

BRANCH DEVELOPMENT LEARNING REPORT

A component of the National Society
Development Learning Project

*Working
together in
partnership*



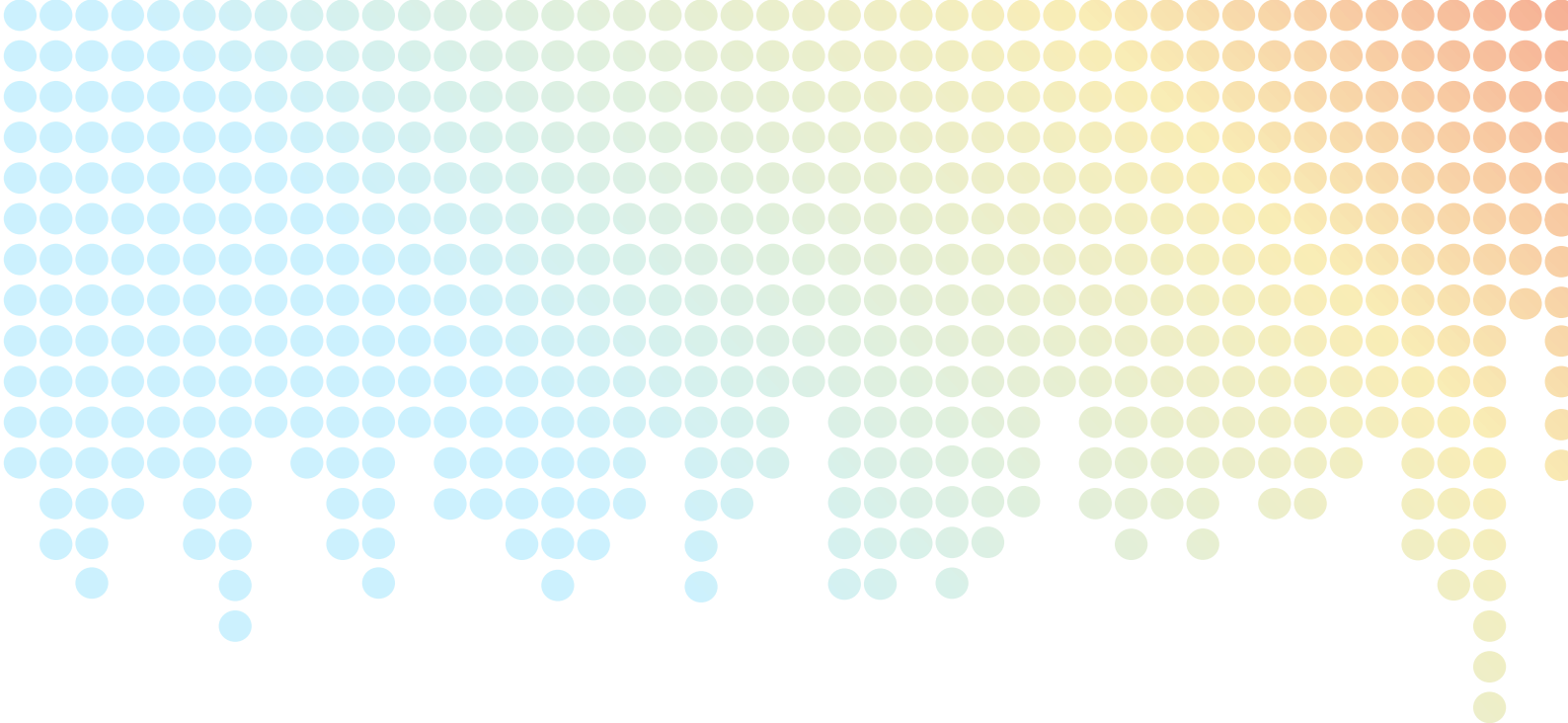
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Acronyms and abbreviations

BIF	Burundi francs
BOCA	Branch Organisational Capacity Assessment
CBF	Capacity Building Fund
CEA	Community Engagement and Accountability
ICRC	International Committee of the Red Cross
IFRC	International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies
KES	Kenyan shillings
KI	Key informant
NSD	National Society Development
NSIA	National Society Investment Alliance
PNS	Partner (donor) National Society
OCAC	Organisational Capacity Assessment and Certification
SAF	Safer Access Framework
UNICEF	The United Nations Children's Fund

Abbreviations of National Society names

ARCS	Armenian Red Cross Society
CRB	Burundi Red Cross
DRC	Dominican Red Cross
GRC	Ghana Red Cross
KRCS	Kenya Red Cross Society
LRC	Lebanese Red Cross
MRC	Mexican Red Cross
MRCS	Mongolia Red Cross Society
PMI	Palang Merah Indonesia / Indonesian Red Cross
RCNM	Red Cross of North Macedonia (formerly Macedonian Red Cross)
SRCS	Somali Red Crescent Society
TRCS	Turkish Red Crescent Society
URCS	Ukrainian Red Cross Society

Acknowledgements

This learning report was commissioned by the British Red Cross (BRC), International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) and International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC). It is part of a wider study on the impact of investments in National Society Development.

The research was undertaken by two consultants, Ian Steed and Aurélia Balpe. Technical and editorial oversight and inputs were provided by the working group and subject matter experts of the three organisations commissioning the work.

This report primarily draws on the findings from various existing case-studies and reports outlined in Annex 1 and follow-up interviews.

We sincerely thank all our Movement colleagues who contributed to the research. A full list of key informants is provided in Annex 2.

This project was made possible with the support of the FCDO.



In 2021, four times as many Burundians received cash assistance from the Burundi Red Cross through funds generated locally than through internationally provided cash assistance.

That year, the 3,000 local units of the Burundi Red Cross provided:

- Hundreds of thousands of 'acts of solidarity' by self-organising groups of volunteers responding to the basic needs of vulnerable people;
- 247,564 first aid responses;
- Support to 106,825 people through emergency response activities.

The IFRC Capacity Building Fund invested 300,000 Swiss francs in the Burundi Red Cross (CRB) in 2008–11 to develop a countrywide network of local volunteer units. ICRC and partner National Societies invested to support the nascent transformation process, along with technical advice and encouragement to the leadership of the Burundi Red Cross.

Fifteen years later, CRB mobilises 624,000 volunteers, organised into 2,926 local units. The units have self-sustained for 15 years, regularly mobilising roughly one in 20 Burundians as volunteers. The impact of this organisational transformation on local humanitarian action, resilience, disaster response and peace in a conflict-affected country is incalculable.



Executive Summary

What works in strengthening local humanitarian actors? As the humanitarian sector reimagines a humanitarian system built around local actors responding to more frequent crises, the question of how to invest in such actors to strengthen their long-term capacities is central. For the Red Cross / Red Crescent Movement, this means reflection on how to invest in National Societies and their most local structures ('branches').

This report analyses case studies and evaluations of organisational change in Red Cross / Red Crescent National Societies and branches published over the last 15 years to gain insights into 'what has worked' in enabling branches to increase their local services, as well as their long-term organisational sustainability. As well as existing published material, the study draws on interviews with key informants from five National Societies, and self-reported challenges and success stories shared by over 250 branch leaders from around the world in March 2023. The analysis aims to enhance understanding of the practice and impact of branch development work conducted by branches, National Societies and their supporters.

THE PRACTICE OF BRANCH DEVELOPMENT

The report presents a complex picture of branch development as something taking place at multiple levels, led and facilitated by local, national and occasionally international actors. While the available literature has a strong focus on planned change within branches, especially change designed and led through national-level processes, there is strong evidence that branches evolve both in response to external stimuli, such as humanitarian crises, as well as through internal, day-to-day interactions and initiatives. An institutional environment which incentivises and inspires local branch leaderships to adapt, innovate and learn from one another is an important enabling factor for branch development.

The overall picture is one of branch development as a complex, long-term process, with many interventions mutually reinforcing one another over time. For example, 49 per cent of branch leaders said that financial resource mobilisation was their biggest challenge in a survey of 257 branch leaders globally in 2023. The report suggests that local financial resource mobilisation is a function of community trust, the relevance of branch services, and a branch mindset that prioritises securing human and financial resources from communities rather than national or international sources. The report identifies interventions under each of these areas which eventually contribute to branches attracting more community resources, and being better able to sustain themselves.

Interviews and cases emphasise the extent to which branches and branch development are rooted in local cultures and contexts. Local understandings of vulnerability, volunteering and accountability shape 'what works' at local level, and how branch development takes place. Most of the successful case studies are grounded in mindset and cultural shifts in National Societies and the partners that support them away from the understanding of branches as deliverers of externally sourced humanitarian aid, to branches as mobilisers of local resources to address local challenges.



KEY LEARNINGS

- Successful branch development is likely to be an iterative rather than a linear process, that addresses fundamental questions as to the role and positioning of the branch within the community, as well as more tangible materials and capacities;
- Inspiring local leadership that navigates between national institutional policy and strategy and the realities of specific local contexts is a crucial driver of branch development. Examples from the studies suggest that leadership comes both from formal and informal roles within branches;
- Addressing organisational culture around the agency of vulnerable people and communities; branch relationships with communities and the role of branches within National Societies all emerge from the cases as key foundations for successful branch development work. A number of cases suggest that one element of successful long-term branch development work is a transition from a culture and business model of top-down humanitarian action, to one that focuses on locally led and resourced humanitarian action, supported externally when local resources are overwhelmed.

LEARNINGS

FACTORS AT BRANCH LEVEL THAT STRENGTHEN BRANCH DEVELOPMENT

Even in resource-poor environments, it is possible to resource relevant humanitarian action over time through mobilising local human, financial and in-kind resources. Factors that support local resource mobilisation include alignment with local cultures, geographical proximity to communities, local transparency and accountability, and visible and relevant services.

Strong relationships with local public authorities within the framework of the Auxiliary Role can support branches to better identify and resource their humanitarian activities. Branches whose organisational structures and services are designed to be sustainable based on locally available resources are more likely to be able to maintain themselves and their services over time.

KEY LEARNINGS

- Branches that consistently deliver local humanitarian services are designed to function primarily as local voluntary organisations: attracting local human, financial and in-kind resources to deliver locally relevant humanitarian services. While external resources can extend and enhance this dynamic, particularly at times of crisis, branches struggle to sustain themselves once external resources and accountabilities replace locally accountable and resourced action;
- Geographical proximity to communities matters, both in terms of delivering relevant services, and mobilising local resources. It is possible to systematically develop and sustain local branches, even in resource-constrained environments;
- Local leadership that motivates, mobilises and coordinates within local branches is a key driver of effective local services and long-term branch sustainability. There is currently a knowledge gap within the Movement for how local leadership is effectively developed: while there is a focus on formal training, it is likely that formal and informal peer learning and experiential learning are also critical factors in developing dynamic, competent and confident local leadership.



LEARNINGS

FACTORS AT NATIONAL LEVEL THAT STRENGTHEN BRANCH DEVELOPMENT

The national level of National Societies is responsible for overall guidance and support to local branches to support their humanitarian action. Tools typically include national statutes, national strategies and policy, development plans and investment pots, as well as tools specifically targeting branch development. At the same time, creating a culture in which local leaderships are empowered and supported to strengthen their branches within the framework of the wider National Society is crucial: An appropriate balance between National Society Unity and local autonomy is vital in order to enable local adaptation to local challenges and opportunities.

While efforts are being made, it is challenging for many National Societies to gather and consolidate data from their local branches on services delivered, which would allow better analysis of how branches are developing and the effects this is having on local services. The introduction of IT systems that span branches is an opportunity to improve data gathering, but requires significant investment to introduce and maintain.



KEY LEARNINGS

- Realistic division of tasks and resourcing between different organisational levels enables branch systems to function more effectively, reducing negative competition between levels and creating positive synergies. These relationships are typically regulated through National Society statutes and supporting documents;
- An enabling environment that empowers local leaderships to flourish within the framework of National Society policy and strategy enables local branches to own their own development and adapt to their local contexts, while not threatening the overall cohesion of the National Society. It is likely that National Societies which promote friendly competition and collaboration between peer branches alongside use of centrally-developed tools see greater advances than National Societies which focus solely on centrally developed tools to drive development;
- National Societies need to be able to define and communicate the expectations of branches internally, but also to external partners. Having sufficient guidance to guide branch leaderships on key national priorities while also ensuring that external support aligns with and reinforces these directions of travel is a key role for the national level.

LEARNINGS

FACTORS IN INTERNATIONAL SUPPORT THAT STRENGTHEN BRANCH DEVELOPMENT

Movement partners engage with branches in a variety of ways. Some have partnerships spanning decades, while others build temporary relationships around short-term funding. Some have a focus on branch development, while for others, short-term humanitarian services are the only concern. Some relationships are held at national level, while others involve branches having direct relationships with partners.

International partners typically support branches through high-level strategic advice, technical support, and through investment, whether directly to the branch, or through national branch development programmes. There is some evidence for National Societies starting to use global funds such as the IFRC Capacity Building Fund, and the joint IFRC / ICRC National Society Investment Alliance to invest in branch systems, suggesting that this is an area of development that is difficult for National Societies to finance.



KEY LEARNINGS

- The report highlights how international technical and financial support has led to significant change in local services and organisational sustainability. Particularly in cases where new structures or capacities are being developed, National Societies do not generally have the financial resources available to invest as required, and external support can be transformational;
- This support is generally more likely to be effective where it aligns with a National Society's and branches' own branch development agendas, is supported by strong local leadership, is coordinated between international partners, and strengthens capacities in ways that can be sustained by the National Society without ongoing external support;
- Some tools, practices and cultures within the international humanitarian system undermine the autonomy and sustainability of local branches. These are likely to threaten wider efforts to localise aid. This can be particularly the case when a partner invests in a branch outside of the wider branch development framework of the National Society.

