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**Executive Board  
Annual Session**

**Rome, 24–26 May 2004**

## **POLICY ISSUES**

### **Agenda item 5**

*For information\**

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## **HUMANITARIAN PRINCIPLES**

At its First Regular Session in 2004, the Secretariat was requested to submit to the Board at its Annual session, through the Bureau, a document on the substance of the statement on humanitarian principles. The present document is the result of the consensus reached through negotiations held with the various lists, through their representatives at the Bureau. It is presented to the Board for information.

\*In accordance with the Executive Board's decisions on governance, approved at the Annual and Third Regular Sessions of 2000, items for information should not be discussed unless a Board member specifically requests it, well in advance of the meeting, and the Chair accepts the request on the grounds that it is a proper use of the Board's time.

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## NOTE TO THE EXECUTIVE BOARD

**This document is submitted for information by the Executive Board.**

The Secretariat invites members of the Board who may have questions of a technical nature with regard to this document to contact the WFP staff focal points indicated below, preferably well in advance of the Board's meeting.

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Humanitarian principles are based on the belief that we all have a responsibility “to uphold the principles of human dignity, equality and equity at the global level”, as stated in the United Nations Millennium Declaration. These ideals provide a framework to guide humanitarian action. They help to justify why an agency works in a particular way and ensure quality of assistance and accountability.

Drawing on international efforts to standardize principles and on WFP’s experience, the Secretariat has selected ten principles that guide WFP’s work, for the Board’s endorsement. They are consistent with the statement in the Millennium Declaration that “we have a duty to all the world’s people, especially the most vulnerable, and in particular the children of the world, to whom the future belongs.”

## DRAFT DECISION\*

The Board takes note of the revised Statement of Humanitarian Principles of the World Food Programme contained in paragraph 14 (WFP/EB.A/2004/5-C), which takes into account comments made during the First Regular Session 2004. The Secretariat is requested to add the final statement to the Consolidated Framework of WFP Policies.

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\* This is a draft decision. For the final decision adopted by the Board, please refer to the Decisions and Recommendations document issued at the end of the session.



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## INTRODUCTION

1. The level of human suffering in the world today is unacceptable: one in five people survive on less than US\$1 per day; 842 million people do not have enough food; over 30 percent of the world's children are malnourished. Wars have forced over 25 million people to flee their homes and an additional 16 million to seek refuge in other countries. Drought, floods, earthquakes and other natural disasters affected over 600 million people in 2003. HIV/AIDS claims an estimated 6,500 lives each day; 42 million people live with the disease. Millions more are affected by HIV/AIDS, including 13.4 million orphaned children.
2. Faced with such hardship, there is no option but to act. This is the essence of humanitarianism: the readiness to respond to human suffering and assist fellow human beings when they have nowhere else to turn. It is this spirit, carried out with dedication and commitment, that guides WFP when it uses the instrument it was established to provide — food aid — when it is best suited to meeting humanitarian needs. The world's leaders reinforced these ideals in the Millennium Declaration, stating: “We have a collective responsibility to uphold the principles of human dignity, equality and equity at the global level. As leaders, we have a duty therefore to all the world's people, especially the most vulnerable and, in particular, the children of the world, to whom the future belongs.”
3. At the Third Regular Session in 2003, the Board asked the Secretariat to clarify the humanitarian principles that guide WFP. At the First Regular Session in 2004, the Board endorsed the ten principles put forward by the Secretariat, and suggested a few amendments to the text. The Board asked the Secretariat to refer to other important bodies of law and the United Nations Charter. The proposed statement of humanitarian principles provided in paragraph 14 addresses the Board's comments, as does the body of the paper. It reflects the belief that the global community must act when families and local and national institutions are unable to meet the needs of vulnerable people. It recognizes the importance of ensuring that aid builds on the capacities available in communities and nations and that assistance is appropriate and well coordinated. The statement is consistent with international humanitarian law and other institutional efforts to standardize humanitarian principles.

