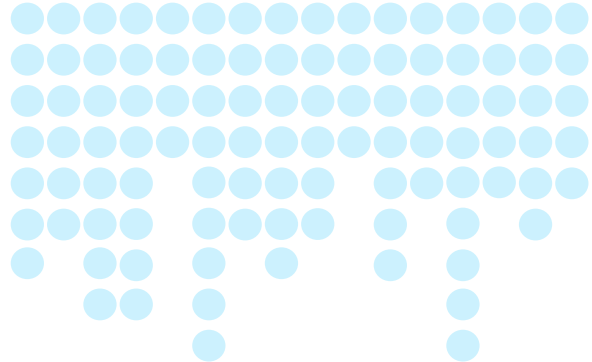




THE IMPACT OF INVESTMENT IN THE AUXILIARY ROLE OF THE MONGOLIAN RED CROSS SOCIETY

Working together in partnership





Executive Summary

A change in leadership at the Mongolia Red Cross Society (MRCS) led to substantive investment in strengthening its auxiliary role. In 2013, in response to the National Society's mediocre reputation and to expand its humanitarian reach and impact, the new leadership team initiated a change programme focused on transforming MRCS's culture, modernising its systems, and strengthening the auxiliary role. Key elements of the change process involved updating the MRCS Law and internal statutes, enhancing corporate governance processes, developing, and decentralising authority to branches, and maintaining a steadfast focus on addressing vulnerability.

Investment in legislative advocacy, humanitarian diplomacy, public advocacy and partnering with public authorities at all levels have been at the centre of MRCS's reinforced auxiliary status. These initiatives have provided the MRCS with the legal, relational, and reputational channels necessary to supplement and, at times, replace the efforts of public authorities in tasks such as

disaster preparedness and response, First Aid, water, sanitation, hygiene and immunisation services, psychosocial and mental health services, and humanitarian assistance to migrants and displaced people. The MRCS's fulfilment of its auxiliary role has been contingent on parallel investment in National Society Development. The Red Cross Red Crescent Movement and its generous donors have played an instrumental role in supporting key elements of this development journey.

Through the lens of disaster-risk management, this case study demonstrates how a better-defined auxiliary role has allowed the National Society to significantly contribute to anticipatory action, preparedness, and emergency response operations, positively impacting the lives of thousands of households. This case also highlights how the public authorities in Mongolia, through their collaboration with the MRCS, have accessed and benefitted from the resources and expertise available within the global Red Cross and Red Crescent network.



Key points from the Mongolia experience

A new Red Cross Law has enabled the MRCS to better support the public authorities in meeting humanitarian and development needs.

The MRCS's ability to supplement and substitute the efforts of public authorities can be traced back to its work advocating for a well-defined auxiliary role, investment in governance, branch and volunteer development, and more robust relationships with public authorities at national, regional, and local levels.

The strategic alignment of solidarity from the Red Cross Red Crescent Movement, including the IFRC, ICRC, and National Societies from the Australia, People's Republic of China, Finland, France, Italy, Japan, the Republic of Korea, Kuwait, the Netherlands, Qatar, Türkiye and the United Kingdom, as well as public authorities, and other domestic and international partners, has been pivotal in expanding the MRCS's services and extending its humanitarian reach.

By collaborating with local authorities, the MRCS has strengthened local disaster-risk reduction efforts. Leveraging innovative measures such as forecast-based financing, introduced with support and expertise from the wider IFRC network, the MRCS has assisted communities before disasters strike, mitigating the devastating effects of Mongolia's extreme winter snowstorms.

A stronger legal base, robust operational capacities, an epidemic preparedness plan codefined with the Ministry of Health and trusted relationships with other public authorities have enabled the MRCS to add significant value during the COVID-19 response.

Despite increased funding for pandemic-related activities, the MRCS encountered difficulties in meeting its operational costs, leading to a decline in its financial reserves. The funds received from donors for COVID activities were primarily allocated to direct operational expenses, often leaving insufficient resources to cover MRCS overheads.

A strong and visible presence during emergencies has increased public expectations that the MRCS will always be present to respond to emergencies. The MRCS is committed to enhancing its domestic revenue-raising activities and advocating for more flexible funding from its partners and donors to continue improving the effectiveness, efficiency, and scale of its services. In a country with limited resources, the government funding that the MRCS now receives because of its strengthened auxiliary role is an invaluable resource.

Another area of auxiliary role-strengthening has focused on International Humanitarian Law (IHL). The ICRC has been instrumental in supporting the MRCS in building the capacity to disseminate information about the Fundamental Principles and IHL to public authorities and the public at large. Moreover, the ICRC's expert guidance has supported the MRCS's participation in multinational military exercises. These exercises have allowed MRCS to develop the skills to apply humanitarian principles and IHL during national armed conflicts. Such initiatives also support the MRCS and its public authorities in better defining the National Society's auxiliary medical role in the case of national armed conflict.



What is the auxiliary role?

The auxiliary role of a National Society is to support its public authorities by supplementing or substituting for public humanitarian services, while acting in conformity with the Fundamental Principles, in particular neutrality and independence. Resolution 2 of the 30th International Conference explains the auxiliary role, and the special relationship that it entails between a National Society and its public authorities.

The auxiliary role is enshrined in the First Geneva Convention of 1949 and originally focused on assisting the medical services of the army, such as in the collection, transport or treatment of the wounded or sick, or the prevention of disease on the battlefield. The scope of a National Society's auxiliary function has considerably expanded due to the changing nature of crises and the resulting humanitarian needs.

