



THE IMPACT OF INVESTMENT IN THE AUXILIARY ROLE OF THE **RED** CROSS SOCIETY OF GEORGIA

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partnership







Executive summary

Responding to the needs of those affected by the 2008 war between Georgia and Russia was a turning point for the Georgia Red Cross Society (GRCS). While the conflict brought many challenges, it provided the National Society with an opportunity to prove its capacity as a humanitarian actor and its immense potential as an auxiliary to the response of public authorities. Since that operation, GRCS has strategically invested in its auxiliary function, allowing the organisation not only to complement but, in certain circumstances, also substitute public services, addressing the urgent needs of thousands of households contending with the extensive consequences of conflict, the COVID-19 pandemic, and climate and weather-related disasters.

At the centre of GRCS's strengthened auxiliary status have been investments in legislative and humanitarian advocacy, public relations and partnering with national, regional and local public authorities. These initiatives have provided the GRCS with the legal, relational and reputational channels necessary to supplement the efforts of public authorities in tasks such as search and rescue, the provision of food and non-food items, health promotion and general First Aid and community-based First Aid, assistance to people affected by disasters and conflict including the establishment of field hospitals, and the coordination of non-state actors engaged in preparedness, humanitarian response and recovery.

The special relationship between the GRCS, the IFRC, ICRC and sister National Societies has been key in supporting the GRCS in developing a stronger understanding of the parameters of its auxiliary role. It has also enhanced GRCS's capacity in humanitarian diplomacy and international humanitarian law (IHL). The GRCS owes its ability to fulfil its auxiliary role to simultaneous investments in governance, management, branch and volunteer capacities. The support of the Red Cross Red Crescent Movement (the Movement) – ICRC, IFRC, and the British, Danish, Estonian, Italian, Norwegian and Turkish National Societies – and its donors has been instrumental in facilitating GRCS's transformation, empowering the National Society to become a central pillar in Georgia's humanitarian arena.

Commissioned by the IFRC, ICRC and British Red Cross, this case study forms part of a series of studies on National Society Development. The case study demonstrates how a better-defined and effectively leveraged auxiliary role allowed the GRCS to significantly contribute to the COVID-19 pandemic response and other disaster and emergency operations, and positively impact the lives of thousands of households.



Key points from the Georgia experience

A humanitarian crisis initially drove changes within the GRCS. The National Society had to respond to the needs of the thousands of people affected by the 2008 conflict. Change happened almost instantly, branches sprang into action, and people spontaneously volunteered their time and resources. Those changes could have been temporary and reversed once the peak of the crisis was over. However, the GRCS chose to go beyond temporary fixes and used the crisis as an opportunity to renew the organisation so that it was better prepared for future humanitarian challenges.

National Society Development and capacity-building initiatives have enabled the National Society to expand its relationships and deliver on its auxiliary mandate.

A Red Cross Law recognises the GRCS as an auxiliary to the public authorities and the sole humanitarian organisation in the country to hold this status. The National Society's auxiliary role is further clarified and embedded in the Civil Safety National Plan Decree, and related laws and decrees, particularly in emergency preparedness, coordination and response.

To preserve its neutral, impartial and independent status, critical for humanitarian work in peace and conflict, the GRCS has prioritised the development of balanced relationships with public authorities at all levels. Because of its auxiliary status, the GRCS must consider requests from public authorities to carry out humanitarian activities within its mandate. However, the organisation's independence means it can reject such requests if they violate the Fundamental Principles.

The GRCS's ability to supplement and substitute the efforts of public authorities can also be traced back to the systematic development of its domestic partnerships. These partnerships include public authorities across the territory, civil society and corporate donors. As more domestic partners have supported GRCS branches to undertake their humanitarian activities, the operational capacity and visibility of the National Society's work have increased. This has inspired other provincial authorities, partners and donors to follow suit. The resulting ripple effect and synergy within this expanding network of support to branches have fortified GRCS's community foundations and transformed the GRCS into a dynamic and influential force capable of driving meaningful long-term change and effective crisis response.

The GRCS's contribution to the country's COVID-19 response was significant. In accordance with its auxiliary role, the National Society operated vaccination centres and a COVID hotline, supported testing, screening and contact tracing, provided home-based care, and disseminated health and safety messages to help prevent the spread of COVID-19 and maximise the uptake of vaccinations. The GRCS reached 2.7 million people through risk communication and community-based activities. By mobilising more than 11,000 volunteers, the GRCS effectively supplemented the response of public authorities and filled gaps in public health services. Long-standing investment in the capacity development of branches and volunteers enabled the GRCS to supplement the response. At local level, authorities partnered with the Red Cross with specific recognition that this would help increase community trust and participation in public health initiatives. The GRCS's pandemic response activities, facilitated by the strong community ties of its branches, led to better-informed communities and supported vaccination uptake.

Drawing a comparison between the GRCS's responses to the 2008 conflict and the pandemic serves as a testament to the value of investment in developing a National Society. In 2008, the National Society found itself operating reactively. However, in 2020, even before the first case emerged in Georgia, the National Society had proactively initiated awareness-raising meetings with key stakeholders regarding the potential risks associated with the virus.


A strong and visible presence during emergencies has increased public expectations that the GRCS will always be present to assist alongside public authorities. This can only happen if the National Society continues to invest in its people, structures, systems and partnerships.

Conflict in Georgia has had a devastating and long-lasting impact on the families of the missing. The GRCS, drawing upon its experience in responding to the 2008 crisis, works with the ICRC in the missing persons programme, addressing disappearances from past conflicts. Recognising the potential for future conflict, the GRCS prioritises strengthening its branches located in sensitive areas along administrative borders and with large ethnic minority populations.

Despite the pivotal role played by the GRCS in development and preparedness – crucial for risk reduction – these proactive efforts often operate in the shadow of the immediate visibility garnered during a crisis. Elevating awareness and securing adequate financial support for these vital but less visible initiatives require robust humanitarian diplomacy and communications capacities.

While addressing the long-lasting impact of past conflicts and preparing for potential future ones, the GRCS also assists refugees fleeing the war in Ukraine, including those who are no longer eligible for government funding.





We are the biggest humanitarian organisation in the country, and we have representation throughout the country. For the state agencies, it is important to have the GRCS on board. We have worked hard to reach this situation [legitimacy] in the country.

Deputy Secretary General, GRCS

Introduction

The Red Cross is pivotal in reaching the country's most vulnerable and isolated communities, including in Georgia's mountainous and conflict-affected territories. The capacity of the National Society to deliver essential programmes and services hinges on its auxiliary role. This unique mandate allows the GRCS to amplify the efforts of public authorities, either by bolstering existing humanitarian services or stepping in when gaps arise.

Significant investment in developing trusting and mutually beneficial relationships with national and local authorities, and investment in leadership, branches, volunteers and management systems, have facilitated the operationalisation of the auxiliary role. The far-reaching contribution of the GRCS to the COVID-19 pandemic response, floods, conflict-affected communities, and the well-being of the most vulnerable – older adults, remote communities, people living below the poverty line, ethnic minorities, internally displaced people, refugees, people living with disabilities and people seeking asylum– can be traced back to this investment. The return on investment in the legal, operational, and relational capacities of the GRCS is incontestable.

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.



Public authorities and the National Societies as auxiliaries enjoy a specific and distinctive partnership, entailing mutual responsibilities and benefits, and 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.



