The Red Cross Red Crescent approach to disaster and crisis management

Position paper
About us

The International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) is the world’s largest volunteer-based humanitarian network, reaching 150 million people each year through our 186 member National Societies. Together, we act before, during and after disasters and health emergencies to meet the needs and improve the lives of vulnerable people. We do so with impartiality as to nationality, race, gender, religious beliefs, class and political opinions.

Guided by Strategy 2020 – our collective plan of action to tackle the major humanitarian and development challenges of this decade – we are committed to ‘saving lives and changing minds’.

Our strength lies in our volunteer network, our community-based expertise and our independence and neutrality. We work to improve humanitarian standards, as partners in development and in response to disasters. We persuade decision makers to act at all times in the interests of vulnerable people. The result: we enable healthy and safe communities, reduce vulnerabilities, strengthen resilience and foster a culture of peace around the world.
Disasters and crises today

Over the past decades the world has witnessed a significant increase in the number of disasters reported; from fewer than 100 disasters per year reported in 1975 to more than 400 disasters in 2010\(^1\). Simultaneously, the number of people affected by disasters and the economic damages caused by reported disasters have increased.

We continue to face significant challenges of growing vulnerabilities related to global threats such as climate change. We must be prepared for increases in extreme weather events, environmental degradation and food insecurity; almost half (48 per cent) of disasters reported through the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) Disaster Management Information System in 2004-2011 were hydro-meteorological disasters.

Population growth and unplanned urbanization can result in ever-growing numbers of people who are vulnerable. The scarcity of resources – including natural resources like water - is likely to contribute to growing tension within and between communities and may fuel new or sustain pre-existing conflict. These current and future challenges call for scaled-up resilience building, risk reduction, disaster preparedness and disaster response measures.

The foundations of our disaster and crisis management role

With 186 National Red Cross or Red Crescent Societies, the IFRC is the largest network in the world delivering humanitarian assistance to vulnerable people. We have an exceptional decades-long tradition in assisting people in disasters and crises and a firm commitment to continue to save lives, protect livelihoods and strengthen recovery from disasters and crises in the future, as outlined in our Strategy 2020.

We are a grassroots network with more than 13 million active volunteers who work within communities in the areas of disaster response and recovery, disaster preparedness and risk reduction, health and development. As community-based responders, the volunteers and staff are often first on the scene of a disaster. They are capable of going the last mile in reaching out to vulnerable communities to provide early warning, to support them to prepare for disasters and crises, to deliver life-saving assistance, and to remain with the affected people throughout the post-disaster recovery process to build resilience.

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resilience to withstand future shocks. Away from the world’s media and attention volunteers address thousands of crises and disasters that happen daily at local levels. In 2010, our volunteers provided services estimated as worth more than six billion US dollars and reached more than 30 million people in disasters alone.

Our work is guided by seven Fundamental Principles: humanity, impartiality, neutrality, independence, voluntary service, unity and universality. They ensure that regardless of nationality, race, religious beliefs, class or political opinions we help solely on the basis of need and deliver our assistance in a neutral and dignified manner. Our volunteers and staff work under the protection of emblems – red cross, red crescent or red crystal - that are embedded in international humanitarian law. These principles and emblems are respected worldwide and - together with the privileged relationship (the auxiliary status) of our National Societies with their respective government provide a unique access to those who need us within and across borders.

Having local roots doesn’t mean having only local impact. The Red Cross Red Crescent network has a global reach with a member National Society in nearly every country in the world. This allows us to efficiently scale up and pull together resources and expertise to support those affected by devastating disasters or crises. In large-scale disasters, such as the Haiti earthquake in 2010, more than 120 National Societies from all continents contributed funds, human resources or goods to the Red Cross Red Crescent response.

Our global representation also allows us to conduct evidence-based humanitarian diplomacy on behalf of our National Societies and the people they serve, giving a voice to the voiceless at the highest decision-making tables, and persuading governments and opinion-leaders to act at all times in the interests of the world’s vulnerable people.
Successful recovery in Peru

Following an earthquake in August 2007, the coastline of Peru was hit by several smaller aftershocks and tsunamis with more than 131,000 families affected by physical damage to houses, schools and community infrastructure.

