants in what they describe as a changing country.⁴⁶ The Swedish Red Cross has made efforts to expand access with immigrant and refugee groups, particularly to

43 A. Galperin, above note 14.

44 Interview with Red Cross colleague, 2012. Quoted in A. Kyazze, P. Baizan and S. Carpenter, above note 14, p. 34.

45 A. Galperin, above note 14.

46 Interview with Swedish Red Cross leadership, Stockholm, October 2014.

promote services offering first aid in communities that may not have access to education otherwise. In times of riots or upheaval, first aid may indeed be a life-saving skill. This also serves to reach out to potential volunteers from these communities, which can lead to a positive spiral and a change in the perception of the Swedish Red Cross over time, increasing acceptance and access.⁴⁷

The refugee support programmes are one very important way to promote the Fundamental Principles, particularly the principle of humanity. One former refugee from Morocco, who now serves as a Swedish Red Cross volunteer, describes it this way:

What do the Fundamental Principles mean to me? They mean humanity, tolerance, compassion, support, discretion, universality. When you first arrive in this country as a refugee, you feel abandoned. You don't have anything, not even any clothes. ... The Red Cross means respect for the individual, no matter what the circumstances.⁴⁸

In Sweden, applying the Fundamental Principles throughout the organization may lead to better access to communities in the face of potential future urban unrest. It is also contributing to an increase in morale and focus for the current staff and volunteers, who are inspired by the leadership.⁴⁹

The importance of leadership

As seen in the Somali, Australian and Canadian cases, good access does not come easily. There must be clear guidance from the top, and throughout the organization, to adhere to the Fundamental Principles in order to gain and increase access.

A deliberate strategy for gaining access and maintaining a level of safety and security for staff and volunteers requires preparation work based on the Fundamental Principles. This is the approach taken at the top of the Swedish Red Cross, and historically at the Canadian Red Cross, to lead to better access and acceptance today and in the future. The managerial courage to steer this kind of work should not be underestimated. Particularly – but not only – in conflict and post-conflict societies, experience shows that this type of work does not arise by accident. The pattern of access, negotiation and acceptance across the Movement, although far from perfect or uniform, has been drawn from efforts to use, demonstrate and live up to the Fundamental Principles.

Leaders in the Movement come in all forms and persuasions; some have not proven to be as inspirational as required.⁵⁰ While all National Societies are legal

47 Interviews with Swedish Red Cross staff, Stockholm, October 2014.

48 Interview with Swedish Red Cross volunteer and refugee, Stockholm, October 2014. Translated from French by the author.

49 Interviews with staff at Swedish Red Cross HQ, Stockholm, October 2014.

50 There remains an unanswered question about whether and how often the Fundamental Principles are violated by National Societies, but this is very rarely documented and so is outside of the scope of this article.

entities based on the Geneva Conventions and the Red Cross Act in their national legislation, some leaders are appointed by the government in power, and this is a challenge for the perception of independence. Fulfilling the auxiliary role, as required by the Statutes of the Movement, is a difficult balancing act. It is often a difficult negotiation in which authorities at different levels of government need to understand deeply the Movement's role and obligations, particularly to the Fundamental Principles.⁵¹

One leader of a National Society in the Middle East explained that, in order to push back against the demands of a person in authority, the work had to be acceptable to the volunteers. If they were not convinced that the work fulfilled the Fundamental Principles, particularly with regard to being impartial and based on need rather than on political decisions and attempts to curry favour, then the leader would not be able to lead them.⁵² The principle of voluntary service here serves to ensure adherence to the principles of independence and impartiality.

All seven Fundamental Principles work together

Unlike other humanitarian organizations, the Movement has the last three principles of voluntary service, unity and universality that, in some ways, define the way it works. These principles tie together the work on the local, national and international scales. In some ways the Movement is expressed by the work of the 17 million volunteers; linking all the Fundamental Principles together is one way to ensure that morale and performance do not falter in this volunteer workforce.