The country

Located in the southern Caucasus and sharing borders with Turkey and Armenia to the south, Azerbaijan to the east and Russia to the north, Georgia is at the crossroads of Western Asia and Eastern Europe. Territorially, Georgia is divided into nine regions, nine cities, two autonomous republics and 64 municipalities.¹ The country has an ethnically diverse population of almost 3,713 million people (excluding the disputed territories of Abkhazia and South Ossetia), 60 per cent of whom live in urban areas.² Two-thirds of citizens are Georgian. The remaining third of the population represents a rich spectrum of ethnicities, including Armenians, Russians, Azerbaijanis, Ossetes, Abkhazians, Yazidi, Ukrainians, Kists and Greeks.

For a long time, the country was caught in a struggle between Persia, Turkey and Russia. In the 19th century, Georgia became part of the expanding

Russian territories, and in 1921, Russia took control. Georgia was later incorporated into the Soviet Union. In 1991, when Soviet rule ended, Georgia emerged as an independent state, joining the United Nations in 1992.

As in many other parts of the former Soviet Union, the breakdown of the USSR and rapid deterioration in socio-economic conditions were accompanied by changes in the distribution of power, igniting conflicts and other violent situations. Extreme tension in two regions of Georgia, the Tskhinvali region in the north (1991-92) and Abkhazia in the west (1992-93), both bordering on Russia, led to open clashes and armed conflicts resulting in the displacement of more than 300,000 people. In 2008, a new armed conflict between Georgia and Russia displaced more than 135,000 people. Georgia continues to be both a destination and a transit country

for displaced people from Ukraine. Due to these various conflicts, there are approximately 288,000 internally displaced persons in Georgia today.³ In Georgia wealth and access to health and education are unevenly distributed, with 28 per cent of the population still living in poverty, particularly in rural areas.⁴ Noncommunicable diseases account for most of the burden of morbidity and mortality, with stroke as the leading cause of death.⁵ Excess mortality due to COVID-19 far exceeded the European average. As in other parts of the world, older people in Georgia are more likely to live alone, are less socially engaged, and report higher levels of loneliness.⁶ Georgia is a high-risk zone for floods, droughts, hail, and landslides. Climate change is a key risk driver, bringing ever-more intense weather and increased unpredictability.

The National Society

The Georgia Red Cross Society was established in 1918. Following Georgia's independence, the Red Cross was recognised by a presidential decree in 1993. In 1991, following the country's independence and almost seven decades after establishing the Georgian branch of the Committee of the Alliance of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies of the USSR, the National Society emerged as an autonomous organisation.

In 1993, the Parliament of Georgia ratified the 1949 Geneva Conventions. In 1997, it adopted Georgia's first law on the Red Cross Society, making the National Society an auxiliary to the public authorities, with responsibilities related to social welfare, promotion of non-remunerated blood donations, disaster preparedness and response, First Aid, assisting victims of armed conflict, medical and paramedical services for the armed forces, and tracing missing persons and restoring family links.⁷ The same year, the country passed the Law on the emblem and designation of the Red Cross and Red Crescent, protecting and restricting the use of the Red Cross on a white background as a symbol of neutral and independent assistance in times of conflict and disaster.⁸

The GRCS has a network of 39 branches, the organisation's service delivery arm, and 27 social day centres for older adults. It is one of Georgia's most prominent civil society organisations, with 15,000 registered volunteers, including 5,000 active volunteers (at least four hours of service per week), 4,700 members and 192 employees. In 2019, the National Society reached 359,375 people through its humanitarian programmes and services. Over the course of the COVID-19 pandemic, the National Society reached 2.7 million people, or 70 per cent of the country's population, through its health communications, vaccination centres, and social care and livelihoods activities.

A map of GRCS activities is provided in Figure 1.

For 15 years, the National Society has been engaged in an active development journey, strengthening its legal base, governance and management systems, branch and volunteer network, and relationships with public authorities. These initiatives have ensured the National Society's capacity to fulfil its auxiliary mandate and resulted in the increased relevance, quality, reach and sustainability of its services.

GRCS's development journey can be traced back to 2008, during the conflict between Russia and Georgia over the territories of South Ossetia and Abkhazia. While the conflict brought many challenges, it provided the GRCS with the opportunity to prove itself as a humanitarian actor and an auxiliary to the response of public authorities.

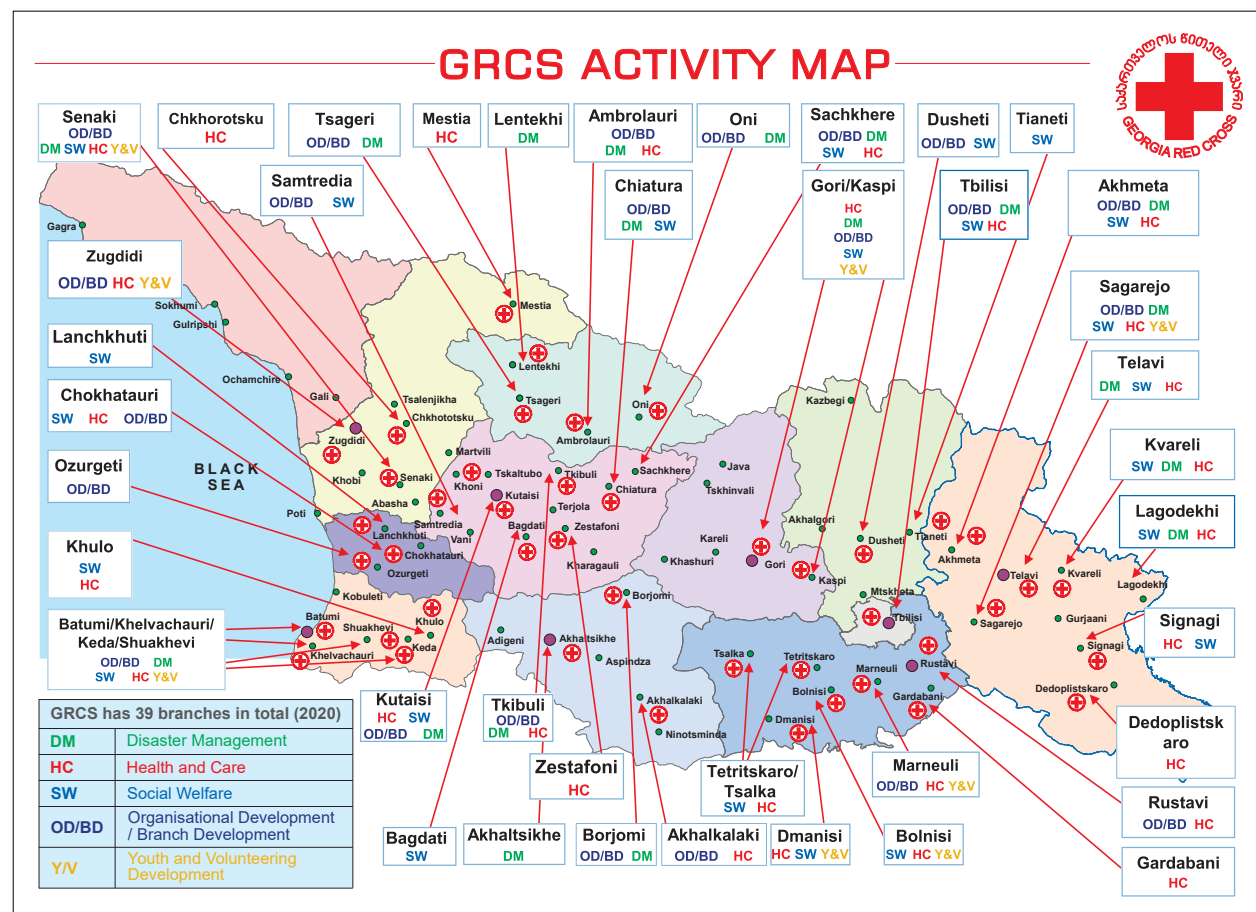
A wave of displacement swept over Georgia in August 2008 as violence broke out. GRCS branches mobilised over 1,000 volunteers to work in conflict-affected districts. Branches, supported by headquarters, collaborated with the ICRC, IFRC and other Movement partners to support needs assessment, the management of dead bodies, relief distributions, psychosocial support, blood donation promotion and reuniting families. The GRCS field kitchen provided daily hot meals for those affected by the crisis. Meals were also provided to those involved in the response efforts. Throughout the operation, the Movement advised the GRCS on the opportunities and parameters of the auxiliary role, mentored on the risks and opportunities associated with different engagement options, and supported discussions with public authorities.