IFRC supported the Peru Red Cross Society to implement a relief and early recovery programme and subsequently a reconstruction programme as part of the long term recovery of the affected population. Considerable emphasis was laid on building local capacities of the affected population and of the Peru Red Cross involving concurrent action from the families themselves, the communities, cooperation agencies and members of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement. Environmental issues were incorporated into programme planning with the completion of an environmental impact assessment resulting in low cost environmentally friendly design proposals.

The community played an integral role in building their own shelters, first in the transitional shelter phase and later on in the permanent reconstruction of their shelters. They were assisted by IFRC in doing this, with financial resources and with technical designs tested for seismic resistance at the Pontificia Universidad Catolica del Peru laboratories. This was an important step in supporting the community in their own recovery process, strengthening their feeling of empowerment (and strengthened psychological well being as a result) and their readiness to move on to the next stage of recovery.

The holistic approach taken by IFRC and the Peru Red Cross meant that a cross-section of community needs could be addressed including: the challenges involved in land ownership and settlement issues; the provision of health, education and water, sanitation and hygiene promotion facilities, and the restoration of old livelihoods alongside the provision of new income earning opportunities. This resulted in a stronger economic base than prior to the disaster with improvements made to local markets along with increased income generation opportunities for women.

Additional benefits emerging from the relief and recovery programme have included an empowered community better able to work together for the common good with the introduction of public ‘spaces’ that can be used for collective social purposes. The community collectively takes care of and manages these spaces. In addition civil society has been strengthened through local organizations’ various participation in training courses on leadership, management and team work. Lastly the Peru Red Cross has been strengthened through the capacity building of its volunteers and an expansion of its disaster risk reduction programme.

Our approach to disaster and crisis management

Our disaster management work often starts long before the onset of a disaster. National Society volunteers and staff support their communities to identify prevalent hazards and vulnerabilities as well as local capacities and coping mechanisms. Based on the analysis, the communities develop initiatives to address risks, ensure local preparedness and response plans exist, improve early warning systems and where possible advocate for broader, climate-smart risk reduction measures through local governance processes. National Societies assist communities also to prepare their response by building local
emergency stock and training community members’ skills in first aid. The more prepared a community is, the more resilient it will be in the event of a disaster.

After a disaster, the arrival of Red Cross Red Crescent staff and volunteers is often the first sign to people affected that their cry for help has been heard and that assistance is on its way. National Society community, branch and national response teams play a crucial role as first responders. They understand local needs, capacities and vulnerabilities. They provide timely assistance and are able to find locally driven, sustainable solutions. The volunteers can immediately take life-saving actions such as search and rescue, first aid, and evacuation. This is reinforced with the provision of basic needs including food and emergency health care, shelter, clean water and sanitary conditions.

Our assistance reaches well beyond the perceived or announced end of an emergency phase. Since Red Cross and Red Crescent volunteers and staff are part of the local community, they continue to support the recovery of those affected. Recovery assistance builds on the affected people’s spontaneous efforts to cope, recover and rebuild. It starts early, alongside relief, seeking to assist people over the peak of the crisis and continues into the midterm to build more resilient lives. Recovery programming comprises of well-linked action to protect and restore livelihoods, enhance food security as well as a wide range of other actions such as community and public health, temporary and longer term shelter provision, protection and psychosocial support. These activities are undertaken in a way that reduces dependency, mitigates conflict and works towards meeting longer-term risk reduction objectives.

Communities do not separate out their needs into sectors and neither does the IFRC. Our integrated approach to disaster management means that instead of providing one standard type of sector-based assistance, we aim to tailor our assistance to meet the varying needs of individuals and communities in a manner, which is holistic and complementary to the efforts of the local authorities, international agencies and local civil society organizations.