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Public authorities and the National Societies as auxiliaries enjoy a specific and distinctive partnership, entailing mutual responsibilities and benefits, based on international and national laws, in which the national public authorities and the National Society agree on the areas in which the National Society supplements or substitutes for public humanitarian services; the National Society must be able to deliver its humanitarian services at all times in conformity with the Fundamental Principles, in particular those of neutrality and independence, and with its other obligations under the Statutes of the Movement as agreed by States at the International Conference.

Introduction

In the vast and sparsely populated expanse of Mongolia, the Red Cross plays a pivotal role in reaching the most isolated and vulnerable rural and urban communities.

The capacity of the National Society to deliver essential supplies and services hinges on its auxiliary role. This unique mandate allows the MRCS to amplify the efforts of public authorities, either by bolstering existing humanitarian services or stepping in when gaps arise.

Despite the importance of a strong and formalised auxiliary role, until 2016 the National Society's

status, along with thousands of other non-state actors, was that of a non-governmental organisation (NGO).¹ In 2016, following an impactful advocacy campaign, new legislation recognised the MRCS as an auxiliary to the public authorities and the sole humanitarian organisation in the country to hold this status. The formalisation of this auxiliary role, as recognised by law, has bolstered the organisation's legitimacy, augmented its resources and enhanced its operational capacity to respond to needs across the country.

Significant investment in advocacy made this legislative change possible, and investment in people and management systems, public communication and partnering have facilitated the operationalisation of the Law. The MRCS's far-reaching contribution to the pandemic response can be traced back to organisational investment in its auxiliary function, and strong and effectively leveraged organisational partnerships with public authorities. The return on investment in the MRCS's legal, operational and relational capacities is incontestable.



*The MRCS is well accepted and perceived.
The organisation has access throughout the
country and a vast network of volunteers.*

ICRC representative





МУЗН

МЯГМСЫН



The country

Mongolia, a landlocked nation bordered by the People's Republic of China and the Russian Federation, is the second least-populated country by area in the world, with a population of 3.3 million people.² It is a lower-middle-income country with an economy based on mining and agriculture that transitioned to a democratic system with a free market in 1990.² Mongolia has almost universal literacy and has seen impressive reductions in poverty over recent decades. Still, disparities persist, especially in the western and Khangai regions, and in the informal settlements (*ger* districts)³ on the outskirts of the capital, Ulaanbaatar, non-communicable diseases are on the rise and are responsible for 80 per cent of all deaths.⁴ Violence against women and children, and interpersonal violence between men, are widespread challenges.⁵

The country's ecosystem is threatened by desertification and climate change.⁶ Moreover, natural hazards, including drought, snowstorms, dust storms and *dzud* – a summer drought followed by an unusually harsh winter – kill livestock in their thousands, affecting traditional herders and leading many to seek alternate livelihoods in the capital. Once in urban areas, migrants can struggle to access housing, land, livelihoods and basic services.

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Natural disasters impact rural-urban migration. There is drought in summer, dzud in winter. People lose their livestock and are tired of herding. People who lose their livestock cannot find any jobs in the countryside, so they move to the city and other settlements to make a living.

Resident, 11 Khoroo, Bayanzurkh district, Ulaanbaatar⁷

Over 45 percent of Mongolians reside in the capital and the *ger* districts on its edges. These districts, where some 800,000 individuals live, have limited access to utilities such as water, electricity, waste removal and infrastructure, including sewerage and road networks.⁸ Most *ger* district households rely on wood or coal-burning stoves for warmth, a major source of air pollution.



The National Society

Supported by its auxiliary function, in 2023, the MRCS reached 368,000 people through its longer-term development and disaster-response activities (See Table 1). In the two years between January 2020 and January 2022, the MRCS reached 2.1 million individuals as part of its COVID-19 operation.

The MRCS was established in 1939 amid the conflict with Japanese military forces, during which Red Cross volunteers provided medical assistance to wounded soldiers. Today, the National Society has a network of 33 mid-level branches across all 21 provinces and nine districts of Ulaanbaatar city, 803 primary-level branches, 14,800 trained volunteers, 517,000 members and supporters, 78,600 Red Cross youth members and 598 member organisations.

Over the last decade, the MRCS has been on a transformational journey that has touched all aspects of the institution, from its legal base to its culture, structure, systems, processes and services.

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We have been in transition and change for ten years. A strong auxiliary role means good cooperation and understanding between the Red Cross and the government, and a good understanding of vulnerability. The Red Cross is a very professional organisation in disaster management, and we have good, rich experience in volunteering and community engagement. Sometimes the government is learning from the Red Cross in these areas.

Madame Bolormaa Nordov, Secretary General, MRCS

MRCS branches are key players in disaster-risk management, including preparedness for and response to *dzud*, droughts, floods and other disasters. Branches have trained disaster-response teams (usually 15 volunteers) responsible for delivering humanitarian assistance (e.g. cash, livestock relief, food and non-food items) and the provision of First Aid and psychosocial support. Outside the disaster-risk management field, branches focus on health promotion, disease prevention and social assistance activities that primarily target individuals outside or at the margins of the formal health and social welfare sectors – urban migrants, vulnerable older adults, single parents, children, victims of family violence and individuals living with a disability.