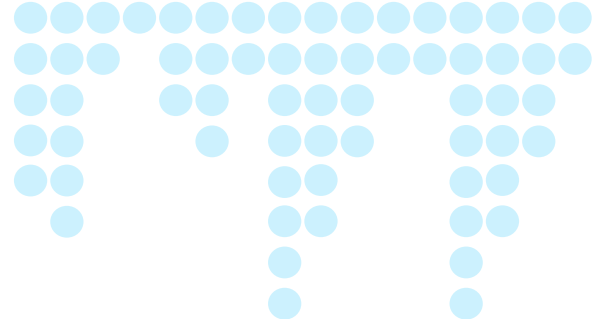
The operation garnered respect for the GRCS from those assisted and the wider public, attracting new members and volunteers. The experience also had a positive effect on internal cohesion within the organisation, demonstrating the GRCS's crisis response capabilities. However, the operation also exposed gaps in areas such as humanitarian diplomacy, knowledge of IHL, volunteer management, safety and security, critical incident management and resource mobilisation. At this time, the National Society realised these gaps presented an opportunity – an opportunity to be more systematic about the development of branches and relationships with public authorities across the territory and in sensitive areas on administrative boundary lines.

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While we would never wish for a repeat of this crisis, it pushed us to be better and do better.

Natia Loladze, GRCS President

FIGURE 1 Map of GRCS activities





The Red Cross Law and Civil Safety National Plan

The Red Cross is a non-governmental organisation with a special auxiliary status in Georgia. It has its own Law and special functions outlined in the Decree of Georgia of Civil Safety National Plan.

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The auxiliary role is so important as it supports us in being a special organisation in Georgia to respond to the needs of those most in need.

GRCS Headquarters representative

The first Georgia Red Cross Law of 1997, approved by the country's president, established the organisation's auxiliary status. The GRCS holds a unique position as the only non-governmental organisation with a designated auxiliary role in the country's National Response Plan (#416). This distinction, established by Presidential Decree in August 2008, came after the GRCS demonstrated its critical role in disaster management and advocated for its formal inclusion in the plan. The National Response Plan was later updated through Parliamentary Decree #508 in September 2015.

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There was a lot of work needed in terms of advocacy to get a role in the Civil Safety Plan. Back in 2008, the government was working on a national response plan, and the leadership of the National Society was pushing to have its role in it, and now the result is that the GRCS is the only humanitarian organisation with its own role. The GRCS continues to demonstrate what an important organisation it is through its pandemic work and recent response to flooding.

ICRC representatives in Georgia

Under the Civil Safety National Plan, the GRCS:

- Participates in search and rescue activities under the coordination of the Emergency Management Agency of the Ministry of Internal Affairs;
- Organises and coordinates the activities of non-state actors involved in emergency response;
- Provides First Aid for those injured and arranges field hospitals under the coordination of the Ministry of Labour, Health and Social Affairs;
- Provides food and non-food items to affected individuals under the coordination of the Ministry of Agriculture.

Changes to Georgia's constitution set in motion the need to safeguard the Red Cross Law: ensuring it was approved by the new parliament became a priority. This, coupled with a desire to strengthen the GRCS's auxiliary role and expand its humanitarian activities, placed the issue of legal reform at the forefront.

Advocating for a change in legislation is a long-term process because it often involves advocating and educating many legislators on the mission and auxiliary role of the National Society, and the structure and mandates of the wider Movement.

Changing the Red Cross Law took several years and involved the GRCS's president, board members, executive team and legal counsel:

- Liaising with the IFRC and ICRC to seek advice on best practices related to laws and statutes;
- Reviewing Red Cross/Red Crescent laws in other countries and identifying gaps in the Law of Georgia on the Georgia Red Cross Society;
- Meeting with legislators to explain the role of the Movement, the National Society and the auxiliary role;
- Meeting with the relevant public authorities to introduce the need for the revisions and to seek support for the change;
- Promoting the proposed changes through social media and within the GRCS.

The revised law was adopted by parliament in 2017. The updates define volunteering, provide for the GRCS to receive funds from budgetary organisations, recognise the role of the GRCS in promoting international humanitarian law, and acknowledge an annual Red Cross Week celebration (*refer to Annex 1 for detailed revisions*). The National Society hoped that the revised law would also include tax exemptions; this was not accepted and remains an objective for future revisions. The Emblem Law was revised the same year; it is now a punishable offence to misuse the Red Cross emblem.





Leveraging its auxiliary status for impact

The auxiliary status of the GRCS has facilitated the enactment of various Memorandums of Understanding (MOUs) and joint initiatives with public authorities. These agreements, in turn, facilitate GRCS access to decision-making platforms, increase its capacity to advocate for vulnerable communities and provide access to resources. The main purpose of these agreements is to cooperate in developing safe and resilient communities, preparedness and response capacities for emergencies, and promoting youth and volunteer engagement in social and health activities.

In negotiating these agreements, the National Society is careful not to jeopardise its neutral, impartial and independent status. The National Society meticulously reviews agreement terms during negotiations, ensuring adherence to the Fundamental Principles, and considering potential interpretations during armed conflict and other situations of violence.

Empowering youth

Thanks to its auxiliary status, the GRCS is a founding member of the National Youth and Volunteering Parliamentary Committee working group. In this capacity, the GRCS actively advocates for recognising young people as crucial contributors to humanitarian action, highlighting their roles as

leaders, volunteers and community members. The GRCS's influence extends to discussions concerning structures and processes facilitating youth participation in decision-making. GRCS played a part in establishing the National Youth Agency, which is responsible for policy implementation, and Youth Boards, which advise the Agency on needs and the relevance of potential programmes. Currently, the GRCS is leveraging its status to advocate for revisions to the Law of Georgia on Volunteering, aiming to maximise the benefits of volunteer involvement, safeguard the rights of volunteers and ensure comprehensive support for them in carrying out their roles.

