



International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies
Fédération internationale des Sociétés de la Croix-Rouge et du Croissant-Rouge
Federación Internacional de Sociedades de la Cruz Roja y de la Media Luna Roja
الاتحاد الدولي لجمعيات الصليب الأحمر والهلال الأحمر

Background information sheet

The Red Cross Red Crescent's Role in the Development of International Disaster Response Laws, Rules and Principles

The Red Cross Red Crescent Movement – and especially its founding organ, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) – is well known for its role in promoting the development and implementation of international humanitarian law (also known as the law of war), in particular, the Geneva Conventions of 1949 and their Additional Protocols. Less attention has been paid to the Movement's contributions to existing international norms and standards relating to non-conflict disasters. As the world's largest humanitarian network, it should come as little surprise that the Red Cross Red Crescent Movement has had a hand in many of the major developments in this area. This sheet summarizes just a few of those most closely associated with the Movement.

Standards concerning the role of the Movement

Although the Movement has its origins in the desire to address the barbarities of war, as early as 1869, the Second International Conference of the Red Cross (International Conference),¹ adopted a resolution calling on national Red Cross societies to also provide relief “in case of public calamity which, like war, demands immediate and organized assistance”. This peacetime role was confirmed in practice, emphasized in the 1919 Constitution of the League of Red Cross Societies (now known as the International



Mobile clinic volunteers explain how food should be prepared at the Red Cross camp in Tahoua, Niger.

Photo: Bruce Liron/British Red Cross

Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies) and eventually codified in the [Statutes of the Red Cross/Red Crescent Movement](#), which were first adopted in 1928.

Today, the Movement's statutes provide that national Red Cross and Red Crescent societies are mandated, among other things, to “organize, in liaison with the public authorities, emergency relief operations and other services to assist . . . the victims of natural disasters and other emergencies for whom help is needed” (art. 3). For its part,

¹ The International Conference of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (as it is currently known) is the “supreme deliberative body for the Movement”, and is attended by all States parties to the Geneva Conventions, all national Red Cross and Red Crescent societies recognized by the ICRC, the ICRC and the International Federation. It normally meets every four years.

the Federation is called upon, both in the Statutes and in its [Constitution](#), to “assist the National Societies in their disaster relief preparedness, in the organization of their relief actions and in the relief operations themselves” (Statutes, art. 6, Constitution, art. 3). In 1969, the 21st International Conference adopted the [Principles and Rules for Red Cross and Red Crescent Disaster Relief](#), which set out a detailed structure for Movement cooperation in international disaster relief operations. The roles of the International Federation, national societies and ICRC are further clarified in the [Seville Agreement](#) of 1997, which sets out leadership and operating roles in armed conflict, disaster and mixed situations. In 1995, the 26th International Conference also adopted guidelines on the [Role of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies in response to technological disasters](#), notably nuclear and chemical disasters.

In addition, the Movement has developed practical instruments that set standards for its international disaster-response work. For example, the [Emergency Items Catalogue](#) provides detailed descriptions and specifications for different relief items with the aim of improving the overall standard of emergency relief and to avoid inappropriate donations.

Facilitation by other players

Red Cross Red Crescent disaster response standards are not limited to defining their own role and activities in the international sphere. For example, in both 1912 and 1938, the International Conference of the Red Cross adopted resolutions calling for domestic laws to be changed to reduce legal formalities to the entry and operation of foreign Red Cross societies. Similarly, in 1969, the 21st International Conference adopted a [Declaration of Principles for International Humanitarian Relief to the Civilian Population in Disaster Situations](#). The declaration called on international humanitarian organizations to conform to humanitarian principles (such as that of non-discrimination) and to coordinate their activities to avoid duplication. It also called on governments to facilitate access by such organizations, including in transit, admission and distribution of relief supplies. At that same conference, participants adopted resolution XXIII on [Air transport in international relief actions](#), calling on airline companies “to transport relief supplies under conditions in no way prejudicial to the conveyance of such supplies and in particular to reduce freight charges”.

In 1977, the 23rd International Conference elaborated on these themes with its resolution on [Measures to expedite international relief](#). The measures include a series of recommendations to recipient governments, donors, intergovernmental agencies and non-governmental organizations on practical measures to speed up customs, visa and other border formalities, to improve the coordination of international relief and to address issues such as transport and emergency telecommunications. In a separate resolution (res. V), the same conference also emphasized the need for expedited visa procedures for Red Cross and Red Crescent delegates and called on national societies to work with their governments to ensure that this goal is met.

Universal humanitarian standards

The Red Cross Red Crescent Movement has long been a leader in the development of humanitarian standards and measures of accountability. The Movement’s own fundamental principles (humanity, impartiality, neutrality, independence, voluntary service, unity and universality), as provided in its statutes, have been enormously influential in determining how humanitarianism is generally defined.

In 1991, the Council of Delegates² called on the Federation to elaborate a code of conduct for humanitarian organizations in disaster settings. Working with partners in the humanitarian community, the Federation developed the [Code of Conduct for the Red Cross/Red Crescent Movement and Non-Governmental Organizations in Disaster Response Programmes](#), which was formally welcomed by the 26th International Conference in 1995. While still a voluntary self-policing document, it remains the most widely-used instrument of its type, with over 370 signatory organizations.

The Federation was also the host and a primary supporter for the Sphere Project, which developed the [Sphere Humanitarian Charter and Minimum Standards in Disaster Response](#) of 2000 (and as updated in 2004). In addition to addressing general issues of humanitarian conduct, Sphere sets out concrete quality benchmarks for humanitarian operations. While also a non-binding instrument, Sphere has seen widespread use and acceptance by the international humanitarian community and donors.

Recent initiatives

In recent years, the Movement's attention to international norms in disaster response has intensified. In [Resolution 5](#) of 2001, the Council of Delegates welcomed the Federation initiative to "advocate for the development and, where applicable, the improvement and faithful application of International Disaster Response Law". In 2003, the 28th International Conference adopted an Agenda for Humanitarian Action, including [Final Goal 3.2](#), which called on the Federation and national societies to "lead collaborative efforts" to disseminate information about existing laws and norms in this area and identify gaps.

This commitment has been echoed in other Red Cross/Red Crescent conference outcomes, including the [Manila Action Plan](#) of 2002, the [Santiago de Chile Commitment](#) of 2003, and most recently in the report of the November 2005 Commission of the Council of Delegates on Access to Victims and Vulnerable Persons. In accordance with the terms of Final Goal 3.2 of the 28th International Conference, the matter will again be taken up at the 30th International Conference in 2007.

For more information

See the IDRL web site and online legal database at www.ifrc.org/idrl or contact us at:

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² The Council of Delegates is a deliberative body made up of representatives of all components of the Movement (recognised National Societies, ICRC, and the International Federation) to discuss matters which concern the Movement as a whole. It normally meets every two years.