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## STANDARDIZING PRINCIPLES

### Relevant Legal Instruments

4. Humanitarian ideals are delineated in international humanitarian law<sup>1</sup> (IHL), which prohibits belligerents from causing unnecessary suffering in armed conflicts. IHL describes the situations in which states must allow assistance to be provided to civilians and permits relief agencies, abiding by certain conditions, to access and assist civilian populations. It addresses international and non-international armed conflicts, which characterize many of the locations where WFP works.
5. Common Article 3 of the Geneva Conventions allows for an “impartial humanitarian body ... to offer its services to the Parties to the conflict” and Additional Protocol II states that “if the civilian population is suffering undue hardship owing to a lack of the supplies essential for its survival, such as foodstuffs and medical supplies, relief actions for the

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<sup>1</sup> Treaties and customary law dating back to the first Geneva Convention of 1864 and beyond.



civilian population which are of an exclusively humanitarian and impartial nature and which are conducted without any adverse distinction shall be undertaken subject to the consent of the High Contracting Party concerned.”<sup>2</sup> The emerging cornerstone humanitarian principles that all actors, including warring parties, must abide by are: humanity, impartiality and “absence of adverse distinction”.

6. The international humanitarian community has expanded the notion of humanitarian principles to serve as a code of conduct for agencies providing assistance in the aftermath of natural disasters, man-made crises and wars. In December 1991, the United Nations General Assembly agreed that the principles listed in Box 1 would guide the United Nations in providing humanitarian assistance.<sup>3</sup> The United Nations humanitarian action is also guided by its Charter which, under article 1, defines its purpose to include achieving “international cooperation in solving international problems of an economic, social, cultural or humanitarian character, and in promoting and encouraging respect for human rights and for fundamental freedoms for all without distinction as to race, sex, language, or religion”.
7. Several other instruments are directly relevant to the definition of humanitarian principles:
  - The Universal Declaration of Human Rights describes the civil and political rights of individuals, as well as their economic and social rights. Although not a legally binding instrument, the Declaration provides general principles of law and acts as guidance for states in the field of human rights.
  - The 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees and the 1967 Protocol, which together comprise international refugee law, define refugees, their rights and the legal obligations of states.
  - The Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement provide an international standard to guide governments and international humanitarian and development agencies in providing assistance and protection to internally displaced persons.<sup>4</sup> The Principles are drawn from existing international humanitarian law and human rights instruments.

## The Sphere Project

8. Notable efforts to standardize humanitarian principles include the Code of Conduct for the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in Disaster Relief. Signed by 200 organizations in 1994, the code outlined the principles of conduct listed in Box 2.
9. The Code of Conduct was recast as the Humanitarian Charter to underpin the Sphere Project, which sought to improve the quality and accountability of humanitarian work. Launched in 1998, The Sphere Project involved representatives from over 300 national and international NGOs, United Nations agencies and academic institutions to set out minimum standards of food aid, nutrition, water supply and sanitation, shelter and site management,

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<sup>2</sup> Common Article 3 of the Geneva Conventions is applicable in all non-international armed conflicts, regardless of state ratification; it has become part of customary international law. Additional Protocol II only applies where it has been ratified by a government, and only to specified types of armed forces.

<sup>3</sup> UNGA Resolution 46/182, 19 December 1991.

<sup>4</sup> Internally displaced persons are defined as persons or groups of persons who have been forced or obliged to flee or to vacate their homes or place of habitual residence, in particular as a result of or in order to avoid the effects of armed conflict, situations of generalized violence, violations of human rights or natural or man-made disasters, and who have not crossed an internationally recognized state border.



and health services. Currently in its third phase, the Sphere Project has just revised its handbook and is piloting the application of the Humanitarian Charter and minimum standards in three regions.

10. In 2000, the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) endorsed the Sphere handbook as an important tool for organizations working with populations affected by disaster. It called on all IASC members to promote use of the Humanitarian Charter and minimum standards in disaster response in their organizations. WFP has provided technical support since the inception of the Sphere Project, most recently in the development of the new food security and nutrition chapter. WFP's standard field-level agreement with implementing partners encourages adherence to the Sphere Humanitarian Charter and standards.

### **Good Humanitarian Donorship**

11. In June 2003, representatives of governments, multilateral donors, WFP and other United Nations agencies, the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and other organizations met in Stockholm to endorse the Principles and Good Practice of Humanitarian Donorship. These reaffirmed that humanitarian action should be guided by humanity, impartiality, neutrality and independence. They also stressed the need to:
  - respect and promote international humanitarian law, refugee law and human rights;
  - ensure stable, flexible and timely funding to meet humanitarian needs;
  - allocate humanitarian funding in proportion to needs and on the basis of needs assessments;
  - involve beneficiaries in monitoring and evaluation and, where possible, the design and implementation of humanitarian response;
  - strengthen the capacity of affected countries and local communities to prevent, prepare for, mitigate and respond to humanitarian crises;
  - provide humanitarian assistance in ways that are supportive of recovery and long-term development and to ensure support, where appropriate, to facilitate transitions from humanitarian relief to recovery and development activities; and
  - support and promote the central and unique role of the United Nations in providing leadership and coordination of international humanitarian action, the special role of the International Committee of the Red Cross, and the vital role of the United Nations, the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and NGOs in implementing humanitarian action.



