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Humanitarian essentials: principles, law, system and standards

Complete manual

A 2-day certified course: the four humanitarian principles, the essentials of international humanitarian law, the actors and architecture of the response (OCHA, clusters, response plans, funds), and the Sphere and CHS standards, with scenario-based exercises, a final assessment and a verifiable certificate.

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Day 1 : Humanitarian principles and international humanitarian law

Objectives

- Define humanitarian action and its principles.
- Distinguish between humanitarian, development and peace work.
- Know the essential rules of international humanitarian law.

What is humanitarian action?

Humanitarian action aims to **save lives, alleviate suffering and maintain human dignity** during and after crises: armed conflicts, natural disasters, epidemics, food crises, population displacement.

It is distinct from **development aid** (long-term change, working with institutions) and from **peace** efforts. In protracted crises, the aim is to link the three more effectively: this is known as the humanitarian-development-peace “nexus” approach.

The four humanitarian principles

Adopted by the United Nations General Assembly (resolutions 46/182 of 1991 and 58/114 of 2004) and derived from the principles of the Red Cross Movement:

- **Humanity**: human suffering must be addressed wherever it is found; the dignity of every person is respected.
- **Neutrality**: not taking sides in hostilities or engaging in controversies of a political, racial, religious or ideological nature.
- **Impartiality**: aid is provided on the basis of need alone, giving priority to the most urgent cases, without discrimination.
- **Independence**: humanitarian action remains autonomous from political, economic or military objectives.

These principles are not abstract: they make it possible to be **accepted** by all parties and therefore to **gain access** to people in need.

International humanitarian law (IHL)

IHL, or the law of armed conflict, limits the effects of war. Its main sources are the **four Geneva Conventions of 1949** and their Additional Protocols, as well as customary law. The ICRC is its guardian.

- **Distinction**: the parties must at all times distinguish between combatants and civilians, and between military objectives and civilian objects.

- **Proportionality**: an attack is prohibited if the expected civilian harm is excessive in relation to the military advantage.
- **Precaution**: take all feasible measures to spare civilians.
- Protection of the wounded, the sick, prisoners, medical personnel and facilities, and humanitarian personnel.
- The parties must allow and facilitate the rapid passage of impartial humanitarian relief for civilians (subject to their right of control).

IHL applies to armed conflicts. **Human rights** apply at all times, and **refugee law** (1951 Convention) protects people who have fled their country. People displaced within their own country are covered by the 1998 Guiding Principles.

Everyday dilemmas

Applying the principles requires judgement. Common examples:

- An armed group demands a “tax” on aid to let the trucks through.
- An authority wants to choose the list of beneficiaries itself.
- The army offers an escort or to distribute aid with you.
- A donor wants to restrict aid to certain groups for political reasons.

In each case, ask yourself: does the decision respect needs (impartiality), does it keep our distance from the parties (neutrality, independence), and does it protect our long-term acceptance? These decisions are taken as a team and with management, never alone.

From principles to decision-making: an operational method

The four principles are not a statement of intent placed on the first page of a proposal. For a field organisation, they are a **decision-making tool** that must be used at every sensitive juncture: where to intervene, whom to serve, with whom to negotiate, what funding to accept, what visibility to display. That requires knowing where they come from, how they fit together and who, within the organisation, has the authority to apply them.

Sources and scope

- **The seven Fundamental Principles of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement** (Vienna, 1965): humanity, impartiality, neutrality, independence, voluntary service, unity, universality. This is the historical template; Jean Pictet's commentary remains the reference for their interpretation.
- **UN General Assembly resolution 46/182** (1991) enshrines humanity, neutrality and impartiality, and establishes that assistance should be provided in principle with the consent of the affected State and on the basis of an appeal by that State. **Resolution 58/114** (2004) adds independence.
- **The Code of Conduct for the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) in Disaster Relief** (1994) translates these principles into ten commitments, including the humanitarian imperative, aid given regardless of race, creed or nationality, refusal to act as an instrument of government

foreign policy, and respect for local culture and custom. Most international NGOs have signed it; many donors require adherence to it.

- **The Core Humanitarian Standard (CHS)** and the **Humanitarian Charter** of the Sphere Handbook take up these principles and link them to verifiable quality commitments.

A functional hierarchy

Practitioners generally distinguish two levels. **Humanity** is the purpose; **impartiality** is the rule for allocating aid (non-discrimination, proportionality to needs, priority to the most urgent cases). **Neutrality** and **independence** are operational means: they serve to earn the trust of the parties and therefore access. This distinction has practical consequences. A so-called "multi-mandate" organisation that also conducts public advocacy or development work with the State may not claim strict neutrality, but it can never give up impartiality in the distribution of assistance.

> Impartiality is not equality. Distributing the same quantity to everyone is not impartial if needs differ. Impartiality requires a documented needs analysis, explicit targeting criteria and the ability to justify, with figures, why one group was served before another.

The six-step decision method

Faced with a dilemma (a demand from an authority, an offer of escort, a donor condition), an experienced team applies a short but traceable process. Typical timeframe: 24 to 72 hours for an operational decision, one to two weeks for a strategic decision (entering an area, accepting funding).

1. **Establish the facts** (base manager or project manager): who is asking for what, since when, who else has received the same demand, what the immediate consequences of a refusal would be. Verified information is distinguished from reported information.
2. **Identify the principles and rules at stake** (project manager with the programme coordinator): which principles are affected, which internal policies apply (anti-fraud, counter-terrorism, data protection, safeguarding), which clauses of the donor agreement.
3. **Consult**: the national team (who know the local dynamics and often bear their risks), the NGO forum, the relevant cluster, OCHA (access unit), the donor if a contractual clause is involved. Check whether a common position already exists.
4. **Formulate at least three options**, including the option "do not intervene" or "suspend", each assessed against four criteria: effect on affected people, effect on acceptance in the medium term, risk to staff, legal and reputational risk.
5. **Decide at the right level**: delegation of authority must be in writing. As a general rule, a payment, a concession on targeting or the acceptance of an escort falls to the head of mission, often after consulting headquarters.
6. **Document and review**: the decision, its rationale, the options rejected and the review date are recorded in a log. A concession accepted "exceptionally" quickly becomes the norm if it is not reviewed.

The main risk is not the big, spectacular decision, but the **accumulation of small concessions** (a slightly skewed list, an imposed driver, a percentage of food "for security")

which, taken together, make the organisation part of an armed actor's system of control. The decision log is the only way to see this drift.

IHL in practice: classification, operational rules and complementary frameworks

A humanitarian worker is not a lawyer, but must know which law applies where they work, because it determines the obligations of the parties towards the population and towards the humanitarian worker, and the arguments that can be used in a negotiation.

Step 1: classify the situation

Situation	Criteria	Applicable law
International armed conflict (IAC)	Resort to armed force between two or more States, whatever its intensity; total or partial occupation of a territory	The four Geneva Conventions, Additional Protocol I (for States party), customary law; law of occupation (Fourth Convention, Articles 47 to 78)
Non-international armed conflict (NIAC)	Protracted fighting between a State and an organised armed group, or between such groups; two cumulative criteria established by case law (Tadić case, 1995): **intensity** of hostilities and **organisation** of the group	Common Article 3 of the Geneva Conventions, customary law; Additional Protocol II if the group controls part of the territory enabling it to carry out sustained and concerted operations
Internal disturbances and tensions	Riots, sporadic violence, below the threshold of armed conflict	Human rights law and domestic law; IHL does not apply
Natural disaster outside conflict	Earthquake, flood, cyclone	Domestic law, human rights, Guidelines for the Domestic Facilitation and Regulation of International Disaster Relief and Initial Recovery Assistance (known as the "IDRL Guidelines", IFRC, 2007)

Several classifications may coexist in the same country: a NIAC in one region, an occupation in another, disturbances elsewhere. The official legal classification is a matter for lawyers (ICRC, the organisation's legal advisers), but the team must know the position adopted.

Step 2: the rules that directly concern humanitarian action

- **Consent and passage of relief**: impartial relief is subject to the consent of the parties concerned (Additional Protocol I, Article 70; Additional Protocol II, Article 18), but such consent may not be arbitrarily withheld. Once relief has been accepted, the parties must allow and facilitate its rapid and unimpeded passage, while retaining a right of control (inspection, routes, timings). Rule 55 of the ICRC Customary IHL Study.
- **Occupying Power**: obligation to ensure the food and medical supplies of the population (Fourth Convention, Article 55) and, if it fails to do so, to agree to relief schemes (Article

59).

- **Relief personnel and objects**: humanitarian relief personnel must be respected and protected (Rule 31), as must objects used for relief operations (Rule 32). The freedom of movement of authorised personnel may be restricted only temporarily and in case of imperative military necessity (Rule 56).
- **Starvation**: the use of starvation as a method of warfare is prohibited (Rule 53), as is attacking, destroying or rendering useless objects indispensable to the survival of the civilian population, such as foodstuffs, crops, livestock and drinking water installations (Rule 54). Security Council resolution 2417 (2018) requests the Secretary-General to report on the risk of conflict-induced famine. Starving civilians is a war crime under the Rome Statute, including in NIAC since the 2019 amendment.
- **Medical mission**: protection of the wounded and sick, of medical personnel, units and transports (Rules 25 to 30), and prohibition on punishing a health worker for providing care in accordance with medical ethics. Security Council resolution 2286 (2016) on the protection of health care in armed conflict.
- **Humanitarian personnel**: Security Council resolution 2730 (2024) recalls States' obligations to protect humanitarian and United Nations personnel, including locally recruited staff.

Step 3: complementary frameworks

- **Human rights law**: applicable at all times, with possible derogations for certain rights in a state of emergency, never for the non-derogable core (right to life, prohibition of torture and of slavery).
- **Refugee law**: 1951 Convention and 1967 Protocol; principle of **non-refoulement** (Article 33); in Africa, the 1969 OAU Convention, which extends the definition to people fleeing events seriously disturbing public order; in Latin America, the Cartagena Declaration (1984).
- **Internal displacement**: the 1998 Guiding Principles (non-binding but widely recognised) and, in Africa, the **Kampala Convention** (2009, in force since 2012), the first binding regional instrument on internally displaced persons.
- **Sanctions regimes and counter-terrorism**: Security Council resolution 2664 (2022) creates a cross-cutting humanitarian exemption in UN sanctions regimes for the funds and resources necessary for humanitarian assistance. National legislation and donor clauses must nevertheless be checked case by case.

