NSD

Branch Development Learning Report
Key learnings

SUMMARY

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Introduction

The local level of the Red Cross Red Crescent Movement ('the Movement') comprises an estimated 188,000 local structures ('branches'). Local branches are where most Red Cross / Red Crescent services are designed and delivered. Branches are often the first responders to local crises, delivering health and social-care services, and carrying out acts of solidarity and kindness that bring communities together. Branches contribute to communities' preparedness for crisis, health and well-being, and long-term resilience on an ongoing basis as part of the fabric of the community.

Each National Red Cross Red Crescent branch is responsible for developing itself in line with national structures and guidance. Many National Societies have explicit programmes to support branch development. Other Movement actors provide a range of support including technical tools and guidance for local adaptation, experience sharing with peer branches, and financial investment, including Movement funds such as the IFRC Capacity Building Fund and joint IFRC / ICRC National Society Investment Alliance (NSIA).

A fraction of branches receive support from international partners: the majority rely on the human and financial resources that they can mobilise from national activities, or within the communities they serve to support their humanitarian activities.

This paper summarises key learnings from a recent Learning Report reviewing Movement experiences of strengthening the reach, relevance, sustainability and accountability of local services, and the branches that develop and manage these services. It draws on examples and quotes from case studies and evaluations covering 13 National Societies since 2010, as well as interviews and written experiences shared with an additional 200+ branch leaders.

It highlights that branch development is a long-term process that often involves changing perspectives and mindsets as much as it involves investment in material or human capacities. Successful branch development often involves interventions at multiple levels and in complementary aspects of branch functioning, in order to sustainably strengthen the branch.

Designing humanitarian services so that they can be executed with locally available human and financial resources is a critical aspect of branch sustainability. Services are more likely to be sustained if they are designed to be deliverable with the human and financial resources available within communities. The simplest form of services – organised acts of solidarity – may be particularly relevant in resource-limited environments as the most basic branch activities.

One challenge is that many organisational development interventions do not relate directly to local services, so attributing changes in service delivery to specific interventions is often not realistic. At the same time, big-picture analysis of National Society service delivery over time regularly shows that branch development correlates in increased numbers of people reached, and local structures that are more capable of sustaining their humanitarian activities.

As well as speaking to a Movement audience, the report captures learnings relevant to any organisation seeking to support local actors to become stronger, more sustainable and more humanitarian.

How do branch development interventions lead to positive change in community services?

National Society Development (NSD) is 'the continuous effort of each National Society to achieve and maintain an accountable and sustainable organisation that delivers – through volunteers and staff – relevant services to address needs, reduce vulnerabilities and build resilience in a changing environment'. (IFRC National Society Development Policy, 2022) Branch development is the most localised aspect of NSD, focused on the structures that deliver local services.

Work to strengthen branch and National Society acceptance and security in communities extends 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 the SRCS capacity to negotiate access to vulnerable communities across a patchwork of different local gatekeepers in the country:

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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 needs assessments shapes the services branches deliver and how they deliver these services

The Branch Development Project Manager in the Lebanon Red Cross gives one example for 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:

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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 see if the results are reflective of their challenges. With one of our branches, this 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 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 a 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 carry out an awareness session in the village. The role of the branch was to coordinate it. 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 increase the number of Red Cross / Red Crescent local branches and situating these closer to communities transforms long-term local service delivery capacity

The Burundi Red Cross's experience provides a good illustration of how the right investment can extend the reach of local Red Cross branches. In 2021, four times as many Burundians (132,651) received cash assistance from the Burundi Red Cross through funds generated locally than through internationally provided cash assistance. That year, the 3,000 local branches 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;
- Assistance to 106,825 people in response to various emergencies.

The International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) Capacity Building Fund invested 300,000 Swiss francs in the Burundi Red Cross (CRB) between 2008 and 2011 to develop a countrywide network of local volunteer branches and a support structure for these branches. This initial investment was complemented by further financial support from the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and other Movement partners and was supported by technical advice and encouragement to the leadership of the Burundi Red Cross on how to develop self-sustaining local volunteer branches.

A key aspect of the change was recognition by the Burundi Red Cross leadership that its then business model of project implementation on behalf of international partners did not enable it to provide sustained, local services across the country. It was not present in local communities unless it received project finance, and its organisational stability and community acceptance was under constant threat as partner priorities changed and the organisation moved in and out of communities.

Developing a new, local level to the organisation required new mindsets and ways of working, that focused on mobilising local people to identify and respond to local needs with the resources they could find locally. New partnerships with local administrations and other partners developed. Other levels of the National Society changed roles to focus on supporting this local action through training, encouragement and monitoring.