Strengthening disaster preparedness

Through an MoU with the Ministry of Internal Affairs' Emergency Management Service (EMS), the GRCS collaborates on disaster preparedness and response. The joint project, 'Reinforcing the Civil Protection System by Strengthening Volunteer Capacity', focuses on training and preparing emergency response volunteers. This cooperation model outlines the joint efforts of the GRCS and EMS in establishing, maintaining and activating joint volunteer groups within target communities. It defines collaboration in civil protection and volunteerism, operationalising the Civil Safety Plan.

The agreement's main objective is to reduce community vulnerability and enhance the preparedness and response capacities of volunteers and GRCS branches for emergencies. Training empowers volunteers and fosters a sense of confidence in their roles, ultimately leading to better support for the people they serve. Additionally, effective training boosts volunteer engagement and retention.

Promoting International Humanitarian Law

As an observer alongside the ICRC, the GRCS participates in the Interagency Commission on International Humanitarian Law. This is a permanent advisory body established to encourage compliance with IHL norms. Within the Commission, the GRCS collaborates with public authorities in the planning and implementation of IHL dissemination activities.

Operationalisation of the auxiliary role

It takes more than a law to enable a National Society to deliver on its auxiliary role. It takes continuously sensitising public authorities, advocating legal revisions, fostering relationships with public authorities at all levels, and developing the appropriate capabilities to supplement or substitute public services when and where needed.

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Investment in National Society Development is most important. The government must also invest in the National Society. If there is no investment in branches and volunteers, then the GRCS cannot fulfil its auxiliary responsibility, and services cannot improve in scale and quality. We say to the government: We help through your help.

Secretary General, GRCS

For the GRCS, operationalising, sustaining and updating the auxiliary role so that it reflects the changing Georgian context and evolving humanitarian needs has involved:

- sensitising national and local authorities to the auxiliary role, the Fundamental Principles, and the functioning of the wider Movement;
- Advocating for revisions to laws and decrees related to GRCS's mandate;
- Developing governance and management systems, and the capacities of branches and volunteers;
- Developing and nurturing strong and balanced relationships with public authorities at all levels;
- Leading and participating in coordination structures at national and local levels;
- Joint activities with public authorities in health, social care and disaster-risk management;
- Substituting for the humanitarian services of public authorities when they lack the means.

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The GRCS actively identifies the needs of different vulnerable groups and advocates for their well-being with local government representatives. This ensures that the needs of all vulnerable groups are heard and addressed. Due to limited resources, public authorities cannot always respond to the needs of every group. In these situations, the GRCS uses advocacy to identify needs and champion support for the most vulnerable.

Deputy Secretary General, GRCS

Investment in the National Society's governance has entailed visioning and strategy, revising the organisation's statutes, updating policies, strengthening internal controls and shaping culture – from a charity and relief mindset to community engagement and accountability.

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Before we had war and we were more focused on humanitarian assistance... but then we started the development process, so we started to teach branches not to give fish to communities, but showing communities how to get that 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, so they could find better opportunities for themselves.

Branch Development Coordinator, GRCS

Developing management skills at headquarters and in branches has been crucial. This has included training in human resource management, financial management, resource mobilisation, asset management, change management, performance management and relationship management. Fundamental to ensuring operational effectiveness has been the training of thousands of volunteers in the Fundamental Principles, the auxiliary role, safer access, community engagement and accountability, needs assessment in a range of technical domains such as health promotion, home-based care, First Aid, mental health and psychosocial support, disaster preparedness and response, climate change adaptation, Water, Sanitation & Hygiene activities (WASH), community-based surveillance, epidemic control and contact tracing.

Financial and technical backing from the IFRC, ICRC, and sister National Societies have played a pivotal role in enabling GRCS to train its people and establishing the necessary organisational systems for performance management.

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Movement partners teach us, and we pass on that knowledge to branches. We always say we are open to learn. We are learning by doing. This is a true statement! I am learning together with you by doing and asking those with more experience to share their knowledge, then you have success.

Staff member, Headquarters, GRCS

Before 2008, weak branch governance, a limited volunteer base, minimal collaboration with local authorities and restricted activities characterised the GRCS branches. At that time, branches perceived headquarters as the primary driver of humanitarian action, leading to many inactive ones.

Fast forward 15 years, and a systematic branch development process has transformed this landscape. Today, most GRCS branches are actively contributing to improving lives, leveraging their own resources. With a significant boost in active volunteers, most branches now boast a base of 80 volunteers or more. Each branch delivers at least two regular volunteer-led services. Annually, excluding emergency response operations, about half of the branches reach a minimum of 300 individuals, while the remainder impact up to 800 individuals through their ongoing services. All branches are strategically positioned within their local areas, effectively fulfilling their role as auxiliaries to local authorities. Impressively, 39 branches have taken the lead in inter-agency coordination. Moreover, 22 branches have successfully trained First Aid teams and 16 have established trained disaster response teams. This evolution underscores the importance of a branch development strategy supported by partner investment.

Auxiliary role implementation at branch level

The GRCS has been decentralising, empowering its branches to develop activities based on local needs and raising resources locally. This approach has fostered increased transparency, accountability and results-oriented local action because branches feel more responsible for their own success. Decentralisation is also a key policy priority for the government. This involves transferring more financial resources and local development powers to municipalities.

Over the last five years, the GRCS has actively engaged in an intensive dialogue process with municipalities, advocating for the mutual benefits of collaboration under the umbrella of the National Society's auxiliary role. The National Society has signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with 33 of Georgia's 64 municipal authorities. These agreements facilitate the provision of office and meeting spaces for branches, funding for general maintenance and restoration of these spaces, and financing for joint initiatives.

“*At the beginning, branches did not believe that they could attract local resources. Relations with municipalities were like rocket science for them. They could not start raising funds locally. They said, “We don’t know how to do that!” Also, local municipal 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. Now municipalities that do not have branches initiate discussion with us!*”

GRCS Branch Development Coordinator

Since the first GRCS-municipal MoU was signed in 2005 in Gardabani municipality, joint activities have expanded across the territory. In 2023, there were 34 co-funded branch-municipal government projects in place, ranging from soup kitchens to home-based care, to day-care centres for the elderly and support for internally displaced communities. Annually, each branch and municipality holds roundtable discussions to agree on their joint activities, review achievements and challenges, and discuss how their collaboration can improve in the coming year.

The MoUs have five-year terms and are automatically renewed unless terminated. The National Society aims to establish MoUs with all 64 municipalities.

“*All municipalities should have good relationships with their local Red Cross branch. When the municipality and Red Cross work together, they can achieve more. When everybody was home, and everybody was locked up during COVID, it was Red Cross volunteers and staff doing the main job.*”

Giorgi Aslamazishvili, Head, Sports, Youth and Social Activities, Dusheti Local Council

Municipalities partner with the Red Cross for several reasons:

- Access to Red Cross resources, including reputation, expertise, time of trained and equipped volunteers, prepositioned stocks and other supplies;
- Delivery of cost-effective social and community outreach services;
- Freeing up of municipal resources for planning, policy and regulation;
- Increase in community trust and participation.

As more provincial authorities have partnered with GRCS branches, the operational capacity and prominence of the National Society’s work have increased. This collaboration has, in turn, inspired other provincial authorities to follow suit. The resulting ripple effect and synergy within this expanding network of partnerships have fortified GRCS’s community foundations. Consequently, when a crisis occurs, branches and their volunteers, having established relationships with communities, are more likely to have improved access, be more responsive and be more effective in delivering assistance.