> In a negotiation, you do not cite articles as you would brandish a criminal code. You use the law as a shared reference ("your own rules say the wounded must be treated without distinction") and keep the precise legal classification for written exchanges and dialogue with the authorities.

Full example: three dilemmas in six weeks in Valmora district

Fictional context. Valmora district, in a country affected by a non-international armed conflict for four years, has 186,000 inhabitants and 41,000 internally displaced persons spread across

14 sites. The fictional international NGO "Aide Commune" runs a food security and water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) programme there, funded by a country-based pooled fund and a European donor: in-kind food or voucher distributions for 6,200 households per month, rehabilitation of 18 water points. The north of the district (three communes, around 52,000 inhabitants) is controlled by a fictional non-state armed group, the "Front de la Vallée". The district capital is held by the national army.

Week 1: the "contribution" at the checkpoint

At the Kessa checkpoint, a local Front commander demands 3% of the food in each convoy "for road security". The driver from the contracted transporter already left two bags behind on the previous run without reporting it. The loss would amount to about 5.4 tonnes of cereals per month, i.e. the ration for 360 households.

Facts established by the base manager within 48 hours: the same demand was made to two other NGOs, which refused; the commander does not have the explicit approval of his political leadership, which can be reached through an intermediary; the population in the north has not received a distribution for 37 days; the latest rapid assessment shows 41% of households with "poor" food consumption.

Option	Effect on the population	Medium-term acceptance	Staff risk	Legal and donor risk
A. Pay the 3%	Immediate distribution	Very negative: sets a precedent, other checkpoints will follow	Low in the short term	High: diversion, anti-fraud clause, possible breach of sanctions rules
B. Suspend convoys to the north	Severe: 52,000 people without assistance	Neutral, even positive if explained	Low	Low, but obligation to report to the donor
C. Suspend temporarily and negotiate with the Front's leadership, in a common position with the other NGOs and OCHA	Interruption of 2 to 4 weeks, partly offset by cash transfers if markets are functioning	Positive: strengthens the common rule	Moderate, to be assessed with the security adviser	Low, with notification to the donor

Decision by the head of mission after consulting headquarters: option C. The incident (loss of the two bags) is reported to the donor within 48 hours as required by the agreement. The transporter receives a written warning and a zero-tolerance clause is added to the contract. The NGO forum adopts a one-page joint statement: no organisation pays any levy on assistance. After 19 days, the Front's leadership agrees to passage without any levy in exchange for two commitments that do not compromise the principles: notification of movements 48 hours in advance and presentation of the targeting criteria to community leaders.

Week 3: the authorities' list

In the district capital, the prefect hands over a list of 1,900 "vulnerable" households and asks that it replace the NGO's registration. A sample check (120 randomly selected households, home visits) shows that 34% of the households on the list meet none of the vulnerability criteria, that 11% cannot be identified, and that households headed by displaced women are under-represented (9% of the list compared with 27% in the cluster's profiling).

Response: the team does not reject the list publicly, which would humiliate the prefect. It proposes to use it as **one source among others**, cross-checked against community-based registration and home verification, with a mixed targeting committee (representatives of the displaced, women, neighbourhood leaders, State social services). The results of the check are presented in private, without naming anyone, drawing on the criteria validated by the food security cluster. The prefect gets what matters to him: being involved and being able to say so. The organisation retains control of the criteria and of verification, which is its red line.

Week 6: the escort offer and funding with visibility

The army offers to escort the trucks to a recently retaken commune. At the same time, a bilateral donor offers an additional 600,000 euros on condition that its flag is displayed on the trucks and bags. The cross-analysis shows that the commune is still contested, that the Front has declared vehicles associated with the army "legitimate targets" and that no other organisation is present. The team recommends declining the escort (last-resort criteria not met: unarmed access has not yet been negotiated) and asking the donor for a visibility waiver on security grounds, which most institutional donors allow. The donor accepts visibility limited to reports and to communications outside the country.

The decision log at the end of the six weeks

Date	Decision	Principle at stake	Decision level	Review
Week 1	Refusal of the 3% levy, temporary suspension, joint negotiation	Independence, impartiality	Head of mission, headquarters informed	Every two weeks until resumption
Week 3	Prefect's list used as one source among others, verification maintained	Impartiality	Programme coordinator	At each registration cycle
Week 6	Escort declined, visibility waiver	Neutrality, independence	Head of mission, headquarters consulted	If the military situation changes

> What sets a professional response apart is not having "held firm" on everything, but having distinguished what was negotiable (advance notice of movements, involvement of the authorities, visibility) from what was not (levies on aid, control of targeting, association with armed forces), and having documented it.

Reusable tools: dilemma grid, decision log and compliance check

Dilemma analysis grid (one page)

Heading	Expected content
Verified facts	Who, what, where, when; sources; what remains to be verified
Affected people	Number, life-saving needs at stake, availability of alternatives (other actors, markets, public services)
Principles and rules	Principles affected; internal policies; contractual clauses; applicable law
Stakeholders	Position, interest, capacity to cause harm and to influence of each actor
Options (at least three)	For each: effect on people, acceptance, security, legal and reputational aspects
Recommendation	Option selected, conditions, mitigation measures, explicit red line
Decision	Name and position of the decision-maker, date, people consulted
Review	Date or trigger event

Principles compliance checklist for an intervention

- Are the targeting criteria written down, based on a needs analysis, explained to the community and applied by the organisation (rather than delegated to an authority or an armed actor)?
- Are areas of intervention chosen according to the severity of needs rather than ease of access or a donor's preferences? Are excluded areas justified in writing?
- Is there a written policy on payments to armed actors, escorts, the use of military assets and visibility?
- Do national staff and partners know these policies, and do they know to whom they should escalate a demand?
- Are funding sources diversified enough to be able to refuse a condition that runs counter to the principles?
- Have public communications (photos, statements, social media) been reviewed from the standpoint of neutrality and security?
- Is a log of access incidents and principled decisions kept and reviewed at least once a quarter?

Perception matrix (acceptance)

To be completed during the context analysis and then every six months, for each significant actor (authorities, armed groups, community leaders, marginalised groups, local media).

Actor	How do they perceive us?	What is this perception based on?	Associated risk	Action
Example: traditional chiefs in the north	"The government's NGO"	Offices in a building rented from a former prefect; vehicles similar to those of the administration	Restricted access, rumours	Move the office, briefing meeting on the mandate and criteria, distinctive vehicle markings
Example: displaced women at site 7	"Only distributes to the committee's friends"	All-male, unelected site committee	Exclusion, complaints not passed on	Separate focus group discussions, complaints channel independent of the committee, reconstitution of the committee

"Principled messaging" sheet for field staff

It is useful to prepare, in the local language, four or five simple sentences that any team member can say at a checkpoint or in a community meeting: "We help people according to their needs only, whichever side they are on"; "We cannot hand over part of the aid, because it belongs to the families who need it"; "We talk to everyone who has an influence on people's lives here, without taking sides"; "I cannot decide on my own, I will pass your request on to my management". The last sentence is the most important: it protects the staff member and prevents improvised commitments.

Variations by context and common mistakes

Adapting the application of the principles to the context

Context	Specific issues	Recommended practices
Sudden-onset disaster without conflict	IHL does not apply; the State is strong and coordinates; risk of politically driven aid (electorally important areas served first); customs and visa procedures	Rely on national disaster management legislation and on the IDRL Guidelines; document severity by area to defend impartiality; work through public structures when they are impartial
Protracted conflict	Normalisation of concessions; donor fatigue; pull of the nexus and of stabilisation	Annual review of red lines; clear separation between humanitarian components and stabilisation programmes; regular perception analysis
Urban setting	Population dispersed and mixed with host communities; multiple authorities (municipality, neighbourhoods, technical services); gangs or neighbourhood militias	Targeting by area and vulnerability profile rather than by status; partnerships with municipal services; vigilance regarding instrumentalisation by neighbourhood actors
Camp or displacement site	Site committees captured by elites; presence of armed elements; risk of undermining the civilian character of the camp	Elected and representative committees; reporting any armed presence to the site manager and to UNHCR or IOM; complaints mechanisms accessible independently of the committee
Remote management	National staff or the partner bear the negotiations and risks alone; loss of control over targeting	Written and limited delegation of authority; independent third-party monitoring; direct lines to the head of mission; do not transfer risk without transferring resources
Local partner with limited capacity	Proximity to one party; community pressure; limited knowledge of donor rules	Capacity assessment that includes the principles; training and accompaniment rather than mere control; equitable sharing of risk and of indirect costs
Environment under sanctions or counter-terrorism legislation	Donor clauses; risk of beneficiary screening; bank de-risking	Refuse screening of final beneficiaries (a position supported by most humanitarian donors); document use of the humanitarian exemption; plan fund transfer channels in advance

Common mistakes in the field

- **Confusing neutrality with silence**: neutrality prohibits taking sides, not reporting violations through the appropriate channels (ICRC, protection cluster, confidential mechanisms). The choice between public advocacy and confidential dialogue is a matter of strategy, not of reflex.
- **Confusing impartiality with equality**, or presenting targeting as impartial without needs data disaggregated by area, sex, age and disability.

- **Leaving the field staff member to decide alone** at the checkpoint. Any request outside procedure must be escalated, with a standard sentence that protects the staff member.
- **Negotiating separately**: when each NGO accepts its own small concession, the armed actor obtains the sum of them all. Common positions (NGO forum, Humanitarian Country Team, access working group) are stronger.
- **Using military or political vocabulary** in communications ("liberated areas", "terrorists", "friendly forces"), which is enough to ruin the perception of neutrality.
- **Ignoring the organisation's history**: local actors judge the organisation on what it has done elsewhere, sometimes in another country, and on its funding.
- **Writing nothing down**: without a log, it is impossible to justify a decision before a donor, an auditor or a court, and impossible to learn.