Thanks to our network of National Societies and our global response system we are able to mobilize resources and expertise from around the world to complement local response when required. The IFRC has a number of long-established and effective response capacity, tools and systems that can be activated immediately and deployed to the scene of a disaster within hours. They include Field Assessment and Coordination Teams (FACT), Regional Disaster Response Teams (RDRTs) and Emergency Response Units (ERUs), forming a seamless arrangement that connects global, regional, national and local capabilities.

IFRC’s disaster management resources also include relief and logistics hubs placed close to disaster-prone areas and an extensive network of pre-positioned relief goods stored in warehouses that ensure people affected by disaster or crisis can be reached with life-saving assistance as soon as possible. Investments are made in information management tools, such as the Disaster Management Information System (DMIS), which provide timely disaster information and analysis to disaster managers. In every context, the IFRC places great importance on the security, safety and well-being of Red Cross Red Crescent staff and volunteers, and strives to enable them to operate in as safe and secure manner as possible.

Having the capacity to prepare for, respond to and recover from disasters today does not automatically imply that the capacity exists years down the line. Therefore, continuous capacity building is a key part of the IFRC disaster and

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Relief and recovery side by side in Kenya

In early 2011 the Kenya Red Cross Society (KRCS) launched an appeal to undertake mitigating and preventive early action on a drought and food insecurity situation which was expected to worsen. The activities included livelihoods support and water and sanitation short- and long term assistance in the affected communities.

When the drought and food insecurity situation worsened later in 2011, the KRCS and IFRC response used a two-pronged approach to meeting the needs of the affected populations. They implemented emergency activities designed to meet immediate humanitarian needs of the affected, including provision of relief food and water. The society is also implementing medium to long term interventions aimed at rebuilding the communities’ resilience to future disasters through early recovery initiatives like seed and agricultural innovation. This combined approach aims to at the same meet immediate life-saving needs and to address underlying causes of vulnerability in the long term.
crises management approach. Overall, as an outcome of any disaster response operation, we aim to achieve safer, more resilient communities and stronger, better prepared National Societies.

Our response to small and mid-scale disasters and crises

While large-scale disasters are often given much media attention and absorb much of our capacities and energies at global level, most disasters are small-scale and managed at the local level. In fact, our experience is that 80 per cent of disasters are managed locally without regional or international involvement. These smaller scale disasters affect a large majority of all disaster victims. Even though they are not visible on TV screens all over the globe, they require a timely and effective response.

For small and mid-scale disasters, the National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies are well placed to respond with trained volunteers forming national and local disaster response teams. The response is planned and executed by the National Society in the affected country, with the IFRC providing additional support or coordination upon request. This support can be in the form of technical support for strengthening National Response Teams (NRT) or a financial contribution from the Disaster Relief Emergency Fund (DREF). In 2010, 17.4 million Swiss francs in financial support were allocated to National Societies responding to small and medium-scale disasters where no international emergency appeal was launched, and provided direct assistance to more than 12 million people affected by small-scale disasters.

On request, the IFRC will also send technical specialists to the affected country to help with the response and coordinate offers of assistance from sister societies in the region and worldwide. In this way, the IFRC supports and complements the efforts of the National Society and competent authorities but does not replace them or add unnecessary bureaucracy that may lead to duplication of effort or resources.

Our response to large-scale disasters and crises

Large or complex disasters can overwhelm even the most developed and prepared country and its National Society. A different range of tools and systems are required in these contexts. When a massive disaster occurs in a region, and at the request of the affected societies, the IFRC activates its global surge capacity and response mechanisms which draw on the skilled personnel and resources available across the Movement. These include:

**Emergency Response Units (ERU):** Each ERU is a self-sufficient international team of trained technical specialists with pre-packed sets of standardized emergency response equipment that can be deployed to the scene of a disaster within 48 hours. They are designed to be self-sufficient for one month and can operate for up to four months, giving support to National Societies in providing life-saving assistance in the areas of, water and sanitation, health care, relief distribution, logistics and IT and telecommunications.

**Field Assessment and Coordination Team (FACT):** These comprise experienced Red Cross Red Crescent disaster managers from across our global network that help National Societies to respond effectively to disasters by assessing urgent needs and facilitating and coordinating the start up of response activities.