LEARNINGS

THE CHALLENGES OF MEASURING THE IMPACT OF BRANCH DEVELOPMENT ON LOCAL SERVICES

The extent to which it is possible to draw a causal link between individual branch development interventions and enhanced services varies. In some cases, it is possible to quantify the impact of the intervention either on local services and communities, or on resources that the branch can use to deliver services. This is particularly the case:

- With interventions that create new services, new branches, or both;
- With interventions that are very local, and result in visible outputs and outcomes, for example new volunteers or income, or new branch services.

However, many branch development interventions create outputs that cannot be readily quantified in terms of services or resources, or whose outputs and outcomes cannot be dissociated from those of other, parallel interventions. In these cases, evidence is often anecdotal, from leaders who have seen 'good change' following on from an intervention. This is particularly the case:

- With interventions that address long-term institutional structures concerning branches, for example statutes revision, or development of national tools and policy;
- With branch-level interventions that address long-term issues, such as local positioning, acceptance and trust.

All of these methodological issues can potentially be overcome with adequate time and resources, however the cost benefit and utility to National Societies of this level of detail across hundreds or thousands of branches are not clear.

KEY LEARNINGS

- The extent to which individual branch development interventions on local services can be measured varies due to significant challenges of data collection, attribution, and the time-frame over which results can be expected. A more realistic approach to understanding the impact of branch development work on services would be to look at changes in the bigger picture of local services and resources raised within a National Society over time, complemented by qualitative data from key individuals within the National Society, and feedback from communities;
- Currently, few National Societies systematically collate basic data on local services and local resource mobilisation over time. Strengthening internal systems to do this would support internal understanding of the effects of overall National Society development work (including branch development) over time, as well as potentially providing evidence for supporters of the importance of long-term investment in National Society Development.



THE IMPACT OF BRANCH DEVELOPMENT ON LOCAL SERVICES

There is regular evidence that efforts to strengthen branches as part of a wider package of organisational development interventions within the National Society correlate to significant strengthening of services and locally attracted resources over time. The Kenya Red Cross Society included branch development work in its overall organisational development strategy in the period 2010–20, and this correlates with increases in the numbers of people mobilised and reached by the National Society:

TABLE 1: Growth in Kenya Red Cross Society services and resources, 2010–20

Organisational strengths	2010	2020
Number of members	23,143	1,258,506
Number of volunteers	70,000	118,506
Number of youth	573 new youth leaders	63,964
People reached		
Disaster response	1,006,857	4,869,356 direct + indirect
Health and social services	3,076,452	12,940,722 direct + indirect

Source: Kenya Red Cross Society, “At the centre of every community”.

At the level of individual interventions, the learning report finds that:

- **Work to strengthen branch and National Society acceptance and security in communities can extend the reach of National Society services, particularly in insecure environments.**

A branch leader from the Somali Red Crescent Society (SRCS) describes the impact of ICRC’s Safer Access Framework training on SRCS capacity to negotiate access to vulnerable communities across the patchwork of different local gatekeepers in the country:

“

Final Report:
National Society
Development
Initiative Evaluation
in the Somali Red
Crescent Society,
2019–21

With Safer Access Framework training, we have been able to work in very difficult areas, even where our Movement is very restricted. Whereas other actors can only work in towns, we have contact with different ideological groups in other areas with different administrations, policies, rules and regulations, all of which we can navigate.

- **Strengthening local-need assessment can impact how the services branches deliver and how they deliver these services.**

The branch development project manager in the Lebanon Red Cross gives one example of how strengthening the process for local needs assessment in branches identified new vulnerabilities, and led to the branch developing new ways of working – in this case moving from being a service-delivery organisation, to convening relevant stakeholders to address one community's challenge:

”

Branch
development
Case Collection

We established a very scientific community-needs assessment three years ago. We use a statistical software system, household surveys, then once we have our results, we double check with stakeholders to check if the results are reflective of their challenges. With one of our branches, it was done three times. The third time... it was done in a village where there was a high level of drug consumption but this was a taboo for the municipality. When we presented the report to all local stakeholders, they were against what we were saying. Then we said to ourselves, 'Why are we hiding?' After heated debate, they agreed, 'Yes, we do have that issue'.

For the first time ever, a local organisation with expertise in drug issues was allowed to undertake an awareness session in the village. The role of the branch was to coordinate. The branch realised for the first time that we identified the need, but we did not need any budget to work on the issue with the community, we just needed to reach out to another organisation with the resources and the expertise. The budget for the needs assessment was very small.

- **Work to strengthen branches' community engagement processes can improve service quality and the likelihood of activities being sustained by communities if they are developed through time-limited funding.**

As part of its strategic shift to put communities at the centre of Kenya Red Cross Society (KRCS) activities, the KRCS introduced procedures to strengthen participative needs analysis into both emergency response and development programming. Previously, in managing development projects, the common practice had been for community dialogue to start during the implementation phase, rather than during project design.

A key informant from the KRCS described how the new participative planning framework affected a water and sanitation project. The involvement of community members both in programme design and through a taskforce to provide course correction during implementation made the key informant confident that as the KRCS phased out of the project, communities would continue to manage the resources provided.

- **Work to increase the number of Red Cross / Red Crescent local branches and situate these closer to communities can transform long-term local service delivery capacity.** (Example from the Burundi Red Cross outlined on page 6).

About this learning report

There's a growing conversation about the importance of local humanitarian action. It's seen as more relevant, rapid, effective, culturally appropriate and sustainable than international aid. The Red Cross Red Crescent Movement builds its humanitarian model around groups of local members and volunteers in communities ("branches"), organised within Red Cross Red Crescent National Societies, carrying out humanitarian services to benefit their local communities.

This learning report is about how branches, National Societies, and domestic and international partners supporting National Societies go about strengthening this local level of work, and what this means for the communities that both benefit from Red Cross Red Crescent services, but also resource many of these same local services through volunteers, cash and in-kind donations, and to which branches are accountable.

The learning questions underpinning this report are:

- What do National Societies and branches do to strengthen local Red Cross Red Crescent action?
- How do these actions strengthen branch services to vulnerable people and communities, and / or make branches more able to resource themselves and their activities over time?
- How do international actors work to support this work?

The Learning Report has been commissioned by British Red Cross (BRC), the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC), and is funded and managed by BRC. It will be shared with National Societies and donors as a contribution to the wider discussions around localisation and effective investment in strengthening local humanitarian action. It has been developed by a team of two consultants with extensive Movement and National Society Development experience.

What data does the report use?

The primary data for this learning report come from analysis of existing learning materials on aspects of National Society Development (NSD). A list of these cases, evaluations and analyses is shared in Annex 1, with short descriptions and public links (where available).

These data are supplemented with in-depth interviews with national and branch stakeholders from four National Societies – Burundi, Kenya, Mexico and Mongolia – to access additional data to complement case studies. A list of key informants is included as Annex 2

A final data source is a series of experiences of branch challenges and successful branch strengthening actions shared by over 250 branch leaders from around the world in the run-up to a peer-learning event hosted by the IFRC for branch leaders. Publicly available data from this event are linked in Annex 1.

How was the learning report developed?

Each case study was analysed for branch development interventions, which were tabulated to record the challenge the National Society was seeking to address, and the activities, outputs and outcomes associated with each intervention (where identified). These challenges were then grouped into six broad areas of work undertaken by National Societies to strengthen branches. Where data on the outcomes of these interventions on branch services and / or branch sustainability were not available from case studies, interviews were conducted with the relevant National Societies, and in some cases, partners.

Each section of the report synthesises approaches taken by National Societies to strengthen branches under each of the six areas of work identified. A final section summarises learnings from cases evaluations and interviews on the roles played by Movement actors in supporting branch development.

What are the limitations of the report?

There are myriad ways in which branches strengthen themselves and are supported to do so. The report focuses on themes, approaches and tools that recur across the case studies. In developing the learning report, the authors have articulated and mitigated, where possible, the following limitations:

- Few case studies contain consistent data on the impact of branch development interventions on services or on service users and their communities, and National Societies often do not collect time-series data on branch services. Interviewees often referred to activities becoming 'more sustainable' or 'reaching more people' rather than being able to provide rigorous evidence for this. To strengthen future evidence-gathering, the consultants propose a short tool (Annex 3) to gather relevant data for understanding the impact of future branch development work;
- The case studies typically describe examples of nationally planned branch-development processes. While interviews and stories shared by branch leaders have surfaced examples of locally led change, and emergent change sparked by external events, it's likely that these types of change are underrepresented within the report. Readers should therefore be mindful that local leaders everywhere take action to adapt and improve their work, irrespective of national initiatives, and such initiatives are likely underrepresented in this report;
- In most cases, branch-development interventions are one of multiple dynamics within a National Society. Therefore, it is often not possible to fully attribute any outcomes identified to a single branch-development intervention;
- Most case studies were probably developed based on significant positive experiences of branch development. National Societies can be reticent to speak about what has not worked in development work, and in particular to speak negatively about the impact of support from partners. It is therefore difficult to fully identify and assess failures in branch development;
- While the study reflects a range of geographies, including conflict and post-conflict contexts, inevitably, not all contexts are represented. For example, little reference in the report is made to branch development in small island National Societies, or following a natural disaster.

Branches and branch development in the Movement

Red Cross Red Crescent branches range from small groups of people meeting informally to identify and carry out local acts of solidarity and kindness, to large, formalised structures, in some cases responsible for multi-million dollar budgets.

To make sense of this diversity, this section shares concepts that underpin many of the interventions described in the learning report. They provide ways to understand ways in which branches grow and change, and insights into potential dynamics around change. Given the variety of terminologies within the Movement, it also establishes a consistent vocabulary for this learning report.

The section also talks more broadly about organisational change, and how different types of change are ongoing within branches and branch systems. Again, the purpose is to provide tools to help readers engage with the material and analyse their own daily contexts and practice.

National Societies as systems of branches

The learning report distinguishes between **local branches**, which are those branches closest to communities, and whose focus is on delivering local services, and **intermediary branches** which are typically responsible for supporting other branches at lower levels of the hierarchy. Not all National Societies need intermediary branches, but where present these often deliver services that cannot be delivered cost-effectively at more local levels – specialist disaster management and response is a typical example. The report does not explore **virtual (i.e. online) branches**.

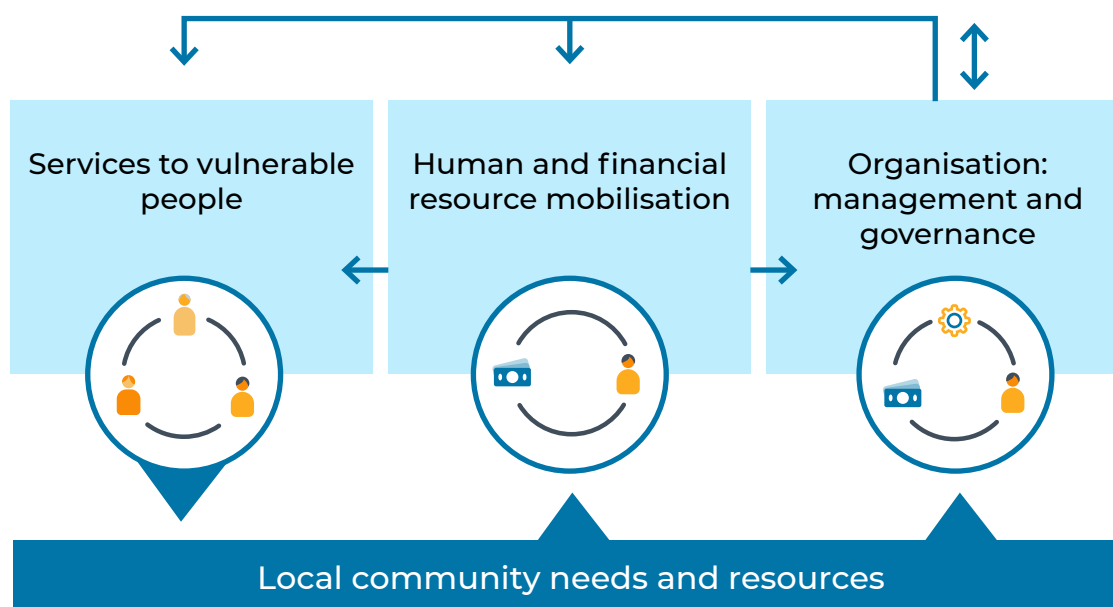
National Society statutes define branch competencies and how branches have a voice in the running of the National Society – typically through representation and voting rights in national governance structures, including General Assemblies. Such decision-making structures may be mirrored at subsidiary levels of the National Society: local branches often have voting rights in governance structures of intermediary branches, for example.

Some National Societies are made up of branches that are **separate legal entities**. Such branches may have considerable autonomy, including responsibility for decision-making and financial management. In such cases, internal coordination and cohesion within the National Society can be challenging if the relationship with the wider National Society is not well-regulated.