What donors, evaluators and auditors look at

- **Donors** check for written policies (anti-fraud and anti-corruption, counter-terrorism, safeguarding, protection from sexual exploitation and abuse), prompt incident reporting (often within 48 to 72 hours for suspected fraud or diversion) and consistency between the needs analysis and targeting.
- **Evaluators** often use the coherence criterion (as defined by the OECD-DAC and the ALNAP guide) to assess respect for the principles: was the intervention consistent with humanitarian principles and IHL? They look for evidence of perception analysis, handling of dilemmas and consultation of communities.
- **Auditors** focus on losses in transit, unjustified payments ("facilitation", "passage fees"), beneficiary lists and the traceability of decisions to depart from standard rules.
- **CHS verifiers** examine in particular the commitment on the quality and impartiality of aid and the organisation's capacity to identify and reduce the negative effects of its action.

> A diversion that is reported spontaneously, analysed and corrected is rarely fatal for an organisation. A diversion discovered by an audit or by the press, with no trace of analysis or reporting, often is.

Interview questions and key references

Interview questions

1. "Explain the difference between neutrality and impartiality, with a field example."

A good answer defines impartiality as a rule for allocating aid (according to need, without discrimination, priority to the most urgent cases) and neutrality as a stance towards the parties (not taking sides). It gives a concrete example: serving an opposition-controlled area and a government area according to the measured severity of needs (impartiality), without making public statements accusing either party or using an armed escort (neutrality). It may add that a multi-mandate organisation can qualify its neutrality but never its impartiality.

2. "A commander demands part of the aid in exchange for letting your convoy through. What do you do?"

The expected answer is neither "I refuse and leave" nor "I pay to save lives". It describes a process: do not decide alone on the spot, establish the facts, consult management, the other NGOs and OCHA, assess the options including temporary suspension, reach the interlocutor's chain of command, build a common position, report to the donor, document. It mentions anti-diversion policies and sanctions regimes.

3. "Does IHL apply in a country hit by an earthquake?"

No, unless there is also an armed conflict. Domestic law, human rights law and, as a reference, the IDRL Guidelines apply. A good answer shows that the candidate knows how to classify a situation and does not apply IHL everywhere by default.

4. "What obligations does IHL impose on the parties regarding humanitarian access?"

Consent is required but may not be arbitrarily withheld; obligation to allow and facilitate the rapid and unimpeded passage of impartial relief; right of control; respect and protection of relief personnel and objects; freedom of movement of personnel; prohibition of starving civilians. A strong candidate cites the Additional Protocols or the ICRC Customary IHL Study and resolution 2417.

5. "A donor asks you to check that beneficiaries are not on sanctions lists. How do you respond?"

Distinguish the screening of staff, suppliers and partners (normal practice) from that of final beneficiaries (contrary to impartiality and refused by most humanitarian actors). Mention resolution 2664 and the value of negotiating the clause before signature, with the support of headquarters and NGO networks.

6. "Tell us about a situation in which you had to defend a humanitarian principle." (behavioural question)

The STAR method applies: a specific situation, the principle at stake identified, personal action (consultation, arguments, escalation), measurable result, and what the candidate would do differently. Recruiters are wary of heroic stories with no consultation of line management.

Key references

- Geneva Conventions of 1949 and Additional Protocols of 1977; ICRC study on customary international humanitarian law (2005) and its database.
- UN General Assembly resolutions 46/182 (1991) and 58/114 (2004).
- UN Security Council resolutions 2286 (2016), 2417 (2018), 2664 (2022) and 2730 (2024).
- Code of Conduct for the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) in Disaster Relief (1994).
- Jean Pictet, *The Fundamental Principles of the Red Cross: Commentary*, ICRC.
- 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees and 1967 Protocol; 1969 OAU Convention; Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement (1998); Kampala Convention (2009).
- Guidelines for the Domestic Facilitation and Regulation of International Disaster Relief and Initial Recovery Assistance (IFRC, 2007).

- OCHA, *What are Humanitarian Principles?* (OCHA on Message); Norwegian Refugee Council and OCHA, study on the impact of counter-terrorism measures on humanitarian action.
- Sphere Handbook (2018): Humanitarian Charter and Protection Principles; Core Humanitarian Standard (2024).
- Hugo Slim, *Humanitarian Ethics: A Guide to the Morality of Aid in War and Disaster* (2015).

Exercise: analysing a dilemma

Choose one of the dilemmas above. For each of the four principles, explain in one sentence what is at stake. Then propose two options for action, their risks, and the one you would recommend to your head of mission.

Key takeaways

- Humanity, neutrality, impartiality, independence.
- Impartiality means: on the basis of need alone.
- IHL: distinction, proportionality, precaution, protection of civilians, health workers and humanitarian workers.
- The principles make it possible to be accepted and to gain access to people.

Quiz

1. Providing aid on the basis of need alone, without discrimination, is the principle of:
   A. Impartiality
   B. Neutrality
   C. Independence
   D. Visibility

2. The four Geneva Conventions date from:
   A. 1919
   B. 2004
   C. 1949
   D. 1991

3. The IHL principle of distinction requires a distinction between:
   A. Donors and NGOs
   B. Towns and villages
   C. NGOs and the UN
   D. Combatants and civilians

Quiz answers : 1. B · 2. B · 3. B

Day 2 : The humanitarian system and quality standards

Objectives

- Identify humanitarian actors.
- Understand coordination and funding.
- Apply the Sphere and CHS standards.

The actors

- **Affected States**: primarily responsible for assisting their population.
- **Communities and local organisations**: the first to respond; “localisation” aims to give them a greater role and more funding.
- **The United Nations**: OCHA (coordination), UNHCR (refugees), UNICEF (children), WFP (food, logistics), WHO (health), FAO, IOM, UNFPA, UNDP…
- **The Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement**: the ICRC, the International Federation and National Societies.
- **International and national NGOs**, donors (States, the European Union, foundations) and the private sector.

Coordination and the programme cycle

In a country in crisis, the **Humanitarian Coordinator** leads the Humanitarian Country Team (UN agencies, NGOs, the Red Cross as an observer). OCHA supports coordination.

Since the 2005 reform, the **cluster approach** has organised the response by sector: health, nutrition, water, sanitation and hygiene, shelter, protection, food security, education, logistics, emergency telecommunications, camp coordination and early recovery. Each cluster has a lead agency.

The **humanitarian programme cycle**: needs assessment (Humanitarian Needs Overview), planning (Humanitarian Response Plan), resource mobilisation, implementation and monitoring, review.

Funding

- **Bilateral funding** from donors to organisations.
- **CERF**: the UN Central Emergency Response Fund, for sudden-onset emergencies and underfunded crises (disbursed to UN agencies and IOM).
- **Country-based pooled funds (CBPF)** managed by OCHA, open to national and international NGOs.
- Funding flows are tracked on OCHA's Financial Tracking Service (FTS).

The standards: Sphere and the CHS

The **Sphere Handbook** brings together the Humanitarian Charter, the Protection Principles, the Core Humanitarian Standard and **minimum standards** in four sectors: water supply, sanitation and hygiene promotion; food security and nutrition; shelter and settlement; health. A frequently cited example: a minimum of **15 litres of water per person per day** for drinking, cooking and hygiene.

The **Core Humanitarian Standard (CHS)** sets out nine commitments on quality and accountability to affected people: a response that is appropriate, timely, strengthens local capacities, is based on communication and participation, has a complaints mechanism, is coordinated, learns, relies on competent and well-managed staff, and uses resources responsibly.

The standards are benchmarks, not mechanical quotas: they are adapted to the context while keeping their objective.

The humanitarian programme cycle step by step: timeline, products and roles

The humanitarian programme cycle (HPC) is often presented as an abstract circle. In practice, it is a tight schedule of products, meetings and deadlines to which an NGO project manager or coordinator must align so that their needs are visible and their projects fundable.

In a sudden-onset emergency: the first 30 days

Timeframe	Product	Who leads	Role of an NGO
0 to 72 hours	Rapid assessments, first situation report (sitrep), decision on a possible activation of the IASC scale-up mechanism	Humanitarian Coordinator, OCHA, Humanitarian Country Team	Immediately share its field data, presence and capacities (3W or 4W matrix)
3 to 5 days	Flash appeal based on a preliminary overview of needs; request for a CERF allocation (Rapid Response window)	OCHA with the clusters	Submit its projects to the cluster for inclusion in the appeal; flag gaps
Up to 2 weeks	Rapid initial multi-sector assessment (MIRA-type): joint analysis based on secondary data and field observations	OCHA, clusters, assessment working group	Take part in assessment teams, use common tools, avoid stand-alone assessments that solicit the same communities several times
About 30 days	Revision of the flash appeal based on the assessments; first allocations from the country-based pooled fund if the country has one (often as a reserve allocation)	OCHA, clusters	Adjust its targets, report in the 4W, prepare proposals

The IASC **System-Wide Scale-Up** (2018 protocols, which replaced the former "Level 3 emergency") is activated by the Emergency Relief Coordinator for an initial period of up to six months, which may be extended once by three months. It triggers the accelerated deployment of staff, the streamlining of agencies' internal procedures and stronger coordination.

In a protracted crisis: the annual cycle

1. **May to August**: assessment planning, multi-sector surveys (often MSNA-type), cluster data collection.
2. **August to October**: joint intersectoral analysis using the JIAF (Joint Intersectoral Analysis Framework). Severity is classified on a scale from 1 (minimal) to 5 (catastrophic) by geographical area and population group. **People in need** (PiN) generally correspond to people in severity 3 or above. Drafting of the Humanitarian Needs Overview (HNO).
3. **October to December**: each cluster sets its objectives, its targets (people targeted, always less than or equal to the PiN) and its costing method (project-based or unit-based activity costing). Partners submit their projects or activities for the Humanitarian Response Plan (HRP), endorsed by the Humanitarian Country Team and launched in the Global Humanitarian Overview (GHO) in December.
4. **Throughout the year**: monthly monitoring through the 4W and cluster dashboards, periodic monitoring reports, funding recorded on FTS, mid-year review if the context changes.