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**Haiti earthquake**

For the Haiti earthquake response operation in 2010, a total of 21 ERUs and three other response teams were deployed by IFRC. These units assisted in providing services to hundreds of thousand earthquake survivors by establishing and operating field hospitals, water treatment plants, logistics bases, portable operational centres, emergency telecommunication infrastructure and sanitation facilities as well as distributing emergency supplies and shelters.
FACT is on standby and can be deployed anywhere in the world within 24 hours, for a period of up to four weeks.

**Regional Disaster Response Teams (RDRT):** promote the building of regional capacities in disaster management. An RDRT team is composed of National Red Cross or Red Crescent Society volunteers or staff, usually members of their own national response teams, trained to work as a team and bring assistance to National Societies in neighboring countries. They are made up of a core group of people with cross-sector expertise, such as health and nutrition, food security and livelihoods, logistics, water and sanitation, as well as generalist relief workers. Most are vastly experienced at providing disaster response in their own countries as well as regionally.

Operational recovery surge capacity is also available and can be deployed by the IFRC as early as possible to provide additional and specialist capacity in detailed assessment, analysis and programme design.

The IFRC will, on request, launch and manage an emergency appeal and coordinate the response by partners within the Red Cross Red Crescent system and externally, such as with the UN family, civil society and other humanitarian organizations. These mechanisms form a coordinated response system which allows us to provide timely life-saving and recovery assistance anywhere in the world.

**The way forward – how we meet future challenges**

We will scale up the quantity and quality of our actions to meet as many of the needs of vulnerable people as our collective resources permit. In the face of the growing complexity of disasters and challenges to coordination posed by the emergence of other actors such as the military and private sector organisations, we will continue to promote the Fundamental Principles and well-coordinated humanitarian action. We will adapt our prevention, preparedness and response measures so that they are suited for urban context and address tensions and community conflicts. We will pay special attention to vulnerable groups such as women, youth, elderly and marginal groups in society.

Collectively and individually we will work to:

**Save lives and livelihoods by responding to disasters and crises in an effective, coherent and timely manner**

We prioritize help to the most vulnerable and ensure that immediate emergency needs are being met. To do this effectively, needs assessment and logistics systems have to interface seamlessly and match the information on unmet needs with the information on the assistance on its way. We will better align our systems and practices so that this essential information is available to our disaster managers in a timely manner.

Early recovery planning must start in parallel with initial relief efforts to ensure coherent and well-linked disaster response. We are scaling up our surge capacity for recovery and further developing our recovery programming tools, such as detailed multi-sector needs assessments.
Effective and relevant response requires an in-depth understanding of communities as social entities and economic units as well as their respective local and national environments. We will more consciously build relations with key opinion leaders and decision makers and influence them – what we now call humanitarian diplomacy - to create conducive environments for both immediate response as well as mid to longer term recovery work.

In the context of climate related threats and environmental degradation, our risk-informed response will need to assist communities to develop solutions which promote sustainable management of natural resources and take into account the current and future effects of climate change. The IFRC reference centers for psychosocial support, livelihoods/food security and climate change are well placed to provide expertise to National Societies who work closely with various communities to build their resilience.

Wherever possible, disaster response activities will be led by staff and volunteer teams from the National Society of the country where the disaster or crisis has occurred. We will strengthen this crucial local response capacity. When the situation requires, we will continue to draw complementary support from our extensive Red Cross Red Crescent global network and external partners. And we will ensure that our eventual withdrawal from internationally coordinated and supported relief operations is prepared for from the outset through careful planning. This will include analysing and deciding how best to hand over specific activities and programmes to relevant national and local partners including government and local authorities as well as the host National Society. An example of this is our work in Haiti, where the IFRC provided daily access to clean water for over 300 000 people during the extended emergency phase and is handing over responsibility for provision of safe water to the national water authority as it is able to resume its pre-disaster functions.

We will continuously analyse humanitarian trends, advance our knowledge management tools, incorporate lessons learned from previous operations, and retain the flexibility to adapt quickly and effectively in a changing world. This includes further fostering approaches such as cash transfer programming which empowers people affected by disaster and crisis to meet their needs according to their priorities and supports the recovery of the local economy.