Recognising that it must ensure branches maintain balanced relationships with their public authorities, all branches are trained to communicate the GRCS’s neutral, impartial and independent status. They are also encouraged to raise resources from other donors so as not to be overly reliant on the resourcing of their local authorities.

An important partnership

Dusheti Red Cross Branch and the municipal government

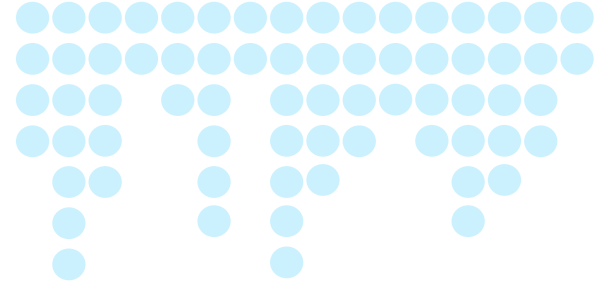
The Dusheti Branch was established in 2013 and is located at the foothills of the Caucasus mountains in the region of Mtskheta-Mtianeti. Some 95 per cent of settlements are in high, mountainous areas.

“Dusheti is a high mountainous region, and some communities are difficult to access,” says Mr. Aslamazishvili, Head of Sports, Youth and Social Activities at the Dusheti Municipality. “The branch, which covers 200 villages, has been very active in the municipality since its establishment.” Mr. Aslamazishvili informs us that he can speak about the municipality and Red Cross partnership endlessly. “I cannot envision my public service functions without the Red Cross partnership because the branch has many resources, including volunteers, technical knowledge and access to a national and international network.” The municipality co-funds projects with the branch.

Recently, the municipality established a football club. The branch donated items to the club, different sports equipment including balls, plastic chips, ladders and stands. The municipality has small-scale projects and provides some funding to the branch through this facility. The branch conducts needs assessments and then writes proposals for government funding. The municipality has a local kitchen that serves 110 individuals daily; the Red Cross is subcontracted to deliver this service. The Dusheti Branch has also been instrumental during disaster response operations, including supporting needs assessment and distributing emergency items, such as medicine, clothing and school supplies.

For Mr. Aslamazishvili, the most essential investment in the branch, leading to impact in communities, is the training of volunteers. These volunteers then deliver skills training and health promotion activities in isolated mountain villages, in areas such as community-based First Aid, healthy lifestyles, healthy ageing and the prevention of communicable diseases. Another important investment has been in the refurbishment of the branch. The municipality provides offices and the ICRC has funded the refurbishment. This was important in the view of Mr. Aslamazishvili, because a welcoming meeting and training space is important for motivating volunteers. An unmet need is for a four-wheel drive vehicle, so that the branch can reach isolated villages, especially during the harsh winter when there is snow. “If the branch had a car, the municipality would purchase the fuel. The branch could reach snow-blocked places in the wintertime,” says Mr. Aslamazishvili.

When asked how the auxiliary role of the GRCS is operationalised in Dusheti, Mr Aslamazishvili responded: “We do not cross the important line of independence. The Red Cross auxiliary role justifies itself. The Red Cross branch is there when and where they are needed. Red Cross is a people-helping organisation, and the auxiliary role is for the people”.



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

Drawing a comparison between the GRCS's responses to the 2008 conflict and the pandemic serves as a testament to the value of investment in developing a National Society. In 2008, the National Society found itself operating reactively. However, in 2020, even before the first case emerged in Georgia, the National Society had proactively initiated awareness-raising meetings with key stakeholders regarding the potential risks associated with the virus.

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Waking up in a locked city was the most difficult... but once out on the street supporting the response, I realised that the red vests of the Georgia Red Cross volunteers dissipated the common fear [of the virus].

Volunteer, Marneuli Branch

The first case of COVID-19 in Georgia was detected in late February 2020, prompting the introduction of restrictive measures that initially staved off the onset of a first wave.⁹ However, easing unpopular restrictions before parliamentary elections led to a rapid surge in infections. As the healthcare system became overwhelmed, authorities reinstated a near-complete lockdown in late 2020.¹⁰ The strained healthcare system faced the dual challenge of accommodating COVID-19-positive patients and addressing vaccine hesitancy.¹¹ High rates of morbidity and mortality among healthcare workers further strained the delivery of care, impacting both in-facility treatment and outreach services. Certain groups bore the brunt of the pandemic's impact, including older individuals living alone, people living with a disability, caregivers and internally displaced persons.

By mid-2023, the country had recorded 1.85 million confirmed cases and 17,132 deaths, indicating the substantial impact of the pandemic.¹² The repercussions of the pandemic extended far beyond the health sector, severely affecting Georgia's economy. A notable consequence was the steep rise in unemployment, with approximately 350,000 people – almost ten per cent of the population – requiring government assistance due to job loss in the initial half of 2020.¹³ Negative economic effects disproportionately affected groups that were already poor and vulnerable, pushing more people back or further into poverty.

Coordination with public authorities

As a member of the Interagency Coordination Council – an inter-agency structure chaired by the prime minister – the GRCS contributed to high-level discussions on the response to COVID-19, sharing its needs assessment and community engagement approaches. To coordinate day-to-day operations, the National Society worked closely with the Ministry of Internally Displaced Persons, Labour, Health and Social Affairs, its subordinate National Centre of Disease Control and Public Health, and the Ministries of Internal Affairs, Economy and Finances. At local level, branches liaised and implemented activities in collaboration with regional and municipal authorities, health facilities and community leaders.

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The Georgia Red Cross Society, as an auxiliary organisation to the public authorities of Georgia... actively carries out work and delivers services in the Kakheti Region, to support the most vulnerable people in emergencies and beyond. They are our reliable partners, and all the municipalities of the Kakheti Region must contribute to this noble cause. I consider it a personal obligation to help the Red Cross... in fulfilling their humanitarian mission. I believe in having a positive impact on the lives of the many people in need through joint efforts. The staff and volunteers, who are directly involved in the delivery of Red Cross service, deserve only praise as they set a good example of civic responsibility to others!

Irakli Shioshvili, First Deputy State Attorney,
Governor of the Kakheti Region

The GRCS's contribution to the government response was extensive. In accordance with its auxiliary role, the National Society operated vaccination centres and a COVID hotline, supported testing, provided home-based care, and disseminated health and safety messages to help prevent the spread of COVID-19 and maximise the uptake of vaccinations. By the end of the operation, the GRCS had reached 2.7 million people through risk communication and community-based activities (See Table 1). Some 10,000 GRCS volunteers were mobilised to support the response. Long-standing investment in the capacity development of branches and volunteers enabled the GRCS to effectively supplement the response of public authorities and fill gaps in public health services.

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Immediately, the National Society formally advised the government that its branches had the capacity to respond. The GRCS operated a 24-hour hotline for people stuck at home and asking for support. Phone operators were registering needs, and this information was transferred to the government authorities. I recall one government representative saying, “When we started to cooperate with the GRCS, we did not know what this organisation was about and whether they could support the authorities, and now I regret that I did not know so much about the Red Cross. They did not need to send volunteers from one place to another because they were already present all over the country!”. The GRCS was identifying local needs immediately, responding in the shortest period of time, and passing these on to local and national authorities. I was amazed by the well-coordinated support provided by the GRCS.