> An NGO that does not fill in its cluster's 4W is invisible: its achievements are not counted, its areas appear as gaps and its proposals to pooled funds score lower, because review committees check participation in coordination.

The functions of a cluster and how its performance is measured

The IASC Reference Module for Cluster Coordination at Country Level sets out six core functions, plus accountability to affected populations: support service delivery (avoid duplication), inform strategic decision-making (needs and gap analysis), plan and develop strategy (sectoral plans, standards, funding requirements), advocate, monitor and report, and contingency planning and capacity building. The cluster lead agency is the **provider of last resort**: it commits, subject to access, security and funding, to filling critical gaps. Each cluster's performance is assessed every year by its members through the CCPM (Cluster Coordination Performance Monitoring) exercise; an active member should respond to it with well-argued input.

Funding a response: mechanisms, rules and donor requirements

Knowing the acronyms is not enough. A professional must know which mechanism is accessible to their organisation, how quickly, with what compliance requirements and what consequences for its freedom of action.

Mechanism	Direct recipients	How it works	Points of attention
CERF, Rapid Response window	UN agencies and IOM (NGOs benefit as implementing partners)	Allocation at the request of the Humanitarian Coordinator, for life-saving activities; implementation generally within six months	NGOs must position themselves early with the lead agencies; sub-granting can take a long time
CERF, Underfunded Emergencies window	Same	Two rounds per year, countries selected on the basis of needs and underfunding analysis	Longer duration, same constraint of going through an agency
Country-based pooled funds (CBPF)	National and international NGOs, UN agencies, Red Cross	Standard allocations (aligned with the HRP, once or twice a year) and reserve allocations (emergencies); strategic and technical review by the clusters; managed by OCHA under the authority of the Humanitarian Coordinator	Prior capacity assessment (due diligence); classification as low, medium or high risk, which determines the size and frequency of instalments and the frequency of monitoring and audits
DG ECHO (European Union)	NGOs holding the Humanitarian Partnership Certificate (2021-2027), UN agencies, international organisations	Annual Humanitarian Implementation Plans (HIPs) by country or region; proposal in the Single Form; indirect costs up to 7%	ECHO Key Outcome Indicators, visibility requirements (with possible waivers for security), rules on cost eligibility and procurement
US funding	NGOs, UN agencies	Application guidelines for emergency assistance; federal rules (2 CFR 200); negotiated indirect cost rates or de minimis rate	The US aid architecture was profoundly restructured in 2025: always check the rules and funding windows currently in force before any application
FCDO (United Kingdom) and other bilateral donors	NGOs, consortia, agencies	Multi-year funding in some protracted crises, logical frameworks and annual reviews	Stringent safeguarding and anti-fraud requirements; due diligence along the whole partner chain

The Grand Bargain commitments

Signed in 2016 at the World Humanitarian Summit, the Grand Bargain set, among other things, the target of channelling at least **25% of humanitarian funding as directly as possible** to local and national actors, increasing multi-year and flexible funding, harmonising and simplifying reporting (the "8+3" reporting template), scaling up cash transfers and

strengthening the participation of affected people. Progress is real but uneven: in practice, the share of direct funding to local actors remains far below the target. Country-based pooled funds are today one of the main channels of direct funding for national NGOs.

What a donor examines in a proposal

- **Relevance**: alignment with the HRP and the donor's strategy, a quantified needs analysis, cited sources, data disaggregated by sex, age and disability.
- **Coordination**: participation in clusters, no duplication (reference to the 4W), demonstrated complementarity.
- **Technical quality**: explicit reference to Sphere standards and cluster standards; modalities (in-kind, cash, mixed) justified by a market and feasibility analysis.
- **Accountability**: complaints and feedback mechanism, protection from sexual exploitation and abuse, data protection.
- **Risk management**: risk matrix (security, fiduciary, diversion, operational), mitigation plan, remote management if necessary.
- **Cost and efficiency**: cost per beneficiary compared with sector benchmarks, ratio of direct support costs to activity costs, justification of staff positions.

> Cost per beneficiary only makes sense when compared with a similar project in a similar context. A water project in a hard-to-reach area will legitimately cost two to three times more per person than in a peri-urban area: this must be explained in the proposal, not left to the reader to understand.

Sphere in practice: reading, applying and adapting the minimum standards

The Sphere Handbook (2018 edition) is organised on four levels for each sector: the **standard** (a universal qualitative statement), the **key actions** (what must be done to meet it), the **key indicators** (how to know whether it is met) and the **guidance notes** (how to adapt to the context). The most common mistake is to retain only the indicator figures and forget the standard they are meant to measure.

The most widely used benchmarks

Sector	Indicator or benchmark	Reference value
Water	Average volume of water used for drinking, cooking and personal and domestic hygiene	At least 15 litres per person per day
Water	Maximum distance from the household to the water point; queuing time	500 metres; 30 minutes maximum
Water	Maximum number of users per water point	250 people per tap (flow of 7.5 litres per minute); 500 per hand pump (17 litres per minute); 400 per single-user open well (12.5 litres per minute)
Sanitation	Communal toilets	At most 1 toilet per 20 people; no more than 50 metres from dwellings; in public places, a ratio of 3 female toilets to 1 male toilet
Hygiene	Soap	250 grams of bathing soap and 200 grams of laundry soap per person per month
Shelter	Covered living space	At least 3.5 square metres per person (4.5 to 5.5 square metres in cold climates or urban settings where cooking takes place indoors)
Site planning	Total surface area per person	45 square metres per person, including household plots; 30 square metres if some communal services are provided outside the site
Food security	Average energy requirements for planning	2,100 kilocalories per person per day
Nutrition	Performance indicators for the management of severe acute malnutrition	Recovered over 75%; deaths under 10%; defaulters under 15%
Nutrition	Coverage of treatment	Over 50% in rural areas, over 70% in urban areas, over 90% in camps
Health	Emergency mortality thresholds	Crude mortality rate more than double the baseline rate; where no baseline is available, more than 1 death per 10,000 people per day (more than 2 per 10,000 children under 5 per day)
Health	Measles vaccination coverage	95% of the target population
Health	Skilled health workers (doctors, nurses, midwives)	At least 22 per 10,000 population

How to use these figures correctly

- **They are minimums for a life with dignity**, not ceilings or automatic project targets. In a long-standing camp, the cluster may set higher standards; in a very acute phase, an intermediate step (for example 7 litres per person per day during the first days, for survival)

may be accepted temporarily, provided it is explicitly justified and accompanied by a timeline for catching up.

- **The national cluster adapts**: national cluster standards and ministry norms often take precedence in proposals and reports. Always check which version applies in the country.
- **An average indicator hides disparities**: an average of 15 litres per person across a site may conceal households at 6 litres at the end of the network. Measurement must be disaggregated by area and by group (female-headed households, older people, persons with disabilities).
- **Do not reduce the standard to quantity**: for water, quality (no faecal coliforms at the point of consumption, free residual chlorine of 0.2 to 0.5 milligrams per litre at the point of delivery in contexts at risk of epidemics) and safe access matter as much as volume.

Companion standards

The Humanitarian Standards Partnership brings together, alongside Sphere, complementary standards with the same structure: the Minimum Standards for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action (CPMS, Alliance for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action), the INEE Minimum Standards for Education, the Livestock Emergency Guidelines and Standards (LEGS), the Minimum Economic Recovery Standards (MERS, SEEP Network), the Minimum Standard for Market Analysis (MISMA, CaLP), and the Humanitarian Inclusion Standards for Older People and People with Disabilities. The IASC Guidelines on the Inclusion of Persons with Disabilities in Humanitarian Action (2019) complete the set.

> In an interview as in a proposal, quoting "15 litres" proves very little. Explaining that you measured actual access through a household survey, disaggregated by area, and adjusted the design for water points more than 500 metres away demonstrates real command of the standard.

The Core Humanitarian Standard (CHS) in practice: commitments, evidence and verification

The revised CHS published in 2024 frames its nine commitments from the perspective of affected people and communities, and specifies for each one the organisational commitments and staff responsibilities. It remains structured around the same themes as the 2014 version, which makes it possible to link it to existing tools.

Commitment (summary wording)	Evidence expected in the field
1. People can exercise their rights and participate in the decisions that affect them	Disaggregated records of consultations; representative committees; decisions changed after consultation
2. They access timely and effective support in line with their needs and priorities	Dated needs assessments; time between assessment and response; written targeting criteria
3. They are better prepared and more resilient	Preparedness activities, strengthening of local capacities, exit strategy
4. They receive support that does not cause harm	Risk and conflict sensitivity analysis; environmental measures; safeguarding policy
5. They can safely raise concerns and complaints and get them addressed	Accessible complaints mechanism (several channels), log, response times, procedure for sensitive complaints
6. They access coordinated and complementary support	Participation in clusters, up-to-date 4W, referrals to other services
7. Support is continuously adapted and improved based on feedback and learning	Periodic analysis of feedback, after-action reviews, documented changes
8. They interact with staff who are respectful, competent and well managed	Signed code of conduct, training, safe recruitment (reference checks), staff support
9. Resources are managed ethically and responsibly	Financial and procurement procedures, anti-fraud measures, environmental management

The four levels of verification

1. **Self-assessment** using CHS Alliance tools: the organisation scores each indicator itself on the basis of interviews, documents and community consultations.
2. **Peer review**: a similar organisation examines the evidence.
3. **Independent verification** by a third-party body.
4. **Certification** by an accredited body (for example HQAI), with initial, maintenance and recertification audits, and field visits including interviews with affected people.

