
INTERNATIONAL FEDERATION OF RED CROSS AND RED CRESCENT SOCIETIES:
COOPERATION ON NEEDS AND CONTRIBUTIONS OF MIGRANTS
IN DISASTER SITUATIONS

(Presented by the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies
for the meeting of January 27, 2009)

Preliminary Remarks

The humanitarian needs of refugees and migrants have been a traditional concern of the Red Cross Red Crescent Movement since its beginnings in the late 19th century. However, with the end of the Cold War the need arose to adapt activities to the changing profile of international migration. At the 30th International Conference of the Red Cross and Red Crescent in 2007, the International Movement and the world's 194 state parties to the Geneva Conventions agreed by consensus to "reinforce international cooperation at all levels to address the humanitarian concerns generated by international migration". Earlier that year, the National Societies of the Americas crafted their own commitments on migration under the motto "to better protect, support and assist people affected by migration, regardless of their legal status". Since then, the International Federation has established an advisory group and a special representative's office to drive the global initiative on migration.

The 30th International Conference underlined that the Red Cross Red Crescent must focus on needs of vulnerabilities of migrants "irrespective of their legal status". Accordingly, the Movement's approach is deliberately inclusive, encompassing labor migrants as well as refugees. While its primary goal is to reinforce international cooperation on international migration, the Movement recognizes the linkage between the latter, and migration and displacement within countries. Thus, all components of the Movement – National Societies, their Federation, and the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) – are called upon and concerned.

Migration and the RC/RC Auxiliary Role

From their inception in 1864, the status of National Societies as auxiliaries in the humanitarian service of public authorities has been - and still is - a key concept. In many countries, this auxiliary status is anchored in national legislation.

The auxiliary status has two sides: It acknowledges the primary responsibility of public authorities in providing assistance and protection to people affected by disasters, and the role of the Red Cross Red Crescent in supporting them in this responsibility. However, it also implies that the intervention of Red Cross Red Crescent Societies is not as a simple substitute of public authorities but in

a special capacity, following specific principles of humanitarian action. These were codified as the ‘Fundamental Principles of the Red Cross Red Crescent’¹.

Balancing the two aspects – support to public authorities, and humanitarian independence – presents challenges and opportunities to both, States and National Societies. The two aspects come together when a National Society provides for vulnerable people, including migrants, while responding to major disasters as part of its Government’s national disaster response plans.

The International Federation’s Approach to Migration

A new, global policy on migration of the International Federation is under elaboration. It will spell out the principles underlying its humanitarian approach to migration. However, the fundamental principles of the Red Cross Red Crescent already form a solid framework from which to draw recommendations specifically relating to migration and disaster preparedness. Four important recommendations are outlined in the following section.

Focusing on needs and vulnerabilities

The fundamental principles of the Red Cross Red Crescent Movement – in particular the principle of impartiality – require that humanitarian assistance be conducted exclusively in response to the needs and vulnerabilities of people, with a priority to the most urgent cases of distress, irrespective of the category to which the people in need belong. Consequently, the Red Cross Red Crescent, in its disaster assistance, has no *a priori* in favor of migrants or any other category.

However, migrants are often underprivileged and, thus, at risk of being ‘the last in line’ in disaster assistance, in disregard of the degree of urgency and gravity of their needs. National Societies themselves can come under pressure to give preferential treatment to local communities. Thus, under certain circumstances, they may depend on the support of public authorities to be able to conduct their activities freely and in accordance to the principle of non-discrimination.

- As part of general disaster preparedness, public authorities may need to pay special attention to measures that ensure non-discrimination in general assistance in case that disaster strikes.

Preparing for humanitarian access

Government relief and recovery aid is often reserved for individuals with the appropriate documentation. Undocumented or illegal migrants may have particular difficulties in accessing assistance. This concerns not only their material needs but also needs of a psychosocial nature. For example, it is often harder for them to get in touch with family to let them know they are safe.