Invest in community preparedness and risk reduction

Communities all over the world are being exposed to more frequent extreme weather events, food shortages and other natural hazards. These hazards only become disasters when they disturb or destroy a community’s ability to function normally. Therefore, scaling up in preparedness and resilience-building is the key in anticipating and coping with these future threats. With our investment - 88 million Swiss francs spent in 2010 on Red Cross and Red Crescent bilateral and multilateral disaster risk reduction programmes, we want to broaden the coverage of the preparedness and risk reduction measures and ensure effective identification of urban, environmental and climate-related risks. Furthermore, we strive to build our approaches based on evidence. This includes utilizing global indicators, developing cost-benefit analysis of risk reduction measures and establishing vulnerability tracking mechanisms.

Pursue well-linked and coordinated approaches to achieve lasting resilience

An example of a resilience building response is the mangrove-planting project carried out by the Indonesian Red Cross (PMI) together with a sister National Society along the east coast of Simeulue Island which was affected by the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami. The project was carried out through a cash-for-work scheme, which provides income for the community involved in the mangrove planting. Originally, the mangrove plantations were developed to reduce the risks from high tides and strong winds. However, their function went beyond the risk reduction agenda. It was found that the community could use the coastal areas under the mangroves plantation to cultivate crab and shrimp. Hence, the project not only provided a short-term source of income, but also introduced a new livelihood option while addressing the risk of high tides and strong winds.
Strengthen organizational preparedness

Organizational preparedness, including contingency planning, is necessary to tackle more frequent and less predictable localized small and medium scale disasters, and to strengthen the capacities of our network to respond to major national, regional and global disasters.

The IFRC and National Societies are striving to act pre-emptively on scientific early warning information to prepare for impending disasters; this includes heeding seasonal forecasts for unusual dry or wet conditions to, for example, pre-position stocks and alert and retrain volunteers to assist in emergency operations if needed. It also includes more focus on reacting to early warning signals available at different time scales – from days to decades – for enhanced local to global contingency planning and preparedness.

We are committed to assisting governments to become better prepared for the common legal problems related to disaster response. As part of the International Disaster Response Laws, Rules and Principles (IDRL) programme, the IFRC and National Societies promote international guidelines to help governments strengthen their domestic disaster laws and policies. Using the guidelines, governments can avoid needless delays in the delivery of humanitarian relief while at the same time ensuring better coordination and quality of the assistance provided.

Place people affected by disaster and crisis in the centre of what we do

We have learnt that participatory approaches work best in strengthening and sustaining community resilience. Our experience working with crisis and disaster-affected populations is that empowering people to make their own decisions and giving them choice ensures that our assistance is relevant and supports the dignity of the affected people. We aim to place the people most affected by disasters and crisis in the centre of our actions and be full partners in their recovery. We also analyse community dynamics and possible tensions to ensure that the support we provide builds togetherness in communities without exacerbating existing tensions. Advanced tools and practices for communication and feedback with the affected people are being employed, utilising traditional local methods as well as modern technology solutions.

Maximize the leverage and influence of Red Cross Red Crescent value

The public, donors and partner organizations look to the IFRC and its member societies for opportunities to support our mission through offers of assistance such as volunteering, donations and partnering. To expand our scope and reach, and make good on this trust from the public, we need to maximize these opportunities and offers of assistance. Evidence-based Red Cross Red Crescent advocacy and humanitarian diplomacy work will complement our programmes and services and will include action against stigma and discrimination of vulnerable people, and promoting equal access to basic health care and disaster services. And in strengthening our relationships with decision-makers - in particular governments - we aim to have National Societies sit at

Effective Preparedness

Bangladesh’s cyclone preparedness programme, run jointly by the government and the Bangladesh Red Crescent, has 42,000 trained volunteers on its books, and has more than 2,000 multi-function shelters available. The programme focuses on preparing people for disasters by using community-based volunteers who do everything from street theatre to classes in schools to lectures for women’s groups. The only high-tech aspect is the radios used by headquarters in Dhaka to pass warnings to field offices.