Fifteen years later, the CRB now mobilises 624,000 volunteers, organised into 2,926 local branches. These branches have sustained themselves for 15 years, mobilising roughly one in 20 Burundians as volunteers. Maintaining this network requires ongoing investment in leadership and management capacities. But the network also represents an opportunity: the Burundi Red Cross is in receipt of a grant from the ICRC and IFRC's National Society Investment Alliance (NSIA) to develop countrywide road safety programming based on its reach and acceptance in communities.

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 its activities, the Kenya Red Cross Society (KRCS) introduced procedures to strengthen its participative needs analysis into both emergency response and development programming. Previously, in managing development projects, the common practice was 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 the project, communities would continue to manage the resources provided.

Kenya Red Cross © Paul Wu / IFRC

What have we learnt about strengthening the sustainability of local branches and their services?

The Movement sees organisational sustainability as key to long-term responsiveness to local community needs and the localisation of humanitarian activities. Sustainable branches can be confident of the human and financial resources to plan for and implement ongoing services, and over time maintain key capacities that enable them to respond rapidly to crisis.

Branches that develop relevant, timely services attract human and financial resources, even in resource-poor communities

Cases reviewed for this study demonstrate that branches that develop relevant, timely services and enjoy community trust have more potential to attract human and financial resources, even in resource-poor communities. This is particularly likely to be the case in times of community crisis:

During COVID-19, a lot of people joined the South African Red Cross as volunteers to help serve hot meals to people in need, especially those living on the streets. This also attracted corporate companies which 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.

Key Informant interview, Kenya Red Cross Society Branch Leader

The South African Red Cross Society
© SARCS / IFRC

Strengthening branch financial sustainability often implies a shift in business model to place greater emphasis on local resource mobilisation, and less reliance on funding from international partners or central government

Many of the branch development examples reviewed involve an implicit shift in business model, away from the branch as a sub-contractor reliant on national or international funding, and towards a business model in which the branch is responsible for resourcing itself primarily through local human and financial resources. In this second model, external support supplements and adds value to existing services, rather than being the branch's primary resource. The organisational shift has significant implications for how communities and service users are seen, and can be schematised as follows:

FIGURE 1:
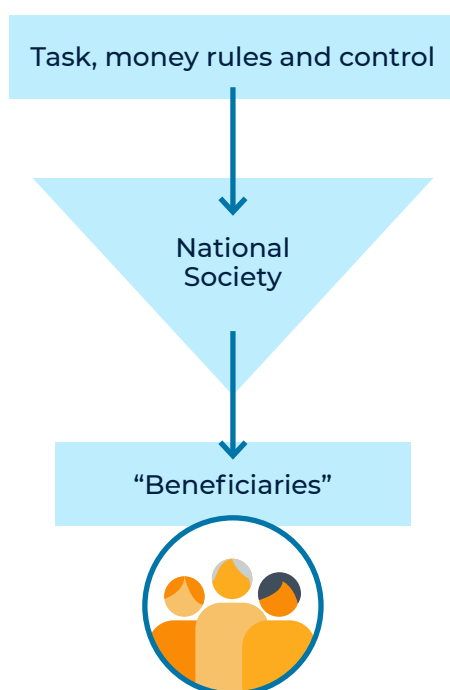BUREAUCRATIC AID
ORGANISATION STRUCTURE

FIGURE 2
LOCAL VOLUNTARY
ORGANISATION MODEL

Task, money rules and control

National Society

"Beneficiaries"

Services / programmes

The community voluntary organisation

Community resources

Initiatives to improve transparency about how resources are used and open dialogue with communities are a basis for branches to strengthen local resource mobilisation and their positioning within communities

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

The Kirinyaga Branch of the KRCS does not receive funding from international partners. The County Coordinator describes how important local financial accountability and transparency are for the branch to attract local resources. Following questions from local donors as to how their donations were being used, he put in place activities to share information on branch activities and expenditures. Now the branch requests slots to speak at local leaders' meetings, sharing videos, images and stories with local media. In addition, branch members and volunteers are trained in how to share their experiences of working with the National Society with family and friends to help promote the branch's work. In one year, the Kirinyaga Branch trebled its income from local sources, in 2023 raising more than KES 2 million (CHF 11,500), which covers staff salaries, volunteer expenses, community services such as clean-ups, blood donations and food drives, as well as branch development activities such as building offices.

Building relationships with local authorities can provide a path for branches to access resources, if authorities perceive National Society services to be relevant and accountable

International partners including the British Red Cross, IFRC and ICRC supported the Mongolian Red Cross Society (MRCS) over a number of years to provide a framework through which the MRCS could partner with local authorities and build branch capacities to engage with and meet local authority requirements.

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 the 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 are 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 receive funds and collaborate well with the government.

Even if public authorities do not have spare financial resources to offer, they can often support through in-kind donations – in this case, land for building:

In 2008, only the branch had a physical address. None of the communes [lower organisational level] 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 mobilised 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 mobilisation and management of volunteers. The equipment is also safe.