The Red Cross Red Crescent or other humanitarian aid organizations may step in to fill the void but irregular migrants do not always trust that they will not cross paths with the authorities when seeking assistance. Moreover, in some countries, it is unlawful to provide assistance to undocumented migrants, and legislation often does not foresee a humanitarian exception to guarantee the basic emergency assistance that is due to disaster victims regardless of their status.

¹ [I. Humanity II. Impartiality III. Neutrality IV. Independence V. Voluntary service VI. Unity VII. Universality](#)

For the full version, including the definition of the principles, as adopted by the 20th International Conference of the Red Cross Red Crescent (1965), see <http://www.ifrc.org/what/values/principles/index.asp>

- It is important to include provisions in disaster preparedness plans that allow and facilitate access of humanitarian aid organizations to undocumented or illegal migrants. Such provisions will reassure the migrants of concern as well as the public that emergency assistance, if needed, will be made available in an equitable, needs-based manner, and without legal prejudice.

Optimizing the strategic contribution of migrants

The most vulnerable people in a society face particular difficulties in recovery from a disaster. Migrants are often more vulnerable to begin with as it is harder to reach their communities with preparedness messages and they have fewer resources to prepare for disasters. They are more likely to build homes in areas that are unsafe, and their living conditions are often especially tenuous.

Once a disaster strikes, migrants may also have more difficulties in responding to, and recovering from a disaster. Newcomers to a society are more likely to lack social networks upon which to draw. They lack places to go and relatives to stay with. Their culture and perspectives can differ from what authorities and humanitarian organizations expect of them. They might mistrust the national humanitarian staff or volunteers of their host countries.

On the other hand, migrants' contributions to host countries are important, sometimes even indispensable. This concerns their economic role as part of the labor force, but it concerns also the transfer of skills and – particularly in relation to disasters – their capacities to cope with adverse conditions and contribute to recovery and reconstruction.

- Migrants' communities should be included in strategic planning in all three dimensions – risk reduction, recovery and reconstruction – through the establishment of participatory mechanisms to address migrants' concerns and call upon their contribution. To this end, it is useful to integrate members of migrant communities as staff or volunteers into the organization for disaster response.

International cooperation

It goes without saying that international cooperation in disaster preparedness and relief is crucial. However, a specific dimension may be underestimated, namely the role which international networks linking migrants with their home communities can play in this regard, in the sense of both, support by migrants to home communities, and support by home communities to their diasporas. It has been demonstrated in recent examples that such exchange plays an unsung but important role in helping many communities to recover after disasters.

The International Red Cross Red Crescent Movement constitutes an international network that is rooted in innumerable local communities. This gives it a unique position is to provide a bracket of exchange between migrants and their home communities in case of disaster. Besides specific international programmes, e.g. RFL activities (Restoring Family Links) under the guidance of the International Committee of the Red Cross, such exchange can take the form of support by National Societies to partner National Societies in countries affected by disaster.

Red Cross Red Crescent cooperation with Governments in facilitating collective or bilateral support between migrants' communities and their diasporas is a key element in both preparedness of, and relief during disaster situations.

- Few Governments have rules and mechanisms prior to the advent of an emergency for facilitating and regulating outside assistance. This can lead to unnecessary bureaucratic hurdles and delays in relief, but also to obstructions caused by well-meant but poorly conceived outside efforts. While the International Federation's International Disaster Response Laws, Rules and Principles programme² does not pertain specifically to migration, rules and mechanisms concerning the provision of assistance can reinforce the inclusion of migrant communities' assistance and optimize their contribution to relief in case disaster strikes.

Strengthening regional partnership between the International Federation and Governments

The 30th International Conference of the Red Cross and Red Crescent in 2007 renewed the commitment of both the International Movement and the world's 194 state parties to work together in reinforcing humanitarian action related to migration. However, the migratory trajectories or cycles differ considerably from region to region.

To translate this commitment into new and strengthened forms of cooperation, a regional approach is required. The International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies is looking forward to working together with the Organization of American States to make this commitment a reality.

² See the "Guidelines for the domestic facilitation and regulation of international disaster relief and initial recovery assistance", unanimously adopted by the state parties to the Geneva Conventions at the 30th International Conference of the Red Cross and Red Crescent in 2007