



Hector Emanuel/American Red Cross

90 years of improving the lives of the most vulnerable



International Federation
of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies



Henry Dunant, 1828–1910

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At the origins of the Federation

The idea of pooling the skills and resources of Red Cross Societies to provide humanitarian assistance in peacetime, and not just to prepare for relief in times of war, goes back to the founder of the Movement, Geneva businessman Henry Dunant. In 1862, Dunant wrote: “These Societies could also render great services, by their permanent existence, in times of epidemics, or of disasters such as floods, fires or other natural catastrophes.” In 1867, Gustave Moynier, the first president of the ICRC, also suggested a ‘federation’ of National Societies.

From the earliest days of the Movement, in the late 19th century, many National Societies provided emergency help in times of epidemics and natural disasters. The French Red Cross, for example, helped victims of floods in Paris in 1876, provided night shelters during the harsh winter of 1879–1880 and care for cholera victims in Marseilles in 1885. The American Red Cross provided humanitarian assistance during forest fires in Michigan in 1881, cyclones in Louisiana in 1883 and the 1906 earthquake in San Francisco. Japanese Red Cross volunteers helped survivors of the Mount Bandai eruption in 1888.

But the real impetus came from Henry Davison, president of the American Red Cross War Committee, in response to an idea from United States President

Woodrow Wilson about the way the world should be managed after the First World War. The result was Davison’s proposal, in December 1918, to form a league of the Red Cross Societies of the victorious nations, as a parallel to the proposed League of Nations, to bring humanitarian assistance to people stricken by famine and disease. “The world is bleeding and needs help now,” he said.



On 5 May 1919, in the Regina Hotel in Paris, the governors of the Red Cross Societies of France, Italy, Japan, the United Kingdom and the United States signed the Articles of Association. The *League of Red Cross Societies* was born. A month later, the Covenant of the League of Nations was signed, with its own historic article containing an undertaking by member states to encourage and promote the formation of and cooperation between Red Cross Societies. The main goals of the Societies were specified as the improvement of health, the prevention of disease and the mitigation of suffering.

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90 years of building a culture of humanity, anywhere, any time

The 1920s – a decade of major disasters and new directions

- **August 1919:** the League sent its first operational mission to Poland to help a country devastated by hunger and typhus. Two appeals launched in October 1919 and July 1920 collected nearly 99 million Swiss francs of the day.
- **1921:** a joint ICRC/League appeal to help famished populations in Russia brought in nearly 180 million Swiss francs.
- **September 1923:** a violent earthquake followed by a tidal wave ravaged Tokyo and Yokohama, killing 200,000 people, leaving 1 million injured and 3 million homeless. A joint

ICRC/League appeal collected more than 277 million Swiss francs to support the relief operation for survivors.

- **1922:** the League moved its secretariat from Geneva to Paris.

The 1930s – facing the global financial crisis and preparing for war

- **The world economic crisis:** as contributions from National Societies diminished, the League reduced its budget by 35 per cent, cut staff and moved to less expensive offices. But it supported programmes to help the unemployed and emigrants driven from their countries by recession. Red Cross Societies in Belgium, Finland, France, Germany, Latvia, the United Kingdom and the United States, to name but a few, had programmes to help the jobless, the homeless and the hungry.
- With the growing threat of war, National Societies began preparations, expanding their first-aid courses, ambulance services and blood donor recruitment, and arranging evacuation plans for children in the event of air attacks and treatment for victims of gas and chemical attacks.



Earthquake in Japan, 1923

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- The League's secretariat returned to Geneva from Paris in September 1939.

1939–1945 – the war years

- **August 1940:** the League and the ICRC established the Joint Relief Commission to coordinate efforts to help war victims. It collected donations – cash, food, clothing and medicines. From 1941 to 1946, despite air strikes, disrupted transportation systems, blockades, bureaucratic obstacles, etc., the commission was able to distribute assistance in some 20 countries and deliver more than 165,000 tonnes of supplies.
- Some 60 million refugees and displaced persons needed long-term help. The appeals launched between 1939 and 1945 for war victims were among the largest ever, reaching 350 million Swiss francs for Europe and Asia, 224 million for the USSR, nearly 200 million for the United Kingdom, 178 million for Finland, 58 million for France, 51 million for Italy and 50 million for China.

