

Sudan Joint Operating Principles (JOPs)

Consultation Report

June 2025

Background & Purpose

The Joint Operating Principles were first developed in mid-2023, shortly after the current war in Sudan began, and were revised in late 2024. They are intended to provide the foundation for a collective approach to a principled and effective humanitarian response. Between March and May 2025, a series of 15 consultations were held with more than 300 stakeholders to the aid response in Sudan to gather insights and lessons into the role and effectiveness of the Joint Operating Principles (JOPs). These consultations, held under Chatham House rules, were undertaken by the Conflict Sensitivity Facility (CSF) in support of and as a former member of the Humanitarian Access Working Group (HAWG). The findings emerging from this consultation process will inform a revision of the JOPs, the dissemination and outreach, and the operationalisation of the principles. The views and findings expressed in this paper reflect the diverse opinions of those consulted; a list of consultations is provided in annex.

Findings

There is limited Awareness of the JOPs. Many aid actors are not aware of the JOPs, or had heard of them, but were not familiar with them. Dissemination efforts did take place in 2023 and into 2024, but were not comprehensive or sustained. In the meantime, a few organisations have undertaken independent efforts to train staff and use the JOPs in their work, but no systemic work has been done, and there have been few opportunities to publicly discuss how the principles are (or are not) shaping the aid effort. Likewise, little has been done to build communities' understanding of aid's principles.

Principles are perceived to be important. Despite the limited awareness of the JOPs themselves, the majority of participants were aware of, and did believe that humanitarian principles are important in guiding the aid response. This belief stemmed primarily from ethical and conflict sensitivity reasons, to ensure that the aid response does not contribute to conflict or to harm, but also for operational, security and programmatic reasons.

The current version of the JOPs is felt to be overly technical, heavy on jargon and not field-friendly. It was felt that a shorter, simpler, more direct document would be easier to communicate, internalise, and apply. There are good examples available from other contexts.¹

There are high ambitions of the JOPs. Participants felt they should inform the overall strategic direction of the aid response, engagement with warring parties, geographical targeting, and negotiations over access and bureaucratic impediments. Respondents also felt the JOPs should support field-level operational questions around checkpoints, hiring processes, registration, travel permits, requests for information or bribes.

Challenges to principles differ across geographical areas and sectors. Actors working in different areas and in different sectors reported different types of challenges to principles, and may benefit from localized solutions.

There is a lack of information, feedback, analysis, discussion or consensus about where the aid sector struggles to abide by its principles. There are few tools or spaces for gathering data or building analysis about where and when aid's principles are most challenged.² This means that we can't

¹ For example, see the [Nepal Basic Operating Guidelines](#), which is a one-page document.

² The AMRF supports reporting of incidents, but is not set up to analyse political or conflict dynamics necessary to understand the aid sector's neutrality, impartiality, or independence.

prioritise issues to focus on. This gap is true at the system-level, in terms of policies, approaches and relationships, as well as at the operational level, in day-to-day field interactions.

There are no systems for incentivising, acting on, enabling or enforcing principles. Even if analysis were available about challenges to principles, there are no accountability mechanisms or processes for acting on them. It is important to reflect that different challenges would likely require different systems for action; some at the national/policy level, others at the subnational/policy or operational levels.

Principles are sometimes in conflict with each other, with operational priorities, or security risks. There are currently limited venues or tools for helping aid actors manage these dilemmas, escalate issues, or seek support.

Collective approaches to principles have a cost and a benefit. Principles are currently undertaken at the organisation level, with different approaches in use for similar challenges. Costs and benefits to greater collective action are summarised in this table:

	Costs	Benefits
Collective Action	Resources for coordination, analysis, monitoring, and support or enforcement. Likely to also take more time.	Stronger negotiating position with parties to the conflict, better collective analysis, greater protection for individual organisations.
Individual Action	Greater burden on organisations to negotiate independently and likely weaker negotiating position. Less transparency.	Faster and allows organisations to apply principles in a way that is contextualised to their mandate and the context.

