

Achieving Good Governance in the IFRC Emphasizing the Role of Integrity in Rescue & Relief

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Abstract

INTRODUCTION: The International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) is an international non-governmental organization that provides a wide range of humanitarian services to its stakeholders. In an environment marked by growing complexities and challenges in humanitarian crises, commitment to good governance is crucial for effective response strategies. The aim of this study is to examine the extent to which good governance has been realized in the IFRC's operational and functional domains by analyzing available data.

METHODS: This qualitative study examines the extent to which good governance has been achieved in the operational and functional areas of the IFRC using discourse analysis, literature review, and studying documents through examining historical documents, the IFRC's regulations, and the reports of the internal audit office over the past 50 years.

FINDINGS: According to the findings, adherence to good governance principles enhances the legitimacy and effectiveness of IFRC operations. The development of ethical standards, transparency and accountability in resource management, and employee ethics and conduct are key factors in maintaining public trust and combating corruption. In the meantime, with an emphasis on impartiality, adherence to humanitarian principles, and attracting global support, the principle of integrity plays a central role, especially in rescue and relief operations.

CONCLUSION: This study emphasizes the importance of IFRC's fundamental principles such as humanity, impartiality, and independence as the foundations of decision-making in crises. As humanitarian needs evolve, strengthening these principles is essential to improve performance and preserve the dignity of those affected, also there is a need to focus on developing frameworks to better integrate these principles into operational strategies.

Keywords: Good governance; Integrity; International Disaster Response Law; IFRC; Implementation challenges.

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Introduction

Governance in humanitarian activities, relief, and rescue refers to the set of processes, structures, and mechanisms through which these activities are managed, coordinated, and implemented. This type of governance plays a vital role in ensuring the efficiency, transparency, and accountability in the delivery of humanitarian aid and relief operations. In critical situations such as natural disasters, wars, or humanitarian crises, good governance can make the difference between

life and death. The necessity of paying attention to good governance in humanitarian and relief activities stems from the fact that these activities are carried out in critical and emergency conditions, where errors or inefficiencies can have irreversible consequences. Good governance in this field not only helps improve the quality and effectiveness of aid but also increases public trust.

The existing problems arising from the nature of accidents and disasters sometimes present governments with numerous challenges, especially for international organizations, including: a) *Misuse of resources*: the risk of

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corruption and misuse of aid in critical conditions (1); b) *Lack of coordination*: the absence of coordination among different organizations can lead to duplication and waste of resources (2); c) *Limited access*: in some areas, access to affected communities is difficult due to security or geographical issues; d) *Political pressure*: political interference can negatively impact the fair distribution of aid (3) are among the main challenges of governance in humanitarian activities.

This issue is particularly important in critical situations where time and resources are limited. Attention to transparency, participation of local communities, justice, and coordination among institutions are among the main principles of good governance in this field.

Other key activities and components of good governance in humanitarian and rescue and relief activities include: establishing coordination structures among governmental, non-governmental, and international organizations (4); defining the roles and responsibilities of each entity in relief operations (5); using crisis management mechanisms for rapid and effective response (2); ensuring transparency in the distribution of resources and aid (3); monitoring the performance of organizations and individuals involved in operations (6); regular reporting to stakeholders and the international community (7); encouraging the participation of local communities in the planning and implementation of activities (8); cooperating with local and international organizations to leverage experiences and resources (9); creating collaboration networks to improve operational efficiency (5); optimal use of financial, human, and material resources (10); assessing the real needs of affected communities and tailoring aid to these needs (11); continuous improvement of processes and methods based on lessons learned (12); fair distribution of aid without discrimination based on race, gender, religion, or other factors (1); special attention to vulnerable groups such as children, women, and the elderly (13); ensuring access to essential aid for all individuals (14).