Understanding branches as local voluntary organisations

The simplest way to understand a local branch is as a voluntary organisation with very similar functioning to millions of other local organisations around the world. Figure 1 below suggests four basic functions of a local branch, and the branch's relationship with the community it serves:

FIGURE 1: Key functions and relationships of a branch



The local branch **mobilises human and financial resources from the community**, which it uses both to **deliver services to the community** and to **organise and sustain itself**. In other words, a successful local branch is an ‘open’ system, with an ongoing flow of people and resources from the community to the branch and back again. What is likely to differentiate these branches from purely local voluntary organisations is the **relationship with the wider National Society**, which can be a source of advice, occasional financing and technical support, as well as providing the wider policies and strategies that shape how the branch operates.

The complexity of change observed in branch development

The data informing this learning report reflect different change dynamics affecting local branches. The case studies tend to focus on planned change: national initiatives to achieve specific goals, often designed to change multiple parts of the system. Yet at the same time, interviewees describe how people within branches interact and new dynamics are created, resulting in new initiatives and ways of working. As such, external events such as the COVID-19 pandemic, conflict or natural disaster, new technologies, legislation or wider social dynamics present branches and National Societies with new challenges and opportunities.

These change dynamics are not discrete; they interact at multiple levels. Branch leaders bear the main responsibility for ‘surfing’ these different dynamics: responding to local internal and external dynamics, as well as implementing national change initiatives and ensuring that such initiatives reflect the challenges and learnings that the branch can share.

Report structure

Branch development takes multiple forms. To make sense of the multiplicity of interventions, the report groups interventions under six outcomes that National Societies and branches achieved through their efforts.

Two of these are seen as enabling actions that support an environment within which branch development work can be effective:

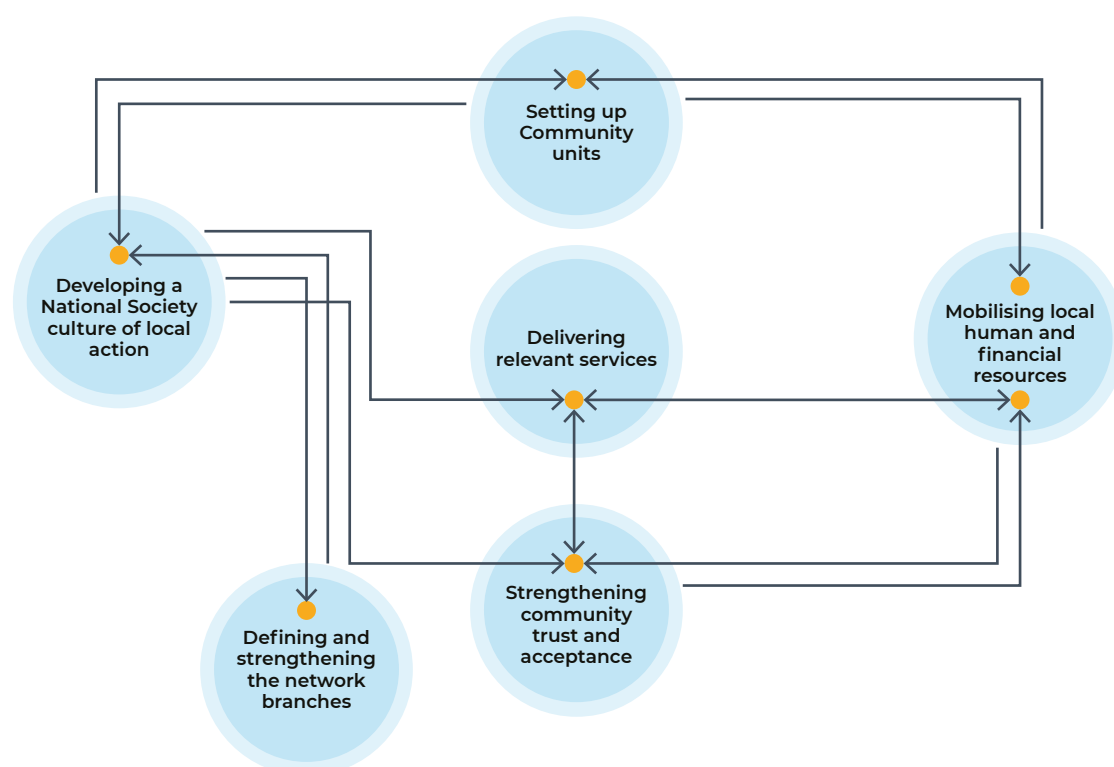
- Developing a National Society culture of local action.
- Defining and strengthening the network of branches.

The remaining four target aspects of the relevance, reach and sustainability of branches:

- Extending reach: Strengthening community trust and acceptance.
- Extending reach: Setting up community units.
- Becoming more relevant: Delivering relevant services.
- Becoming more sustainable: Mobilising local human and financial resources.

While these changes are treated as discrete for the purposes of the report, in reality there is significant overlap and interdependency between interventions described under each heading. For example, key aspects of strengthening local resource mobilisation include building community trust and acceptance and delivering relevant services. In turn, resource mobilisation enables the branch to deliver more and better services, strengthening community trust and acceptance. Some of the relationships observed between these areas of work are captured in figure 2 below:

FIGURE 2: BD interventions



LEARNING



Enabling action

Developing a National Society culture of locally led action

Underpinning all case studies are changes in mindset and organisational culture that place greater emphasis on locally led action. Such changes occur both at branch and national level. To what extent these are deliberate efforts to change organisational culture, and to what extent cultures shift as new ways of working take hold within the National Society, is not always possible to disentangle, but it is clear from cases and interviews that cultural change is often crucial to the sustained success of branch-development efforts.

A number of the National Societies featured in the cases started with organisational structures shaped by top-down funding channelled through national headquarters, and then out to branches – a classic relief model. Moving away from the logic of top-down funding towards a model which focuses on mobilising local humanitarian action, supplemented by external humanitarian aid when local resources are overwhelmed, is a strategic shift for National Societies. It can be seen as a shift from a bureaucratic organisational model, to one with greater emphasis on a model of local voluntary organisation, as schematised in diagrams 3 and 4 below.

FIGURE 3:
Bureaucratic aid
organisation structure

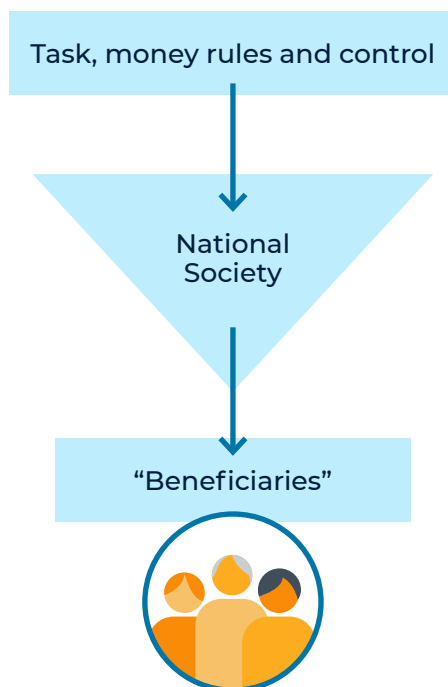


FIGURE 4:
Local voluntary
organisation model



Evolving understanding of the capacities of vulnerable people and communities

In the Georgia Red Cross Society (GRCS), leaders speak of the shift from a 'charity' model, in which the National Society distributed relief, to a 'developmental' model which supports communities and individuals as agents in their own development. They highlight that this shift does not negate the need for humanitarian assistance, but underlines that this is not the only way in which the National Society can support communities.

”

Branch Development in the GRCS

Before we had war and we were more focused on humanitarian assistance...but then we started the development process, so we started to engage with branches not to give fish to communities, but showing communities how to get that fish, how to find those rivers where the fish comes from. This was also relevant to branches themselves, we encouraged them to solve their own problems with our support and guidance, they could find better opportunities for themselves. Branches initially could not understand, it took so much time, so much effort, to make them believe in themselves. Branches were saying, 'No! Communities do not want development, they want relief, they want sugar and flour!' We argued that communities could source their own livelihoods if branches helped them to develop. We are now more focused on strengthening resilience...but there are still cases where relief is important.

Such a change in culture has implications for both the types of programming the National Society undertakes, but also how human and financial resources are attracted. Seeing vulnerable people and communities as having capacities is the basis for efforts to attract local volunteers and funding. As slogans shared by volunteers following the transformation process in the Burundi Red Cross (CRB) illustrate, these changes in mindset are not just within the National Society, but in how vulnerable people start to see themselves and the relationship with the branch:

”

Burundians can be donors too!

We don't have anything but our strength to give to help vulnerable people...so we'll dig fields and build houses....

Evaluation Report: Building sustainable local capacity in the branches of the Burundi Red Cross Society

”

I am the branch manager and my responsibility was to coordinate volunteers mobilizing clothes in the community, link up and network with district and other partners, and work in collaboration with local leaders to mobilize used items for the vulnerable community. This was a change in the Red Cross approach of always waiting for donations from partners and national headquarters to support the vulnerable community. I noticed that the community has resources that can be tapped and channelled to the affected community with low cost. There was change of community attitude as they always think the Red Cross only collects blood.

Submission to branch development special event: branch leader

Evolving relationships between National Society and community

Several cases describe how National Society branch development efforts have included changing internal attitudes to communities, in particular seeing them as partners rather than beneficiaries. This often requires a shift in how relative power is perceived, from the National Society / branch as being the source of solutions, resources and expertise, to the National Society / branch as bringing useful expertise and resources, but not necessarily solutions. Instead, solutions are co-designed and co-owned between branch and community based on negotiation, rather than needs defined by the branch, National Society or international partner.

Efforts to change culture in the Kenya Red Cross Society

Key informants from the Kenya Red Cross Society (KRCS) describe some of the actions taken to put the community at the centre of thinking, planning and action. This included how the KRCS set up governance feedback and complaints committees at national, regional and county branch levels as part of efforts to create a culture of accountability to communities. National Society strategic planning shifted to put community needs (as opposed to donor or centrally defined priorities) at the centre of National Society strategy. Indicators that reflected this community focus were created which both helped to track progress, and were also linked to individuals' performance appraisals, incentivising them to change behaviours.



Kenya Red Cross Society
© Paul Wu / IFRC

Evolving understanding of the role of the branch within the National Society

A parallel shift observed in some cases involves changes in understanding of the relative importance of local branches within the National Society system, in particular, a rebalancing of focus between the top-down systems of central planning and resourcing (particularly supported by international aid), and the bottom-up work that mobilises local resources to address local need.

This cultural shift is often reflected in processes to revise the formal relationships between branches and national headquarters, described in [“Enabling action: Strengthening the network of branches”](#).

In 2005, new leadership in the Burundi Red Cross (CRB), came to the insight that the CRB was not fulfilling its mandate to deliver services to vulnerable people. For years, the CRB had functioned as a project-delivery partner to international actors. This worked based on a hub and spoke model, where the 125 community-level branches (each covering populations of c70,000 people) could extend relief services to the population when financed to do so by an international partner.

In this model, the CRB was not tapping into the capacities and resources of local communities. To do this meant becoming more locally present, and making this new community level of the organisation the starting point for National Society action. The subsequent branch-development intervention was explicitly about changing the mindset and business model of the CRB to be focused on the resources and needs of local communities, and led to the setting up 2,920 ‘colline’ units, each serving a community of 3–4,000 people. These were seen as the primary level of National Society planning and action rather than implementation hubs, and the role of other branch levels changed to focus on supporting these to be effective.

LEARNINGS

DEVELOPING A NATIONAL SOCIETY CULTURE OF LOCALLY LED ACTION

- Changes in how National Societies understand the capacities of vulnerable people, their relationships with communities, and the relative value of their own local branches often correlates with effective branch development work;
- Systems of top-down funding for local action have incentivised many National Societies to treat vulnerable people as ‘beneficiaries’ rather than potentially active humanitarians, communities as ‘targets’ rather than partners, and local branches as delivery mechanisms rather than the starting point of a National Society’s humanitarian action;
- Such funding has also created organisational structures which are in many cases geographically distant from local communities, meaning that local action may not be relevant, local branches may be seen as external organisations, and local human and financial resources may be hard to access;
- Change in organisational culture often results from an external shock – failure to respond to a specific event driving further reflection and change. Cases suggest the critical role of national leaderships in shaping new discourses within a National Society, and inspiring and incentivising new ways of thinking at all levels, and shaping appropriate interventions to put new ways of thinking into practice.



Extending reach

Strengthening community trust and acceptance

The extent to which National Societies can access communities to deliver services is based on their trust and acceptance. This sense of acceptance and ownership affects the extent to which communities will resource National Societies with financial and in-kind support. Strengthening branches to function as accountable, neutral and impartial humanitarian actors is key to local access and strengthening branch sustainability. While some of this work can be addressed at national level, there is much about local positioning and behaviours that can only be addressed at branch level.

Developing National Society policy

Some National Societies described developing national instruments to strengthen branch interactions with communities. The KRCs developed profiles for local members, to ensure that branch members were seen as neutral, impartial and independent by communities, and were less likely to bring partisan viewpoints into their governance role in the branch. This was complemented by a code of conduct for all volunteers and members, setting out expected behaviours and sanctions for non-compliance.

In order to strengthen the influence that community voices could have over its policy making, the Mexican Red Cross (MRC) amended its statutes to introduce further participation of local community members, volunteers and youth in its policy making, and ensure local voices were better heard in national forums through expanding local branch representation on state boards, and state representation in the national board.