The Lebanese Red Cross Society is a leader in the Movement for innovative practices that ensure staff and volunteers adhere to the Fundamental Principles, which secure access. Inside Lebanon, the National Society is well known throughout the country as an active and impartial provider of emergency services. It currently runs the only national emergency service, with a fleet of 270 ambulances and forty-five ambulance stations staffed by approximately 2,700 volunteers. This is not without significant challenges, particularly running a 24-hour emergency service based on volunteers.⁵³ However, the work that the Lebanese Red Cross has been doing for decades has placed it in very good standing.

In the civil war, the Lebanese Red Cross was able to work across as many as fifty different internal "borders"; it could and still can reach areas inaccessible to government agencies, and is the only national institution with that reach.⁵⁴ It continues to be well known for its activities and neutrality.

51 IFRC in consultation with ICRC, *National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies as Auxiliaries to the Public Authorities in the Humanitarian Field: Conclusions from the Study Undertaken by the International Federation of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies*, 28th International Conference of the Red Cross and Red Crescent, 2–6 December 2003, available at: www.icrc.org/eng/resources/documents/misc/5xrfbm.htm.

52 As shared at an ICRC/IFRC-hosted Regional Workshop entitled "Reaffirming the Fundamental Principles: A Movement-Wide Initiative", Beirut, March 2014.

53 Sorcha O'Callaghan and Leslie Leach, *Principles in Action in Lebanon*, BRC, ICRC and Lebanese Red Cross, 2012, p. 14.

54 *Ibid.*, p. 15.

One way the Lebanese Red Cross ensures neutrality is through a vigorous and ongoing process of recruitment based on the Fundamental Principles. During recruitment, volunteers need to sign a neutrality oath, and backgrounds are verified in the community to ensure political neutrality. New recruits are mentored for up to a year before deployment.

Due to the religious nature of the conflict and divisions within Lebanese society, once staff and volunteers are operational, they are called by nicknames that have no religious or cultural affiliation to further reinforce neutrality. No political discussions are allowed at ambulance stations, and at some stations even the news is turned off to prevent strong reactions to the media. All eighteen different confessional groups from Lebanese society are represented in the staff and volunteers, and there is strong representation of both men and women in the teams.⁵⁵

The Lebanese Red Cross has captured staff and volunteers' experiences in publications with the ICRC and the British Red Cross. Many other National Societies in the region and beyond, including ICRC staff, are inspired by the Lebanese example, and imitate some elements of the Lebanese Red Cross's work in applying the Fundamental Principles. However, there is very little documentation about this work and the innovations required to deliver according to the Fundamental Principles. It is felt that with 189 National Societies, there may be many more innovations being trialled. So far the Movement has not been very successful in capturing lessons learned and saving and sharing them in ways that can promote best practice over the wider network. This article is one attempt to do so.

Decision-making guided by the Fundamental Principles

It is not enough merely to talk about the principle of humanity in a vague way. Today's Movement actors need to have access to reliable and high-quality data to make strong decisions. As discussed above in the cases of Somalia, Uganda and Sweden, the context and power holders in any situation can change and shift. In addition, for services to be relevant and stand up to challenges, the National Society must be focused on the most vulnerable as a way of demonstrating impartiality. This is not a simple task of generalizations and assumptions. Rather, it relies on communications with a range of stakeholders from different parts of society, a thorough examination of relevant information and an excellent context analysis, revisited regularly.

As we saw above in the Canadian example, a good vulnerability and capacity assessment might lead a National Society in a new and different direction. In the United Kingdom, the British Red Cross works in Northern Ireland. Throughout the years of political tensions and conflict (known euphemistically as "the Troubles"), the Red Cross operated across sectarian lines and was known for national initiatives such as blood drives, social services and first aid.⁵⁶

⁵⁵ S. O'Callaghan and L. Leach, above note 7.

⁵⁶ Interview with former head of Londonderry Red Cross active during the conflict, Derry/Londonderry, August 2014.