The IFRC is the largest global humanitarian network, playing a vital role in relief and rescue worldwide. This organization assists those affected in times of natural disasters and other emergency situations and has been working for hope and humanity for over 100 years. It was

founded in 1919 in Paris in the aftermath of World War I. Initially named the League of Red Cross Societies, it was renamed the IFRC in 1991. It currently works alongside National Societies in the field of relief and rescue in natural and man-made disasters and acts as the coordinator of humanitarian operations worldwide, effectively serving as the voice of all National Societies in the international community. The IFRC is composed of an assembly of National Societies (191 National Societies) and its Secretariat. Its Secretariat is headquartered in Geneva and, along with five regional offices and over 50 offices worldwide, works to inspire, encourage, facilitate, and promote all forms of humanitarian activities by National Societies to prevent and alleviate human suffering and thereby help maintain and promote human dignity and peace in the world.

Responding to crises and natural disasters, disaster preparedness and risk reduction, supporting public health and hygiene, long-term humanitarian aid and comprehensive development, international coordination (9), and supporting volunteers are among the most important activities of the Federation in the field of relief and rescue.

It is a membership-based organization established by its constituent National Societies and is one of the pillars of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement. The responsibilities of the IFRC are as follows: to assist National Societies in recruiting, supporting, empowering and retaining volunteers and members and to increase their knowledge and understanding, as well as that of the general public, of the fundamental principles and ideals of the Movement; to be the official representative of National Societies at the international level in dealing with any matter relating to the decisions and recommendations of the General Assembly; to protect the interests of National Societies and to provide relief to victims of disasters by all possible and available means, in particular by organizing, coordinating and directing international relief operations in accordance with the "Principles and Rules for Red Cross and Red Crescent Disaster Relief"; to contribute to the promotion and development of international humanitarian law and to disseminate these principles and rules on the basis of agreements reached with other components of the Movement, including the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC).

The IFRC's main role is providing relief within the framework of operations to assist disaster victims, combined with developmental work to strengthen the capacities of its member National Societies.

Given the influential role of humanitarian organizations in global humanitarian developments, including in the humanitarian crises in Gaza and Ukraine, it seems appropriate to have a clear framework for the conduct of such organizations.

Humanitarian actions often operate in diverse political, social, and cultural landscapes. This requires a strong governance framework that ensures accountability, efficiency, and ethical conduct. IFRC, as a leading entity in global humanitarian efforts, embodies these governance principles to navigate the complexities of relief and rescue operations. Therefore, considering the mentioned challenges, the objective of this study is to examine the extent to which good governance has been realized in the operational and functional domains of IFRC through the analysis of existing data and information

Methods

In this descriptive-analytical study, with a qualitative approach and discourse analysis, how good governance discourses are formed in the documents of the IFRC and their relationship with international documents were examined, and key concepts such as "good governance", "the principle of integrity" and "implementation challenges" were extracted using thematic coding. Finally, a case study was conducted focusing on the actions of the IFRC in the past five decades and how it addressed governance challenges. The data were collected through library and documentary sources using the following methods:

Study of international documents

This documents includes the UN Charter, Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), International Human Rights Covenants, the Convention against Corruption (2003), and documents from regional organizations such as the African Charter on Governance (2007).

Review of IFRC documents and reports

This documents includes the Guide to International Disaster Response Law (IDRL), legal and relief checklists, ten-year strategies, and codes of ethics.

All documents, regulations and reports published by the IFRC and international institutions related to good governance were selected and studied, and the research sample was selected using key documents including the IDRL Guide, the IFRC's Ten-Year Strategies and international conventions related to corruption and human rights.

The following issues were also examined: Good governance provisions established in international law (the UN Charter, Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) and the international human rights covenants); The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the World Bank, which introduced good governance as a condition for financial assistance to countries in the 1990s; regional organizations such as the African Union and the European Union; The Maastricht Treaty (1992) and the Lisbon Treaty (2007), which emphasize democracy, human rights and good governance in the European Union; The African Charter on Governance (2007) mandates principles such as the fight against corruption and the rule of law; The United Nations Convention against Corruption (2003) (which emphasizes financial transparency, accountability of officials and strengthening of oversight institutions).