Strengthening branch capacity to mobilise local resources can create localised income streams to make branches more financially sustainable and less reliant on national or international funding. Some, but not all, activities, benefit from capital investment from partners

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

Guest houses are examples of capital-intensive income-generating projects that often require financial and technical investment from international partners. As the example below shows, however, such investments can make a significant contribution to the long-term capacity of a branch to resource its own activities, making it less reliant on financial support from donors:

The Bentiu Branch, thanks to the establishment of a guest house [with the support of international partners], 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.

Interventions that strengthen IT capabilities can support branches to be more transparent and work together better with other branches

The IFRC Capacity Building Fund invested in the Red Cross of Serbia to upgrade hardware and train staff across 25 of its 183 branches. This investment by the CBF enabled the RCS to plan and develop capacities in a holistic manner, rather than having to allocate internal funding on a piecemeal basis. Previous investment had enabled RCS to function effectively during the COVID-19 pandemic:

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 key to 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 were put in 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 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.

In the Turkish Red Crescent Society, new systems enabled the national office to monitor branch performance and respond to performance gaps:

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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"

Which internal organisational factors support the development of branches and services?

A number of learnings relate to the organisational characteristics of National Societies that support development of individual branches and of branch systems.

Effective branch development takes place in local, national and international organisational cultures that acknowledge and build on the capacities of vulnerable people

The case of the Georgia Red Cross Society illustrates this cultural change. When the GRCS struggled to respond to the 2008 conflict, this led to a change process within the National Society. The quote below illustrates how national leadership worked to support a change of mindset in local branches to become more self-reliant. During the COVID-19 pandemic, GRCS branches were then able to take leading roles in supporting the public authorities in responding:

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Case Study: Branch Development in the Georgia RCS

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 them how to catch fish, how to find those rivers where the fish come 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.

Georgia Red Cross Society
© Georgia Red Cross

Creating an organisational environment which empowers local leaders to take action is key to successful branch development

At the centre of every successful branch development initiative is local leadership that balances national policy and approaches with local realities and resources, inspires and empowers colleagues, responds to ongoing events, visions and manages change, and mobilises local resources. This example shared by a youth leader in the Nairobi branch of the Kenya Red Cross Society exemplifies how important local leadership is in branch development:

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 one-on-one weekly sessions are being 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 people from the deaf community and enhance the perception of the branch as a safe space for engagement for all.

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

Coordinated support to branch development from the National Society and partners ensures the best use of limited resources and efficiency, while reducing the risk of internal disputes

Adapting National Society statutes to better define the role and responsibilities of branches within the National Society can be an important intervention to create the long-term conditions for growth. To better respond to local needs and strengthen the national capacity to oversee implementation of agreed priorities, the MRC revised its statutes to:

- Expand state branch representation on the national board and in 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 ones;

- 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.

Burundi Red Cross © Alex Wynter / IFRC

Peer learning can be a powerful and cost-effective way for innovation and good practice to spread between branches

The Movement is increasingly facilitating learning between peers as a cost-effective approach to sharing good practice and innovation between branches, both within the same National Society and between National Societies. Peer learning can take place in person, through study visits and meetings, but is increasingly digitally facilitated. This example from the Burundi Red Cross illustrates how simple ideas can move between branches, in this case strengthening the branch's capacity to respond to crisis without external support:

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Key informant interview, Branch Leader, Burundi Red Cross

One thing I learned was how the Kayanza branch mobilises 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 at the Gitega branch, and we 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.

What have we learned about measuring the impact of branch development interventions?

The challenges of attributing the impact on communities to individual interventions within complex organisational contexts are well documented. However, two particular aspects emerge for the Red Cross Red Crescent Movement from the Branch Development Learning Report:

- There is an opportunity to strengthen data collection both at local branch and national levels in many National Societies. This is particularly true for locally developed and led programmes, which do not have the same reporting requirements as internationally funded programmes;

- There are opportunities, and some ongoing initiatives, to develop broader approaches to describing and measuring organisational change at local level. It's likely that a mixture of methodologies will need to be applied to give snapshots of the impact of branch development initiatives over time.

Conclusion

The examples above illustrate how branch development within the Movement strengthens humanitarian services and enhances the human and financial resources of local branches to deliver and sustain these services.

Central to the development of effective and sustainable local branches is a focus on communities as the main source of human and financial resources with which to address local humanitarian challenges. Without this focus, there is a strong likelihood that branch capacities can only be sustained through the provision of national or international funding.

In the context of the wider global dialogue about investment in locally led actors, this paper suggests that there is a strong case for investment in initiatives that build on local branch capacities, as well as in the national capacities which inspire, guide and facilitate them, complementing the efforts of the local branches themselves.