In recent years, however, the management team in Northern Ireland has become concerned that services might not be focused exactly as they should be: on accessing communities that were most in need of the services, in accordance with the principle of impartiality. They examined people's access to the services that the BRC offered, whether those were emergency shelter, wheelchair loans or care in the home. This demanded a close look at the statistics across the region, using different mapping tools and indicators to identify those most vulnerable. For example, the team investigated the relevant social and geological data relating to flood risk, poverty levels, education levels and access to State services. The locations of Red Cross services and branches were also charted, and whether and how they were utilized. In small but significant ways, the data suggested that the Red Cross needed to make some different decisions and shift some of its staff, volunteers and services if it wanted to live up to the Fundamental Principles. Ambulances had to be stationed closer to where they were needed. Some branches had been operating where there was a historical link with past volunteers, but would be more useful closer to vulnerable communities.⁵⁷ With this in mind, the Red Cross in Northern Ireland is undergoing a process of realigning people and assets to more appropriately reflect the requirements of those in need across society. In addition, the management decided to look at the demographics of the staff and volunteer base; similar to the Swedish Red Cross and the Lebanese Red Cross, the BRC also had to take steps to ensure that its personnel base reflected the diversity of the communities that it aims to serve.

This process demanded significant managerial courage in a society that is still recovering from conflict. For the Red Cross management team in Northern Ireland, even embarking on a refocusing of the work along the lines of the Fundamental Principles raised very painful reactions in some staff, many of whom saw the Red Cross as a neutral haven where divisions in society were not to be spoken about. In order to keep staff and volunteers on board, and to further diversify the staff in the future, the Fundamental Principles have been the tools for decision-making and communication.

This alignment with the Fundamental Principles has real impact in terms of access, even on a small scale. For example, Derry/Londonderry is a city quite divided between different groups of people.⁵⁸ Political activism is still very much alive in the city, and graffiti decorates the walls and monuments in sectarian colours. The Red Cross provides a meals-on-wheels service that serves vulnerable people including those just out of hospital and the elderly. Volunteers for the service cross literal boundaries within the city four days a week.

Maintaining a position of neutrality and a focus on impartiality of services takes constant vigilance on the part of managers as well as staff and volunteers in a divided Society. A good context analysis accepts that the Society is changing, political processes are under way, and people may have very diverse views, even

⁵⁷ Interview with Northern Ireland management team, Belfast, August 2014.

⁵⁸ As an example, the population cannot agree on one name for the city: some call it Derry, while others call it Londonderry. Street signs towards the city state both names.

within a community. A Red Cross staff member described the line that staff and management have to walk:

You need to steer real clear of sectarianism. We promote our work as principled and relevant to today's people – not just to two different communities, but across divisions, such as the disabled, the elderly, those with alcohol problems, etc.⁵⁹

Another staff member described the importance of showing neutrality:

We're very conscious ... you always need to think that there could be allegations of favouritism. Politicians are always looking for something to poke a finger at. Some throw sectarian allegations to suit their politics. Then you have to bend over backwards to show it is not sectarian, that you represent a mixed group.⁶⁰

This work is difficult and subtle, and takes its toll on staff. However, it pays off in terms of access. A volunteer coordinator stated that volunteers who are retired policemen now have greater access to different parts of the city as Red Cross volunteers than they ever did during their long careers in positions of State authority.⁶¹

Training on the Fundamental Principles

Having staff and volunteers who can act and make decisions along the lines of the Fundamental Principles takes active and relevant training, and regular revisiting of the subject. It does not prove successful merely to use the Principles as part of staff members' introduction to a Society; lessons learned from different contexts show that coming back to the Fundamental Principles before, during and after a crisis makes the organization stronger and volunteers and staff more focused.

The South African Red Cross Society had to work on acceptance and capacity-building in order to overcome a history wherein it was felt that the Society was not supportive enough of the anti-apartheid struggle prior to the 1990s. The Society started to build its reputation by providing first aid and emergency evacuations in 1993 and 1994, and at political protests and demonstrations throughout the decade. At the outbreak of xenophobic violence in 2008, the Society quickly mobilized staff, volunteers and relief supplies. Building on existing relationships, which were based on past performance, access was secured by involving different communities in the process of identifying solutions and providing relief. In addition, the Society structured its programmes to bolster community self-help initiatives and empower community volunteers.⁶²

59 Interview with Red Cross staff, London, August 2014.

60 Interview with Red Cross staff, Omagh, August 2014.

61 Interview with Red Cross staff, Derry/Londonderry, August 2014.

62 South African Red Cross Society and ICRC, *Safer Access in Action Case Study: South Africa*, 2013, available at: www.icrc.org/eng/assets/files/2013/safer-access-case-study-south-africa.pdf.