Table 1: People reached by the Mongolian Red Cross Society in 2022 and 2023

Programme	People reached through MRCS humanitarian activities	
	2022	2023
Dissemination on Fundamental Principles, the Emblem, International Humanitarian Law, MRCS Law	73,762 Male 33,078 Female 40,684	66,548 Male 30,905 Female 35,643
Climate change and disaster-risk management	107,497 Male 51,803 Female 55,694	195,846 Male 90,089 Female 105,757
Public health promotion programme	109,513 Male 49,966 Female 59,547	37,742 Male 17,711 Female 20,031
Social care and Inclusion	33,890 Male 14,477 Female 19,413	14,988 Male 5,545 Female 9,443
Youth development	49,320 Male 21,986 Female 27,334	52,938 Male 23,716 Female 29,222
Total	373,982	368,062

Historical conflicts have shaped **the activities of the Mongolia Red Cross**

In 1939, Soviet and Mongolian armies clashed with Japanese armies on the Manchurian-Mongolian frontier. This conflict, called the Nomonhan Incident by the Japanese and the Battle of Khalkhin Gol by the Mongolians and Russians, resulted in the deaths of 25,000 Japanese soldiers, and 10,000 Soviet and Mongolian troops.*

During the Nomonhan Incident, the Mongolian Red Cross Society was established and its volunteers were deployed to the battlefield. Their primary mission was to assist the medical services of both the Mongolian and Soviet armies, providing crucial aid to the wounded and the fallen.

The Geneva Conventions emphasise the obligation of parties to a conflict to facilitate the return of the remains of the deceased if requested by their government or next of kin. The Conventions form a core part of International Humanitarian Law. The Movement's Statutes recognise the role played by the National Societies in conjunction with their governments to ensure respect for IHL.

In 1962, the Ministerial Council of Mongolia assigned the MRCS the task of protecting and furnishing the graves of Japanese captive soldiers of the Battle of Khalkhin Gol. In 1964, before the formalisation of diplomatic ties between Mongolia and Japan in the 1970s, the Mongolian and Japanese Red Cross Societies entered a memorandum of understanding. Their collective objective was to collaborate on repatriating deceased Japanese soldiers to Japan. Although not reflected in its auxiliary role, the MRCS has also undertaken the responsibility of maintaining commemorative sites erected in honour of Japanese soldiers who lost their lives on Mongolian territory.

*Sella, A. (2017). Khalkhin-Gol: The Forgotten War. In *The Second World War* (pp. 1–37). Routledge.



The campaign for the 2016 Red Cross Law

A strong vision and an effective advocacy campaign delivered the 2016 Red Cross Law. In 2013, the MRCS was operating under the status of a non-governmental organisation and, therefore, was not legally recognised as an auxiliary by its public authorities, so its humanitarian activities were limited.

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Between 1990 and 2000, the Red Cross was without any law; we were under NGO Law. The first Red Cross Law of Mongolia was adopted in 2000, but the MRCS still had the legal status of an NGO. This was when few NGOs existed, perhaps 400. But now, there are around 7,000 NGOs, and the definition of an NGO is unclear. Private organisations register as NGOs. We worked with the government under the old law, but there was no financial support, and our cooperation was limited.

Madame Bolormaa Nordov, Secretary General, MRCS

Advocating for a new Red Cross Law was first identified as a high priority in 2013 when Madame Bolormaa Nordov became Secretary General. For 36 months, the MRCS invested leadership time and drew on technical and financial support from the IFRC and ICRC to implement the legislative advocacy campaign.

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When I joined the MRCS as Secretary General, our legal base was very weak, our auxiliary role was not clear, we were an NGO, the government was not supporting us, and we were not very active in disaster preparedness, social programmes or public health promotion. The culture of the MRCS was to work slowly... and governance and management were mixed. First, with the help of the IFRC and ICRC, we revised our statutes to protect the MRCS from different kinds of [political] challenges. Statutes were very important, they helped to create change. We separated governance from management, brought on more women and we met more regularly. The new leadership agreed, “We will lead everyday with our statutes!”... then we focused on making our auxiliary role stronger.

Madame Bolormaa Nordov, Secretary General, MRCS

The MRCS's leaders recognised that, in advocating to strengthen the Society's legal base, it would be beneficial if members from the two major political parties were familiar with and supported its work. The MRCS, therefore, approached Members of Parliament from both major parties and invited them to join the newly established “Parliamentarians for Red Cross” working group. The group met regularly to discuss humanitarian issues. Once it was well established, the MRCS proposed the idea of a Red Cross Law. Group members were

supportive, and a separate drafting committee was established, comprising representatives from the working group: the MRCS Governing Board, the IFRC and ICRC, and a governmental legal drafter. Once a draft MRCS Law was prepared, the MRCS, in partnership with the IFRC and ICRC, and with the support of the wider working group, took steps to raise parliamentarians' awareness of the auxiliary role, the work of the MRCS, and the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement.

Representatives from the IFRC presented the auxiliary role to Parliament, and the Secretary General of the Fiji Red Cross visited Mongolia to share that organisation's legislative advocacy experience. In parallel, the MRCS continued to actively engage with and support the “Parliamentarians for Red Cross” working group. The draft of the MRCS Law was introduced by the Parliament speaker in August 2015 and passed in January 2016. The two major parties co-proposed the law, reflecting the MRCS's successful effort to achieve bipartisan support. In May 2016, the government adopted a Resolution to enforce the new MRCS Law. Together, the Law and Resolution create a strong legal base for the MRCS to respond to the needs of the most vulnerable groups.

