



International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies  
Fédération internationale des Sociétés de la Croix-Rouge et du Croissant-Rouge  
Federación Internacional de Sociedades de la Cruz Roja y de la Media Luna Roja  
الاتحاد الدولي لجمعيات الصليب الأحمر والهلال الأحمر

## Health policy

### Introduction

National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies and their International Federation, as the most significant non-governmental actor in the health and social welfare sector, contribute throughout the world to alleviating suffering of the most vulnerable people, both during a disaster and at other times. Activities that support health have always been central to carrying out the humanitarian mandate of National Societies and their International Federation.

### Scope

This policy reaffirms the commitment of National Societies and their International Federation to carrying out a broad scope of health activities for the most vulnerable, through voluntary service. These include, but are not limited to, health promotion, social support, primary health care, disease prevention, and provision of clean water and sanitation facilities. This policy also reaffirms health as a central component in disaster management.

This policy builds on the experience of working with vulnerable communities throughout the world and recognizes the increasing need to strengthen the capacity of communities to promote health, prevent disease outbreaks and public health emergencies and to respond to the challenges of both communicable and non-communicable disease.

### Policy base

This policy is based on the definition of health as adopted in the constitution of the World Health Organization (WHO), which describes health as “a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity”.

This policy affirms that:

- Health is an inalienable right of all people without any regard to race, religion, colour, nationality, sex or origin. In the absence of health, the full potential and capabilities of individuals as active, productive and responsible members of society cannot be realized.
- Health is a cornerstone of human dignity and humanitarian assistance.
- Poverty, inequity, the widening gap in social justice and the lack of respect for human rights and gender equality need to be addressed as critical determinants of physical, mental and social health.
- Health is not only an outcome of development but also a key contributor to social cohesion and citizenship, as well as economic and social progress. Hence health security is a fundamental and indispensable prerequisite to global, national and individual development.
- Community and civil society action for health is an essential and decisive component of global health action.

The international health crisis created by emerging and re-emerging diseases has become a priority concern for the international community. In response, health has been recognized by the United Nations as a key component of strategies to reduce poverty and ensure international peace and security.

Health is also a key concern in major demographic shifts (especially ageing of populations), in large population movements and in the increase of non communicable diseases and mental health problems.

Health is now a critical component of social development and social welfare programmes in most countries and the health activities of National Societies and their International Federation reflect the diversity of challenges worldwide.

National Societies and their International Federation have responded to these new challenges with a number of specific policies and innovative approaches all of which put people and volunteer action in the centre.

### **Statement**

National Societies and their International Federation are uniquely important institutions for health at the global, regional, national and community level. Their strength lies in numbers, global reach, experience and the energy and dynamism created through voluntary service.

1. In recognition of its humanitarian mission and the overall goals of the IFRC – as expressed through its Strategy 2010 – National Societies and their International Federation shall:
  - Strive to be a strong voice of social conscience in protecting and promoting the health of the most vulnerable populations.
  - Actively engage key actors at the national and international level for the right to basic health care and safe water and sanitation by all vulnerable groups.
  - Actively advocate for a holistic, integrated and participatory approach to health problems by governments and other actors.
  - Prioritize integrated, community-based health programmes which include, as much as possible, all components of primary health care so that the essential health needs of the most vulnerable populations are recognized and provided for.
  - Place special emphasis on empowering vulnerable communities to increase control over their health and its determinants. This includes recognition of community capabilities in maintaining and developing their own health through participatory approaches that increase health literacy and support healthy life styles.
  - Develop programmes that build social cohesion and strengthen the social fabric and social support through volunteer action.
  - Strive to promote gender equity in all its programmes.
2. As auxiliaries to the governments, National Societies, supported by their International Federation as appropriate, shall:
  - Advocate for the establishment, maintenance and continuous development and improvement of a national health system which is stable, sustainable and capable of meeting the health needs of the entire population, including the most vulnerable.

- This includes the availability of financial, material and appropriately skilled human resources for the provision of health services, including public health, health promotion and prevention and rehabilitation.
  - Identify, within the national and local context, the appropriate areas for the Red Cross and Red Crescent interventions to meet the needs of the most vulnerable.
  - Provide the corresponding health and social care activities without attempting in any way to carry out the responsibilities of the state.
  - Ensure that the health activities provided will be complementary to those of the government and the other partners and providers of health care services and reflect the mission, means and capabilities the National Societies.
3. In their efforts to contribute and provide support to the achievement of the health components of the Millennium Declaration and the Millennium Development Goals National Societies and their International Federation shall:
- Make all possible efforts to scale up their volunteer capacity in health to complement the efforts of governments at national and local level.
  - Engage key actors – both public and private - in contributing to the Red Cross and Red Crescent efforts to reach and engage the most vulnerable populations.
  - Scale up community-based first aid and participatory health promotion and prevention activities, in the relevant priority areas of individual National Societies.
  - In recognition of the scale of the global pandemics, scale up their activities to fight HIV/AIDS, Tuberculosis and other diseases.
4. In their commitment to disaster management and humanitarian response the National Societies and their International Federation shall:
- Make certain that physical, mental and social health care are incorporated in, and are an integral part of all other humanitarian work and programmes.
  - Ensure that all health care services provided in a disaster context shall take the long-term sustainability of services into consideration, with the assurance that services provided in any prolonged emergencies will develop into sustainable integrated community based primary health care.
  - Recognize the need to prepare and train communities for rapid response to public health emergencies and disease outbreaks and to strengthen the preventive capacity of communities.

## **Responsibilities**

National Societies have the responsibility to:

- Identify their supportive role in country health programmes with regard to the government or other actors, while adhering to this Health Policy and the Federation Strategy for Community Health, as well as other health-related policies of the Federation.
- Ensure that their health programmes consider and take into account the health promotion, disease prevention, treatment and control protocols officially promoted by the World Health Organization, as the world's leading intergovernmental health body.
- Encourage their governments to implement the policies adopted by WHO, and to participate in other major global health efforts and alliances.

The International Federation has a responsibility to:

- Build partnerships and operational alliances between National Societies and other partners to support and implement programmes and projects at community level.
- Provide advice, guidance as well as frameworks for coordinated community and civil society-based approaches to health.
- Facilitate sharing of resources among National Societies and assist National Societies in the mobilization of funds for programmes and projects.
- Coordinate and direct international support for National Society capacity building in health and development, and in community and civil society action for health, including models of good practice.
- Build management capacity in terms of planning, implementation, monitoring, evaluation, leadership and coordination related to provision of health services in times of disaster.

National Societies and their International Federation together have a responsibility to:

- Ensure that all health programmes are in compliance with this policy, and that all staff and volunteers participating in such programmes are aware of the rationale and details of this policy.
- Inform, to the extent possible, all governmental, intergovernmental and non-governmental partners of this policy.
- Develop, introduce and implement a mechanism for the monitoring and verification of compliance with this policy. One such mechanism is for National Societies to develop a health strategy based on this policy.
- Significantly strengthen their capacity to address the health needs of the most vulnerable populations through integrated strategies and innovative partnerships.

## **References**

This policy was adopted by the 15th Session of the General Assembly of the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, November 2005. The policy replaces the health policy of 1999.