Findings

Good governance plays a key role in enhancing the legitimacy and credibility of relief, rescue and humanitarian operations. The study's findings demonstrate how adherence to the fundamental principles not only facilitates trust-building among affected communities, but also strengthens cooperation with local authorities and other actors in humanitarian activities and actions. Furthermore, over the years, the IFRC has not only developed strategies, programmes and policies, but also established a framework and principles of ethical standards.

The principle of integrity in relief and rescue operations, as one of the ethical principles, plays an important role in maintaining the essence of the Federation in the field of relief and rescue. A review of relevant documents shows that adherence to humanitarian principles, transparency and accountability in resource management, ethical conduct of staff and volunteers, maintaining public trust and gaining global support, combating corruption and abuse in the provision of aid, and impartiality and

impartiality in relief operations are important aspects of this principle.

The elements that constitute good governance in the field of relief and rescue and humanitarian activities are as follows:

Integrity

The Integrity Principle is the standard by which National Societies and the IFRC actively monitor the integrity and soundness of their organizations, staff and volunteers to ensure that their objectives, policies, standards and actions are fully aligned with the Fundamental Principles of the Movement. It plays an important role in providing the right context for the implementation of good governance. In addition to the eight principles of good governance adopted by the United Nations, the IFRC, through its General Assembly, has developed Integrity and Compliance Policies to monitor its own activities and those of National Societies in achieving good governance.

When a National Society breaches the Integrity principle, the IFRC takes action to address it in accordance with the provisions of the IFRC Statutes and, secondly, the Integrity Policies adopted by the Board of Directors in October 2018.

Types of integrity violations include: a) violation of fundamental principles and non-compliance with the Movement's Statutes; b) political, administrative or executive interference in the affairs of a national society that results in government control and interference in that society, such as key appointments in the national society, financial affiliation and political support; c) Issues related to the statutes of the national society, their compliance with the "Guidance for National Society Statutes 2018" (18) and their implementation and how the fundamental principles are reflected in the National Society's statutes; d) issues related to the performance of the leadership of the National Society or Federation's leadership regarding compliance, protection of the image and reputation of the organization, including financial management, financial reporting and governance issues; e) the integrity of individuals in the National Society/Federation regarding mismanagement of funds, fraud and corruption, and abuse of position and power, including conflicts of interest and nepotism, sexual misconduct and all forms of harassment, including sexual harassment and

sexual exploitation and abuse, with regard to gender and diversity policy; f) the operational integrity of the National Society/Federation in the way it carries out its national and international activities, which may include donor interference, non-compliance with the regulations relating to the emblem and non-compliance with the principle of unity; g) any failure or shortcoming in the performance of the duties of the National Society, as stated in article 8 of the IFRC's constitution. Violations of any or all of the above would damage the credibility, acceptability and legitimacy of the National Society (18).

IFRC has devised and made publicly available various reporting methods so that people can report any misconduct related to IFRC and the National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (3) such as online via the website, by email and by calling the toll-free number (15).

In other words, any person can report misconduct related to the principle of integrity concerning personnel, property, and operations, which includes fraud, corruption, ethical issues, harassment and sexual abuse, child abuse, health security, information security, misuse of IFRC and National Societies' emblem (logo).

The IFRC, as a global humanitarian organization, typically avoids imposing punitive measures in the traditional sense. However, in cases where its members violate fundamental laws and principles, it may apply regulatory or punitive measures such as official notice or warning, temporary suspension of membership, restrictions on participation or receiving aid, or removal of membership (in rare cases) based on article 24 of its Constitution.