Protection from sexual exploitation and abuse

The **IASC Six Core Principles** (2002, revised in 2019) prohibit, among other things, any sexual activity with a child (a person under 18) regardless of the local age of majority, and any exchange of money, employment, goods or assistance for sex, and require staff to report any suspicion through established mechanisms. For the UN system, the Secretary-General's bulletin ST/SGB/2003/13 sets out the same rules. In practice, a donor or verifier will ask for: a policy signed by every employee, a trained focal point, reporting channels known to communities, a confidential, survivor-centred investigation procedure, and participation in the country's PSEA network.

Setting up a complaints and feedback mechanism in six steps

1. Consult communities on the channels they consider safe and accessible (separating women, men, adolescents, persons with disabilities).

2. Combine at least three channels: a toll-free hotline, help desks or suggestion boxes, and direct contact with trained staff.
3. Classify feedback into categories (information, request for assistance, programmatic complaint, sensitive complaint: fraud, abuse, sexual exploitation).
4. Set response times (for example immediate acknowledgement of receipt, a reply within 7 days for a programmatic complaint, referral within 24 hours to the focal point for a sensitive complaint).
5. Protect data: restricted access to the log, anonymisation in reports.
6. Close the loop: inform the community of changes made as a result of feedback, and analyse trends each month in programme meetings.

Full example: from a Sphere diagnosis to a country-based pooled fund application

Fictional context. The Morenga displacement site, in Haute-Sélia province, hosts 18,000 people (around 3,600 households of five people) who arrived in three waves over the past eight months. The fictional national NGO "Solidarité Sélia", a member of the WASH and Shelter clusters, was rated medium risk following the country-based pooled fund's capacity assessment. A standard allocation has just been launched: an envelope of 6 million dollars, WASH and shelter priorities in severity 4 sites, a ceiling of 500,000 dollars per project, 12 months.

Step 1: a quantified diagnosis against the standards

The team combines data from the site manager, a survey of 380 households (random sample, margin of error of about 5% at a 95% confidence level), an infrastructure inventory and focus group discussions separated by sex and age.

Indicator	Measured situation	Standard	Gap and calculation
Water available	150 m³ per day, i.e. 8.3 litres per person per day	15 litres per person per day	Requirement 18,000 × 15 = 270 m³ per day; shortfall of 120 m³ per day
Water points	22 functioning taps and 8 functioning hand pumps	250 people per tap, 500 per pump	Current capacity 22 × 250 + 8 × 500 = 9,500 people; the equivalent of 34 taps is missing for 8,500 people
Distance to water point	27% of households more than 500 m away (sectors 5 and 6)	500 m maximum	Install the new taps as a priority in sectors 5 and 6
Toilets	310 functioning toilets, with no sex segregation in 60% of blocks and no lighting	1 per 20 people	Requirement 18,000 / 20 = 900; shortfall of 590; bring existing blocks up to safety standards
Water quality	41% of samples at the point of consumption contain faecal coliforms	0 faecal coliforms per 100 ml	Chlorination at the point of delivery, distribution of covered containers, hygiene promotion
Site surface area	52 hectares, i.e. about 29 m² per person	45 m² per person (30 m² minimum excluding household plots)	Congested site: advocacy with the CCCM cluster and the authorities for a 29-hectare extension
Shelter	1,100 households under damaged tarpaulins, average surface area of 12 m² for 5 people	3.5 m² per person, i.e. 17.5 m² for 5 people	Shelter upgrade kits or transitional shelters for 1,100 households, depending on the cluster's decision on the modality

The focus group discussions provide what the figures do not: women avoid the toilets at night because there is no lighting and no lock; older people in sector 6 cannot carry 20 litres over 700 metres; two incidents of harassment near a water point have been reported to the protection cluster.

Step 2: check coordination before writing

The 4W shows that an international NGO has a project for 200 toilets funded by a bilateral donor in sectors 1 to 3. The shortfall to be covered by Solidarité Sélia is therefore 390 toilets, in sectors 4 to 6. The Shelter cluster indicates that a UNHCR partner is covering 600 of the 1,100 households; the proposal targets the remaining 500. These two checks avoid a duplication that the review committee would have spotted.

Step 3: the results framework submitted

Outcome	Indicator	Baseline	Target
Access to water	Litres per person per day available on the site	8.3	15 by month 4, maintained until month 12
Access to water	% of households in sectors 5 and 6 within 500 m of a water point	48%	95%
Water quality	% of samples at the point of consumption free of faecal coliforms	59%	90%
Sanitation	Number of people per functioning toilet in sectors 4 to 6	71	20 or fewer
Sanitation	% of women reporting that they feel safe using the toilets at night	23%	75%
Shelter	Number of households with at least 3.5 m² per person	0 out of 500 targeted	500
Accountability	% of complaints received handled within the set timeframes	not applicable	90%

Step 4: summary budget and consistency check

Budget line	Amount (dollars)	Share
Water: network extension, two tanks, 34 taps, chlorination	132,000	27%
Sanitation: 390 sex-segregated toilets, solar lighting, rehabilitation	117,000	24%
Shelter: upgrade kits for 500 households	95,000	20%
Hygiene promotion, hygiene kits, complaints mechanism	38,000	8%
Project staff	64,000	13%
Operational support costs (office, vehicles, security)	21,000	4%
Indirect costs (at the rate authorised by the fund)	17,000	4%
Total	**484,000**	**100%**

Cost per person for the WASH component, which benefits the whole site: about 16 dollars excluding support costs; for the shelter component, 190 dollars per household in kits. The team compares these costs with the cluster's benchmarks and explains the difference for the water component (rocky ground, existing borehole 1.8 kilometres away). As a medium-risk partner, it plans for payment instalments linked to reports, a field monitoring visit by the fund and a project audit, and budgets the time required.

> The review committee does not score the quality of the writing but the consistency: every figure in the results framework must derive from the diagnosis, every budget line from an

activity, and every activity from a measured gap against a standard or a need expressed by affected people.

Contextual variations, common mistakes and evaluators' expectations

The system does not work the same way everywhere

Context	Coordination architecture	Practical consequences
Refugee crisis	Refugee Coordination Model: UNHCR coordinates, in support of the host government; Regional Refugee Response Plan (RRP) rather than an HRP	Sector working groups are often co-chaired by UNHCR and a ministry; NGOs are part of the RRP. In mixed situations (refugees and IDPs), a Joint UNHCR-OCHA Note sets out the division of roles
Natural disaster in a high-capacity State	National coordination (disaster management agency), clusters activated only if necessary; UNDAC teams deployed on request	International NGOs register with the authorities; customs clearance and visas are the first bottlenecks
Protracted crisis with a multi-year HRP	Well-established clusters, sometimes with regional sub-clusters; country-based pooled fund	The annual calendar of the HRP and allocations sets the pace of work; the challenge becomes donor fatigue and the shift to nexus approaches
Urban context	Central role of municipalities and technical services; area-based planning tools	Sphere standards translate into access to existing services (networks, rent, markets) rather than new infrastructure
Remote management	Coordination from a capital or a neighbouring country; cross-border coordination hubs	Third-party monitoring, remote verification (geotagged photos, calls to beneficiaries), stricter fiduciary risk thresholds
Local partners with limited capacity	Access to pooled funds after capacity assessment; presence in clusters often limited by language and time	Capacity strengthening plan with milestones, sharing of indirect costs, support for participation in clusters (translation, co-chairing)

Common mistakes

- **Using standards as uniform targets** without disaggregation or consultation: the site "meets the standards" on average, but women do not use the toilets at night.
- **Confusing people in need, people targeted and people reached**. The three figures are different, and adding them up across clusters creates double counting; the HRP calculates a separate intersectoral figure.
- **Turning up at the cluster only to obtain funding**. Cluster coordinators know the regular members; their opinion carries weight in the technical review of allocations.
- **Underestimating the cost of compliance**: audits, field monitoring, third-party monitoring, insurance and accountability staff must be budgeted.

- **Displaying a complaints mechanism that exists only on paper**: a box that is never opened, a number that nobody answers. CHS verifiers test the channels and interview communities.
- **Forgetting the State**: the affected State retains primary responsibility. Ignoring line ministries undermines sustainability and can lead to access restrictions.

What evaluators and auditors look at

Humanitarian evaluations use the OECD-DAC criteria as adapted by ALNAP: relevance and appropriateness, coherence, coverage, connectedness, efficiency, effectiveness, impact. For the topics covered today, they look in particular for evidence that the needs analysis guided the design, that the intervention was coordinated (4W, participation in clusters), that Sphere standards were applied in a contextualised way, and that feedback from affected people changed implementation. Inter-Agency Humanitarian Evaluations (IAHEs), triggered in particular after a system-wide scale-up, examine the collective response rather than a single organisation. Auditors, for their part, check that the quantities reported (for example 390 toilets) match the supporting documents: purchase orders, goods received notes, photos, handover certificates, signed distribution lists.

> A report stating "390 toilets built in accordance with Sphere standards" without specifying the number of people per toilet, sex segregation, lighting and user satisfaction proves nothing. An evaluator will ask for the data, and an auditor for the supporting documents.

Interview questions and key references

Interview questions

1. "Explain the humanitarian programme cycle and where an NGO fits in it."

A good answer describes the stages (needs assessment and analysis, HNO, strategic response planning, HRP, resource mobilisation, implementation and monitoring, operational peer review and evaluation), gives the annual calendar in a protracted crisis and the accelerated timeline in a sudden-onset emergency (flash appeal within a few days), then shows concretely what an NGO does: take part in joint assessments, submit its projects through the cluster, fill in the 4W, report. Mentioning the JIAF and the severity scale is a plus.

2. "What is the difference between CERF and a country-based pooled fund?"

CERF is a global fund that directly finances UN agencies and IOM, through a Rapid Response window and an Underfunded Emergencies window. Country-based pooled funds are managed by OCHA under the authority of the Humanitarian Coordinator, directly fund national and international NGOs, and rely on capacity assessment and risk-based management. A strong candidate mentions their role in localisation.

3. "The site where you work has 9 litres of water per person per day. What do you propose?"