The 1950s – battling politics to bring assistance

- **1948–1950:** following a request from the United Nations, the League, with the ICRC, assisted some 300,000 Palestinian refugees, providing them with food, clothing, shelter and

healthcare. In 1950, the operation was turned over to the newly created UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA).

- **1956:** one of the largest operations in the 1950s was the help provided to Hungarian refugees. For nine months, the League administered 44 camps, looking after refugees in Austria and Yugoslavia, while the ICRC helped the Hungarian civilian population. In July 1957, the operation was handed over to the Austrian Red Cross. That year, the Office of the UN



Austria 1956, Hungarian refugees

High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) awarded the League the Hansen medal for its “efficient and humanitarian” relief operation for Hungarian refugees.

- **1959–1962:** the League carried out its longest relief operation ever for Algerian refugees in Tunisia and Morocco, following the outbreak of hostilities in Algeria. At its peak, the number of refugees was nearly 300,000, many of whom were living in miserable conditions scattered along Algeria’s borders with Morocco and Tunisia.

The 1960s – expanded membership and a Nobel Peace prize

- **1960:** the year was marked by two terrible earthquakes. In March, a violent quake destroyed the Moroccan city of Agadir, killing 20,000 people. In May, tremors in Chile lasted several days, accompanied by volcanic eruptions, tidal waves and fires. The League also provided health services and other assistance to refugees following serious disturbances in the former Belgian Congo.
- In **1963**, the ICRC and the League were jointly awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for having done “the best work for fraternity among nations”. In 1961, the League adopted a new motto, *Per Humanitatem ad Pacem* (Through humanity to peace).



Bangladesh cyclone, 1972

The 1970s – an unprecedented number of disasters

- Throughout the **1970s**, the League issued more than 200 appeals – more than in the period from 1945 to 1960 due to the intense demands of disaster and war. Operations included help for the survivors of the ‘cyclone of the century’ in East Pakistan (now Bangladesh), which killed 200,000 people, massive storms in India, the ‘boat people’ from Viet Nam and Cambodia, earthquakes in Turkey, Guatemala and Romania, and refugees from Angola.

The 1980s – thwarting famine and mitigating the impact of nuclear fallout

- **October 1983:** a change of name to the *League of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies* was adopted, and

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community health declared a priority as nurses and volunteers spread messages on breastfeeding, good nutrition, hygiene, immunization, etc.

- **1984–1986:** in response to the Sahel drought, which severely affected 45 million people, the League set up its biggest operation ever to provide food



Famine in Ethiopia, 1984

to some 2 million people in 21 African countries. The operation ended in 1986 when the rains came and funds ran out.

- Appeals were also launched to assist vulnerable people in Poland (1981–1983), Palestinian and Lebanese refugees in Syria (1982) and, in 1985, survivors of the cyclone in Bangladesh, the massive earthquake in Mexico City and the volcanic eruption in Colombia.
- **1986:** the Chernobyl nuclear explosion contaminated wide expanses of

Ukraine, the Russian Federation and Belarus. After providing initial assistance to survivors, the League set up the Chernobyl Humanitarian Assistance and Rehabilitation Programme



Chernobyl, screening for thyroid cancer, 2005

(CHARP) in 1990. Its mobile diagnostic laboratories screen tens of thousands of people every year for thyroid cancer in remote villages contaminated by nuclear fallout in the three countries.

- **December 1988:** the League mounted a huge operation to help survivors of the devastating earthquake in Armenia, which killed 25,000 people and left half a million homeless.

The 1990s – more people affected by disasters, creation of a major diplomatic tool

- **1991:** the League was renamed the *International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies* (IFRC).

- The **1990s** were marked by an average annual increase of some 10 million people affected by disasters, leading to longer, more complex and more expensive operations. Never before had the IFRC's secretariat mobilized so many resources and personnel for its operations. The number of beneficiaries more than tripled between 1991 (5.7 million) and 1994



Refugees flee Rwanda, 1994

(19.4 million), with most of the IFRC's resources going to assist millions of Rwandan refugees, displaced people from the former Yugoslavia, people left vulnerable by the socio-economic collapse of the newly independent states of the ex-USSR, and Ethiopians suffering from food insecurity.

- **October 1994:** the IFRC obtained the status of observer at the United Nations General Assembly. The status

allows the IFRC to speak out on humanitarian issues in UN meetings and those of most other international organizations. It does so to advance the interests of its member Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies.