Strengthening the branch auxiliary role

A strong auxiliary role and ongoing relationships with local authorities open the door for branches to participate in local decision-making bodies, such as state disaster committees, to share information gathered on the needs of communities, and to advocate on behalf of these communities. Stronger relationships with authorities lead to better coordination and sharing of resources, increasing the reach of humanitarian assistance.

Dr.Tungalag, Orkhon Branch Manager, Mongolia Red Cross (MRCs), describes how the Orkhon branch works to strengthen its partnership with local government each year:

“

Branch development
in the Mongolia Red
Cross Society

To receive funding from the government, we raise awareness about the Red Cross among government agencies. We share how the Red Cross works and our auxiliary role. The next thing is advocacy. The government runs several programmes, and to put Red Cross budget activities into these programmes, we have to prove our added value. We discuss with local government and citizen representative meetings. After advocating and securing funding, implementation has to be transparent. Being transparent, trustworthy, credible and a strong implementer is important. And reporting is crucial, financial and activity reporting have to be open and transparent to government and communities. This is one of the reasons we are receiving funds and collaborating well with the government.

Access and acceptance in communities

Delivery of humanitarian services requires local actors to be able to access communities safely, and have their role understood and accepted by communities. The Safer Access Framework (SAF) is one tool that supports strengthening National Society acceptance, security and access to people and communities in need. It is usually deployed in conflict settings, or in settings with a high risk of violence.

The GRCS has also been guided by the Safer Access Framework (SAF) since it was introduced by the ICRC. “Because we have two frozen conflicts, it is important to have safer access to affected communities so the SAF is a really helpful tool, and we pay significant attention to it.”

The National Society has integrated the eight pillars of the SAF into its own policies and processes including inductions, codes of conduct, communication and coordination protocols, volunteering management, training and simulation exercises, incident reporting, and partnership arrangements with local authorities. The SAF is therefore not seen as only relevant to those branches that are affected by conflict but as a powerful acceptance, access and security framework for all branches.

Two Somali Red Crescent Society (SRCS) branch leaders describe the impact of work to extend access and acceptance in their context:

”

With SAF training we have been able to work in very difficult areas, even where our Movement is very restricted. Whereas other actors can only work in towns, we have contact with different ideological groups in other areas with different administrations, policies, rules and regulations, all of which we can navigate.

National Society
Development Initiative
Evaluation in the
Somali Red Crescent
Society, 2019–21

Volunteers are better supported and are responding more quickly to incidents which has increased trust in the SRCS's neutral, impartial roles and work. We have increased our acceptance and used our approach to risk management to improve our community engagement.



Somali Red Crescent Society
© IFRC

Building more diverse and inclusive branches

Most National Societies described the steps to make branches more welcoming to all groups within the local community. The Turkish Red Crescent Society (TRCS) established branch sections for women, youth and people with disabilities to make branches more diverse. The number of TRCS Youth Units in universities rose from 89 in 2016 to 155 in 2020, complementing 75 Young Red Crescent Provincial Organisations, and 94 Young Red Crescent District Organisations.

Likewise, the KRCS made efforts to diversify its paid staff base through transferring the responsibility for making appointments from the national office to branches.

For many branches, the ability to function across cultures and with diverse stakeholder groups is critical to meeting local needs. Marneuli Municipality in Georgia borders neighbouring Azerbaijan and Armenia, and its 84 villages are host to a diverse population. Over several years, the branch has developed new ways of working to engage Muslim communities. Relying on volunteers from the Azerbaijani, Abkhazian, South Ossetian and Armenian communities, the branch has also overcome language barriers. Volunteers now support other civil society actors with the translation of their health promotion.

“

Branch
Development
in the Georgia RC

At first, the Azerbaijani communities did not understand why the Red Cross, and not the Red Crescent, was wanting to work with them. We explained the principles of Unity and Impartiality, that only one Red Cross can exist in each country and that the National Society invites volunteers from all communities and supports all peoples.

The branch also had to overcome reticence around allowing young women to participate in community activities and as volunteers:

“

Branch Development
in the Georgia RC

A big problem in our municipality is young marriage. We work on this problem. We arrange presentations for volunteers and for their parents about young marriage, explaining the negative effects of young marriage. We also arrange theatre plays on such social issues... and the parents are very emotional to see their children on the stage. And in this way and through this important work with youth, communities from different ethnicities come to trust the branch.

“

Submission to branch
development special
event: former Youth
Chairperson, Nairobi
County Branch, KRCS

How are our volunteers able to deliver an inclusive service when they cannot communicate to the intended recipients of the service? I was able to spark the conversation around inclusivity with the target being the deaf community and initiate online volunteer-led sign-language training sessions for our volunteers during the COVID-19 period, and currently weekly one-on-one sessions are conducted at the branch. We also received sponsorship to obtain certification for some staff and volunteers. Through this initiative, we were able to engage more with persons from the deaf community and enhance the perception of the branch as a safe space for engagement for all.”



Strengthening branch financial transparency

The need to demonstrate strong financial management to stakeholders recurs across cases. The Ukraine Red Cross Society (URCS) developed and disseminated internal policies, guidelines and tools to strengthen branch transparency and accountability, and introduced an accountancy position at Regional Branch level to support local transparency.

SRCS also went through a process of financial management strengthening with support from the IFRC, ICRC, British and Norwegian Red Cross Societies. This included:

- Development of SRCS Draft Finance Management & Procurement Manuals;
- Migration to a uniform accounting software;
- External audit of SRCS accounts and financial statements;
- Training of SRCS finance management staff.

Two SRCS branches described the impact of this investment on their internal processes:

“

Final Report:
National Society
Development Initiative
Evaluation in the
Somali Red Crescent
Society, 2019–21

From two years ago when there was no regular financial reporting, we now produce a financial report each month, pay salaries on time and discuss reports with all Departments on a weekly basis”.

We now have active standard operating procedures to maintain our transparency and integrity.

An example from the Kirinyaga Branch, KRCS, illustrates how efforts to strengthen local transparency can be driven from within the branch, without external resources:

“

Key Informant
interview

The Kirinyaga Branch does not receive project funding from partners. The County Coordinator described how important financial accountability and transparency are in order for the branch to attract local resources. He put in place activities to share information on how the branch uses locally donated funds following requests from local donors. Now the branch requests slots to speak at local leaders’ meetings, sharing videos, images and stories with local media. Branch members and volunteers are trained and confident to share stories of what they do with family and friends to help promote the branch’s work.

In one year, the Kirinyaga Branch trebled its income from local sources, raising more than KES 2 million (CHF 11,500) in 2023, which covers staff salaries, volunteer expenses, community services such as clean-ups, blood donations and food drives, as well as branch development activities.”



LEARNINGS

STRENGTHENING COMMUNITY TRUST AND ACCEPTANCE

- Activities to strengthen branch trust and acceptance in communities correlate with improved access to vulnerable communities, and increases in locally generated income
- While some interventions may be nationally led, or require national-level processes, for example a national Community Engagement and Accountability programme in the KRCS, other initiatives can be locally designed and led

Extending reach

Setting up community units

The humanitarian business model described in “[Branches and branch development](#)” functions around a hub and spoke model: branches functioning as distribution hubs from which aid (often provided from international partners) is shipped to affected communities. Branches are not necessarily active in communities outside their immediate vicinity, unless specific funding enables them to travel (potentially long) distances to reach far-away communities. It is not unusual to find branches covering thousands of square kilometres and very large populations without the resources to regularly access distant communities.

Intervention to design, test and replicate sustainable local branches

In Burundi, an intentional process was put in place to design, test and replicate a model for a sustainable local Red Cross branch in each of Burundi's 3,000 communities. This involved creating a narrative around the Red Cross' humanitarian values which aligned to traditional cultures of mutual aid within communities. In pilot communities, the CRB worked to inspire and mobilise local leaders, and support them to design ways of working that would be understood as locally owned within the communities, and could be sustained with local resources.

Once initial units were carrying out simple services in pilot communities, the idea was spread through a managed process, but also through communities spontaneously copying what they saw from their neighbours. In parallel with the rapid creation of 2,920 new community structures, the CRB had to develop guidance and support structures to ensure the sustainability of the new local branches ('colline units'), and has worked since 2008 to continue to maintain and develop these branches, which have become the frontline of local Red Cross activity.

One key informant describes the colline unit as 'the gateway to the Burundi Red Cross', mobilising volunteers to assist the most vulnerable people in the locality, and resourcing three types of regular services through local resources:

- 'Acts of solidarity' such as digging a field, mending a shelter, or fetching water and wood for vulnerable people;
- Self-help activities which typically raise resources for the unit and for participating volunteers, for instance growing crops on land donated by authorities, or selling labour to raise shared funds;
- Community-development activities, such as contour mapping and tree planting for environmental protection.

In addition to locally designed and led activities, branch structure also provides disaster-response services:

“

Key informant
interview

30 km from the provincial branch, lightning struck several schoolchildren in a classroom one afternoon. Six pupils died and several were injured. The provincial and community branches mobilised the emergency services to join other responders in helping the injured. With our ambulance, we helped transport the injured to health facilities. The other paramedics helped the population transport the dead to the morgues.

Another branch leader describes how the network of existing local volunteers provides a basis for local ownership and sustainability of an international project. Local units exist before and after projects, so are able to retain knowledge and skills transferred through project activities:

“

Key informant
interview

The project ‘DGD/Community Resilience, Action Plan 2022–2026’ operates in three communities and covers 79 colline units, covering 216,750 people. Volunteers from the colline units take ownership of all the planned health, WASH environmental resilience, community resilience and other activities, supervised by the Communal Committees and the Communal Secretary. If the colline units had not existed, the activities carried out through this project would only have lasted for the duration of the project funding.

Humanitarian outcomes from the intervention

Figures for people reached in the CRB Annual Report (2021) underline the extent to which the original intervention, plus interventions to support the local units, have transformed local services over the past 15 years:

- Emergency response services saved 247,564 lives through first aid, assisted 106,825 people in response to various emergencies, and provided shelter to 7,926 people;
- 73 per cent of colline units (2,136) take action to prevent malnutrition, 94 per cent (2,750) have teams specialising in the prevention and community management of HIV/TB and 3,740 households were reached through food-security initiatives. 2,570 households received support for self-build latrines and a further 6,740 received support within the framework of the ‘Model Household’ programme;
- Awareness-raising sessions on the prevention and peaceful resolution of conflicts reached 27,160 people, including 720 opinion leaders such as provincial governors, law enforcement and security officers, and judicial officers;
- 132,651 vulnerable people were assisted using funds generated by income-generating initiatives, and 2,713 of those assisted in turn assisted more vulnerable people;
- 34,362 people received assistance through cash transfers through international projects.

In particular, the fact that four times as many people received cash through locally generated funds than through international support underlines the potential impact of localised humanitarian action, even in very poor communities.

Ongoing work to maintain the network

The creation of the colline units prompted further branch development in the CRB. Statute revision was required to formally define the role of these new units, and how the voices of their members and volunteers contributed to wider National Society governance.

Each provincial branch carries out a Branch Organisational Capacity (BOCA) self-assessment every two to three years to identify actions for its self-development plan. This is carried out at each branch level: in the Mwaro branch, for instance, 111 of 132 colline units are 'well-functioning', meaning that they mobilise more than 50 volunteers to give three to four hours / week in service to vulnerable people, and pay a statutory contribution of 300,000 BIF annually (CHF 90) to the CRB.

An ongoing challenge for the CRB is supporting the nearly 3,000 colline unit leaderships to work in line with National Society policy and values. This requires continuous investment in support, training and communication. In 2021, the CRB received IFRC Capacity Building Fund (CBF) investment to train members of the national committee and all 18 provincial committees in risk management, transparency and accountability, and resource mobilization, in response to identified organisational failings. Support was provided to set up volunteer coaching and learning centres. Centres combine four or five local units, bringing together volunteers for general training and operational experience sharing (peer learning).

However, not all development actions are centrally led:

”

In 2008, only the branch had a physical address. None of the communes had an office, and this was hampering activities to serve the most vulnerable. We launched a campaign to seek land from the local administration, which was granted. We then mobilized volunteers to collect funds and building materials. Now, all 11 communes have physical addresses consisting of offices, small meeting rooms and stores. This facilitates the mobilization and management of volunteers. The equipment is also safe.

Key informant
interview, CRB

Burundi Red Cross
© Siegfried Modola



Individual initiative to set up a branch

While change at the scale reflected in the CRB example required significant external investment over years, an example below shows what one committed individual can achieve:

“

Submission to
branch development
special event:
branch leader,
Zambia Red Cross

When I moved into this district, I discovered that there was no Red Cross Society. I started by mobilizing like-minded individuals. Despite receiving negative sentiments, I and the team never gave up. Last year's World Red Cross Day celebrations gained us some new members. We did not end there, we now managed to arrange all the affiliations required and immediately started pushing for first-aid training which we had in the third quarter and 45 members were trained. We gained confidence such that headquarters recognized our efforts by including us on the list of districts. 78 volunteers participated in COVID-19 sensitization campaigns.



LEARNINGS

SETTING UP LOCAL COMMUNITY UNITS

- There's evidence that setting up sustainable local branches can significantly increase services to vulnerable people through bridging the geographic gap between branches and communities, and allowing National Societies to significantly increase access to local human and financial resources as well as vulnerable people;
- Local branches can be set up through managed or spontaneous processes;
- There's evidence that designing new local structures to be able to function with realistic local resources is a crucial factor in long-term sustainability. In the case of the Burundi Red Cross, this involved alignment with local cultural norms around mutual aid;
- A significant increase in the number of local branches will require changes in how other parts of the branch system function.