One element considered key, identified by a Safer Access review of the work, was building on the competencies and skills of staff so that they could be strong Red Cross “ambassadors” to help gain acceptance. An important starting point for building these skills was identified to be the Fundamental Principles. Teaching community volunteers to use the Principles to guide decision-making and relief activities was considered key to positioning the organizations and securing access during disturbances. A compilation of lessons learned identified understanding of the Principles and the ability to translate them into action in daily work and life to be essential for the success of this response.⁶³

Managing volunteers, particularly in difficult, politicized or emotive situations, takes different management techniques and skills. In the Australian Red Cross, using the Fundamental Principles with volunteers was central to securing the right kind of behaviour and access. A colleague interviewed for this study commented:

I worked in a very supportive team who were very committed to the same approaches and objectives. We had some great volunteers – people in retirement, students and employed people – who made themselves available for one week per month for detention visits and then returning to the office to write up the report. That’s not easy volunteering.

Red Cross staff and volunteers need training on the Principles that gives deeper reasoning on their relevance and ties them to Movement practices and the history of access. A lot can be learnt through debriefing after activities to consider whether decisions and actions adhered to the Principles.

The Principles are part of the persuasion you need to have with Red Cross staff and volunteers, to convince them that their small actions matter.⁶⁴

The work in Australia would be inconceivable without the Fundamental Principles and the commitment of the wider Movement. Teaching the volunteers and continually supporting their work using the Fundamental Principles is the practical method the teams have found to sustain access and their difficult work in the long term.

In Northern Ireland, the British Red Cross has ensured that understanding of the Fundamental Principles does not just begin and end with a welcome workshop in the first few days. Managers of the different teams discuss the Fundamental Principles in monthly staff meetings, whether they are working with those who teach first aid, those who arrange wheelchair rentals or those who support refugees. This ensures a refreshed understanding of what it means to be a Red Cross volunteer, and a better ability to incorporate the Principles into daily decision-making.

Interviews with volunteers in Northern Ireland show that they do consider the regular discussions on the Fundamental Principles helpful for focusing and delivering their work. In the words of one volunteer:

⁶³ *Ibid.*

⁶⁴ Interview with former Australian Red Cross humanitarian observer, London, January 2015.

The principle of humanity means that you keep it focused. You treat people how you would want to be treated. Would you be happy with your mum getting these services? You need to understand that people all have the right to be treated with dignity and respect.⁶⁵

In addition to regular briefings and debriefings about the Fundamental Principles, the Red Cross in Northern Ireland has improved its training materials in order to better reflect the local reality faced by volunteers there. While the BRC carries out scenario-based training on the Fundamental Principles, it was strongly felt that the training needed to be updated in this specific context to give volunteers and staff more practice and discussion around decision-making according to the Principles. [Figure 3](#) shows an example of materials currently being used for training across Northern Ireland.

The Fundamental Principles are highly motivational for staff and volunteers. Staff are drawn to the Movement for what it stands for and how it goes about its work. In addition to providing training and interesting work, the Principles also can provide some protection. This was reported to the author by volunteers in Northern Ireland, Sweden and other places. In Lebanon, volunteering for the Lebanese Red Cross provided an alternative path to being conscripted by a militia group during the civil war.⁶⁶ In many countries there may be pressure to volunteer or work along lines drawn according to political divides, religious differences or ethnic affiliation. The Fundamental Principles help the National Societies to be a potentially positive place where neutrality is a considerable draw.

Working as part of the Movement

Maintaining neutrality and independence in tricky situations takes intentional strategy, with the support of the resources and identity of the Movement. The Fundamental Principles – all seven together – ensure that these situations are approached systematically and practically, supported by a range of National Societies, the IFRC and the ICRC. The principles of universality and unity are not often mentioned at first in discussions about the Fundamental Principles, but then, like the principle of voluntary service, it becomes clear that the work of the Movement would not have anywhere near the access or global reach that it has without these principles. The work in Kenya discussed above was supported by the Canadians. The Canadian approach to aboriginal communities is being duplicated with work in Australia. The Northern Ireland programme was supported by the ICRC, including a recent visit to Kosovo and Serbia to connect with the National Societies working in those contexts. The ICRC is a strong supporter of National Societies working in conflicts and other situations of violence – the work cited here in Somalia, Lebanon and South Africa was specifically facilitated or supported by the ICRC.