Do not just answer "reach 15 litres". Analyse first: is it a production or a distribution problem? Are there disparities between sectors? What about quality? Queuing times? Then propose

short-term measures (water trucking, repairs, loss reduction, storage) and medium-term measures (borehole, extension), coordinate with the WASH cluster, disaggregate monitoring and consult users, especially women and people with reduced mobility.

4. "How do you demonstrate accountability to affected people?"

Cite the CHS, describe a multi-channel complaints mechanism with categories and response times, a separate procedure for sensitive complaints, data protection, monthly analysis and feedback to the community. Give an example of a programme being changed as a result of feedback. Mention the IASC Six Core Principles on protection from sexual exploitation and abuse.

5. "What are the benefits and limitations of the cluster approach?"

Benefits: predictability, clear accountability (lead agency, provider of last resort), common standards, gap analysis. Commonly cited limitations: burdensome meetings, low participation of local actors, a sectoral approach that compartmentalises intersectoral needs, coordination that sometimes runs parallel to that of the State. A good answer proposes remedies: co-chairing with national NGOs, intersectoral working groups, translation and meetings in the local language.

Key references

- Sphere Association, *The Sphere Handbook: Humanitarian Charter and Minimum Standards in Humanitarian Response* (2018).
- CHS Alliance, Groupe URD and Sphere Association, *Core Humanitarian Standard on Quality and Accountability* (2024), and CHS Alliance verification tools.
- IASC, *Reference Module for Cluster Coordination at Country Level*; System-Wide Scale-Up protocols (2018); Six Core Principles relating to sexual exploitation and abuse (revised in 2019); Guidelines on the Inclusion of Persons with Disabilities in Humanitarian Action (2019).
- OCHA, reference documents on the humanitarian programme cycle; Joint Intersectoral Analysis Framework (JIAF); Global Guidelines for Country-Based Pooled Funds; CERF guidelines.
- UNHCR, Refugee Coordination Model; Joint UNHCR-OCHA Note on Mixed Situations.
- DG ECHO, Humanitarian Implementation Plans, Single Form and guidance on Key Outcome Indicators; Humanitarian Partnership Certificate.
- Grand Bargain (2016) and annual independent reports.
- ALNAP, *The State of the Humanitarian System* (latest edition) and the guide *Evaluation of Humanitarian Action* (2016).
- Humanitarian Standards Partnership: CPMS, INEE Minimum Standards, LEGS, MERS, MISMA, Humanitarian Inclusion Standards.

Exercise: mapping the response

For a crisis-affected country of your choice, find on ReliefWeb and the OCHA website: the Humanitarian Response Plan for the year, the amount requested and the percentage funded (FTS), and three active clusters and their lead agency. Summarise them in half a page.

Key takeaways

- The affected State bears primary responsibility; local actors are the first to respond.
- Clusters by sector, each with a lead agency; OCHA coordinates.
- CERF for UN agencies; country-based pooled funds (CBPF) open to NGOs.
- Sphere: minimum standards; CHS: nine commitments on quality and accountability.

Quiz

1. Which agency coordinates UN humanitarian action?
   A. OCHA
   B. UNDP
   C. The World Bank
   D. The WTO

2. Country-based pooled funds (CBPF) are:
   A. Bank loans
   B. Open to national and international NGOs
   C. Reserved for armed forces
   D. Reserved for States

3. The minimum quantity of water often cited in Sphere is:
   A. 50 litres per household per week
   B. 5 litres per person per day
   C. 100 litres per person per day
   D. 15 litres per person per day

Quiz answers : 1. B · 2. B · 3. B

Day 3 : Humanitarian access, negotiation and principled dilemmas

Objectives

- Prepare and conduct a humanitarian access negotiation.
- Manage civil-military relations under the IASC and Oslo guidelines.
- Take a reasoned, principled decision when facing a dilemma.

Humanitarian access: a process, not a given

Humanitarian access has two dimensions: the ability of humanitarian actors to **reach** people, and the ability of people to **access** aid. IHL requires parties to a conflict to allow and facilitate the rapid and unimpeded passage of impartial relief (Additional Protocol I, art. 70; customary rule 55), but access is **negotiated** day by day.

Acceptance is built over time: consistency between words and deeds, transparency about selection criteria, staff drawn from all communities, and aid based on need alone. A single decision perceived as partisan can destroy years of acceptance.

Preparing a negotiation: the CCHN method

The Centre of Competence on Humanitarian Negotiation (CCHN) proposes a three-step approach:

- **Analyse the context and the counterpart**: interests, motivations, network of influence (who influences them, whom they influence).
- **Set your objectives and limits**: what you want, what is negotiable (timing, routes, modalities) and what never is (needs-based selection, control of aid, armed presence).
- **Build common ground**: start from shared values (protecting civilians and children), then facts, before tackling points of friction.

A negotiation is documented: minutes, commitments obtained, and information shared with coordination (OCHA, access working group).

Civil-military coordination and red lines

The **Oslo Guidelines** (disasters) and the **IASC guidelines on armed escorts** set the **last resort** principle: military assets are used only when there is no civilian alternative, for a life-saving need, for a limited time and under civilian control. OCHA leads humanitarian civil-military coordination (UN-CMCoord): information sharing and deconfliction of movements, without operational cooperation that would blur the distinction.

When facing a dilemma (paying a "right of passage", accepting an escort, keeping quiet about a violation to keep access), document the options, assess their consequences for people and

for other actors, and decide collectively, at the right level, with reference to the principles and to "do no harm".

Analysing access in a structured way: constraints, severity and strategy

An access strategy starts with rigorous analysis, not with a negotiation. Too many teams negotiate piecemeal, checkpoint after checkpoint, without knowing which constraints are structural, which are negotiable, and at what level the decisions that concern them are taken.

The nine categories of access constraints

OCHA's Humanitarian Access Monitoring and Reporting Framework classifies constraints into nine categories, grouped into three families. Using this classification in your own reports makes it possible to aggregate them at country level and to feed collective advocacy.

Category	Family	Examples
1. Denial of the existence of humanitarian needs or of entitlements to assistance	Access of affected populations to assistance	Authorities denying the presence of displaced people in an area
2. Restriction of entry into the country of personnel, organisations or goods	Access of humanitarian actors to affected populations	Visas refused, goods held in customs, NGO registration suspended
3. Restriction of movement within the country	Access of humanitarian actors to affected populations	Travel authorisations, checkpoints, curfews
4. Interference in the implementation of humanitarian activities	Access of humanitarian actors to affected populations	Imposition of lists, staff, suppliers; requests to share data
5. Violence against humanitarian personnel, assets and facilities	Access of humanitarian actors to affected populations	Kidnappings, looting, attacks on convoys
6. Restriction or obstruction of access to services and assistance by affected populations	Access of affected populations to assistance	Certain groups prohibited from going to distributions, confiscation of documents
7. Ongoing hostilities and military operations	Physical and security environment	Shelling, shifting front lines
8. Presence of mines and explosive remnants of war	Physical and security environment	Roads not cleared, contaminated fields
9. Physical constraints	Physical and security environment	Roads cut off in the rainy season, no bridge, terrain

The five-step analysis method

1. **Map** (access officer or security manager, one to two weeks): for each area, population and severity of needs, actors controlling the territory and the roads, current humanitarian presence (4W), incidents over the past six months classified according to the nine categories.
2. **Score the severity of constraints** by area (for example from 1, access without significant impediment, to 5, access virtually impossible), using a common grid defined by the country's access working group.
3. **Cross-reference severity of needs and severity of constraints**: areas with high needs and high constraints are the priority of the access strategy; areas with high needs and low constraints fall under standard planning; areas with low needs must not absorb most of the effort on the pretext that they are easy to reach.
4. **Identify the levers** for each constraint: administrative constraint (negotiation with a ministry, advocacy by the Humanitarian Country Team), constraint linked to an armed actor (frontline negotiation, network of influence), physical constraint (logistics assets, Logistics Cluster), acceptance constraint (programming, communication, recruitment).
5. **Formulate a written strategy**, with responsibilities and deadlines, reviewed every quarter and after any serious incident.

Acceptance, protection, deterrence

Security management in violent environments (reference: the Humanitarian Practice Network's *Good Practice Review 8*) distinguishes three strategies. **Acceptance** reduces the threat by gaining the consent of the actors; it is the preferred strategy of humanitarian organisations, but it is built slowly and does not protect against criminal or opportunistic actors. **Protection** reduces vulnerability (procedures, walls, suitable vehicles, communications). **Deterrence** poses a counter-threat (armed guards, escorts, suspension); it is used as a last resort and often comes into tension with the principles. Most organisations combine all three, with acceptance predominating.

For National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, the ICRC's **Safer Access Framework** breaks acceptance down into eight elements: context and risk assessment, legal and policy base, acceptance of the organisation, acceptance of the individual, identification, internal communication, external communication, and operational security risk management. It is useful to any organisation as a self-assessment grid.

> Acceptance is not capital acquired once and for all. A single recruitment perceived as partisan, a poorly targeted distribution or a photo of senior management with a minister can erode it. It must be monitored, like an indicator, through perception analysis.

Frontline negotiation step by step: the CCHN tools

The Field Manual of the Centre of Competence on Humanitarian Negotiation (CCHN), developed from the experience of the ICRC, UNHCR, WFP, MSF and the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue, offers a structured method. It distinguishes three roles that must never be confused.

- **The negotiator** conducts the exchange with the counterpart. He or she has a margin defined in writing.
- **The support team** prepares the analysis (context, counterpart, network, arguments), takes part in the debriefing and writes up the documentation. It protects the negotiator against isolation and being drawn in.
- **The mandator** (head of mission, senior management, headquarters) sets the objectives and the **limits** (red lines). It is not for the negotiator to define his or her own limits in the course of the exchange.