IFRC's Disaster Law (19)

International Disaster Response Laws (IDRL) refer to the set of legal rules governing the coordination and facilitation of international assistance during natural disasters or human-made crises such as earthquakes, floods, or armed conflicts. This legal framework is designed to reduce administrative and legal obstacles in sending humanitarian aid and is based on the seven principles of IFRC. (20)

Legal Foundations of IDRL

1) *International Humanitarian Law*: The Geneva Conventions and their Additional Protocols guarantee protection for disaster victims within the framework of humanitarian law.

2) *United Nations Resolutions*: Such as General Assembly Resolution 46/182, which considers access to immediate aid a fundamental right.

3) *Regional Documents*: Such as ASEAN agreements or European Union strategies that regulate cross-border cooperation in crisis management.

IFRC's Disaster Response Law has two pillars: a) conducting research and supporting the development of models, tools, and guidelines for practical use; and secondly; b) supporting governments in strengthening their own disaster response laws.

Implementation challenges

- Conflict between national sovereignty and foreign aid: some governments limit the entry of foreign organizations for security or political reasons.
- Customs and tax complexities: delays in clearing relief goods due to administrative formalities. For example, in the Haiti earthquake (2010), a lack of coordination in implementing IDRL led to delays in aid distribution (16).
- Lack of coordination between local and international entities which leads to unfair distribution of aid.

Improvement Strategies

- *Developing domestic laws compatible with IDRL*: such as the adoption of the "Crisis Management Law" in Iran, which anticipates facilitating the entry of foreign aid.
- *Creating coordinating mechanisms*: such as National IDRL Committees.

In fact, IDRL, by creating a legal framework, helps reduce the suffering of those affected and increases the efficiency of relief operations, but its effective implementation requires the engagement of governments and international organizations.

IFRC Relief and Rescue Training

IFRC's training is a key component in providing a suitable ground for realizing good governance in relief and rescue. Although the teachings of IFRC are very broad and diverse, in the field of relief and rescue, personnel, rescuers, and volunteers are obliged to comply with specific Federation regulations and instructions. One of the specific trainings of IFRC in realizing good governance in relief and rescue is the teaching of ethical codes. These trainings focus on standardizing the behavior of rescuers and are not

about how to set up a camp. Rather, the goal is compliance with all Movement regulations, including the seven Fundamental Principles, and compliance with the laws and regulations of the country in which they are serving. Other teachings include respecting people equally, free from discrimination based on nationality, religion, political opinions and beliefs, gender, and race. The actions of rescuers, based on the principles of integrity and accountability, are fundamental elements of human behavior. Based on the principle of integrity, rescuers are not permitted to participate in any form of sexual behavior or violence during relief operations. Property in the possession of rescuers is held in trust, and they are not permitted to steal, waste, or misuse it for their personal purposes. For over 20 years, IFRC has been providing various training courses to personnel, rescuers, and volunteers through different methods (in-person and online) (17). In line with achieving good governance, IFRC has assigned roles and responsibilities to National Societies (recognized by governments) in humanitarian law education (5) and has developed and communicated ten-year educational strategies to National Societies.(17)

Office of Internal Audit and Investigations (OIAI) (17)

The Office of Internal Audit and Investigations (OIAI) functions as a supportive tool for the Federation to achieve good governance. The Internal Audit and Investigations Department is the cornerstone of the IFRC and helps the organization fulfill its commitments in the field of good governance (accountability, transparency). Monitoring performance and compliance with the principle of integrity according to IFRC's statute is the responsibility of this department. The mentioned office has two key functions: 1) Audit (internal and external) 2) Investigations. The role of the Office of Internal Audit and Investigations is to support IFRC in fulfilling its commitments in the areas of good governance, accountability, transparency, and respect for stakeholders. It has an independent and objective assurance and investigative function that helps improve the performance of IFRC and its members. This office helps the organization achieve its outlined objectives by providing a systematic and disciplined approach to evaluating and improving the effectiveness of governance processes, risk management, and control.