2000–2010 – building safer and more resilient communities

- **2000–2010:** the IFRC refocused its activities on health and care, disaster response, disaster preparedness and the dissemination of the Fundamental Principles. It put new emphasis on developing sustainable capacities for National Societies, giving renewed impetus to recruiting, training and retaining volunteers as an inherent way of building stronger and more resilient communities.
- **2003:** the Bam earthquake in Iran signalled a new dimension for IFRC work in support of a National Society working effectively as the auxiliary to its public authorities in the humanitarian field. Lessons from that experience have been of benefit to National Societies and vulnerable populations around the world.
- **2004:** on 26 December, a massive earthquake off the coast of Sumatra (Indonesia) triggered a huge tsunami which devastated countries around the Indian Ocean. To bring emergency relief to survivors and rebuild homes, schools and hospitals, the IFRC mounted the biggest emer-

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Tim Meyer/IFRC

Sri Lanka, tsunami relief operation, 2005

gency and recovery operation in its history, with most of its activities in Indonesia, the Maldives and Sri Lanka. International public generosity was unprecedented – some 3 billion Swiss francs were collected by the secretariat and more than 100 National Societies. The operation was placed under the theme of ‘building back better’ to mitigate the impact of future disasters on these communities.

- The systematic linking of disaster response, recovery and prevention (by strengthening coping mechanisms at community level) underpinned all the following important operations: Hur-

ricane Katrina in 2005 in Louisiana (United States), the 2005 earthquake in Pakistan, floods in Mozambique in 2007, hurricanes and tropical storms affecting Central America and the Caribbean in 2007 and 2008, Cyclone Nargis in Myanmar in 2008, etc.

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90 years of fostering a culture of innovation

The 1920s – first aid, primary healthcare, youth

- Almost every National Society engaged in first-aid instruction right from the beginning. In the **1920s**, the League broke with the tradition of curative care to promote preventive medicine and develop primary healthcare.
- In **1922**, the League decided to focus its support to National Societies in three important fields: hygiene, nursing and youth.
- By **1929**, the Junior Red Cross had more than 12 million members.

The 1930s – nursing and disaster preparedness

- Nursing and public health remained priorities, and the League expanded its programmes of visiting nurses, emergency care and home treatment. Dozens of National Societies established nursing schools, crèches



Training midwives in India, 1928

and antenatal care for pregnant women.

- In parallel, extensive disaster preparedness work was carried out with Latin American Societies throughout the **1930s** to set up 'disaster relief rooms' and establish warehouses of emergency supplies.

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The late 1940s – the aftermath of the war

- The meeting of the Board of Governors in **July 1946** – one of the most important in the history of the League – focused on strengthening National Societies and their cooperation, and defined relations to be established between the League and the United Nations, and between the National Societies and governments.
- The League's role was defined as a coordinating body to facilitate relief and contacts between National Societies and to set down the impartial, independent and voluntary nature of National Societies' work as auxiliaries to their public authorities.
- Delegates also pledged to seek duty-free transit of goods, special postal facilities and the rapid issue of visas for Red Cross staff – an important basis of the IFRC's current International Disaster Response Laws, Rules and Principles (IDRL) programme.

The 1960s – the family expands



Health education in Ecuador, 1968

- The **1960s** saw a great increase in membership with the independence of many former colonies. Consequently, the League strengthened its commitment to support the development of well-functioning National Societies, each with a strong legal base and new plans to train staff and recruit volunteers. The League's budget grew in response to this need.

The 1970s – beyond emergency

- A new consciousness emerged among many National Societies of the importance of disaster mitigation, of reducing community vulnerability and of the need for regular, dependable funding for non-emergency work.

The 1980s – responding to neglected disasters

- **1985:** the Disaster Relief Emergency Fund (DREF) was set up. It allows the immediate release of funds for small-scale emergencies or as start-up funds before a formal appeal is launched for a larger disaster. It remains one of the IFRC's most flexible and effective disaster response tools today.



Mauritania, 1986

The 1990s – leading in disaster response

- The IFRC set up emergency response units (ERU) composed of field delegates specialized in medicine, primary healthcare, logistics, telecommunication, water and sanitation or relief coordination for quick and effective response in times of crisis.