Zambia Red Cross Society
© Donna van der Knaap /
Netherlands Red Cross

Becoming more relevant

Delivering relevant services

The services delivered by branches are likely to be what motivates people to volunteer their time or give resources, and what justifies the presence of the branch in a community. Recognition that branches are not delivering relevant services is a recurrent trigger for change in several cases.

In some cases, lack of relevance is a result of poor local leadership. However, in others, this irrelevance or dormancy recurs across most or all branches. Contributory reasons for this include:

- A general lack of focus on responding to current and future community need within the National Society at all levels;
- Political change leading to National Societies no longer being directed and resourced by the state – in particular in post-Soviet countries. The process of redefining National Societies' role is challenging in a culture used to top-down direction and resourcing;
- A culture of branches waiting for centrally or internationally provided direction and resourcing to carry out activities, and of the national level engaging, monopolising and managing incoming funds.

Branch leadership renewal and re-energising

Local leaderships are responsible for ensuring that branches address key issues in their communities. Particularly in small branches, leaderships can become entrenched over time, or overwhelmed and paralysed by the range of tasks that they should be carrying out. In most cases, branches elect their own leaders, so branch leadership renewal can be a delicate topic for the national headquarters and other branch partners, which may explain why it is not addressed in great detail in the case studies.

Branch leadership renewal in the MRCS was a core element of the wider organisational transformation: a statute revision process achieved the separation of governance and management at all levels and the shift to having branch managers appointed by the Secretary General, instead of local boards, protected managers from potential political influence. Significant investments were made in developing the leadership and management skills of branch managers, such as management of local operations, transparency and public engagement. Each year managers must report on their performance and are held to account if they do not meet key performance indicators. Branch managers who are not up to the task are moved on. The professionalisation of branches has improved public trust and support, and allowed branches to extend their services.

Several key informants noted that a regular cycle of elections and limits to the length of time that volunteers can serve in branch governance roles are important tools to ensure regular rotation of branch leaders, and opportunities for communities, through branch memberships, to hold branch leaderships to account.

Developing shared standards and tools to support branch development

To develop a consistent approach to branch development, the GRCS tested and agreed a definition of a 'model branch'. The model was initially agreed in 2013 – and then revised five years later – through General Assembly decisions, meaning that all branches had a voice in defining what they would be held accountable for achieving. (Source: Branch Development in the Georgia RCS.)

How national standards are framed is important: a focus on administrative capacity may encourage branches to focus on internal process, rather than external impact:

“

Branch
Development
in the Mongolia RCS

The MRCS branch development framework takes into consideration the services delivered by the branches, representing 50 per cent of branch performance. The other 50 per cent focuses on branch management. Through this framework, the MRCS has promoted the idea of minimum activities / services that branches must deliver as their contribution to the accomplishment of the National Society's strategic plan. These minimum activities are framed by the organisation's four core programme areas: disaster management, social care and inclusion, public health and youth. The branches each determine the focus and scale of their services and are responsible for raising the required resources in cash and in kind to enable service delivery.

To reinforce national development plans, strategies and policies, all of the National Societies examined use some sort of internal self-assessment tool for branch performance. In most cases, this was the IFRC Branch Organisational Capacity Assessment (BOCA), although the ICRC Safer Access Framework (SAF) may be used in the context of a heightened risk of violence. In other cases, National Societies developed their own tools, sometimes based on BOCA. Data may be shared through a dashboard or publication – partly to promote positive competition and learning between branches.

“

Board member,
in Branch
Development in the
Mongolia RCS

BOCA started at the MRCS in 2014. We knew we had some good branches, but did not know exactly in which areas they had the most strength. Based on BOCA results, we asked branches to make an annual action plan and budget. This was new for them. As a headquarters, we were able to learn how branches were spending money. Now, we use BOCA each year. It is a good tool for monitoring mid-level branches.

Shared assessment and analysis may not just highlight areas of change required at branch and network levels, but also create shared awareness and ownership of the need for change:

”

To strengthen the ownership of the branches over change, in 2015 an updated branch capacity mapping took place of the 34 provincial chapters and 147 district/municipality branches. This once again confirmed significant variations in capacities, a lack of national cohesion between HQ and branches, and the lack of a branch development strategy.

Indonesia Case Study,
“Faster response closer
to communities”

One key informant from the KRCS shared how a change in branch assessment tools, from a centrally led audit to a locally led self-assessment (BOCA in this case), incentivised branch stakeholders to take ownership of their own development. They observed that results were more likely to be owned and acted upon by the branch in a locally led and owned process than if the assessment process was structured as a centralised compliance exercise.

The risks of not having a uniform approach to branch development across the National Society are that the National Society fragments:

”

The KRCS created eight “regions” and organised partnerships to concentrate the efforts of different partners in each, based on their programmatic expertise and appropriate capacity strengthening support. For example, the ICRC was asked to support a region of regular violence and clashes, UNICEF in areas suffering from severe nutritional deficiency, and the PNS supported other regions according to their programmatic specialisations. However, the strategy did not provide optimal results, leading instead to uncoordinated and inconsistent cross-cutting capacity enhancement approaches, a loss of coordination benefits, and more bilateral arrangements with less joint updates.

Kenya Red Cross
Society, “At the centre
of every community”



Indonesian Red Cross Society
© Corrie Butler / IFRC

Strengthening dialogue with local public authorities

The capacity of the National Society to deliver essential health, social care and disaster-risk management services hinges on its auxiliary role, usually defined through legislation. This unique auxiliary mandate allows National Societies to amplify the efforts of public authorities, either by bolstering existing humanitarian services or stepping in when gaps arise. However, an auxiliary role captured in law is only useful if it is operational at branch level.

In Mongolia, the formalisation of the auxiliary role, recognised by law, has enhanced the organisation's legitimacy, resourcing and operational capacity to respond to needs across the country. Regular dialogue to educate local authorities on the Red Cross and its auxiliary status, share information on needs assessment and report on how resources have been used for community activities, nurtures strong, trusting relationships.

“

Key informant, MRCS *During a disaster, we have a legal responsibility to help people affected. NGOs don't have this. Because of Red Cross Law, branches have access to government funding, and land and building space. Good, active branches that are transparent with the public have good public and local government support, but if the branch is lazy and inactive, government support is limited. Our auxiliary role is helping us because in Mongolia, we have a small population and huge territory, and hard-to-reach remote areas. When the Red Cross and the government work together, we do more. During harsh winters, Red Cross distributes food and animal kits, and the local government lends vehicles. And we don't have strong men's teams, but they do, and they help us to get aid to border communities.*

Strengthening local needs assessment

How branches assess and identify local needs and formulate responses affects perceptions of their relevance by communities. In some cases, branch development involved strengthening processes that branches use to identify and respond to need; in others, there are national initiatives to strengthen a programming area where all branches are weak.

In Indonesia, investments in stronger planning skills at branch levels led to an increase in the number of contingency plans developed: In 2013–14, the number of Indonesia Red Cross (PMI) chapters and branches impacted by disasters that had developed emergency contingency and operational plans increased from 61 to 72.

In the Lebanon Red Cross, a new needs assessment process led to new insights in one community:

“

Branch development Case Collection *We established a very scientific community-needs assessment three years ago. We use a statistical software system, household surveys, then once we have our results, we double check with stakeholders to check if the results are reflective of their challenges. With one of our branches, it was done three times. The third time... it was done in a village where there was a high level of drug consumption but this was a taboo for the municipality. When we presented the report to all local stakeholders, they were against what we were saying. Then we said to ourselves, 'Why are we hiding?' After heated debate, they agreed, 'Yes, we do have that issue'.*

As part of a process to focus more on community needs, the KRCS realised that its needs-assessment processes often excluded communities. In responding to emergencies, the KRCS had built a strong reputation for the speed and quality of its disaster response services, but speed had sometimes come at the expense of dialogue with affected communities. In managing development projects, the common practice had been for community dialogue to start during the implementation phase, rather than during project design. The KRCS realised that these practices often led to limited programme outcomes and a sense of disempowerment among communities. The KRCS therefore introduced procedures to strengthen participative-needs analysis in both emergency response and development programming.

One KRCS key informant described how the new participative planning framework affected a water and sanitation project. The involvement of community members both in programme design and through a taskforce to provide course correction during implementation made the branch manager confident that as the KRCS phased out of the project, communities would continue to manage the resources provided.

In developing sustainable local branches, the CRB focused on an approach to needs assessment that was readily understood in local culture, transparent, and led to insights that local units could act on immediately. Local committees met to discuss:

- Who is the most vulnerable person in our community?
- What can we do for them with what we have?

In the context of community tension in a post-conflict environment, this approach meant that decisions on 'acts of solidarity' were transparent within communities, and led to specific actions that local branches could carry out when they met each week.

Developing new services and service delivery mechanisms

New insights into local needs open up opportunities for new services and new ways of working. For example, the outcome of the needs assessment in the Lebanon Red Cross described above was a new way of working within the branch that addressed local needs through partnership, rather than through Red Cross-delivered services:

”

For the first time ever, a local organisation with expertise in drug issues was allowed to carry out an awareness session in the village. The role of the branch was to coordinate. The branch realised for the first time that we identified the need, but we did not need any budget to work on the issue with the community, we just needed to reach out to another organisation with the resources and the expertise. The budget for the needs assessment was very small.

Branch development
Case Collection

In the Ghana Red Cross (GRC), needs analysis led to the development of a service to attend funerals (major social events) and provide hand sanitizer for mourners who had shaken hands with other participants, reducing the risk of disease transmission. The service was cheap to resource, very visible in local communities, and directly related to health needs. This visibility led directly to income-generating opportunities for the GRC: a public official attending a funeral was impressed by GRC volunteers, and approached the GRC to deliver first-aid training as part of driving-licence provision.

Closing services

Community needs change over time, as do the responses and capacities of branches and of other actors. A challenge for branches can be recognising that it is time to phase out individual services, or pass them on to other actors. The risk of not phasing out services when needed is that branches accumulate a portfolio of low-impact services, and are not able to focus resources on having an impact in areas of major humanitarian need.

“

Submission to
branch development
special event:
Branch Leader,
Icelandic Red Cross

When I took over the branch, we had several projects. Soon after I started, my board made the decision to review the projects run by the branch with a few things in mind:

- 1. Did the project fit with RC strategy?*
- 2. Was any other organisation running the same or similar projects?*
- 3. Were we as a Red Cross branch responding to a need that no one else was addressing?*

After going through these questions, we had some hard choices, closing and handing over projects that we had been running for a long time.

We handed over two big projects. One to the city of Reykjavík, and another to an NGO. We closed down many small projects to make room for new projects.

Closing branches

A last resort is to close branches that are not performing, usually following recognition that there is no realistic prospect of these branches becoming active in the short term, and limited resources can better be used elsewhere.

In the GRCS, this led to the number of branches registered with the Georgian authorities being reduced from 75 to 23. In the TRCS, the number of branches was reduced from 750 to 251 in a three-year period. In neither case would this preclude branches being re-founded in the future.



LEARNINGS

DELIVERING RELEVANT SERVICES

- There is a correlation between efforts to deliver relevant services and communities' willingness to resource local branches;
- Committed local leadership remains a key factor in driving local relevance;
- How branches assess need matters – in particular, the extent to which branches engage with communities during needs-assessment processes is likely to determine, among other things, the extent to which communities will continue to support branch activities;
- Services are more likely to be sustained if they are designed to be deliverable based on locally available human and financial resources. The simplest forms of services – organised acts of solidarity – may be particularly relevant in resource-limited environments.



Neyðarvarnir
Disaster Services

Becoming more sustainable

Mobilising local human and financial resources

Effective branches mobilise local human and financial resources to address humanitarian needs. This enables them to respond directly to local needs without outside support. It also pushes them to be relevant and accountable to local community stakeholders.

In a survey of 257 branch leaders globally, 49 per cent said that financial resource mobilisation was their biggest challenge. The next two biggest challenges, accounting for a further 20 per cent of responses, were mobilising and working with volunteers, and engaging with young people. (Source: “Learning from branch voices. Keeping the ear to the ground”).

While branch sustainability is a major challenge for branch leaders, there are many links between effective local resource mobilisation and themes explored in previous pages, particularly how volunteers and communities are understood within the National Society ([“Extending reach: Strengthening community trust and acceptance”](#)), community trust and acceptance of the branch ([“Extending reach: Setting up community units”](#)) and the relevance of the branch activities ([“Becoming more relevant: Delivering relevant services”](#)) Local resource mobilisation is the tip of a much larger iceberg.

In most National Societies, members are the formal supporters of the National Society and the core of the governance process: community members pay a small annual fee in return for a formal voice in National Society governance processes; particularly the right to stand and vote in governance elections. Members may, but do not have to be, volunteers. In some contexts, membership size will be taken as a proxy for community support, so a large membership may mean greater attention from public authorities.

Volunteering can be a regular time commitment, or a one-off activity in response to a specific initiative or event. A good rule of thumb is that most volunteers are likely to be able to offer around three hours a week alongside family and work commitments, but this may vary for unemployed or retired people.

Red Cross Red Crescent volunteer systems can be understood on a spectrum from highly managed, with processes in place that are very similar to western human-resource management systems, to forms of volunteering that are organic, where tasks and leadership emerge from interactions between local volunteers. Both can co-exist in National Societies. The first tends to be relevant in situations where volunteers require high levels of training, and need to act in defined ways (for example, to provide expert disaster response, or implement a project to specific standards). It is resource-intensive to manage. The second is more likely to be in line with local cultures of volunteering – aligning traditional ways in which people in communities help one another with Red Cross Red Crescent values. It is cheaper to run than the first model as it relies on local energy and leadership rather than cash, and hence can scale. The example in the CRB described above builds on this second logic.