Phase 1: analyse the environment (before the meeting)

1. **Context analysis**: historical, political and social facts; perception of the organisation; recent incidents.
2. **The island of agreement**: list the points of convergence (shared facts, common norms, values) and the points of divergence. The negotiation starts with the convergences to build trust; the divergences are dealt with afterwards, starting with the least contentious.
3. **The iceberg**: for your own organisation and for the counterpart, distinguish the **position** (what is being demanded: "you will pass only with our escort"), the **reasoning** (why: fear that weapons will be smuggled in the trucks) and the **motives or values** (security of the population, authority in front of his men, recognition). Negotiation takes place at the level of reasoning and motives, rarely at that of positions.
4. **Network mapping**: who influences the counterpart, whom the counterpart influences, which actors can facilitate or block. Priorities are set according to influence and closeness to the counterpart.

Phase 2: set the framework (with the mandator)

- **Objectives** ranked on three levels: the ideal outcome, the acceptable outcome, and the minimum below which it is better not to conclude.
- **Red lines** in writing, few in number, linked to the principles and policies (for example: no levy on aid, control of targeting criteria, no armed presence at distribution sites).
- **Scenarios**: what do we do if the counterpart refuses, sets an unexpected condition, or makes threats? Who is called, and how quickly?

Phase 3: conduct the negotiation

- Build the relationship before the transaction: presentation of the organisation, its mandate and its criteria, listening to the counterpart's concerns.
- Start from the island of agreement and from the norms the counterpart recognises: custom, religion, the code of conduct of his own group, IHL rules that he has sometimes internalised (some groups have signed deeds of commitment, for example those promoted by Geneva Call).
- Propose options on technical points (timings, routes, advance notification, presence of community observers) rather than engaging in head-on opposition.
- Never conclude beyond the set margin: "I need to consult my management" is a professional answer, not an admission of weakness.

Phase 4: debrief and document (within 24 hours)

A factual report: participants, demands, commitments made on both sides, outstanding issues, perception of the counterpart, risks to staff. The report is classified confidential, shared on a need-to-know basis, and an anonymised summary feeds into the access working group. The negotiator is given time for a psychological debriefing if the exchange was tense.

> A good negotiator is not the one who "gets everything", but the one who secures an agreement that is respected over time, without compromising the principles or exposing the staff who will have to implement it after he or she has left.

Full example: negotiating access to the Dôle-Ouest valley

Fictional context. The Dôle-Ouest valley (around 64,000 inhabitants, including 23,000 internally displaced persons) has been controlled for five months by a fictional non-state armed group, the "Mouvement du Haut-Pays". No organisation has distributed assistance there for 71 days. A mid-upper arm circumference (MUAC) screening carried out by community volunteers on 1,240 children aged 6 to 59 months shows 3.1% severe acute malnutrition and 14.6% global acute malnutrition. Two cholera cases have been notified at the valley's health centre. The health cluster and the nutrition cluster classify the valley as severity 4. The fictional consortium "Accès Haut-Pays", made up of three international NGOs and two national NGOs, is mandated by the access working group to conduct the negotiation.

Step 1: context and network analysis

Actor	Role and interest	Influence on access	Approach
Movement's sector commander	Controls both roads; wants to prevent infiltration by informants and maintain his authority in front of his men	Decisive on a day-to-day basis	Main field counterpart
Movement's political bureau, abroad	Seeks international recognition; sensitive about its image	Strong on decisions of principle	Contact through the headquarters of one consortium NGO, on a strictly humanitarian basis
Valley council of elders	Wants assistance for the population; respected by both sides	Strong over the commander	Prior consultation, spokespeople for needs
Prefect and national army	Fear that aid will strengthen the Movement; control the airport and the road into the province	Strong on delivery up to the front line	Notification and dialogue through OCHA, without negotiating on behalf of the Movement
Regional religious authorities	Moral legitimacy with the population and some of the fighters	Medium	Support for the arguments (values of assisting the weakest)

Step 2: the island of agreement

Convergences	Divergences
The valley's children are suffering from malnutrition (the Movement recognises the figures from its own community volunteers); a cholera epidemic would also threaten the fighters; aid must go to the most vulnerable; the elders must be involved	The Movement demands that its men distribute the aid and wants an escort of its fighters; it asks for the beneficiary lists; it wants the vehicles to stay in the valley overnight

Step 3: the commander's iceberg

- **Position**: "my men distribute and escort you".
- **Reasoning**: fear of informants among humanitarian staff; need to show the population that the Movement "brings" the aid.
- **Motives**: security of his forces, legitimacy with the population, recognition.

Step 4: the framework set by the mandator (consortium and heads of mission)

Level	Content
Ideal objective	Regular access, two convoys per week, full nutrition and WASH programme, registration by the consortium's teams
Acceptable objective	One convoy per week for three months, distribution by the consortium with community observers, opening of a nutrition treatment centre
Minimum	A 48-hour assessment mission and an emergency health and nutrition convoy (therapeutic food, cholera kits)
Red lines	No distribution by fighters; no handing over of named lists; no armed escort; no levy on aid
Negotiable	Notification of movements 48 hours in advance; passage times; presence of elders as observers; public presentation of the targeting criteria; recruitment of day labourers in the valley through a transparent procedure

Step 5: how it unfolded and the outcome

First meeting (day 1): presentation of the consortium and of the malnutrition figures; the commander maintains his position. The negotiator does not contradict him; he proposes to share the data with the elders. Day 6: at the elders' request, a second meeting; the negotiator responds to the fear of informants with a concrete proposal: a named list of convoy staff sent in advance, no camera phones in the valley, a fixed route. He responds to the need for legitimacy with the presence of the elders as observers and a public announcement of the criteria in places of worship and at markets, making clear that the aid comes from independent humanitarian organisations. Day 14: oral agreement on the acceptable objective, confirmed by a message from the political bureau. Day 19: first convoy of 9 trucks, 46 tonnes of food and nutrition supplies.

Results after three months: 11 convoys without incident; 1,380 children admitted to the nutrition programme; water points chlorinated in 14 villages; one attempt by a deputy commander to impose a levy, resolved within 48 hours by appealing to the sector commander, who overruled him. The report of each exchange was entered in the log; the consortium's commitments (advance notice, staff list) were scrupulously honoured, which consolidated trust.

> Handing over the convoy staff list is a compromise that must be carefully weighed: it can expose national staff. The consortium accepted it after consulting the people concerned, limiting the information to name and position, and guaranteeing each person the right to decline the mission without consequence.

Civil-military coordination: operational rules and the escort decision

Relations with armed forces (national, foreign, peacekeeping missions) are governed by a body of UN and IASC guidelines. The general principle is **distinction**: humanitarian actors must be perceived as distinct from military and political actors. The degree of interaction lies on a spectrum ranging from **cooperation** (possible in a natural disaster in a country at peace) to mere **coexistence** (in armed conflict, where interaction is limited to the necessary information sharing and deconfliction).

Reference texts

- **Oslo Guidelines** on the Use of Foreign Military and Civil Defence Assets in Disaster Relief (revised in 2007).
- **MCDA Guidelines** on the Use of Military and Civil Defence Assets to Support United Nations Humanitarian Activities in Complex Emergencies (2003, revised in 2006).
- **IASC Reference Paper on Civil-Military Relationship in Complex Emergencies** (2004).
- **IASC Non-Binding Guidelines on the Use of Armed Escorts for Humanitarian Convoys** (2013).
- **Country-specific civil-military guidelines**, developed by OCHA with the Humanitarian Country Team: these are the ones that apply first in the field.

Criteria for the use of military assets

Under the Oslo and MCDA Guidelines, military assets are used for humanitarian tasks only if they meet a **unique capability** (no civilian alternative), at the right time (**timeliness**), under **civilian control**, in a manner **limited in time and scale**, with an exit strategy, and as a last resort. Foreign military assets are in principle provided at no cost to the affected State. In conflict, direct assistance (distribution by military personnel) is to be ruled out; infrastructure support (repairing a road or a bridge) or indirect support (transport to a warehouse) can be considered more readily.

Decision grid on an armed escort

The 2013 IASC guidelines state that an armed escort is an exception, a last resort. Before recommending one, the team checks each of the following criteria and documents the answer.

Criterion	Question to ask	Documented answer
Critical need	Is the need critical, with avoidable mortality or suffering in the absence of assistance?	Severity data, number of people, indicators (mortality, malnutrition, epidemic)
No alternative	Have all unarmed options been exhausted (negotiation, alternative route, alternative modality, accepted local partner)?	Record of steps taken and their outcomes
Authority and accountability	Who provides the escort? Is it a party to the conflict? Is it able to comply with IHL?	Actor analysis; position of the other parties
Security effectiveness	Does the escort genuinely reduce the risk, or does it turn the convoy into a target?	Threat analysis by the security adviser
Medium-term consequences	What effect on the acceptance of the organisation and of other humanitarian actors, and on the perception of the population?	Opinion of the access working group and OCHA
Duration and exit	For how long? Under what conditions will it end?	Review date

Deconfliction and notification

In many conflicts, OCHA runs a humanitarian notification system: organisations communicate to the parties, through OCHA, the coordinates of their fixed facilities and their movements, so that this information is taken into account in military planning. Its limits must be understood: notification **does not guarantee** safety; it is not an authorisation; it does not relieve the parties of their obligations under IHL, which protects civilians and humanitarian workers whether or not they have been notified. The organisation must decide, with its security adviser, whether it notifies, what it notifies and how it protects these data.

Integrated missions and quick impact projects

Where a UN peacekeeping mission is present, the UN integration policy provides that the humanitarian component preserves its own space. Peace missions' quick impact projects, designed to build confidence in the peace process, must not be presented as humanitarian action. Humanitarian organisations avoid sharing premises, vehicles or logos with missions in areas where the missions are perceived as parties to the conflict.