National Societies are not **non-governmental organisations**

In most contexts, National Societies are not NGOs* as they have a specific and distinctive partnership with their public authorities. At the same time, they are not part of any government and must be able to always deliver humanitarian services to vulnerable people in conformity with the Fundamental Principles of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement.

While National Societies have a unique legal connection with public authorities, NGOs play a critical role in supporting development and providing humanitarian aid. National Societies often partner with like-minded NGOs to meet common objectives in their communities. Many NGOs also partner productively with public authorities on humanitarian objectives. However, the partnership between National Societies and their public authorities is distinct, considering their unique legal connection and in light of the 150-year tradition of States interacting with the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement.

** There are exceptions. Some National Societies, while recognised as being auxiliaries to their public authorities, are still considered NGOs under the law, such as the Georgia Red Cross Society.*



The 2016 Red Cross Law

The auxiliary role, as outlined in the 2016 Red Cross Law, defines what the MRCS does to respond to the needs of vulnerable households and communities.

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I was prouder to work for Red Cross after the new Law. We are now able to implement unified activities with the government for our communities. Before that, the government was undertaking small activities, and so were we. Now we work together and can reach more people.

Dr. Tungalag, Orkhon Branch Coordinator, MRCS

The public authorities in Mongolia are encouraged by the MRCS to take full advantage of the services and activities of the National Society to complement governmental action and disaster-response mechanisms. Moreover, because of its auxiliary status, the MRCS must consider seriously any request from its public authorities to carry out humanitarian activities within its mandate.

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During a disaster, we have a legal responsibility to help people affected by it. NGOs do not have a legal responsibility.

Madame Bolormaa Nordov, Secretary General, MRCS

The Law makes provisions for funding, requiring the government to support the MRCS through annual budget allocations at national and local levels. In turn, the Government Resolution requires the Deputy Prime Minister to delegate certain humanitarian functions to the MRCS.

“

Before, we were considered an NGO, and it was difficult to cooperate with government organisations; they took a long time to respond. The collaboration was limited, but after this Law, the Red Cross is considered an auxiliary to the government, and the responsiveness has increased. We are more credible. The Law means that the government recognises Red Cross activities. This Law has increased funding for the branch. So now we are more financially sustainable.

Dr. Tungalag, Orkhon Branch Coordinator, Mongolia Red Cross

Mongolia's public authorities, recognising MRCS independence, must refrain from requesting that the National Society perform activities that conflict with the Movement's Fundamental Principles or Statutes.

While the 2016 Red Cross Law focuses on the National Society's Auxiliary Role, the MRCS is mentioned in other pieces of national legislation, including the Donor Law and the Disaster Protection Law. The Donor Law of Mongolia was adopted in 2000, amended in 2012 and revised in 2018. The law stipulates that blood must be collected from voluntary non-remunerated blood donors. The MRCS is mandated and funded by its public authorities to recruit blood donors and motivate the general population to donate through broad community-based education and awareness-raising activities.



A statement from the President of the MRCS regarding **the enhanced auxiliary status of the National Society**



In light of the revised Law on the Legal Status of the Mongolian Red Cross Society, significant progress has been achieved, including:

- The elevation of the Mongolian Red Cross Society from a standard Non-Governmental Organisation to a National Humanitarian Organisation.
- The adoption of a clear definition outlining the National Society's objectives and functions.
- The formal codification of State-Red Cross Cooperation within the legal framework, promoting closer collaboration with the government. Specifically, the Mongolian Red Cross Society is mandated to act in an auxiliary capacity to the government in humanitarian fields, with local governments required to cooperate with the National Society in these areas.
- The establishment of defined financial sources for the Mongolian Red Cross Society, with plans to expand them further.
- The implementation of this law has assigned responsibilities to key governmental figures, including the Deputy Prime Minister, Minister for Finance, City Governor and Governors of local authorities, to ensure its execution. Consequently, active cooperation between the Mongolian Red Cross Society and the government has flourished. Currently, entities such as the Ministry of Health, the Ministry of Labour and Social Protection, and the National Emergency Management Agency (NEMA), actively support and collaborate with the Mongolian Red Cross Society.
- Moreover, the creation of mid-level State-Red Cross Cooperation Councils has bolstered stable and long-term cooperation between the two parties. Efforts are now being made to enhance cooperation between Primary Level Red Cross branches and their respective government entities at that level.

Battsetseg Batmunkh, President of the Mongolian Red Cross Society,
Member of the Government of Mongolia, Minister of Foreign Affairs Mongolia, 2024



The 2016 Mongolia Red Cross Law

The Law formalises the National Society's relationship with public authorities:

The Mongolia Red Cross Society is a voluntary aid society, auxiliary to the public authorities in the humanitarian field, recognised and authorised on the basis of the Geneva Conventions (and their additional protocols)... Article 5.1, MRCS Law, 2016

The government and local authorities will hold meetings at least once a year with the Mongolian Red Cross on issues related to the goals and functions of the... Society. Article 10.2, MRCS Law, 2016

It exempts the Society from taxes and provides legal protection of its independence and emblem:

It is a non-profit, tax-exempt, national humanitarian organisation that works on the principle of self-governance. Article 5.1, MRCS Law, 2016

The Society shall at all times act in accordance with its statutes adopted by its National Assembly. Article 5.4, MRCS Law, 2016

It outlines the ten functions of the MRCS:

...to provide health, social and psychological assistance to the population in times of armed conflict and disasters, as well as to prevent and alleviate human suffering. It does so with complete impartiality, making no discrimination as to nationality, race, language, age, gender, sexual orientation, religious beliefs, class or political opinions. Article 6.1 MRCS Law, 2016