While volunteers give their time for free, volunteering often has costs to the organisation. At times, branches may need to buy food or pay transportation costs for volunteers, particularly if they are volunteering outside of their own community. Likewise, the costs of volunteering include adequate training and appropriate protective material.

The Uganda Red Cross Society
© Corrie Butler / IFRC



In resource-poor regions, even small membership fees may be a challenge, as can be the pressures on people to be economically active rather than volunteer their time.

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Volunteers in Uganda are mainly the youth, most of whom are unemployed. While they have the zeal to work, it's critical that the small facilitation [payment of small sums] like airtime, transport etc is available on time. Sustaining volunteers in an environment without a sound financial base is a bit challenging. Some motivating aspects might have financial implications which the branch might not be able to meet.

Submission to
branch development
special event: branch
staff member,
Uganda Red Cross

Strengthening member and volunteer engagement and motivation

Empowering members and volunteers

The extent to which volunteers and members are heard within National Societies affects their motivation and their wellbeing. Listening to members and volunteers can be informal, such as quick chats during activities, or formal.

The Armenia Red Cross Society (ARCS) does not have the resources to employ staff at branch level and invest in heavy volunteer management systems. So, a decision was taken to focus instead on self-led volunteering, empowering local volunteers to identify needs and find the resources to address them. Peer-to-peer support between branches shares inspiration and learning. These approaches are motivational for volunteers, ease volunteer recruitment, and have led to branches that had been dormant becoming active again.

Investment in branch leadership

Leadership involves inspiring people to give their time and resources to support the branch's humanitarian action, ensuring that this action is relevant and impactful, and maintaining the relationship with the wider National Society. Branch leadership roles are taken on by both paid staff and volunteers, and are often informal as well as formally defined. However, ensuring high-quality leadership can be challenging:

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Submission to
branch development
special event:
Branch Leader,
Fiji Red Cross

Succession planning was and continues to be a challenge for my branch. Not only finding good leaders from within our ranks, but also holding on to those who demonstrate the potential to be good leaders in the future. The impact this has had has been the decline in activities that maintain volunteer engagement and interest, a drop in branch governance and administration, and misunderstanding of roles and responsibilities of volunteers/members and executives.

The Armenia Red Cross selected 20 young people to take part in a Youth Leadership Academy with support from the CBF. They were trained in project development and implementation, before proposing their own community projects. Fourteen received seed funding to implement these projects, forming teams with young people who had not been part of the Academy. In the city of Ijevan, a team of young people organized library huts in the city to promote interest in modern writing among young people, and began to share their books within the community. Several participants in the Academy programme have since stepped into branch volunteer leadership roles.

Visible and relevant response to community need and crisis

Multiple stories from branches describe how visible, relevant action, especially in times of crisis, is likely to attract new members and volunteers. Activities do not need to be complex, but they do need to visibly deliver value to the community:

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Submission to
branch development
special event:
Branch staff
member, South
African Red
Cross Society

During COVID-19, a lot of people joined the South African Red Cross as volunteers to help serve hot meals to the people in need, especially those living on the streets. This also attracted corporate companies that assisted with funds for hot meals. Our volunteers are community-based and trusted by community members. Our volunteers became educators during COVID-19 and the community members trusted the information they were sharing.

Developing volunteer skills

Learning new skills may be an attraction for potential volunteers, in particular unemployed young people. Access to training through tools such as the IFRC Learning Platform or TRCS training platform may be an opportunity for volunteers to gain the confidence and skills which may contribute to their long-term employability as well as their capacity as volunteers.

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Key informant
interview,
branch leader,
Burundi Red Cross

We needed volunteers with a variety of profiles to support our volunteers and meet the needs of the community. We started by identifying the profiles, then approached potential volunteers individually, and in most cases, we were successful. As a result, we now have volunteers who are agronomists, foresters, mechanics, teachers, carpenters, etc. All these volunteers share their know-how, which improves the quality and quantity of the services provided at the community level.

Strengthening volunteer management systems

The TRCS has strengthened its branch volunteer management systems so as to have better data on volunteers and their skills, and be able to contact them more rapidly. Prior to 2016, the TRCS was running a manual volunteering system. The system introduced in 2016 brought the branch network into one cohesive online system, incorporating local capacity assessments, and aligning their standard operating procedures and service areas to the nationally adopted systems. Investments in digitalised volunteering systems enabled volunteers to apply, have their profiles checked, undergo personality tests to check their suitability for a range of deployments, receive training in specific areas of interest, and link to online mobile phone app systems to monitor their location, duties performed and real-time feedback on operations. (Source: Turkish Red Crescent, “Preparedness for response – Building sustainable local capacities”.)

Incentivising branches to attract members

Internal National Society protocols can incentivise branches to strengthen their membership bases. How membership fees are divided between organisational levels can encourage or disincentivise local member recruitment. In the Macedonia RC, branch representation at the General Assembly is proportional to the number of members: branches that recruit more members have a greater voice in national-level decision-making. In addition, membership income assigned to the national level is allocated to a branch development fund, to which branches can apply for their own development initiatives.



Developing financial resources

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When a wildfire outbreak occurred in 2022 that affected over 300 households, the branch did not have the resources to support the vulnerable community members. That made the community lose hope in us after believing that the Red Cross is the partner that responds to disasters like this.

Submission to branch development special event: Branch Leader, South Sudan Red Cross

Small-scale volunteer and member fundraising activities

Multiple stories describe how motivated members and volunteers use their time and skills to carry out income-generating activities for the branch. These are generally low-risk activities which build on existing skillsets that do not involve significant capital investment or training of volunteers, such as agricultural activities.

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When we visited one of our groups and discussed sustaining the group, the idea of embarking on agriculture came up and we helped them and a few other groups with seedlings. These they have multiplied through group farming and now helping individuals to cultivate on their own. The difference here is, before now the group wholly depended on monthly subscriptions to raise funds, but now they generate funds from the agricultural produce.

Submission to branch development special event: branch staff member, Sierra Leone Red Cross Society

”

In 2008, the Gitega Branch had a problem with financial resources because even the little we used came from headquarters. The branch adopted a strategy to mobilise financial resources, which consisted of making each volunteer aware of the need to contribute 100 Burundi francs (CHF 0.03) per week. The sum collected was to be paid into the unit's account opened at a recognised financial institution. The purpose of these funds is to assist the most vulnerable people in real time and/or during emergencies, before calling in outside help if necessary. Before the strategy was adopted and generalised, the branch used to help up to 120 vulnerable people a month, but now we help up to 900 vulnerable people a month.

Key informant interview, Branch Leader, Burundi Red Cross

Leveraging relationships with local authorities

Local authorities represent an opportunity for branches to seek ongoing support, in particular if the auxiliary role is well-defined through agreements at national and local levels and there is good ongoing dialogue. Positioning the branch as a local, as opposed to internationally supported actor, may facilitate this process:

The diversification of funding sources has been a major element of branch development in Georgia. In the 2000s, the National Society depended entirely on international funding. Today 24 of the 39 branches have at least three sources of local funding (membership fees, local fundraising and local government support). This diversification has been achieved through extensive relationship-building, advocacy and delivering services that communities need. In turn, local municipalities are keen to support the branch to continue its work.

The National Society has signed 33 memoranda with local state authorities facilitating the provision of office and meeting spaces for branches, as well as funding for maintenance and restoration of these spaces. Local authorities co-funded 31 local projects and services at branch level in 2021, ranging from home-based care, to support to internally displaced communities, and pandemic response activities.

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Branch
Development
in the Georgia
Red Cross Society

At the beginning, branches did not believe that they could attract local resources. Relations with municipalities was like rocket science for them. They could not start raising funds locally. They said, ‘We don’t know how to do that!’ Also, local municipality officials were surprised and curious: ‘So you are the Red Cross and now you are requesting support from us?’ Municipalities saw our role as relief but not long-term social and development activities. For them it was also strange. We had to work hard to position ourselves through our auxiliary role.

In some contexts, local authorities may not be able to support local Red Cross units financially, but may instead provide in-kind resources such as land to support income generation.

External investment in income generating activities

Branches with international partners may attract investment in more substantial income-generating projects: for example, kiosks, guest houses or other small businesses. Some of these align with the social purpose of the branch, others not. Such businesses typically require specific knowledge to run the business effectively, as well as discipline to reinvest earnings to maintain the business. As part of its branch development programme, the Ukraine Red Cross Society invested nationally held funds in promising income-generating activities.

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Submission
to branch
development special
event: Branch
Leader, South
Sudan Red Cross

From 2013 to 2021, the branch was 90 per cent dependent on the ICRC to support its activities and, considering the huge need in the communities, we felt that we had not met our expectations to support the vulnerable communities that needed our assistance. We were not able to reach most of the vulnerable people due to financial constraints.

The Bentiu branch, through the establishment of a guest house, is now able to cover 25 per cent of its operational costs. Through this, the branch is able to buy fuel and maintain its vehicles, and branch staff and volunteers are able to reach vulnerable communities to complement the support that the branch is receiving from national headquarters.

Local corporate social responsibility

Partnerships with the local private sector may provide a source of income for branches. In 2011–13, the proportion of national income to the Red Cross of the Republic of North Macedonia (RCRNM) from the private sector grew from 2 per cent to 7.6 per cent. In parallel to national corporate engagement, branches also built links to local businesses. Their experience was that smaller, local companies did not necessarily have corporate social responsibility (CSR) agendas in the way that national entities did, and that they were often more comfortable donating in-kind rather than cash: this could be staff time through corporate volunteering, or materials.

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Comfy Angel is a mid-sized textile company with 900 employees and is one of the largest donors and supporters of the Prilep branch of the RCRNM. The company has supported the RCRNM's Hunger Day and blood donation campaigns and company volunteers have participated in Red Cross humanitarian activities. The Prilep Red Cross has trained Comfy Angel's employees in first aid. Annually, Comfy Angel has contributed roughly 2,000 euros to the budget of the Prilep Red Cross. After recent floods, it provided duvets and bedding to people in Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina through the Red Cross.

The Red Cross of the Republic of North Macedonia and cooperation with the private sector, 2015

Mobilising in-kind resources

Several stories emphasise that communities support branches through non-financial resources: this might include labour and materials to build an office, or agricultural produce that can be used to support vulnerable people:

”

One way we resource mobilization in our branch was through conducting stockpiling during harvest season since our branch Trans Nzoia County is within the maize-growing region. Stockpiling activity included volunteers and their friends and well-wishers bringing cereal produce to the branch. The cereals which were part of stockpiling were used to feed asylum seekers who were being received at the Kitale reception centre en route to the Kakuma refugee camp”.

Submission to branch development special event: Branch Youth Chairperson, Kenya Red Cross Society



LEARNINGS

MOBILISING LOCAL HUMAN AND FINANCIAL RESOURCES

- Even very poor communities have human and financial resources to support local branch activities;
- Branches that are visible and relevant, accountable to communities and well-led are likely to attract human, financial and in-kind resources. There is a virtuous circle of local resource mobilization: relevant activities and transparency are likely to attract further volunteers and financial and in-kind resources, enabling branches to do more;
- Many activities to strengthen local human and financial resource mobilisation are based on local initiatives; while external financial support can enable investment in capital-intensive income generation projects, such projects are the exception rather than the norm for most branches.

Burundi Red Cross community volunteers

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The volunteers were attracted by the various interventions of the CRB in the community, the various training courses on specific themes such as community-based first aid, community mobilisation around self-development activities, and models of mutual aid within the community. Awareness-raising sessions were organised for the entire population, particularly during meetings organised by the local administration. The people reached by these awareness-raising sessions asked to join the CRB Kayanza Branch. The number of volunteers has grown steadily from 44,018 (2016) to 52,978 (2022). This initiative has been successful thanks to the bravery of the various members of the provincial committee, communal committees and hill committees involved.

From this process of attraction, I learnt that there are many people in the community who want to help the vulnerable. We just need to find a safe channel for them.

All these volunteers are mobilisable resources for the development of the Branch. They are the ones who are building the various provincial and communal offices. They are actively involved in mobilising aid for the vulnerable. Many services are offered to the most vulnerable. They are role models for the rest of the population in prevention and community development activities.

Key informant interview, branch leader, Burundi Red Cross

Enabling action

Strengthening the network of branches



You have to stop competition between headquarters and branches. Each level cannot do everything. Emergency programmes need to be national. Other programmes should be delivered only locally. This balance can be reached. For whatever event, headquarters has to be clear on its role and the branch has to be clear on its role. This helps to create unity.

Charting the future of branch development

A recurring theme of cases and interviews is how creating an enabling national environment can accelerate branch development. Not getting this right can mean a duplication of roles at multiple levels, confusion for external partners as to which part of the National Society they should be interacting with (particularly when discussing funding opportunities), poor data sharing and understanding of the consolidated reach and impact of the National Society, and mistrust and a poor working atmosphere within the National Society that limits development.

Defining relationships between different National Society components

Several of the cases reference revision of National Society statutes to support branch development. This revision often involves better defining the roles and responsibilities of national and branch levels to improve collaboration and coordination. A regular issue faced by National Societies is that, as public authorities restructure local administrations, branches' geographical areas may no longer correspond to local administrative structures, requiring revision of National Society statutes to ensure that branches have clear administrative counterparts in order to perform their auxiliary roles.