Table 1. Good governance framework in the IFRC

Governance	Executive Mechanisms	Foundational Documents	Key Functions	Implementation challenges
	Integrity and Compliance Policy (2018)/ Reporting mechanisms (online platform, email, phone call)/Disciplinary actions (reprimand, suspension, termination)	IFRC Constitution Governing Body Policies (2018)	Preventing corruption and abuse/ Maintaining organizational credibility/ Ensuring compliance with the fundamental principles	Cultural differences in the interpretation of misconduct/ Government resistance to acknowledging and investigating violations
Disaster Law (IDRL)	4 key guidance documents: IDRL Guidelines (2007)/(19) Disaster Risk Reduction Legal Checklist/Preparedness and Response Checklist/Public Health Emergencies Guide (2022) (9)	International Conference Resolutions	Facilitating international assistance/Strengthening national legal frameworks	Domestic laws not in line with international standards Political constraints in crises
Ethics & Relief Training	Face-to-face and online courses/Code of Ethics Training (anti-discrimination, sexual violence)/ Humanitarian Law Training	IFRC Training Guidelines (2022)/ National Societies Statutes	Standardizing aid worker behavior/Promoting operational accountability	Challenges in training local volunteers/Cultural differences in accepting ethical concepts
Audit and Oversight (OIAI)	Internal/External Audit Independent Investigations Risk Assessment and Control	IFRC Statutes OIAI Policies	Ensuring financial transparency/ Addressing organizational misconduct	Restrictions on access to sensitive government information/ Challenges in international follow-up

Discussion and Conclusion

This study shows that the IFRC has established a comprehensive governance framework based on principles of integrity, accountability, and ethical standards to enhance the legitimacy and effectiveness of its humanitarian operations. Key mechanisms such as the Integrity Policy (2018), International Disaster Response Law (IDRL) guidelines, mandatory ethical training, and the Office of Internal Audit and Investigations (OIAI) collectively strengthen transparency, compliance, and risk management. However, the implementation of these measures faces challenges arising from differences in national laws, political interference, and cultural resistance, particularly in areas where local norms conflict with international humanitarian principles. While "soft law" instruments such as checklists and guidelines show flexibility, their effectiveness is highly dependent on the cooperation of host governments and local actors. The findings emphasize that good governance in humanitarian action requires a balance between global standards and contextual flexibility to maintain operational trust and credibility.

The necessity to pay attention to good governance in humanitarian and relief activities arises from the fact that these activities are carried out in crisis and emergency situations, where

errors or inefficiencies can have irreparable consequences. Good governance in this field can increase the efficiency and effectiveness of aid and ensure that financial, human and material resources are allocated and used optimally. This is especially crucial in critical situations where time and resources are limited.

According to a report by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) (10), good governance can prevent up to 30% of resource waste in humanitarian activities. Also, transparency in the distribution of aid and accountability of institutions are among the principles of good governance. This helps reduce corruption and misuse of resources (3).

Good governance leads to community participation and increased acceptance. This participation not only helps to improve the quality of aid, but also increases the acceptance and trust of local communities (8). It also helps to build public and international trust, which is essential for attracting more aid and improving international cooperation.

According to a report by the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (7), public trust is one of the key factors for success in humanitarian activities. On the other hand, good governance ensures that aid is distributed fairly and without discrimination. This is particularly important for

vulnerable groups such as children, women, and the elderly. Amnesty International (1) emphasizes that discrimination in the distribution of aid can exacerbate humanitarian crises. In critical situations, coordination between governmental, non-governmental, and international entities is essential. Good governance provides mechanisms for this coordination. The UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (2) points out that a lack of coordination can lead to duplication and waste of resources.

The principles, guidelines, and frameworks are tools to support governments in their efforts to strengthen legal preparedness and prevention for dealing with disasters. Their target audiences are domestic legislators, policymakers, and crisis management officials. The main objective of these guidelines is to consolidate the set of IFRC recommendations into a single document that can serve as a benchmark for evaluating domestic instruments.