**Box 1**

- Humanitarian assistance is of cardinal importance for the victims of natural disasters and other emergencies.
- Humanitarian assistance must be provided in accordance with the principles of humanity, neutrality and impartiality.
- The sovereignty, territorial integrity and national unity of states must be fully respected in accordance with the Charter of the United Nations. In this context, humanitarian assistance should be provided with the consent of the affected country and in principle on the basis of an appeal by the affected country.
- Each state has the responsibility first and foremost to take care of the victims of natural disasters and other emergencies occurring on its territory. Hence, the affected state has the primary role in the initiation, organization, coordination, and implementation of humanitarian assistance within its territory.
- The magnitude and duration of many emergencies may be beyond the response capacity of many affected countries. International cooperation to address emergency situations and to strengthen the response capacity of affected countries is thus of great importance. Such cooperation should be provided in accordance with international law and national laws. Inter-governmental and non-governmental organizations working impartially and with strictly humanitarian motives should continue to make a significant contribution in supplementing national efforts.
- States whose populations are in need of humanitarian assistance are called upon to facilitate the work of these organizations in implementing humanitarian assistance, in particular the supply of food, medicines, shelter and health care, for which access to victims is essential.
- States in proximity to emergencies are urged to participate closely with the affected countries in international efforts, with a view to facilitating to the extent possible the transit of humanitarian assistance.
- Special attention should be given to disaster prevention and preparedness by the governments concerned, as well as by the international community.
- There is a clear relationship between emergency, rehabilitation and development. In order to ensure a smooth transition from relief to rehabilitation and development, emergency assistance should be provided in ways that will be supportive of recovery and long-term development. Thus, emergency measures should be seen as a step towards long-term development.
- Economic growth and sustainable development are essential for prevention of and preparedness against natural disasters and other emergencies. Many emergencies reflect the underlying crisis in development facing developing countries. Humanitarian assistance should therefore be accompanied by a renewal of commitment to economic growth and sustainable development of developing countries. In this context, adequate resources must be made available to address their development problems.
- Contributions for humanitarian assistance should be provided in a way which is not to the detriment of resources made available for international cooperation for development.
- The United Nations has a central and unique role in providing leadership and coordinating the efforts of the international community to support the affected countries. The United Nations should ensure the prompt and smooth delivery of relief assistance in full respect of the above-mentioned principles, bearing in mind relevant General Assembly resolutions. The United Nations system needs to be adapted and strengthened to meet present and future challenges in an effective and coherent manner. It should be provided with resources commensurate with future requirements. The inadequacy of such resources has been one of the major constraints in the effective response of the United Nations to emergencies.



**Box 2**

- The humanitarian imperative comes first.
- Aid is given regardless of the race, creed or nationality of the recipients and without adverse distinction of any kind. Aid priorities are calculated on the basis of need alone.
- Aid will not be used to further a particular political or religious stand point.
- We shall endeavour not to act as instruments of government foreign policy.
- We shall respect culture and custom.
- We shall attempt to build disaster response on local capacities.
- Ways shall be found to involve programme beneficiaries in the management of relief aid.
- Relief aid must strive to reduce future vulnerability to disasters as well as meet basic needs.
- We hold ourselves accountable to both those we seek to assist and those from whom we accept resources.
- In our information, publicity and advertising activities, we shall recognize disaster victims as dignified humans, not hopeless objects.

**Field-Level Principles**

12. In addition to these global efforts, there have been several field-level attempts to reach agreement on humanitarian principles, most notably in Liberia, Somalia and Sudan in 1995 and in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Sierra Leone in 1998. These have resulted in agreements that set out in operational terms principles of humanity, impartiality, neutrality, independence, capacity building, transparency, accountability and coordination. In Afghanistan, the introduction of the Strategic Framework in 1997 defined the overall political, humanitarian and human rights objectives of the United Nations and led to the creation of a mechanism for establishing the assistance community's priorities, programmes and projects based on agreed goals, principles and the needs of Afghans. In general, there has been mixed success in implementing the various agreements, but they have served as important advocacy tools for agencies faced with operational constraints in the field.
13. The IASC has not reached an agreement among international humanitarian assistance agencies on a set of common principles. With regard to integrating a gender perspective in humanitarian assistance, the IASC has agreed that agencies should:
- embrace gender equality and the equal protection of women's and men's human rights in carrying out humanitarian and peace-building activities, paying special attention to the violation of women's rights and the provision of appropriate remedies;
  - ensure equal representation of women and men in peace mediation and decision-making at all levels and stages of humanitarian assistance; and
  - guarantee participation of women's organizations in capacity-building for humanitarian response, rehabilitation and recovery.