ICRC representative in Georgia

The government benefitted from the expertise of the Red Cross Red Crescent Movement through the GRCS access to policy guidance, standards and training. The GRCS's COVID-19 policies, planning and operations were guided by the most up-to-date information, guidelines and training provided by the IFRC, covering measures for epidemic control, community-based surveillance, infection prevention and control, Water, Sanitation & Hygiene (WASH) initiatives, mental health and psychosocial support, COVID-19 immunisation, community engagement and accountability, social care and cohesion, and support to vulnerable

groups and volunteers. Moreover, through IFRC dialogue platforms, the GRCS both contributed to and benefitted from information, resource sharing, and collaborative research on vulnerability and best practices among Red Cross and Red Crescent members.



Supplementing the work of public authorities

The GRCS contributed significantly to the government's vaccination strategy by operating three mass vaccination centres in Rustavi, Mukhrani and Mtskheta, as well as two mobile vaccination units. These centres were operated by employees and volunteers from both headquarters and branches. Comprehending the reasons behind vaccine hesitancy was another area of focus for the GRCS. The organisation conducted surveys to gather insights into the underlying causes for vaccine hesitancy, contributing to behavioural change, knowledge and strategies. The GRCS also supported a testing centre near the administrative boundary with

disputed territories. In parallel, the GRCS played a role in assisting local authorities in maintaining uninterrupted primary healthcare services. These services faced accessibility challenges during the pandemic due to the strain on the public-health system and transportation limitations.

Through its COVID hotline, the GRCS responded to 12,200 enquiries, facilitating access to information on pandemic-related directives, the virus, the vaccination process, treatment options and governmental financial support.

“Many people were asking about what would happen if they were vaccinated. Sometimes it was necessary that I call them back from the hotline number and have a therapy [session] with them because they were very stressed. For example, “My mother is old, she has diseases, I am afraid she will die, what can I do?”

GRCS Headquarters hotline staff member

The GRCS also provided referrals to state and non-state services and responded to requests for essential supplies like food, hygiene parcels, medical transportation, home-based care and psychological support through its hotline. GRCS psychologists conducted online consultations referred from the hotline.

TABLE 1: People reached by the Georgia Red Cross Society between January 2020 and December 2022

Indicator/Activity	People reached
People reached through risk communication and community engagement for health and hygiene promotion activities	2.7 million
People reached with mental health and psychosocial support services during the COVID-19 response	110,654
Staff and volunteers trained in COVID-19 vaccine health promotion	99
Individuals supported by the National Society to be vaccinated against COVID-19	8,744
People made vulnerable by COVID-19 reached with food and other in-kind assistance	36,116
National Society staff and volunteers trained in community engagement and accountability	11,000
Number of responses to COVID-19 hotline calls	20,587
Blood donors mobilised	372





Filling gaps in public services

The complexities of the COVID crisis exposed the limitations of conventional top-down public-health strategies and emphasized the pivotal role of community engagement in reaching different groups. The GRCS filled the gap in government public-health messaging through its community-based networks. Ensuring equitable access to vaccinations for ethnic minorities was a key focus for the GRCS.

For instance, in Marneuli and Batumi, an IFRC study on community engagement found that community participation activities supported by Red Cross branches enhanced compliance with public-health measures and outreach to priority groups.

“*They trust us; as many lost their jobs because of COVID-19 and lost their income, we would provide them with essential services, we were very important for them to survive, and this would make us, our organisation, more reliable and trustworthy.*”

Batumi Branch Volunteer

The Marneuli branch collaborated with the Azerbaijani and Armenian National Societies to produce information material in these languages and distribute it to communities. They also worked with community leaders to translate messages into local languages and deliver them orally,

employing door-to-door outreach and loudspeaker broadcasting.

“*We were better able to handle the pandemic thanks to the Red Cross – we were better informed and able to follow the guidelines. Every single child in our village knows what to do to protect themselves from COVID.*”

Marneuli community leader

The IFRC study also found that community members who have consistent contact with the GRCS through their involvement with community centres, such as the day-care centre for older people in Batumi, used the Red Cross as their primary source of information during the pandemic:

“*Training sessions [organised by the Red Cross] helped us to distinguish real information or trustworthy information from disinformation.*”

Service user at Batumi day-care Centre for older people

Mobile units proved integral in establishing effective two-way communication with remote and marginalised populations. The GRCS mobile teams undertook door-to-door information campaigns in remote areas, facilitating access to crucial COVID-19 prevention materials and vaccination services.

In these municipalities, the GRCS had experience with mobile units from a diabetes screening project. Leveraging this experience, alongside other ongoing programmes fostering engagement in rural and isolated communities, significantly contributed to the two branches' ability to facilitate community participation.

“*The biggest enabler for us, especially in the Kvemo Kartli Region, was the diabetes project, which was implemented in 2014. We have quite a close relationship with local medical staff and with community leaders, especially in Kvemo Kartli, because of the diabetes project, as it was implemented similarly. As I mentioned, this project was very similar to this one [mobile units for COVID], except it was on diabetes. There was a screening car, the same door-to-door approach for community mobilisations, and people had trust in us because of that project.*”

GRCS Headquarters staff member

In communities unfamiliar with the Red Cross, engagement was more challenging, demonstrating the importance of longer-term investment in building community foundations, so that trusting relationships are already in place when crisis strikes.

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[In small and isolated communities], they would see the Red Cross for the first time, and they were not eager to cooperate. That's why it's crucially important to have inside every single village or community a volunteer or volunteers [from that community] who would spread the word and who would encourage the local population to cooperate with us or other NGOs.

Marneuli Branch member

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Raising awareness on the topic of vaccination is not easy in small villages. It is not a one-time thing. It is a long-term process that needs to be addressed slowly and sensitively. We trained kindergarten and school staff on the importance of vaccination with the support of the Ministry of Education. Since we have a lot of volunteers, they go to their communities and raise awareness.

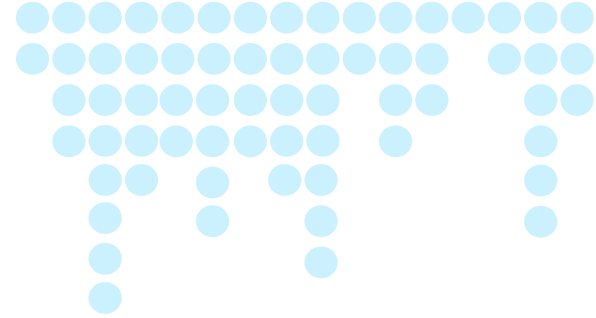
Zugdidi Branch member

Overall, the GRCS's COVID activities led to better-informed communities who trusted the information and services delivered by the Red Cross. This was made possible because of the existing relationships branches and volunteers had developed and nurtured with local authorities and communities before the pandemic. The GRCS's pandemic response consolidated existing relationships and lent further legitimacy to the National Society's auxiliary role.

Dusheti branch fulfils its auxiliary role and benefits from increased support

According to the Dusheti Branch Coordinator, Nino Chkhutiashvili, the biggest challenge of the pandemic was vaccine hesitancy. “Mistrust was caused by false information spread on social networks. It was not easy to overcome, but because of the active work of the branch, we achieved a positive result.” The branch has 196 registered volunteers, 130 members and five employees. During the pandemic, branch volunteers were trained in vaccine messaging and conducted outreach visits to unvaccinated households. “We would go house to house in the municipality's villages,” recounts Nino, “accompanied by a community representative and a doctor, which increased the credibility of our message. Then, we would transport the people who consented to the nearest immunisation centre and, after the vaccination, monitor them in their home to verify their health status”.