To better respond to local needs and strengthen national capacity to oversee implementation of agreed priorities, the MRC revised its statutes to:

- Expand state branch representation in the national board and local branch representation on state boards;
- Give greater responsibility to branch governance and management to contribute to the development of national plans, and implement and report on locally developed plans;
- Give more power to the national board in designing and implementing national strategies;
- Give clearer roles to the secretary-general to manage the implementation and monitoring of national rules and regulations.

This enabled the MRC to implement a national compliance module and introduce a national operations information management system in 2023. (Source: Mexican Red Cross, "Closer to the people" and key informant interview.)

Both in the URCS and MRCS, statute revision saw formalisation of the expectation that local branches will be responsible for attracting the resources both for themselves to be self-sustaining, and for them to contribute to financing other organisational levels.

“

Capacity Building
Fund Report 2021–22

A change in leadership in the Dominican Red Cross (DRC) brought a renewed focus on working together as one National Society. There was disconnection between the national headquarters with its focus on national programmes, and the community organization of the DRC. It was not clear how many branches made up the National Society. The DRC used CBF investment to work with branches to develop simple visual materials describing the Fundamental Principles, objectives, priority groups and other basics of the Red Cross Movement, so that staff, volunteers and people helped by the DRC would have the same understanding of the National Society. The DRC developed a basic planning process so that each branch could plan and share its annual plans with the national headquarters. In the first year of implementation, 26 of 145 DRC branches produced annual plans.

The learning from this was that it will take time until all branches see the purpose of working together and have developed trust in the national headquarters. However, important information is already emerging. Ten of the 26 branches work with pregnant teenagers – a theme that was not on the radar of the national headquarters. It seems probable that DRC branches are working in different ways with this vulnerable group, meaning that the Red Cross may be giving different messages in different parts of the country. Having identified this, the National Society has the opportunity to work in a more harmonious and coherent manner.

Supporting peer learning between branches

Several cases describe the value of mechanisms that encourage branches to learn from one another, complementing centralised efforts to support branch development. An interviewee from the Burundi Red Cross describes two dynamics that the National Society seeks to foster at all levels: a sense of positive competition between branches to encourage innovation; but also mechanisms that promote cooperation through sharing and peer learning. Such mechanisms are likely to be important when centralised resources are inadequate to provide individualised support to large numbers of branches.

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Key informant
interview,
Branch Manager,
Burundi Red Cross

One thing I learned was how Kayanza branch mobilizes resources. With the maize harvest, each volunteer was asked to bring two ears of maize. These cobs were then put together to form a large quantity. One part was then sold and the other constituted a strategic stock for a possible emergency. We did the same in the Gitega branch, and now have a large quantity of maize and beans. This has made it possible to set up an emergency stockpile and assist the most vulnerable without calling on outside help in case of emergency.



Ten years of branch development in the Mexican Red Cross

The Mexican Red Cross (MRC) comprises 34 state-level branches, with each state branch supporting further local delegations, totalling 494 nationally.

Since 2014, the MRC had recognised gaps in public humanitarian service provision, requiring a new role for branches in their communities, and a balance between response to local needs, and national cohesion. Early stages of the programme included:

- An inventory of branch services aligned all existing previously uncoordinated local services to the MRC's newly defined core services;
- Confirmation of service relevance ensured that every service or "project" responded to a community issue identified in the updated needs assessment, and linked it to a sustainability strategy;
- A mapping of branch assets supported development of sustainability plans to retain them.

In 2017–18, the MRC adapted and rebranded the IFRC's Branch Organisational Capacity Assessment (BOCA) process to accelerate internal change, marketing the process as an opportunity for all state and local branches to "know who they are, and how to better align to their new Strategy 2016–2020". Through the process, the MRC realized that it needed to strengthen the capacities of branch decision makers.

The challenge in a big and diverse country, in which state branches had significant autonomy, was to create a development programme which both attracted state branches to participate, while at the same time encouraging alignment and cohesion within the National Society, while leaving space for local diversity.

We carried out research into why some branches were resistant to change. What we found was that some were frightened that they would lose power and influence, or lose their jobs, as they did not have the skills that would be needed in the future. At the same time, many understood the need to change to remain relevant, and to mobilise resources. We learned that we needed to spend time building understanding and ownership among branch leaders, and to support branch leaders to develop skills to help them manage change.

”

Mexican Red Cross, “Closer to the people”, and key informant interviews

The MRC created an internal branch certification process. State branches would be certified at three stages:

- When branches had completed internal and external capacity and needs assessments;
- When branches had turned diagnosis and analysis into action plans;
- When branches started implementing their plans and reporting on both humanitarian activities and branch and delegation capacities through the MRC internal reporting system.

This process was supported by the creation by the new role Branch NSD Commissioners: paid staff employed by state branches, with the responsibility to facilitate and support continuous improvement within branches. Commissioners are trained together, but also provide peer support to one another. When commissioners have undertaken an activity in their own branches, they can support a neighbouring state with a similar activity.

In the case of the Guanajuato State branch, a large branch covering 23 local delegations across a wide geographical area, completing the initial and planning phases of certification led to realignment of branch activities, including closure of activities that were no longer fully relevant, or could no longer be prioritised with available resources. The Guanajuato branch then became the first of the state branches to cascade the programme to align local delegation priorities across the state.

Describing the process to date, the MRC Branches Coordinator highlighted the long-term nature of the process, which has its roots in decisions the MRC took in 2014: “It has taken time to understand the motivations of branches. Some do not see the need for development. Currently, 22 out of 34 branches have recruited NSD Commissioners – they must pay for these roles themselves, so it is a good indicator for how serious they are about change. The chance of certification is an incentive for branches!”

Inducting and training branch leadership

The cases do not provide much detail on how the National Societies train and support branch leaderships, although leadership training is regularly mentioned as an ongoing intervention. Training enables standardized procedures to be shared across a branch network, as well as providing opportunities for peer learning. Inducting, training and supporting large numbers of regularly changing volunteer branch leaderships is a particular challenge in resource-poor settings.



Capacity Building
Fund Report 2021–22

The CRB applied for CBF investment to train members of the national committee and all 36 provincial committees in risk management, transparency and accountability, and resource mobilization, and to set up volunteer coaching and learning centres. These centres group together four or five local units, bringing together volunteers for general training and operational experience sharing (peer learning). Initial results of this investment are encouraging. The CRB regularly carries out a branch self-assessment exercise. Results show that in 2022, 80 per cent of branches met the “well-functioning” standard, compared to 70 per cent the previous year. CBF investment was described as a major driver of this improvement.

Investing in shared IT systems across the National Society

IT offers opportunities for rapid communication and data sharing between branches and national offices, underpinning shared financial management, resource allocation and transparency. However, investments are often capital-intensive and require significant expertise to make work.

Maintaining the network of 183 Red Cross of Serbia (RCS) branches requires constant adjustment and revision of business systems, and training. Data and communication are the key to effective decision-making for the National Society working in a coherent manner between different levels, and between local branches. The RCS had already started investing in Office 365 prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. As COVID-19 restrictions took place, the RCS had to move communications, governance and training functions online. Through the pandemic, data collection and the flow of information improved, as reporting systems and templates helped the RCS to report on time to different stakeholders.

This experience encouraged the RCS to continue updating its digital capacities. The RCS used CBF support to:

- Upgrade existing hardware in 25 branches to be able to access the cloud and e-office;
- Train staff from branches and RCS IT support hubs in use of the technology.

This investment has enabled the RCS to become more unified through more efficient and effective communication and data sharing between different levels. However, change takes time. While some branches are making full use of the new systems, others are taking more time to adapt to new ways of working.

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Since using our new e-documentation system, we can now see our branches, their members and active volunteers, and how they are meeting certain criteria. They have 54 goals and agreed that if you don't meet the criteria, you are at risk of closure. We introduced a five-day leadership training session and a branch-to-branch peer support portal.

Turkish Red Crescent,
“Preparedness for
response – Building
sustainable local
capacities”

LEARNINGS



STRENGTHENING THE NETWORK OF BRANCHES

- Creating an enabling environment that encourages branches to develop themselves within an agreed National Society framework is a critical aspect of branch development;
- Mechanisms that incentivise and support innovation and learning between branches complement centrally led planned change processes;
- Information technology provides a ‘glue’ that can connect branches to facilitate information sharing and data collection, and promote unified and coordinated action within the National Society.

© Turkish Red Crescent Society





MOVEMENT PARTNER SUPPORT TO BRANCH DEVELOPMENT





Kenya Red Cross Society
© IFRC

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KRCS Regional
Branch coordinator
at the Kenya Red
Cross Society, “At
the centre of every
community”

In the early days of 2002 onwards, our national and branch structures and systems were weak. Branches were mainly working autonomously, heavily dependent on international donor funds often provided by multiple partners to selected branches, with limited local resources and no knowledge-sharing between them. Some felt that, ‘If you don’t have a donor-funded programme, you don’t have a branch’, even though several continued with traditional local activities of first aid training and promoting voluntary blood donation.

Movement partners work with and through branches in other National Societies in a variety of contexts. These include long-term partnerships with National Societies (decreasingly, with individual branches), response to conflicts, natural disasters, and protracted crises and emergencies. In some partnerships, the focus is on achieving programmatic goals; in others, the long-term development of the National Society and / or its branches is an explicit aim of the collaboration. Other partnerships involve peer exchange, ranging from opportunistic mutual learning to formalised twinning programmes between National Societies, often managed at branch rather than national level.

Partner support includes a body of case material and tools developed internationally to help guide and inspire National Societies and branches in their development. Examples include tools such as BOCA and SAF, as well as the case material on which this report is built.

This section explores the dynamics around partner support for branch development. It relies more on desk research than other sections, primarily because National Societies are understandably reticent to critique partners given the financial support provided through these partnerships. It is important to remember that it is still a small minority of branches that receive direct support from partners.

Types of Movement partner support to branch development

The cases reflect different types of support provided by Movement partners to National Societies and branches:

- High-level support influences branch and National Society leaderships, supporting them to identify and analyse challenges, and formulate responses. This type of support can be informal, such as a phone call between peers or a casual coffee-break discussion on the edges of a meeting with a senior international staff member. Alternatively, it may come through formal missions conducted by peers or international staff. At times, this support is explicitly funded by partners, for instance through peer exchanges;
- Technical support facilitates 'how-to' knowledge and experience in technical areas and in planning and leading change. The cases illustrate the application of global guidance and tools such as those related to Community Engagement and Accountability (CEA), or self-assessment. Additionally, they showcase how knowledgeable individuals share their experience across different contexts. These individuals may be from international partners, or increasingly from peer branches within a National Society or from sister National Societies;
- Financial support to development processes. Sometimes this is in the form of dedicated project funding with specific goals agreed with a donor (for example, the BRaVo programme supporting URCS), in others a small component of programmatic funding is allocated to an aspect of branch development. In such cases, this often prioritises investment in activities that support project implementation, rather than wider (and potentially more pressing) aspects of branch development. In some cases, funding is accessed by National Societies through the CBF and National Society Investment Alliance (NSIA).

Over the course of the interventions described, partner support might include several of these modalities.



*Red Cross of The Republic of North Macedonia
© Caroline Haga / IFRC*

Coordination in support of branch development among Red Cross Movement actors

Cases and interviews suggest that there is no one common approach to coordinating support to branch development. In some contexts, Movement partners work together in conjunction with the National Society to address major issues, in others, the National Society manages a series of bilateral relationships to attract resources, but does not bring partners together to coordinate. Both approaches can be seen to work.

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Submission to
branch development
special event:
Branch Project
coordinator, South
Sudan Red Cross

There was no toilet, training hall and staff capacity building. Then, the Rumbek branch developed a BOCA in 2018 to help the branch in terms of development and capacity building, and we were able to build a toilet with funding from the ICRC. We constructed a training hall which can accommodate 50 participants, and funded training of branch staff, volunteers and board members, and recruitment and dissemination of new volunteers in the branch with funding from the Finnish Red Cross through headquarters and branch relationships.



South Sudan Red Cross
© Conor Ashleigh

Approaches by Movement partners that undermine branch development

Through cases and interviews, a number of Movement practices surfaced that undermine branch development. They often stem from a failure to think of branches as complex systems, instead focusing on narrow understandings of branch capacities, and creating unintended consequences which impede development:

A focus on projects

Internationally funded projects typically introduce significant resources into branches, often tied to objectives determined outside of the branch and without community involvement. Such projects may undermine aspects of long-term branch development, including autonomy and engagement of branch leaderships, ongoing community dialogue and sustainable volunteering. They may give the impression to the local community that the branch is well-resourced by international partners, rather than dependent on local support for its actions, or focus branch attention on what international partners, rather than local communities, think should happen. They may also take ownership from the branch, leaving dependency on external actors in its place:

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We came to implement this project in a branch that was already existing and was delivering a lot of activities in the community. It was an extremely rural area and very impoverished. Our project was quite large, it provided a lot of funding and we gave per diems to the volunteers. The project brought a lot of good to the community and was able to achieve a lot. But when we went back six months after the project had finished, the branch was doing almost no activities any more. When we asked why, the response was that they didn't have any money or resources to do anything and couldn't get people to volunteer. But when we looked at it, prior to our implementing our project, there were a lot of activities going on, with lots of volunteers. They just mobilised resources from within their own community, getting by with what they had. Our project upset that dynamic, and seemed to have reduced their resilience in the long run as a result.