Investment in
advocacy
**Strengthening the
auxiliary role in
disaster response**

Shortly after the MRCS Law and Resolution were adopted, the MRCS focused on revising the disaster law and strengthening its auxiliary role in disaster-risk management. The existing legislation did not clearly distinguish between the different phases of disaster-risk management and did not regulate the coordination of humanitarian assistance. The MRCS, with support from the IFRC, worked closely with the National Emergency Management Agency (NEMA) to draft a new disaster law. The resulting draft law was aligned with international best practice and recognised the MRCS's role in disaster-risk management. The MRCS mobilised the Parliamentarians for the Red Cross working group once more, this time in support of the draft disaster law. In February 2017, the State Great Khural passed the Law on Disaster Protection, further strengthening the MRCS's legal base.

The new Law acknowledges the MRCS's role in providing disaster protection training and coordinating international humanitarian assistance from the IFRC. This means that public authorities can request international support through the MRCS for certain disaster situations without launching an international appeal with the United Nations. An appeal through the United Nations would likely attract media attention and impact tourism.



From legislation to operationalisation

Following the successful advocacy campaign, investment was required to operationalise the Red Cross Law and the revisions to the disaster response law. This included:

Externally:

- Sensitising public authorities to the Red Cross mandate, the Fundamental Principles and the mandate of the wider Movement;
- Educating public authorities on the auxiliary role and how the MRCS works with the wider Movement to support affected communities during peacetime and crisis;
- Developing and nurturing strong and trusting relationships with national, provincial and local public authorities;
- Leading and participating in national, provincial and local coordination structures;
- Coordinating and jointly implementing activities with public authorities in the domains of health, social care, international humanitarian law and disaster-risk management.

Within the MRCS:

- Educating employees, members and volunteers on the laws relating to the MRCS's auxiliary role;
- Developing internal processes and structures to maintain and monitor auxiliary relationships.

Every year, the MRCS updates and revises cooperation agreements with authorities, including the Ministry of Labour and Social Protection, the Ministry of Health, the Ministry of Education and Science, Ulaanbaatar's Citizens Representative Khural and the National Emergency Management Agency. A national Red Cross Cooperation Council meets quarterly to discuss the Red Cross's partnership with public authorities and humanitarian needs. The Council comprises members from various key ministries, including Foreign Affairs and Trade, Agriculture, Finance, Health and the National Emergency Management Agency.

Operationalisation of the auxiliary role at branch level

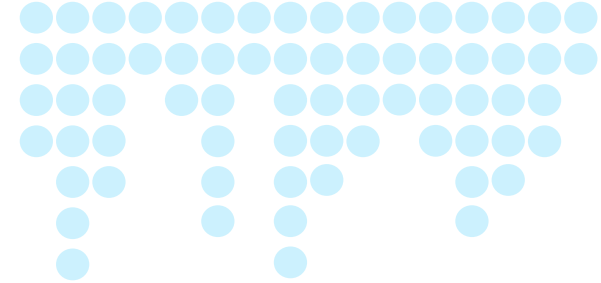
Meetings also take place every year between branches and regional authorities at local level. Regional meetings focus on cooperation achievements, lessons learned and plans for the following year. State and local budget allocations to the Red Cross are confirmed annually.

This long-term investment in partnerships has enabled MRCS to amplify the disaster mitigation, preparedness and the response activities of public authorities.

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Let me start with the close collaboration with local authorities. 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 include Red Cross budget activities, we must prove our added value. We discuss with local government and citizen representative meetings. After advocating and securing funding, the implementation must be transparent. Being transparent, trustworthy, credible and a strong implementer are important. And reporting is crucial, financial and activity reporting must be open and transparent to the government and communities. This is one of the reasons we receive funds and collaborate well with the government.

Dr. Tungalag, Orkhon Branch Coordinator, MRCS



The impact of investment in MRCS's auxiliary role **COVID-19 operation**

Sharing the world's longest land border with the People's Republic of China, Mongolia established a strong early response to prevent the spread of COVID-19. This started with a mask order the day after the novel coronavirus was identified. This was followed by border closures, establishing facilities for quarantine and isolation, scaling up hospital capabilities, and creating a robust contact tracing system and testing.

Existing planning for influenza outbreaks with the Ministry of Health

Between 2010 and 2018, the MRCS supported the prevention and control of several communicable disease outbreaks but had little involvement in influenza-related activities. However, the government sought the National Society's support in 2019 when the health system became overwhelmed by the severe outbreak of Influenza A (H1N1). Following this operation and recognising the value of improved preparedness for future epidemics, the MRCS, in collaboration with the Ministry of Health, developed a preparedness plan for the 2019–20 influenza season. Planning comprised a review of seasonal influenza risks, including risk factors and vulnerability; mapping key stakeholders and relevant policies, plans and capacities; and a literature review to determine the evidence base for community-focused, influenza-related interventions.

The plan readied the MRCS for the threat of seasonal influenza, with volunteers trained, health communication materials developed, and hand sanitisers stockpiled. The training focused on non-pharmacological interventions that individuals and communities could adopt to reduce exposure to the virus and avoid infection. Prevention messages addressed hand hygiene, the cleaning of high-touch surfaces, respiratory etiquette, self-quarantine for those feeling unwell and annual influenza vaccinations.

