

# **CODE OF CONDUCT**

## **For Humanitarian Agencies in Sierra Leone**

### **Revised 21<sup>st</sup> November, 1998**

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

The humanitarian community, while acknowledging the diversity of individual agency mandates, agrees to work together and in collaboration with the people of Sierra Leone. We, the signatories, pledge to work toward the alleviation of human suffering, the promotion of self-reliance and the enhancement of human dignity. We intend to accord priority to the needs of the most vulnerable, to optimise the available resources, and to avoid actions which might contribute to the continuation of conflict.

The humanitarian agencies will work toward improving the access of beneficiaries throughout Sierra Leone to clean water, food, health care, shelter, education, human rights, a secure environment and economic opportunity. In so doing humanitarian agencies will actively work towards minimising the potentially harmful impact of humanitarian interventions.

Accepted humanitarian laws and principles will guide the humanitarian community. The Code recognises the rights and obligations of authorities and humanitarian agencies towards all applicable international legal standards. It also recognises the specific mandate of organisations towards international law, notably international human rights law (OHCHR), refugee law (UNHCR) and international humanitarian law (ICRC). The consent of all parties is the best way to ensure that these human rights are protected for all.

## **2. PRINCIPLES**

### **Humanity**

Human suffering should be addressed wherever it is found. The dignity and rights of all victims must be respected and protected. All parties concerned must grant free and unimpeded access for humanitarian assistance activities and for the staff of humanitarian organisations.

### **Impartiality**

Humanitarian assistance should be provided without discrimination as to ethnic origin, gender, nationality, political opinion, race or religion. Efforts should be made to relieve the suffering of individuals and activities should be guided solely by need.

### **Neutrality**

Neutrality is maintained by not taking the side of any of the parties to the hostilities nor supporting any aspect of the conflict. Consistent with international law, humanitarian assistance should be provided without engaging in hostilities or taking sides in controversies of a political, racial, religious or ideological nature. Humanitarian action is not a partisan or political act and should not be viewed as such.

## **Independence**

The humanitarian community should have the freedom to act on humanitarian considerations independent of military, political or economic interests or interference.

## **Human Dignity**

Protection of human rights is a fundamental aspect of humanitarian action. The rights of all persons to live in safety and dignity must be affirmed and protected.

## **Sustainability**

All humanitarian actions should be tailored to local circumstances and aim to enhance, not supplant, locally available resources and mechanisms. Strengthening local capacity to prevent future crises and emergencies is an integral part of the humanitarian mandate.

## **Transparency**

Humanitarian agencies should operate in an open manner so as to promote a broader understanding of their humanitarian work. Information should be openly shared in order to allay doubts and/or suspicions.

## **Accountability**

Humanitarian agencies hold themselves accountable to those they seek to assist by monitoring humanitarian interventions to ensure their appropriate impact. Humanitarian agencies hold themselves accountable to those from whom they accept resources.

# **3. OPERATIONAL GUIDELINES**

These guidelines are designed to assist in the implementation of the above mentioned principles.

## **3.1 Coordination**

Solidarity amongst the humanitarian community relies on agreement on the principles and guidelines, and adherence to the guidelines during operations. Upholding an agreed code of behaviour will strengthen the credibility of the humanitarian community as a whole and maximise the long-term effectiveness of humanitarian assistance. Agencies recognise that unilateral departure from guidelines can jeopardise other agencies' work and even safety.

Agencies agree to abide by the following guidelines in order to ensure consistency and professionalism:

- 3.1.1 Agency interventions should continue to be guided by strategies established within the framework and mechanisms of inter-agency cooperation in Sierra Leone.
- 3.1.2 New humanitarian agencies to a region must respect existing designated operational areas and sectors. Consultation through coordination mechanisms should occur before any planning and/or intervention in an area.
- 3.1.3 Information sharing is essential, especially regarding security incidents such as harassment of staff or theft of assets.
- 3.1.4 Respect for appropriate working practices should continue. Etiquette over staff employment, salaries, rent for property, resources and general services should be followed.
- 3.1.5 Under the principle of independence, the humanitarian community is responsible for assessment monitoring and control of humanitarian resources. This should be done in cooperation with the relevant local, national, and international stakeholders.

## 3.2 SECURITY

Humanitarian action in favour of civilian population should not be seen as interference or an unfriendly act, and therefore, humanitarian personnel and assets must be respected and protected at all times. Safety in the Sierra Leonean context depends on the image and integrity of the humanitarian community as a whole, the manner in which agencies conduct themselves in the field, and the consent of armed groups to the principle of humanitarian access.

Agencies agree to abide by the following in order to ensure consistency and professionalism:

- 3.2.1 Humanitarian operations must be carried out under a “no-gun” policy, hence the transportation of armed personnel by humanitarian vehicles is forbidden.
- 3.2.2 Payments at checkpoints should not be made.
- 3.2.3 No payment should be made in order to access or bring relief to civilian populations.
- 3.2.4 Demands from any armed group for relief items or assets should be refused.
- 3.2.5 Demands for payment under armed threat should be treated as armed robbery and the incident reported to the proper authority for action to be taken.
- 3.2.6 The safety of staff is a self-evident pre-requisite. It is understood that in the event of direct personal threat to agency staff in times of crisis, agencies may be required to take the necessary steps to assure personal safety without consultation.

Exceptional use of Armed Escorts

There may be exceptional circumstances where the use of armed escorts is considered to be necessary in order to save lives. The decision to take an armed escort should be on a case by case basis, and should meet the following criteria:

- 4 That humanitarian needs are great enough to justify the use of an armed escort.
- 5 That escort must be a last resort after all other methods of access have been exhausted.
- 6 The escort should be capable of deterring attack. If not it should be refused.
- 7 Providers of the escort should be disciplined and understand the nature of their mission with regards to humanitarian operations.

Escorts should never be used without questioning the nature of the humanitarian action, the increased threat to personal security and any distortion of humanitarian neutrality. In every case, agencies should first consult the appropriate sectoral forum before bringing the issue to the Code of Conduct Committee for discussion.

## **7.1 CODE OF CONDUCT COMMITTEE**

A Code of Conduct Committee comprised of representatives of the national and international NGOs, concerned Donors, the relevant UN Agencies and ICRC (Observer status) will monitor implementation of the Code of Conduct and advocate on its behalf with the parties to the conflict. The Committee will undertake the following responsibilities:

- 7.1.1 Periodic review of the Code of Conduct and its implementation.
- 7.1.2 Advocacy for the guidelines; orientation of incoming agencies and organisations.
- 7.1.3 Promote common assessment and operational standards as per the Code of Conduct and within the context to the existing coordination forums.
- 7.1.4 Encourage dissemination of the Code of Conduct.
- 7.1.5 Provide a forum in which agencies may discuss and make recommendations on proposals to use an armed escort. The final decision regarding the use of an armed escort rests with individual agencies who will make this decision in accordance with the agreed criteria.
- 7.1.6 Resolution of disputes arising from various interpretations of or departures from the code.

Should any departure from the principles occur, a timely and full disclosure of details of the extenuating circumstances should be provided to the Code of Conduct Committee and the it may impact relevant humanitarian forums, as on members of the humanitarian community.