Global Review
of Volunteering

National Societies such as the CRB with big community bases develop mechanisms to 'protect' their community units from the perverse incentives that funded projects can bring. Examples of strategies used to ensure that external funding integrates within local structures include:

- Careful management of language to avoid use of the word 'project' in communities – in some contexts it has strong associations with international aid;
- Encouraging partners to fund training for all local units, even those that will not receive direct implementation support, so these feel included and may use the knowledge in their own actions;
- Decisions by local units as to which existing volunteers will be selected to carry out paid tasks, and how much they should be paid, with the remainder of the money passing to unit funds.

Conflicting priorities and cultures

“

Branch Key informant

[An international partner] has been working with us for 25 years. We should be able to do more than we can.

Just as branch development often involves cultural change within branches and National Societies, some Movement partners remain in a culture that prioritises short-term delivery at the expense of long-term development. Particularly in protracted crises, opportunities to develop the autonomy and sustainability of branches are missed, and branches may develop cultures of dependency and disempowerment.

The understanding of branches as implementing partners as opposed to long-term local actors is often reflected in the way that partners exit relationships with branches:

“

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Seven years on, one branch key informants (KI) was still visibly angry that one exit had saddled the branch with debts to local tradespeople.

In one case, the decision to withdraw was made six months before withdrawal. An agreement was then made that the partner would fund two significant resource mobilisation activities within the branch. In this case, NSD support would appear to be being used as a ‘thank you’ present – but if resources were available, then why not support the NSD in a more strategic manner from the start? This approach suggests that the NSD process was not a priority for the partner, and not central to wider partnership strategy.

In another case, the decision to leave the branch (after a much shorter relationship) was communicated to the headquarters, which then failed to retransmit this to the branch, leading to confusion and bad feeling.

Siloed approaches to branch development

As international partners each have their own mandates and interests, support to branches can often align with partner interests, rather than engaging with the branch as a holistic system. The risk is that capacities of interest to one partner may be developed, yet cannot be sustained because the branch's underlying business model has not evolved sufficiently to resource these capacities into the future.

A similar challenge arises when resources are concentrated in some branches within a network, while other branches equally in need of strengthening do not have the same opportunities. This can lead to disparities and tension between branches. In some instances, branches can become stronger than the headquarters, impeding organisational coherence.

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2020 IFRC/ICRC report *Approaching NSD in situations of conflict and protracted crisis*

The focus of some international partners primarily on areas of conflict meant that opportunities for other branches to develop were potentially being missed, which contributed to tension within the NS and increased the risk of organisational collapse once the international presence was scaled down. This suggests a more effective NSD approach could be for partners to focus on ‘whole NS’ NSD rather than just a small proportion of conflict-affected branches in their NSD efforts.



MOVEMENT PARTNER SUPPORT TO BRANCH DEVELOPMENT

- While much branch development is nationally and locally conceived and resourced, the right support to National Societies and branches can catalyse and accelerate transformative change in local services. In particular, significant financial investment from Movement actors and other partners may enable change that is beyond the reach of many National Societies;
- There is, however, evidence that not all partner support leads to stronger branches, in particular in contexts where:
 - » Branch development is not seen as a priority for the partner and / or National Society;
 - » Partner and National Society do not consider how programmatic support influences the long-term development of the branch;
 - » The partner invests bilaterally in a specific branch, without due consideration of the wider organisation;
 - » The branch is not ready for change internally.
- Partner support to branch development is more likely to be effective when it aligns with a coherent vision of change within a National Society, and is led by the National Society, with partners willing to invest and be coordinated within this one agenda;
- There are challenges for Movement partners to align support to programmes with the goal of branch development, and to ensure that in short- and long-term humanitarian crises, sufficient focus is given to branch development alongside meeting immediate humanitarian need. In some contexts, it is likely that failure by National Society and partners to align these goals reduces the potential for long-term development of branches;
- Criteria for investment in branch development by partners could include:
 - » Investment is coordinated with or channelled through a wider National Society branch development programme, in line with existing norms and standards;
 - » Investment builds on the branch's existing efforts. There is evidence that the branch has a culture of self-development, and is taking steps to strengthen its own capacities through its own efforts;
 - » Investments do not disturb existing incentives that enable the branch to take action without external support;
 - » Investments create capacities that are sustainable by the branch with the resources it can obtain through its own efforts, and are sustainable in terms of local culture and understandings of the branch as a local organisation.



Conclusion

This learning report highlights the iterative, long-term effort required to strengthen local Red Cross Red Crescent branches in a way that can be sustained over time and leaves them more able to respond to local crisis and development needs. It identifies interconnected areas of intervention that local leaderships, supported by national and sometimes international actors can address to support long-term change. As well as management tools and approaches, these include deeper issues such as community trust and acceptance, and organisational understanding of local action, which form the bases of any successful local organisation.

Attributing changes in local services to individual branch development interventions is challenging, and not possible for every type of intervention, yet it is often possible to link individual branch development interventions to positive change in service delivery. At National Society level, data showing the numbers of people reached and locally mobilised resources often correlate to long-term investment in branch development. Yet few National Societies systematically collate basic data on local services and local resource mobilisation over time. Strengthening internal systems to do this would support the internal understanding of the effects of overall National Society development work (including branch development) over time, as well as potentially providing evidence for supporters of the importance of long-term investment in National Society Development.

The learning report sketches out a series of interrelated areas of intervention that support long-term branch development, both at branch and National Society level. (See [Figure 2](#) on page 20)

- Cultures of how vulnerable people, communities and branches are seen matter in determining how National Societies and branches structure and resource themselves, and the messages that they send to communities and other stakeholders. A **shared culture of how National Societies will interact with local communities and mobilise local people to resource and carry out local humanitarian action** is the basis for branch development.
- There is evidence **that strengthening branch trust and acceptance in communities** improves programme quality and the resourcing available to branches, enabling them to achieve more. There are multiple facets to this work, ranging from national policy and guidance, to local initiatives to build relationships and dialogue, involve people from new groups within communities, listen better and demonstrate accountability.
- The Burundi Red Cross case represents a transformational effort by a National Society to **localise its branch structure within communities, rather than at a geographical distance, and designing these local branches to be sustainable through local resources**. The massive, sustained increase in the number of people reached by the National Society suggests that other National Societies might consider whether they are allocated close enough to communities to effectively mobilise human and financial resources.

- Choosing the **right services to deliver is a major strategic question for branches**. The 'wrong' services can lead to demotivation, limited local resource mobilisation and eventual branch dormancy. Services that do not meet local needs, or replicate services provided by other organisations are unlikely to attract the resources to sustain themselves. Yet developing new services can be challenging, as branches may not have the resources to invest in needs assessment, service design, business planning and initial start-up costs.
- Successful **local resource mobilisation can be thought of as a virtuous circle**: branches that offer visible and relevant services to communities, that are accountable and well-led, are likely to attract human, financial and in-kind resources even in the poorest environments. These resources enable them to do more. Investments that build understanding and confidence among local leaders in their role in attracting and managing local resources, provide them with simple tools to adapt to their contexts, and in some cases invest in activities that can provide sustained income to the branch over time, are likely to be successful.
- How **a National Society structures its branch network** can catalyse development through clear responsibility, accountability and incentives for branch performance, and sharing, learning and positive competition between branches. Conversely, inflexible, centralised structures are likely to disincentivise the local initiative and adaptation necessary for local branches to flourish. While adaptation of National Societies' statutory instruments, policy and culture takes time to affect branches and how they function, defining these relationships is critical to supporting branches and branch services that are sustainable and effective in the long term.
- While much branch development can and should be conceived and managed by National Societies, **support by Movement partners can catalyse and accelerate sustainable change**. This is particularly true for interventions which require financial investment beyond the reach of National Societies. However, not all Movement support leads to development: there are examples, particularly in protracted and sudden crises, where international support ignores and eventually undermines local capacity and autonomy.

Annex 1

List of sources

National Society cases and evaluations

Title	Year	Weblink (if available)
Armenia Red Cross: Self-led volunteering as an approach to re-activating branches	2023	Link
Building sustainable local capacity in the branches of the Burundi Red Cross	2011	
A Red Cross unit in every community: developing a countrywide community volunteer network in Burundi Red Cross	2013	Link
Branch Development in the Georgia Red Cross Society	2021	Link
Indonesia Case Study “Faster response closer to communities”	2021	Link
Kenya Red Cross Society “At the centre of every community”	2021	Link
Lebanese Red Cross “Communities as first responders”	2021	Link
Evaluation of Capacity Building Fund support to organizational change in the Macedonian Red Cross 2008–11	2014	
Mexican Red Cross “Closer to the people”	2021	Link
Branch development in the Mongolia Red Cross Society	2021	Link
Final Report: National Society Development Initiative Evaluation in the Somali Red Crescent Society, 2019–21	2022	
Turkish Red Crescent “Preparedness for response – Building sustainable local capacities”	2021	Link
National Society Development in the Ukrainian Red Cross Society, 2016–19		

Generic publications on branch development and volunteering

Title	Year	Weblink (if publicly available)
257 Stories from Branch Leaders	2023	Link
Branch Development Case-Collection	2022	Link
Capacity Building Fund Report 2021–2022	2023	Link
Charting the Future of Branch Development	2022	Link
Global Review of Volunteering	2015	Link
Learning from branch voices	2023	Link
IFRC/ICRC report <i>Approaching NSD in situations of conflict and protracted crisis</i>	2020	

Annex 2

List of National Society key informants

The authors are extremely grateful to the following key informants who generously gave their time to support the development of this learning report.

Organisation	Name	Role
Burundi Red Cross	Aloys Barazingiza	Branch Secretary, Mwaro Provincial Branch
	Daniel Butoyi	Branch Secretary, Kayanza Provincial Branch
	Prosper Ndikumana	Branch Secretary, Gitega Provincial Branch
	Gilbert Nshimirimana	Head of Organisational Development and Disaster Management
Kenya Red Cross Society	Rukia Abubakar	County Coordinator, Turkana County Branch
	Maurice Anyango	Manager, Upper Eastern Region
	Martin Kagunda	County Coordinator, Kirinyaga County Branch
	Caleb Kibet	County Coordinator, Baringo County Branch
	Serah Lekalkuli	Organisational Development Manager
	Gregory Macharia	County Coordinator, Isiolo County Branch
	Joe Mbalu	(at time) Head of Organisational Development
	Evelyn Munyao	Monitoring, Evaluation, Accountability and Learning (MEA&L) Officer, Upper Eastern Region
	Oskar Okumu	Monitoring and Evaluation Coordinator
	George Opidi	County Coordinator, Kisumu County Branch
	Dalia Álvarez	PMER Commissioner
	Ana Bermúdez	Chief of Staff
	Juan José Tovar	Branches Coordinator
Mongolia Red Cross Society	Bolormaa Nordov	Secretary General

Annex 3

Measuring branch development – a proposal

From the project terms of reference:

“The methodology used for the Branch Development Study should be documented, as a template which in the future can be used by the NS and their branches to assess the impact of their own branch development work/journey/ investment.”

“A description of the methodology used for the analysis of the outcome and impact of different branch development efforts designed as a template which in the future can be used by the NS and their branches to assess the impact of their branch development journey and support received, if relevant.”

The following powerpoint slides reflect the research team's proposal:

Understanding the challenges

- Challenges of measuring community impact without significant investment in research capabilities: unlikely to be financially viable at scale;
- Some interventions will take years to work through the system, particularly from national level;
- Multiple interventions, making attribution impossible without significant investment in research capabilities;
- Time and capacity required for National Societies to extract and make sense of data, and level of utility to National Societies.

Why might it be useful to know?

For NSs:

- Are we moving in the right direction? Are development efforts leading to change in local services / resourcing?
- Are there recurring issues 1) in one branch, 2) across the system?
- Is there positive deviance that we could learn from?
- How can we demonstrate our reach and impact to partners?

Proposal (1) Branch services

Service level data collection every (6 months)

Per branch service:

of volunteers giving at least 6 hours to service delivery

of volunteers giving at least 6 hours to lead / manage service

of people reached 1+ times during time period

Branch level data collection (every 6 months)

locally generated income

members as per NS Statutes

Proposal (3) Branch challenges and successes

6-monthly questionnaire to branch leaders + anyone in the branch who is interested.

- What is the biggest challenge your branch is currently facing? (menu)
- Tell us about a time when this challenge limited your humanitarian activities
- Tell us about a time that you did something that made you proud in your branch in the last 6 months
- What happened? How did this help your branch to deliver services to your community?
- Is there something you would like to share with another branch?

Delivery

This could be SMS delivered, or through SurveyMonkey or similar.

Data could be collated and analysed rapidly, with outputs to:

- Identify individual branch and system level challenges
- Identify examples of positive deviance
- Feed peer learning mechanisms
- Support NS leadership decision-making.

Our suggestion is that this would be tried and refined within some branches within a NS.

Icing on cake: 'survey to friends of RC'

Annual survey to (3) key partners nominated by branches

Questions on perception of branch relevance and impact

- Tell us about a time when the branch took the lead in addressing a humanitarian challenge.
 - » What was the challenge the branch was addressing? How did it meet community needs? How did this activity change your perception of the branch?
- Tell us about a missed opportunity for the branch to respond in your community.
 - » How would you like to see the branch responding to this need with local resources? What would need to change? How could you support the branch to address this opportunity?

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.