65 Interview with BRC volunteer, Omagh, August 2014.

66 S. O'Callaghan and L. Leach, above note 7.

In an area of the country where there has been serious political and religious tensions which have resulted in killings and violent demonstrations, the local Branch of the Red Cross has been asked to provide first aid cover for a planned demonstration.

The local Red Cross Branch has not been successful in recruiting from, or developing any real contacts with the relevant groups, and is concerned that its volunteers will be seen as ‘supporting’ the police and the authorities, or even as part of the ‘establishment’ against which the demonstrators are protesting, and that they may, therefore, be the target of attacks.

- How should the Branch respond to the request for first aid cover?
- What action should it take in the long-term?
- Which of the Fundamental Principles are most relevant?

The participants are then guided through a discussion, where consideration will be encouraged along the lines of: how the Branch management might go about making more contacts throughout the communities; how this might be a good opportunity to demonstrate impartiality and improve community contacts, if handled well; how to consider volunteers who will be a diverse mix that will be acceptable to the community, possibly drawing on other branch resources and staff as needed, and that the first aiders themselves are aware of upholding the Fundamental Principles and being seen to do so.

Figure 3. Training materials for Ideals in Action. Source: Northern Ireland Management Team, *Ideals in Action Training Package*, BRC, 2015.

And these are just a few examples. All of the large or complex emergencies across the world will have aspects of Movement coordination and decision-making, whether that be in response to the Ebola outbreak in West Africa in 2014–2015, or the ongoing Syrian refugee crisis across the Middle East. This is not to say that these relationships and programming options are easy and free from problems; regardless, it is inconceivable that the Movement would have the scale of operations and access it does without all the Fundamental Principles, and the principles of universality and unity tying it all together.

Conclusion

It is through debate and rigorous discussion that we keep the Fundamental Principles alive. We’ve achieved an enormous amount already.⁶⁷

⁶⁷ Former IFRC disaster management colleague, Geneva, December 2014.

The Fundamental Principles may be the beginning for introductions with communities and recruiting volunteers, but they do not end there. They must be revisited, examined, emphasized in debates, used to approach dilemmas, and promoted in management decision-making and corporate strategies. They need to be living ideals, applied in real time in the daily work and challenges of National Societies.⁶⁸ In a review of the literature and Movement documents, as well as interviews, it emerges that the Fundamental Principles are largely what makes the work of the Movement possible. The Principles are practical and useful tools, literally translated into local languages and concepts that have resonance with different cultures. The Principles are not just for conflict contexts, but support the Movement's way of working in any difficult situation. With the right leadership and managerial courage, the Fundamental Principles are key to establishing access and acceptance, and are useful when that acceptance is threatened. For a Movement largely based on the delivery of services by millions of volunteers, all seven of the Fundamental Principles work together in concert and cannot be used as effectively in isolation.

This article has put forward a range of evidence emerging from nine National Societies, but it is also a strong call for more evidence to be gathered. The Movement undoubtedly has a large number of examples in which the Fundamental Principles have played a part in designing, delivering and evaluating programmes. However, there has been little attempt to collect the information systematically, so learning has been lost. In addition, there is little or no regular collection of information regarding breaches of the Fundamental Principles. While understandable in context, the failure to establish strong evidence about the impact of programmes based on the Fundamental Principles, and conversely of the consequences of failing to adhere to the Principles, weakens the wider argument about the effectiveness of principled humanitarian action. It is hoped that by sharing this article and others of its kind, further research will come to light and be disseminated, strengthening the call for the practice and application of the Fundamental Principles worldwide.

68 For a discussion of how the Principles can be applied on a day-to-day basis, see the article by Katrien Beeckman in this issue of the *Review*.