Principles should be operationalised through systems and by building a culture. Reinforcing a culture of principles was thought to be as important as putting into place tools and systems.

Role of ‘Red Lines’. Respondents suggested differing views on the value and role of ‘red lines’. Many felt they were important for shaping aid actors’ behaviour and putting limits on what could be accepted. Others felt that it gave mixed messages that other unprincipled actions were somehow acceptable, and noted that there was limited reporting and no enforcement of red lines.

Relation to Parties to the Conflict (PTTC). It was questioned whether the JOPs are the right vehicle for stating expectations to the parties to the conflict, noting that International Humanitarian Law may provide a more persuasive framework for armed actors.

Systemic issues of association. Challenges to neutrality are deeply embedded, and related to where different aid actors are based and who they legitimise through recognition.

Recommendations from the JOPs Consultation Process

Contents of the JOPs

Low Hanging Fruit	Needs Discussion	Needs Commitment
- Simplify and shorten document, cut jargon and focus on the principles themselves. - Provide a one-pager in English and Arabic that is suitable for use in field. - Clarify the purpose and audience (not needed in the document itself).	- Consider if there is value in having donors endorse. - Consider adding 'resilience', 'localisation' or 'conflict sensitivity' as core principles of the aid response. - Consider the purpose of 'red lines' given what we can realistically monitor and enforce, and explore potential alternatives.	- Create ways for wide participation in the revision process, including NGOs, Local Responders, and communities. - Build connections with those working on complementary responses in Chad, South Sudan, Ethiopia, etc.

Recommendations on Disseminating and Building Understanding of the JOPs

Low Hanging Fruit	Needs Discussion	Needs Commitment
- Develop a comms strategy with comms professionals to not just disseminate, but build understanding. - Share in multiple formats and languages, e.g. radio, social media, video clips, posters, case studies. - Develop tools that aid orgs can use to share and discuss principles with communities.	- Develop a short course on the history and current challenges to principles in Sudan that all aid workers are required to take. - Develop two-pagers for all clusters and working groups, tailoring the principles to their mandate and specific challenges.	Provide regular opportunities for peer-to-peer discussion at the subnational level about what the principles mean in practice in different specific geographic contexts. This should build on robust actor mapping and analysis of how the aid response is interacting with dynamics in the area.

Recommendations for Operationalising the JOPs

Low Hanging Fruit	Needs Discussion	Needs Commitment
- Principles as key reference document for external engagement and internal decision-making. - Develop standard negotiating strategies for specific, common challenges, e.g. around hiring, checkpoints, travel permits, targeting. - Produce short analysis about prioritised needs and opportunities for diplomats. - Create opportunities for peer-to-peer learning about how to manage challenges.	- Integrate principles into donor and cluster mechanisms for targeting, funding and MEL - Organisations coordinate on shared messaging and actions in support of principles - Develop minimum standards for principled action; organisations that implement them receive 'certification'. - Feedback, reporting and analysis mechanism set up to build understanding of challenges to principles and possible options.	- Donors design and fund an independent analysis and reporting mechanism to correct for blind spots, to be tied to both aid leadership and diplomacy. - Area-based coordination structures set up to lead responses to local challenges to principles - Mechanism developed to facilitate/coordinate collective action in support of principles.

Annex - List of Consultations

1. INGO Forum
2. National NGOs
3. Intercluster Coordination Group
4. Protection Cluster
5. WASH Cluster
6. Cash Working Group
7. Humanitarian Access Network
8. Donors
9. A/ICCG-Darfur
10. Health Cluster
11. Food Security & Livelihoods Cluster
12. Accountability Affected Populations Working Group
13. Durable Solutions Working Group
14. Experts
15. Humanitarian Access Working Group
16. Local Responders - *Pending*