ERU deployment

- **1991:** the IFRC was named in the UN General Assembly resolution which set up the humanitarian response system. This system, in which the IFRC takes part, is still used by the international community.
- **1994:** the *Code of Conduct for the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and NGOs in Disaster Relief* was published, the fruit of collaboration between the IFRC, ICRC and six major non-governmental organizations. The set of voluntary guidelines includes the humanitarian imperative as the absolute

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priority, the dispensation of assistance without discrimination of any sort, respect for human dignity and local culture and the involvement of beneficiaries in relief operations.

- **1999:** governments and National Societies agreed at the 27th International Conference of the Red Cross and Red Crescent that each country should have a national disaster management committee, with the Red Cross or Red Crescent Society as a member.

HIV – a long-term priority

- In **1987**, a General Assembly resolution called on all National Societies to respond to the challenge of HIV and AIDS. Today, they continue to work to prevent the spread of the disease and to fight the associated stigma. Since 2006, National Societies have pooled resources in a Global Alliance to scale up their prevention, care, support and treatment programmes.

2000–2009 – facing complex crises, adapting to a new environment

- **2002:** to address global climate change and help National Societies put in place measures to mitigate its impact, the Red Cross Red Crescent Climate Change Centre was set up in the Netherlands.
- **2006:** the 29th International Conference amended the Statutes of the Movement, making it possible for the National Societies of Palestine and Israel to become members of the IFRC.
- **2007:** the 30th International Conference adopted a declaration, *Together for humanity*, calling to strengthen partnerships in addressing today's humanitarian challenges: the humanitarian consequences of climate change, migration, violence and health emergencies (including re-emerging diseases).
- The 2007 International Conference also endorsed resolutions to enhance the role of National Societies as auxiliaries to the public authorities in the humanitarian field and to adopt guidelines on IDRL.



Sudan, HIV prevention

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90 years later: empowering people to address 'today's Solferinos'

- The IFRC is an organization encompassing the world's largest humanitarian network, with **186 National Societies** and **tens of millions of volunteers** acting at the community level before, during and after a disaster or a crisis strikes.



Olivia Wewo/Indonesian Red Cross

Indonesia, planting mangroves, 2007

- Every year, the IFRC and National Societies bring support to and improve the lives of more than 200 million people worldwide.
- The IFRC's DREF is increasingly used to prepare for imminent crises as well as for disaster response. On **11 July 2008**, the IFRC launched its first-ever appeal based on a seasonal forecast,



José Candón/International Federation

Ethiopia, food distribution, 2008

- worth US\$ 750,000, for flood preparedness in West Africa.
- The IFRC believes that responding to emergency food crises is not enough to attain food security. Long-term investment is vital. On **10 April 2008**, it launched a five-year strategic programme (2008–2012) to enhance food security programming for 2.3 million people.
- Between **January 2005** and **June 2008**, Red Cross and Red Crescent National Societies in Africa reached 32 million beneficiaries through their HIV programmes. Four million people will be supported by the IFRC's global malaria programme (2009–2010).

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- From **2000 to 2007**, the *Measles Initiative*, supported by National Societies, helped to save more than 3.5 million lives as a result of increased measles vaccination.
- Hygiene promotion and educational programmes reach more than 650,000 people every year and are an integral part of IFRC water and sanitation interventions.
- The approach of all components of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement to migrants is strictly humanitarian, focusing on the needs and vulnerabilities of migrants, irrespective of their legal status or social category, as well as on their potential assets for their host community. Working with and for vulnerable migrants is one of the long-standing traditions of National Societies and the Movement.



Manuel Herrera/Spanish Red Cross

A migrant in Spain's Canary Islands, 2006



With the **'Our world. Your move.'** campaign, launched in **April 2009**, the IFRC is promoting a culture of prevention, encouraging action at the individual, national and global levels.

- Emergency response is not enough; we need to take action before disaster strikes. Prevention must become the primary focus, locally and globally, as the most effective way to protect people, safeguard development and build resilient communities.
- The tens of millions of Red Cross and Red Crescent volunteers play a vital role at the community level, informing their communities about how to prepare for disasters.

**Red Cross and
Red Crescent volunteers
are at the forefront in
bringing about positive
change in the lives of the
most vulnerable people
and communities.**

Ninety years later, the raison d'être of the IFRC – bringing support and hope to the most vulnerable – remains both its driving force and its major achievement. In the 21st century, the strength of the IFRC continues to be its global–local reach, enabling it to be uniquely positioned to address today's humanitarian challenges.

Cover photo: USA, New Orleans,
Hurricane Katrina, 2005

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