The main objective of these guidelines is to consolidate the set of IFRC recommendations into a single document that can serve as a benchmark for evaluating domestic instruments as well as to provide guidance on the implementation of relevant international documents, particularly the Sendai Framework and the International Health Regulations (2005).

The guidelines adopt a comprehensive approach and identify various types of instruments (laws, regulations, policies, plans, and Standard Operating Procedures - SOPs) that can collectively provide a comprehensive framework for effective crisis management. The guidelines address key issues that should be considered in domestic disaster response mechanisms.

The foundations of an effective crisis management system consist of several sections: a) addresses organizational arrangements, budgeting, monitoring and evaluation, and prevention of fraud and corruption; b) disaster preparedness, forecasting actions and responses; c) disaster recovery; d) guidelines; e) international assistance in disasters; f) legal facilities for crisis management practitioners; g) protection and inclusion of marginalized and at-risk groups; h) mental health and psychosocial support; i) homelessness in disasters.

Although these guidelines are designed to be comprehensive, they also pay attention to the role of social support systems in reducing the effects

of natural disasters, especially on marginalized and vulnerable groups.

The time and manner of using the guidelines are such that for each issue addressed in these guidelines, there is a description of key legal and practical matters. Then, a short checklist is prepared that identifies the types of legal regulations, policies, and planning that should generally exist that are designed thematically to be used as a benchmark for evaluating domestic instruments and identifying strengths, weaknesses, and gaps and can be used to identify areas for improvement and the types of regulations that may need to be adopted. These guidelines may be used to support a comprehensive or partial review of a country's disaster laws, policies, and plans. In these circumstances, IFRC recommends following the guidelines by methodically considering each topic and checklist.

The IFRC like many humanitarian organizations, is obliged to adhere to principles and rules referred to as the Fundamental Principles. The seven principles governing all activities and actions of this organization, namely Humanity, Impartiality, Neutrality, Independence, Voluntary Service, Unity, and Universality, are not only the motto of all activities of this organization but also in a way oblige all 191-member National Societies to respect and adhere to these Fundamental Principles. These principles are considered governance principles within IFRC, shaping specific behavioral and operational complexities. The principle of integrity, which this article has addressed as one of the principles of good governance, led to the consideration of the seven accepted components in the category of good governance. These 7 components, which are: Accountability, Transparency, Participation, Rule of Law, Efficiency, Effectiveness, and Justice, are all manifested and embodied in the principle of integrity.

The principle of integrity, now accepted as one of the inviolable principles in all international organizations, means loyalty to reality, transparency in actions, and avoidance of any deception or manipulation; this principle requires adherence to international norms and integrity in interactions with member states, other organizations, and the general public.

IFRC, like other international organizations, inspired by this principle, seeks to make loyalty to reality, transparency in actions, and avoidance of

any deception or manipulation the guide for all its actions in its humanitarian operations and towards its members, which are the National Societies.

The model of good governance in international organizations, especially humanitarian organizations, is among the new approaches to development. In such a model, the primary owners of the organization's power are its members.

Although good governance is a complex concept that can be implemented in any organization or entity based on its requirements and needs, it always relies on common principles indicative of good governance indicators, the most obvious of which are "Rule of Law," "Accountability," and "Participation."

In carrying out its relief operations, recognized as its primary task, IFRC has not only proposed the principle of integrity for good governance within this organization but has also considered it for organizational development, which in today's globalized world is considered the ultimate goal of institutions, organizations, and even countries.

Compliance with Ethical Guidelines

There were no ethical considerations in this research.

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Author's Contributions

This article is based on Adel Zariei PhD at Isfahan (Khorasgan) Branch, Islamic Azad University, who was responsible for conducting the research, collecting, and analyzing the data; and the second author, Leila Raeisi Dezaki, was responsible for the design and supervision, and Zeynab Poorkhaghan Shahrezaei was responsible for the methodology. However, Leila Raeisi Dezaki was responsible for correspondence and editing the final manuscript submitted to the journal.

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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