## STATEMENT OF HUMANITARIAN PRINCIPLES OF THE WORLD FOOD PROGRAMME

14. WFP is driven by the need to respond to human suffering and assist fellow human beings when they have nowhere else to turn. WFP will use food and related assistance to meet immediate needs and improve food security. It is committed to the purposes and principles of the United Nations Charter and to the values and principles expressed in the Millennium Declaration. WFP will not use food, at any time or under any circumstances, as a means of applying political or economic pressure. WFP will adhere to the principles set out below when providing food aid, non-food assistance and technical support in response to humanitarian needs.

| <b>CORE HUMANITARIAN PRINCIPLES</b>                 |  |
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| I.  | <b>Humanity.</b> WFP will seek to prevent and alleviate human suffering wherever it is found and respond with food aid when appropriate. It will provide assistance in ways that respect life, health and dignity.   |
| II.   | <b>Impartiality.</b> WFP's assistance will be guided solely by need and will not discriminate in terms of ethnic origin, nationality, political opinion, gender, race or religion. In a country, assistance will be targeted to those most at risk from the consequences of food shortages, following a sound assessment that considers the different needs and vulnerabilities of women, men and children.  |
| III.  | <b>Neutrality.</b> WFP will not take sides in a conflict and will not engage in controversies of a political, racial, religious or ideological nature. Aid will not be provided to active combatants.  |
| <b>FOUNDATIONS OF EFFECTIVE HUMANITARIAN ACTION</b> |  |
| IV.   | <b>Respect.</b> WFP will respect the sovereignty, territorial integrity and unity of the state in which it is working. WFP will respect local customs and traditions, upholding internationally recognized human rights. WFP will act in accordance with the United Nations Charter and consistent with international humanitarian law and refugee law. WFP will also take into account the Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement, when applicable.  |
| V.  | <b>Self-reliance.</b> WFP will provide humanitarian assistance with the primary objective of saving lives, in ways that support livelihoods, reduce vulnerability to future food scarcities and support durable solutions. WFP will work to ensure that food aid does not undermine local agricultural production, marketing or coping strategies, or disturb normal migratory patterns or foster dependency. WFP's programmes will be planned and implemented in ways that facilitate the link from relief to development.  |
| VI.   | <b>Participation.</b> WFP will involve women and men beneficiaries wherever possible in all activities and will work closely with governments at the national and local levels to plan and implement assistance.   |
| VII.  | <b>Capacity-building.</b> Within its own capacity and resources, WFP will strengthen the capacity of affected countries and local communities to prevent, prepare for and respond to humanitarian crises. WFP will ensure participation by women's organizations and will integrate a gender perspective in capacity-building activities.  |
| VIII.   | <b>Coordination.</b> WFP will provide assistance with the consent of the affected country and, in principle, on the basis of an appeal by the affected country. All States Members of the United Nations or Members or Associate Members of any specialized agency or of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) are eligible to submit requests for consideration by WFP. WFP may also provide emergency food aid and associated non-food items and logistics support at the request of the Secretary-General of the United Nations. WFP will work within established United Nations coordination structures at the global and field levels. This will include working with other humanitarian actors such as NGOs and the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement. |



| <b>STANDARDS OF ACCOUNTABILITY AND PROFESSIONALISM</b> |   |
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| IX.  | <b>Accountability.</b> WFP will keep donors, host country governments, beneficiaries and other relevant stakeholders informed of its activities and their impact through regular reporting.   |
| X.   | <b>Professionalism.</b> WFP will maintain the highest standards of professionalism and integrity among its international and national staff to ensure that its programmes are carried out efficiently, effectively, ethically and safely. All staff will adhere to the <i>Standard Code of Conduct for the International Civil Service</i> and the Secretary-General's <i>Bulletin on Sexual Abuse and Exploitation in Humanitarian Crises and Other Operations</i> . |