During the 2018–19 and 2019–20 influenza seasons, the Ministry of Health recognised the MRCS's epidemic response capacities and, as a result, assigned the MRCS the responsibility for community-level health communication and psychosocial support in the COVID-19 response.

The MRCS's COVID-19 operations

The National Society's contribution to the government's response was extensive. As a member of the State Emergency Commission – an inter-agency structure chaired by the Deputy Prime Minister – the MRCS contributed to high-level discussions on the response to COVID-19. The National Society shared its needs assessment with the Commission, was part of multi-sectoral surveillance teams for contact tracing, cluster investigation and information management, and was one of the few humanitarian organisations authorised to support COVID-19-positive individuals during lockdowns. More than 2,000 MRCS volunteers shared health and safety messages to help prevent the spread of the virus, delivered food, hygiene and other supplies to people in self-isolation, provided social connection and reassurance, referred people to formal mental-health services when needed, and assisted individuals from vulnerable population groups to access vaccinations. By January 2022, the MRCS had reached an estimated three million people through risk-communication and community-based activities (See Table 2).

Table 2: People reached by the Mongolia Red Cross Society between January 2020 and January 2022

Indicator/Activity	People reached as of 31 January 2022
COVID-19 cases in cohort/home isolation and/or contacts under quarantine receiving material support from NS	24,300
People reached through risk communication and community engagement for health and hygiene promotion activities	2,978,000
Health facilities supported with infection prevention control and Water, Sanitation & Hygiene (WASH) activities	112
People supported through community WASH activities that reduce the risk of COVID-19 transmission	534,250
People reached with MHPSS services for COVID-19 response	247,180
Staff and volunteers trained in COVID-19 vaccine introduction	7,260
Individuals NS has supported to be vaccinated against COVID-19	118,200
People made vulnerable by COVID-19 reached with food and other in-kind assistance	184,380
People reached with safe and adequate shelter and settlements under the circumstances of COVID-19	92
NS staff and volunteers trained in community engagement and accountability	751
Branches which include an analysis of the specific needs of marginalised groups in their assessments	30
People reached by programmes addressing violence	6,120

The MRCS rapidly adapted its preparedness plan for an influenza outbreak to the COVID-19 response in January 2020. Many of the MRCS's routine influenza prevention messages also applied to COVID-19; they were quickly rebranded for this purpose and incorporated into volunteer training and public communication materials. Relationships established with national and local authorities to address seasonal influenza enabled joint planning and information-sharing for COVID-19.

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A major difference from other organisations is our training for volunteers that strengthens our human resources, and we are able to gain the respect and trust of people and other organisations. Our uniforms also mean we are very visible in communities. During COVID, we disseminated information and delivered relief to vulnerable families.

Mr. Ganbold, Dornod Branch Coordinator, MRCS

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At the peak of the pandemic, approximately 100,000 people needed medical care, exceeding health-care capacity. The role of volunteers had been crucial during this period. Without volunteers, not only would the hospital have failed to cope with the workload, but it would also have faced a shortage in human resources. There is no denying that such shortages would have led to a crisis and shortages that other nations had suffered from. Therefore, the MRCS contribution was significant.

Representative of the State Emergency Commission

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The daily number of confirmed cases of COVID-19 was very high. The fact that MRCS volunteers provided cooperation during this period when the human resources in health care and capacity were in a dire situation was exceptionally positive and effective. It is believed that the human resources problem was resolved.

Representative of the National Centre for Communicable Diseases

Challenges presented by the COVID-19 response

While MRCS activities extended the reach and effectiveness of public authorities' response to the virus, they also highlighted the limitations of the National Society's capacities and potentially also how the public authorities understood the MRCS and what it could (and could not) achieve as a volunteer-based organisation.

For MRCS volunteers and staff, the COVID-19 pandemic presented specific stressors. These included the risk of being contaminated and contaminating others, the physical strain of protective equipment, the stress of following strict and unfamiliar procedures, the stigmatisation of those working with COVID-19 patients and the workload. At the height of the pandemic, employees and volunteers worked up to 15 hours a day, seven days a week. During winter, the extra workload of the double

emergency (*dzud* conditions and the pandemic) added enormous pressure on MRCS' people. The National Society is now working with public authorities to enhance the environment (policies, laws and other key legal instruments) that enable volunteering and MRCS's capacity to protect and incentivise volunteering.

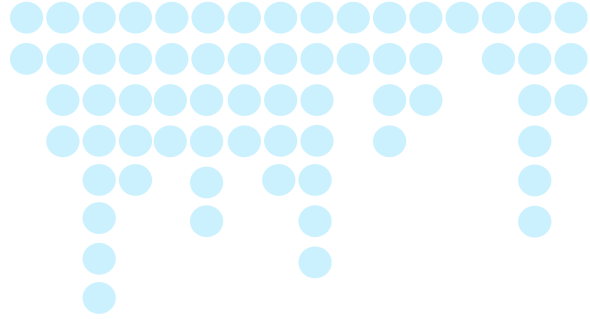
Another challenge was that, despite increased funding for pandemic activities, the MRCS struggled to cover its overhead costs throughout the pandemic, and the organisation's financial reserves declined because of the operation. Funding from donors was allocated to direct operational costs and rarely included enough to cover overheads, including the salary cost of finance or logistics teams' salaries, utilities and rent. This highlighted the importance of the MRCS advocating to public authorities and international partners for adequate overhead funding to enable it not just to survive but to maintain and build capacities for the next emergency.