In 2022 and 2023, the funding allocated to the branch by the municipality increased. “This was caused by the activities we implemented for COVID,” says Nino. “It increased trust in the Red Cross... in recent years, the acceptance of the Red Cross by local government and the population has increased. We are active in about 80 villages. Walking from village to village with our health messages increased our profile.” In 2022, the branch provided humanitarian assistance to 320 families. At the time of the interview (September 2023), the branch had supported 112 families through its community-based activities.



The impact of the investment in GRCS's auxiliary role Weather-related disasters

Between June and August 2023, severe weather conditions battered several parts of Georgia, affecting thousands of households. Gurjaani Municipality, along with the regions of Smegrelo-Zemo Svaneti, Imereti, Guria and the Adjara Autonomous Republic, experienced heavy rainfall, flooding and hailstorms during June and July. These conditions triggered mudflows and landslides, destroying roads, bridges and power transmission towers. Countless homes in numerous villages were destroyed or damaged, while the devastation of crops and the loss of cattle and poultry impacted livelihoods. Soon after, a landslide and mudflow struck Shovi in Oni municipality in the Racha-Lechkhumi and Kvemo Svaneti Administrative Region, causing extensive damage to surrounding roads and demolishing bridges and homes.

“

There were flash floods causing landslides in June and August, and people always hope that the Red Cross and not just local government will help them. They know the GRCS will support them. This is good and challenging for the GRCS. Challenging because of the expectations of the public, and we must work hard to be with them [affected communities]. It is the job of the government to respond, but people often look to the Red Cross, perhaps because we are perceived as neutral.

GRCS Headquarters representative

During these crises, the Red Cross was pivotal in each emergency response operation. Mobilising staff and more than 100 volunteers from 15 branches, the National Society performed its auxiliary function, including management of dead bodies, data collection on missing and injured individuals, conducting needs assessments, distributing food and non-food supplies and cash grants, re-establishing family connections, providing first aid and psychosocial support, and coordinating the activities of civil society organisations involved in the various operations. The GRCS was part of the inter-agency task force and closely coordinated with various public authorities, including the Ministry of Regional Development and Infrastructure, regional and local municipalities, emergency management services, the police and the military.

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Preparing the relationships with government before an emergency is important. Response is chaotic if preparedness is not in place. People in the authorities change frequently at national and local levels because of the political cycle.

Headquarters staff member, GRCS

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We have a different reality compared to before COVID. Our role is now accepted by communities and authorities... we have a role in the National Council, which was visible during COVID and the Shovi disaster. We are responsible for the coordination of non-state actors, and we advocate on their behalf in the Council.

Headquarters staff member, GRCS

A well-defined auxiliary role captured in law facilitates the contribution of the GRCS to such disaster operations.

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Like all crises, the National Society was guided by the Civil National Safety Plan, where the GRCS and state institution roles are outlined.

Secretary General, GRCS

In Shovi, 150 GRCS volunteers and 50 employees deployed from around the country supported over 800 humanitarian workers daily with food and essential supplies, enabling them to undertake their search, rescue and clean-up activities. Concurrently, the GRCS coordinated the work of civil society organisations, provided psychological First Aid to 1,500 people and psychosocial support to 430 individuals affected by the crisis, and relatives of the deceased and missing, and delivered cash assistance to 131 families.

Moreover, over the last 15 years, internal and partner investment in the development of people, processes, systems and partnerships have enabled the National Society to deliver on its auxiliary role.

“
The National Society played an immense role in responding to recent floods in the mountainous regions of Georgia. The task force was established at national level, and a lot was put on the shoulders of the National Society. Not all the branches are strong, but when it comes to response, the National Society becomes an army of humanitarians. It has thousands of trained volunteers from its 39 branches ready to support.

ICRC representative in Georgia

Ongoing investment in maintaining the organisation's operational and partnership capacities are essential to ensure that the GRCS can continue to supplement or substitute for government services when needed across the territory.

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The IFRC and sister national societies continue investing in the GRCS's headquarters and local branch capacities. So far, the GRCS has been able to play its role in response to all the disasters it has been involved in. But if there were a large-scale disaster beyond the capacity of the National Society, then the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement would be ready to provide additional support. The National Society has a frank relationship with the government. So, it would ask the government to allow international support from the Movement to enter the country, and we would be ready to provide this support.

IFRC representative for the South Caucasus



The legacy of past conflicts and future preparedness

Conflict in Georgia has had a devastating and long-lasting impact on the families of the missing. The GRCS, drawing upon its experience in responding to the 2008 crisis, works with the ICRC in the missing persons programme, addressing disappearances from past conflicts.

The ICRC plays a crucial role in identifying missing persons and is progressively handing this responsibility over to the national authorities. Meanwhile, the GRCS focuses on supporting the families of the missing. It is providing support to over 2,000 families. These families have designated representatives called 'family committees', which are attached to four GRCS branches. These committees support public authorities during events dedicated to missing persons. The GRCS strengthens the capacities of the family committees and supports their efforts to register as non-profit organisations, enabling them to raise funds.

Strengthening branches for future crises

Furthermore, considering the frozen nature of past conflicts, the GRCS prioritises strengthening its branches located in sensitive areas along administrative boundary lines and with large ethnic minority populations, including:

- Zugdidi (in the west of the Samegrelo-Zemo Svaneti Region), situated near the administrative boundary line with Abkhazia;
- Marneuli (in the south of the Kvemo Kartli Region), located in on the border with Azerbaijan;
- Akhalkalaki (in the south of the Samtskhe-Javakheti Region), bordering Armenia;
- Gori (Shida Kartli Region), situated near the administrative boundary line with South Ossetia
- Akhmeta (eastern Georgia, Pankisi Gorge), bordering the Russian Federation.
- Khulo (south-west Georgia, Adjara Autonomous Republic), sharing a border with Turkey.

These branches receive specialised training in safer access practices, including risk assessment, strategies to gain acceptance among key stakeholders, designing and delivering culturally sensitive humanitarian services, communicating the Fundamental Principles and the mission and mandates of the Movement, and maintaining respectful communication practices, including on social media. By prioritising these branches and equipping them with the necessary skills, the GRCS is increasing its acceptance, security and access to people and communities who might need assistance in the event of internal or international armed conflict.

Responding to present needs: Ukrainian refugees

While addressing the long-lasting impacts of past conflicts and preparing for potential future ones, GRCS is also assisting Ukrainian refugees.

Responding to the influx of refugees from Ukraine presented a significant challenge, as existing facilities and services were inadequate. Recognising this, the GRCS leveraged the knowledge of sister National Societies, drawing on their experience and know-how to advise its public authorities on establishing essential support systems. Additionally, as per its auxiliary role as the civil society humanitarian coordinator, the GRCS established two web-based

coordination platforms: one to connect refugees with organisations offering psychosocial support; and another to facilitate information-sharing among all organisations and refugees, ensuring that everyone knew where to access needed services. The GRCS's direct assistance to refugees has included providing cash and vouchers for food, shelter and healthcare, and offering mental health and psychosocial support through individual counselling, child-friendly spaces and case management. The GRCS also advocates for refugees to encourage public authorities to continue their support.

“

I would like to thank you for the warm welcome. My expectations to get to know Georgia were completely met. Georgia is very beautiful and the people are hospitable. We were able to touch a little on your traditions. In general, there was a very warm atmosphere.