The effectiveness of the programme has been tested in real disasters: wearing their distinctive yellow waterproofs and equipped with only megaphones and drums, volunteers evacuated hundreds of thousands of people just before Cyclone Sidr, a category 4 cyclone, struck the country’s south-west coastal delta in 2007.
the table when humanitarian decisions are made as well as to have a predictable and sustainable flow of resources for our humanitarian work.

Partner with others

Innovative partnerships inside the network and externally enable us to access a wide range of skills, competencies and experiences to add value to our own capacities. Our commitment to partnership includes a willingness to lead when we are best able to do so – such as our commitment to IDRL and the Shelter Cluster. We seek partnerships to improve capacity in flexible programming delivery via the Cash Learning Partnership as well as our hosting of important inter-agency initiatives such as the Sphere Project, Code of Conduct, Steering Committee for Humanitarian Response and the Global Road Safety Project.

Act with a strong focus on results and impact

When resources are entrusted to us to deliver assistance to those in a dire need, we need to make sure we provide value for money. This means being cost-effective, relevant to needs of the people and able to present the results of our work. We will further strengthen our assessment, analysis and planning as the basis for timely decision-making and quality action that meet or exceed industry standards. We will engage in meaningful communication with our beneficiaries to ensure that we continuously improve the efficiency, effectiveness, relevance, sustainability and impact of our assistance and that we remain accountable to them. We will monitor our progress against clear performance indicators, which include gender-specific data, and report on them from local to global level.

We continue to learn and improve our performance by utilizing tools such as real-time evaluation, which are undertaken for major operations to coach disaster managers and to identify successes and challenges in the disaster management system.

Our impact in disaster and crisis management

Our endeavours in disaster and crises management will continue to strengthen the capacities of National Societies and the efficiency of our global disaster management system to assist people before, during and after disasters and crises. Ultimately this leads to increased resilience, lessened loss of lives and property, and reduced suffering due to disasters and crises.
The Fundamental Principles of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement

**Humanity** / The International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, born of a desire to bring assistance without discrimination to the wounded on the battlefield, endeavours, in its international and national capacity, to prevent and alleviate human suffering wherever it may be found. Its purpose is to protect life and health and to ensure respect for the human being. It promotes mutual understanding, friendship, cooperation and lasting peace amongst all peoples.

**Impartiality** / It makes no discrimination as to nationality, race, religious beliefs, class or political opinions. It endeavours to relieve the suffering of individuals, being guided solely by their needs, and to give priority to the most urgent cases of distress.

**Neutrality** / In order to enjoy the confidence of all, the Movement may not take sides in hostilities or engage at any time in controversies of a political, racial, religious or ideological nature.

**Independence** / The Movement is independent. The National Societies, while auxiliaries in the humanitarian services of their governments and subject to the laws of their respective countries, must always maintain their autonomy so that they may be able at all times to act in accordance with the principles of the Movement.

**Voluntary service** / It is a voluntary relief movement not prompted in any manner by desire for gain.

**Unity** / There can be only one Red Cross or Red Crescent Society in any one country. It must be open to all. It must carry on its humanitarian work throughout its territory.

**Universality** / The International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, in which all societies have equal status and share equal responsibilities and duties in helping each other, is worldwide.
“In the Red Cross Red Crescent we place people at the heart of our preparedness, mitigation, response and recovery work as we believe that local ownership and empowerment are key for enhanced community resilience. As community-based responders, Red Cross and Red Crescent volunteers and staff are often first on the scene of a disaster. Supported by professional staff, our volunteers cover the last mile into vulnerable communities to provide early warning, support them to prepare for disasters and crises, deliver immediate on site life-saving assistance and remain with the affected people throughout the post-disaster recovery process. This first response capacity is complemented by an unrivalled global surge capacity to scale up our response with national, regional and international resources. Achievements in response capacity and coordination are matched by equal advances in disaster preparedness and risk reduction, and our volunteers help build resilience to withstand future shocks.”

Bekele Geleta, Secretary General