The story of Ariuntuya

Ariuntuya is no stranger to tragedy. A few years after the deaths of her husband and son, she lost both her legs in a car accident. She now lives with her 15-year-old niece in Ulaanbaatar, making her living by sewing woolen slippers. Yet even this simple livelihood came under threat from COVID-19. Tourists, who were her primary customers, could no longer travel to Mongolia. After the country shut down to prevent the spread of the virus, many of her local customers lost their jobs. Without an income, Ariuntuya relied on food parcels from the MRCS. "I appreciate the good gesture shown by the Red Cross in helping me and my family in a time I need them the most," she said.

Stories like Ariuntuya's played out in homes across Mongolia, a country which had relative success in tackling COVID-19. This was achieved through restrictions on movement and widespread prevention measures, such as the closure of borders and schools at the start of the pandemic. These restrictions led to significant socio-economic impacts and increased vulnerability among poor households. In response, the MRCS, together with the IFRC, provided food and hygiene parcels to the most affected families.



Support to herder communities through forecast-based financing

Operationalisation of the auxiliary role in disaster-risk management

MRCS branches work closely with local authorities to support vulnerable groups before, during and after disaster strikes. Through their network of community-based volunteers, branches can help local authorities identify the most vulnerable households.

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We provide humanitarian assistance to herders. We cooperate with local authorities to select the affected families. We receive lists from local authorities, but we also know the families, so through our herder groups, we consult them and they help us to double-check who is in need. During summer, herder communities come back to their province, and this is when we can reach them and conduct meetings, discussions and awareness-raising activities. And at this time, we collect the data from herder families.

Dr. Tungalag, Orkhon Branch Coordinator, MRCS

While the MRCS had supported communities affected by extreme weather for decades, it has traditionally been at the height of the dzud, when animals were already dying. Working with the National Agency for Meteorology and Environmental Monitoring, and the National Emergency Management Agency, the MRCS has established a new early-action system: forecast-based financing (FbF), a way of assisting communities before a disaster strikes. The system combines weather forecasts and other data

to trigger the release of funding ahead of extreme weather events to prevent natural hazards from becoming disasters. If an extreme event is likely to strike, FbF activates an early-action protocol. This trigger releases funding for a series of preventive actions.

Based on the 2020–21 National Met Agency dzud risk map and calculations from the IFRC Climate Centre, more than 60 per cent of Mongolia was estimated to be at risk of a dzud in the winter of 2021. Five provinces had a very high risk of 20 per cent or more of their land area being affected. The early-action protocol was triggered with support from the British Red Cross and the Red Cross Red Crescent Climate Centre.

The MRCS, in collaboration with the National Emergency Management Agency, was then able to provide help worth 245,000 Swiss francs to more than 7,000 vulnerable people across 19 provinces to prepare for the harsh winter. This included cash grants to buy animal fodder, and providing livestock nutrition kits and essential household items such as warm clothes, medicine and food. A follow-up study found that early-action assistance doubled the chances of herder families saving their most valuable animals: their horses.⁹ People's most important belongings were saved, and fewer families fell into debt and poverty.

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Dzuds are devastating for the herder families who rely on their animals for almost everything, whether it's meat and milk for food, or the cashmere and skins they sell to buy supplies or pay school fees. Losing their animals means they can quickly fall into poverty. Without support, extreme winter brings misery, hunger and hardship for thousands of families, forcing many to move to squatter settlements outside Ulaanbaatar, our capital.

Secretary General, MRCS

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At the mid-level, our Red Cross staff and volunteers work with a local emergency-management agency to provide humanitarian assistance. Basically, our branches select the households, informed by their knowledge of community needs, guidance from the emergency management agency and the dzud map.

Senior Executive, MRCS



The auxiliary role and International Humanitarian Law

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The MRCS is well accepted and perceived. The organisation has access throughout the country and a vast network of volunteers. Their COVID-19 operation was proof that their auxiliary role is not only strong in law, on paper, but is also strong in real operations. We all benefit from the strong auxiliary role and leadership of the National Society.

ICRC representative

When Mongolia became a party to the 1949 Geneva Conventions and their 1977 Additional Protocols, it committed to disseminating the provisions of those instruments as widely as possible, both in peacetime and during periods of armed conflict, so that they are known to the armed forces and the wider population.

Although it is primarily the responsibility of public authorities to make the law known, the MRCS, through its auxiliary role, has a mandate to assist the state in this task. Two initiatives have increased MRCS's engagement and visibility in the field of IHL. First, in 2017, the MRCS and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, with support from the ICRC, established the IHL Core Group. The Core Group includes representatives from various ministries, the Legal Analysis Division of the Mongolian Bar Association,

the International Law Committee, ICRC's Regional Delegation for East Asia (as an observer) and the MRCS.¹⁰ The long-term goal of this group is to disseminate knowledge and promote IHL ratification, implementation, and operationalisation.

Secondly, in 2022, for the first time in its history, the MRCS participated in Khaan Quest – a regularly scheduled, multinational exercise co-sponsored by the United States Indo-Pacific Command and annually hosted by the Mongolian armed forces. During the exercise, the MRCS trained alongside the military from 15 countries and showcased their First Aid skills. The ICRC's armed forces delegate conducted classroom sessions and field training on key aspects of the law of armed conflict. Through a United Nations peacekeeping scenario, MRCS staff learned about the complexities of the relationship between the Red Cross and the military. The trainees were engaged in role-plays involving complex situations in a non-international armed conflict and were instructed to act in accordance with the humanitarian principles of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement. Such initiatives support the MRCS and its government in better defining the National Society's auxiliary medical role in the case of national armed conflict.