Reusable tools: preparation sheet, incident log and access checklist

Negotiation preparation sheet (to be completed with the support team)

Heading	Content
Purpose	What we are seeking to obtain, in one sentence
Counterpart	Name or position, place in the hierarchy, actual decision-making authority, history of exchanges
Iceberg	Position, reasoning and motives of the counterpart; the same for the organisation
Island of agreement	Shared facts, shared norms, divergences ranked from easiest to most difficult
Network	Three to five actors who influence the counterpart, and how to mobilise them
Mandator's framework	Ideal, acceptable and minimum objectives; red lines; negotiable points
Arguments	Quantified needs, norms recognised by the counterpart, benefits for the population the counterpart claims to protect
Logistics and security	Venue, composition of the delegation (gender, language, origin), means of communication, plan in case of incident
After the meeting	Person responsible for the report, deadline (24 hours), recipients

Access incident log (format compatible with OCHA monitoring)

Field	Sample entry
Date, location (commune, road)	12 March, Kessa-Talou road, bridge checkpoint
Category (1 to 9)	3: restriction of movement within the country
Alleged perpetrator (type of actor, without a name if sharing it would expose them)	Non-state armed group
Factual description	Convoy of 4 trucks held for 6 hours, demand for a written authorisation not previously required
Impact on assistance	Distribution postponed by 3 days for 820 households
Follow-up	Contact with the sector commander, anonymised sharing with the access working group
Status	Resolved, ongoing, recurrent

The log is shared, in aggregated and anonymised form, with OCHA and the access working group. It makes it possible to distinguish an isolated incident from a pattern (for example, a rise in demands for beneficiary lists in a province), which justifies collective advocacy with the authorities or with the command of an armed group.

Checklist before opening up a difficult area

- Needs are documented and quantified, with sources that can be shared with counterparts.

- The presence of other actors has been checked (4W, cluster), so as not to negotiate in competition.
- The actors controlling the territory and the roads have been identified, along with their channels of influence.
- Red lines and the delegation of authority are written down and known to the team.
- The staff deployed have been chosen taking their profile into account (origin, language, gender) and have given their informed consent; everyone may decline a mission without sanction.
- The security analysis is up to date (threats, vulnerabilities, measures), and the communications plan and the medical evacuation plan have been tested.
- Key messages about the organisation, its mandate and its criteria have been translated into local languages.
- The donor has been informed of the risks and the strategy, including a possible suspension.
- A community feedback mechanism is planned from the very first intervention.
- The date of the first review of the access strategy has been set.

Access monitoring indicators

A few simple indicators, monitored every month, make it possible to measure access rather than describe it: number of missions planned and carried out, cumulative number of days of delay, number of targeted people not reached because of access constraints, number of incidents by category, share of severity 4 and 5 areas where the organisation is present. The last indicator says a great deal about the real impartiality of a project portfolio.

Contextual variations, common mistakes and donor expectations

Adapting the access strategy to the context

Context	Main constraints	Preferred levers
Natural disaster, strong State	Administrative constraints: visas, registration, customs clearance, travel authorisations; sometimes refusal to acknowledge the scale of needs	Dialogue with the national disaster management agency; advocacy by the Humanitarian Country Team; reference to the IDRL Guidelines and to model agreements on customs facilitation
Conflict involving non-state armed groups	Checkpoints, demands for payment or interference, mistrust of foreigners or certain profiles	Frontline negotiation, network of influence, common positions, engagement with the groups' political structures
Siege or encirclement	Access blocked by one or more parties; risk of famine	High-level advocacy (Humanitarian Coordinator, Emergency Relief Coordinator, Security Council), arguments based on resolution 2417 and the rules on starvation, proposals for joint inter-agency operations
Urban setting controlled by criminal groups	Extortion, invisible boundaries between neighbourhoods, kidnapping risks	Acceptance by community actors, local recruitment, low profile, digital cash modalities
Remote management	Transfer of risk to national staff and partners; loss of first-hand knowledge	Explicit delegation, equivalent security resources for partners, third-party monitoring, regular visits by senior management where possible; "Saving Lives Together" framework for UN-NGO security collaboration
Local partner with limited capacity	Proximity to one party, family or community pressure, no written policy	Joint development of red lines, negotiation training, direct escalation line to the partner organisation, sharing of security risks and costs

Common mistakes

- **Negotiating without a written mandate**: the negotiator improvises his or her limits under pressure, and the organisation is bound by commitments it did not decide on.
- **Negotiating in competition**: each organisation seeks its own deal, and the counterpart raises the stakes. The access working group exists precisely to avoid this.
- **Confusing access with presence**: being present in a garrison town does not mean reaching populations in contested rural areas.
- **Giving way on control of data**: handing over named beneficiary lists to a party can expose people to reprisals; data protection is an access issue.
- **Using military assets for convenience** (a helicopter is available, an escort is offered) without applying the last-resort criteria, with consequences for the entire humanitarian community.
- **Not debriefing**: oral commitments get lost, successors do not know what was promised, and the counterpart perceives inconsistency.

- **Exposing national staff** by placing them on the front line of dangerous negotiations without giving them the corresponding authority, protection and recognition.

What donors and evaluators look at

- A credible **access analysis** in the proposal, with a risk matrix, mitigation measures and a plan B (alternative modality, local partner, remote management), rather than a generic sentence on insecurity.
- **Written policies** on payments to armed actors, anti-diversion, compliance with sanctions regimes and the humanitarian exemption, and evidence that staff are aware of them.
- **Prompt reporting of incidents** (diversion, loss, interference), within contractual deadlines.
- For evaluators, **coverage**: did the organisation reach the most affected areas and groups, or only the most accessible ones? The ratio between high-severity areas and areas served is a key indicator.
- **Coherence** between the discourse on principles and observed practices (visibility, recruitment, relations with armed forces).

> A donor prefers an organisation that temporarily suspends an activity and explains why, to one that maintains its distribution figures by quietly accepting conditions contrary to the principles. The reputational risk of a discovered diversion is out of all proportion to that of a justified delay.

Interview questions and key references

Interview questions

1. "How would you prepare an access negotiation with an armed group your organisation has never met?"

A good answer describes a method: context and perception analysis, mapping of the network of influence, search for accepted intermediaries (elders, religious authorities, other organisations already in dialogue), island of agreement and iceberg, written mandate with red lines, carefully considered composition of the delegation, security plan, and a documented debriefing. It recalls that dialogue with an armed group for humanitarian purposes is legitimate and necessary, while checking the legal constraints related to sanctions.

2. "When is an armed escort acceptable?"

Only as a last resort, in line with the IASC guidelines: critical need, no unarmed alternative, an escort able to genuinely reduce the risk and that does not turn the convoy into a target, analysis of the consequences for acceptance and for other organisations, a decision at the appropriate level (often with the Humanitarian Coordinator for UN agencies), limitation in time and review. A strong candidate also cites the country's civil-military guidelines.

3. "Your national team tells you that a commander is asking for the beneficiary lists. What do you do?"

Do not hand them over; understand the reason for the request (fear of infiltration, control of the population, census); propose alternatives (presentation of the criteria, aggregate figures, community observers); escalate to management; check whether other organisations have received the same request; document; assess the risks for the national team and adapt security measures.

4. "What is the difference between civil-military cooperation and coexistence?"

Cooperation: close interaction possible in peacetime or in a natural disaster, with possible use of military assets in line with the Oslo Guidelines. Coexistence: in conflict, minimal interaction, limited to the information sharing needed for security and deconfliction, in order to preserve distinction. Where the cursor is set depends on the context and on the country guidelines.

5. "Tell me about a difficult negotiation you have conducted." (behavioural question)

Recruiters expect a concrete situation, the mandate the candidate had, his or her tactical choices (relationship, arguments, options), what he or she refused and why, the outcome over time and what was learned. A story in which the candidate obtained "everything" alone and without consulting line management is more worrying than reassuring.

6. "How do you measure humanitarian access?"

Through indicators: missions planned and carried out, days of delay, targeted people not reached, incidents classified according to OCHA's nine categories, coverage of high-severity areas. The candidate shows that he or she knows how to turn isolated incidents into data that are useful for collective advocacy.

Key references

- Centre of Competence on Humanitarian Negotiation (CCHN), *Field Manual on Frontline Humanitarian Negotiation*.
- OCHA, Humanitarian Access Monitoring and Reporting Framework; Guidelines on Humanitarian Negotiations with Armed Groups (OCHA, 2006, and companion manual).
- Oslo Guidelines (2007 revision); MCDA Guidelines (2003, revised in 2006); IASC Reference Paper on Civil-Military Relationship in Complex Emergencies (2004); IASC Non-Binding Guidelines on the Use of Armed Escorts for Humanitarian Convoys (2013); OCHA UN-CMCoord Field Handbook.
- ICRC, *Safer Access Framework*; Customary International Humanitarian Law study, Rules 31, 32, 55 and 56.
- Humanitarian Practice Network, *Good Practice Review 8: Operational Security Management in Violent Environments* (revised edition, 2010).
- "Saving Lives Together" framework for security collaboration between the United Nations and NGOs.
- UN Security Council resolutions 2417 (2018), 2664 (2022) and 2730 (2024).
- Geneva Call, deeds of commitment for armed non-state actors.
- Groupe URD and Humanitarian Outcomes, research on remote management and risk transfer to local partners.

Exercise: prepare a negotiation brief

Choose a real context (for instance an area where ReliefWeb reports access constraints). Write a one-page brief: target counterpart and their interests, three objectives, two negotiable points, two red lines, and the arguments based on IHL and shared values.

Key takeaways

- Access is negotiated and acceptance is built through consistency and impartiality.
- CCHN method: analyse the counterpart, set objectives and limits, start from shared values.
- Armed escorts and military assets: last resort, life-saving need, civilian control.
- A dilemma is settled collectively, documenting the options and their consequences.

Quiz

1. In an access negotiation, which of these points is never negotiable?
   A. The number of vehicles.
   B. Selecting recipients according to need.
   C. The route.
   D. The time of the convoy.
2. Who leads humanitarian civil-military coordination in the UN system?
   A. NATO.
   B. OCHA (UN-CMCoord).
   C. UNDP.
   D. The Security Council.
3. The Oslo Guidelines concern:
   A. Accountability to donors.
   B. The use of foreign military and civil defence assets in disaster relief.
   C. WASH standards.
   D. Refugee status.

Quiz answers : 1. C · 2. A · 3. B