Nataliia, mother of Kirill and Varvara, Ukrainian Winter Camp participant

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Maxim and I are very grateful for such a warm welcome! We became mentally and physically stronger. It was interesting to learn about Georgia and the work of the Red Cross. Thank you very much everyone!

Tetiana, mother of Maxim, Ukrainian Winter Camp participant

“

Thank you very much for the wonderful days of relaxation for me and my children, your hospitality, care and warmth will warm us for a long, long time!

Oksana, mother of Ola and Sasha, Ukrainian Winter Camp participant



Ongoing investment during peacetime is essential

National Society visibility is often more pronounced during a crisis due to the immediate and visible nature of their response, while their crucial work in preparedness may not receive the same level of attention and financial support despite its significance in reducing risks and mitigating the impact of future disasters.

“A challenge for the National Society is to stay visible outside disaster operations. During peacetime it is less visible, but it does not mean that it is not working hard.”

Headquarters staff member, GRCS

For instance, given the backdrop of political tensions, historical grievances and social divisions, there is concern that the 2024 Georgian elections could be prone to electoral violence. To mitigate this risk, the National Society is actively preparing by training response teams, strategically prepositioning essential items, conducting simulations for emergency response and revising contingency plans throughout its branch network.

“The ICRC is focused on branches located in sensitive areas, along the administrative boundaries lines and in areas populated by ethnic minorities. Branches are the pillars on which the National Society is standing. We support branches so that they develop and maintain their capacity to be accepted as neutral humanitarian, which ensures access to communities to deliver Red Cross assistance.”

ICRC representative in Georgia

In the southern region of Samtskhe-Javakheti in Akhalkalaki, an area largely populated with Armenians, a newly established branch has only recently commenced its development journey. Establishing a humanitarian presence in this region is more difficult because more than half the population speaks Armenian. The National Society is investing heavily in developing the capacities and activities of the branch. Training branch staff and volunteers, supporting regular dialogue with local authorities, offering primary care services, and disseminating information about the Red Cross, its humanitarian principles, and its emblem in Armenian, have been core elements of the work. Investment in the branch are yielding promising results. Local volunteers have been actively engaged from within communities, fostering a





sense of ownership and commitment. Securing office space, courtesy of the municipality, has provided an operational base for the branch's activities. Georgian-language classes are offered by the branch and, in partnership with a neighbouring branch and a medical clinic, the branch provides mobile health assessments to underserved communities.

“More dialogue, more presence, more activities, more visibility and dissemination about the Red Cross. More dialogue with authorities is key. Slowly, results are coming, but it takes more time and resources compared to other regions because of the language challenge.”

National Branch Development Coordinator, GRCS

Across the country, the National Society continues to invest in branches and volunteers with the support of government and other partners. Significantly, investment directed to recruiting and developing the skills of branch coordinators has enhanced the ability of branches to fulfil their auxiliary functions. Given the high turnover of mostly young volunteers who relocate to larger cities for study or work, 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 and training of new volunteers.

“We have invested a lot in our branch coordinators. They receive a salary. Hiring paid staff at local level is important so that people stay motivated and are accountable for professional work standards. Even with volunteers, there is an issue of turnover. There is a need to start again. The coordinators provide the glue between the waves of new volunteers.”

GRCS National Branch Development Coordinator

The GRCS relies on diverse volunteers with strong ties to their communities to deliver its services. Volunteers play an important role in designing outreach strategies and encouraging community participation.

“We have 147 volunteers. Since the Gori Branch lost access [to international funding], we have had support from local authorities and raised funds through First-Aid training. As you know, we have a special [auxiliary] role in emergency response, and this was visible during COVID-19, the Ukraine crisis and flooding disasters. We have responsibilities during disasters. Through our activities, the awareness and acceptance of our role were raised in our communities. They rely more on us than before. This is the main thing that has changed over several years. We have reached more people. In one year during the pandemic, we reached 3,000 people!”

Gori Branch Coordinator



Conclusion

This case study traces the GRCS's journey in establishing its role as a strong humanitarian actor and auxiliary to public authorities. The Red Cross Law of 1997 established the GRCS's auxiliary status, setting the foundation for its engagement with public authorities. The 2008 conflict between Russia and Georgia acted as a catalyst, prompting GRCS to assert its role, leading to the inclusion of its functions in the Civil Safety National Plan – providing important clarifications of the organisation's auxiliary role and making GRCS the only non-state actor to be featured.

Moreover, the National Society's strong relationships with Movement partners allowed it to access international resources to strengthen its understanding of its auxiliary role and undertake broader National Society Development and capacity-building initiatives, increasing its ability to deliver its auxiliary functions.

Simultaneously, the National Society has strategically engaged with local government to secure long-term financial and operational partnerships

for 34 branches, increasing its reach, sustainability and legitimacy at local level. These factors have collectively contributed to strengthening the organisation's auxiliary status and ability to play a proactive and substantial role in addressing the needs of those affected by crisis and disaster, most recently during the COVID-19 pandemic, major flooding and the Ukraine refugee crisis.

While addressing the long-lasting impact of past conflicts, the National Society is preparing for potential future ones, providing specialised capacity-strengthening support to branches operating along administrative borders with other states.

Overall, the case study underscores the significance of a crisis as an opportunity for transformation, the steps the GRCS has taken to strengthen and leverage its auxiliary role, and the multifaceted factors that have contributed to this work.

Key revisions of the Law of Georgia on the Georgia Red Cross Society, 2017

1. Recognition of the role of the GRCS in promoting International Humanitarian Law:

...ensures respect for the rules of International Humanitarian Law, particularly through the dissemination of knowledge and facilitation of these rules to be observed at national level – Article 6 (l);

...in cooperation with the state authority bodies, it ensures compliance with International Humanitarian Law and the protection of Red Cross, Red Crescent and Red Crystal emblems – Article 6 (m).

2. A definition of voluntary service

The Society also relies on the principle of voluntary service when fulfilling its goals, objectives and functions –Article 9.

Voluntary service of the Society is a socially beneficial activity. It is usually an unpaid, humanitarian and voluntary activity commissioned by the Society and undertaken without establishing formal labour relations with the Society – Article 10.

A natural person aged 16 or above can volunteer for the Society; also a juvenile under 16 who is willing, with the consent of a legal representative or body of guardianship and custody can serve as a volunteer, if it does not conflict with the interests of juvenile, harm his/her moral, physical and mental development and does not limit the right and possibility to have an compulsory elementary and basic education – Article 11.

3. A refinement of the article related to income sources and their application, in particular the possibility for the GRCS to receive payment under contracts with budgetary organisations:

The Society may have income from the following sources: a) membership fees; b) grants, donations and contributions; c) income generated from commercial activity of a subsidiary nature, undertaken for the fulfilment of goals and objectives prescribed by the statute of the Society; d) payment received under contracts with relevant entities (including budgetary organisations) concluded within the powers envisaged by this law, resulting from the goals and objectives of the Society.

4. Acknowledgement of the annual Red Cross Week celebrations to recognise the work of volunteers and reaffirm the unwavering commitment to a common humanity and the Fundamental Principles:

For the purposes of representing the activities of the Society, Red Cross Week is celebrated annually, from May 1 to 8, and Georgia Red Cross Society Week from September 20 to 28 – Article 6.

Endnotes

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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.