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This proved to be a very rich and intense experience for the MRCS as they had not previously interacted with or trained alongside military forces... There is much more to do in assisting and training the MRCS in military relations, but this has been an excellent start.

ICRC representative



Ongoing investments during ‘peacetime’ are essential

For the MRCS, it is also important to be ready for internal strife and conflict. With the support of Movement partners, the National Society has formed National Disaster Response Teams whose members are trained in First Aid and psychosocial support.

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Now, Mongolia is very peaceful, with no armed or religious conflict. But in 2008, after the parliamentary election, there were big demonstrations... five people died, and many were injured. The main building of the ruling party was damaged by fire, and half of the cultural palace also; it was like a small civil conflict. The Red Cross played no role in the response. A few years back, we decided to improve our crisis management. We work closely with the IFRC and have strongly prepared disaster-management activities in the country. We also needed to learn crisis management during armed conflict. We invited the ICRC and organised many workshops and training sessions. If we face an election crisis, how can the Red Cross manage it? We prepared National Disaster Response Teams, and they trained in First Aid and psychosocial support. Every four years before the parliamentary election, I invite the ICRC to organise this crisis management training.

Secretary General, MRCS

Across the country, the National Society continues to invest in its 33 mid-level branches at *aimag* level and primary branches at *soum* and *khoro* levels with the support of public authorities and other partners. Significantly, investment directed towards recruiting and developing the skills of branch coordinators (secretaries) and their teams has enhanced the ability of branches to fulfil their auxiliary functions.

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We have been investing in the skills of mid-level branch secretaries, good, active, hard-working branch secretaries who are transparent with the public. They have good support from the public and local government. But if they are lazy and not so active, community and government support is very limited. We have monitoring indicators for branches, we do an annual audit. If a branch is falling behind, we discuss with them. The change in our statutes means that the Secretary General approves the mid-level branch secretary, and there is no longer any interference from local government as there was before. So, we can hold branch secretaries accountable. Recently, we let go of a branch secretary who was not acting independently of politics. We also encourage our branches to be financially sustainable, not just relying on government funds but trying to balance things 50/50 between government support and public donations.

Secretary General, MRCS

Branch coordinators play a crucial role; their longer tenure ensures they retain valuable knowledge about the branch and community needs, foster relationships with local authorities, and facilitate the recruitment of new members and training of new volunteers.

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We are trusted because we have been supporting the community for a long time. Our challenges are mostly financial and human resources. This is a common challenge for all branches. In July [2023], the average government salary increased by ten per cent, higher than that of the Red Cross, so it is difficult to be competitive. We try to increase salaries year by year, but this increases the social insurance tax. This increases personal income tax.

Mr. Batzorig, Gobi Altai Branch Coordinator, MRCS

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The Dornod Branch has been operating since 1967. We have 12,500 members. Every adult in the province knows about the Red Cross through their children because we have a very active youth group. Recently our province was affected by dzuds, wildfires and sandstorms. We visited 31 families yesterday who were provided with ghers.¹¹ We checked if they received ghers, cash assistance and resources for their cattle and asked how this had supported them. We have reserves in case of a disaster for 100 herder families. We provide quarterly and annual reports to the press and the government.

Mr. Ganbold, Dornod Branch Coordinator, MRCS



Conclusion

The impact of strategic investment in the development of the MRCS has been profound and far-reaching. The formalisation of its auxiliary role, recognised in law, has significantly enhanced the organisation's legitimacy, paving the way for stronger relationships with public authorities, increased resources and coordinated humanitarian action, bolstering its operational capacity to respond effectively to diverse needs nationwide.

The successful advocacy campaign for the 2016 Red Cross Law was pivotal, elevating the MRCS from a non-governmental organisation to a legally recognised auxiliary in the eyes of the public authorities. This accomplishment, achieved through bipartisan support, laid the groundwork for a strong legal base that mandates government support and clearly outlines the MRCS's humanitarian mandate.

The operationalisation of the auxiliary role has involved sensitising authorities, educating internal stakeholders, and fostering balanced and robust relationships with public authorities at all

levels. MRCS branches have become vital players in health promotion, disaster-risk management, and community-focused initiatives. Cooperation agreements, coordination structures, annual planning and partnership review meetings provide the framework for collaboration between the MRCS and the public authorities.

The impact of investment in the MRCS's auxiliary role was particularly evident during the COVID-19 pandemic. The MRCS played a crucial role in the national response, leveraging its established network of branches and volunteers, technical expertise, and relationships with public authorities to reach thousands of households.

By investing in strong relationships with the public authorities and enhancing its operational capacity, the MRCS ensures clear recognition of its auxiliary role and timely requests for support, ultimately strengthening its ability to respond to humanitarian needs.

Endnotes

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- 10 Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Department of International Law, and Treaty Ministry of Justice and Home Affairs, Department of International Law and Foreign Cooperation, Ministry of Education and Science, Legal Division Ministry of Culture, Department of Policies Regarding Cultural Objects Ministry of Defence, Foreign Cooperation Directorate (Department) Ministry of Digital Development and Communications, Department of Cyber Security Policies, General Authority for Border Protection, Legal Division General Staff of the Armed Forces, Training and Exercise Department Office of the President, and the N/A Office of the Parliament.
- 11 Collapsible felt dwellings commonly used by Mongolian mobile pastoralists.

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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.