

### INTRODUCTION

**Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (often referred to as National Societies) are autonomous, impartial, and neutral humanitarian entities, present in 191 countries around the world.** Each one is made up of an unparalleled network of community-based volunteers and staff who play a vital role in building resilience, and helping communities prepare for, respond to, and recover from disasters and health emergencies.

The services provided by National Societies vary country by country, but health and care often represents their largest area of work.

In fact, in many countries, 'Red Cross' or 'Red Crescent' is synonymous with health. Collectively, Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies reach millions of people every year with a wide range of health services—everything from first aid to palliative care. They thereby contribute to strengthening health systems, universal health coverage, health security, and resilience.

Amid growing gaps in health and well-being worldwide and rising health risks, National Societies' work supporting safe and healthy communities is more important than ever.

### WHAT IS THE AUXILIARY ROLE?

Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies are neither governmental institutions nor wholly separate non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Rather, they hold a **unique status as auxiliaries to the public authorities in the humanitarian field.**

This means they work in partnership with public authorities, based on international and national laws, but remain independent at all times. Each National Society agrees with the authorities in its country on the areas in which it supports or substitutes public humanitarian services.

At all times, National Societies must retain sufficient autonomy to act solely on the basis of need and in an impartial and neutral manner—according to the Fundamental Principles of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement (see page 4).

The auxiliary role is permanent and integral to the legal foundation of every National Society. It is typically enshrined in domestic law through a Red Cross or Red Crescent act or decree, in which the public authorities formally recognize the National Society, on the basis of the 1949 Geneva Conventions, as a *'voluntary aid society, auxiliary to the public authorities in the humanitarian field'*.



At the 30th International Conference of the Red Cross and Red Crescent in 2007, the members of the Movement and the States parties to the Geneva Conventions agreed on the following definition of the auxiliary role:

*"Public authorities and National Societies as **auxiliaries enjoy a specific and distinctive partnership, entailing mutual responsibilities and benefits, based on international and national laws, in which the national public authorities and the National Society agree on the areas in which the National Society supplements or substitutes public humanitarian services [...]."***

## WHY IS THE AUXILIARY ROLE IMPORTANT IN HEALTH?

The origins of the auxiliary role actually lie in health. The idea dates back to the foundation of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement in the 19th century, when Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies were set up to provide medical assistance to those wounded in battle in support of their countries' military medical services.

Demand quickly grew for National Societies to provide humanitarian services in times of peace as well as war, and over time of the nature of these services has evolved—including in the field of health and care.

Today, National Societies provide a diverse range of health and care activities, such as: first aid training; ambulance services; pre-hospital care; blood donation; disease prevention and outbreak response; water, sanitation and hygiene programmes; immunization; and much more.

The auxiliary role in health is important because it defines the specific health and care responsibilities of the National Society, outlines its relationship with the public authorities in supporting the health of the country's population, and provides opportunity for regular engagement between National Societies and public health authorities at all levels.



## HOW TO ENGAGE WITH YOUR COUNTRY'S NATIONAL SOCIETY IN HEALTH?

An integral aspect of the auxiliary relationship involves public authorities promoting and supporting the development of their National Societies to become effective and resilient humanitarian organizations. There are many ways in which public authorities can support and involve their National Societies in health. **Types of engagement that might provide great mutual benefit and lead to the good implementation of health-related activities include:**



Fostering skill and knowledge-sharing by including representation from National Societies in key decision-making and coordination bodies in the areas of health; water, sanitation and hygiene; and emergency management.



Strengthening coordination in activities and planning by defining their relationship in the area of health and care, for example through the signature of Memoranda of Understanding with the Ministry of Health.



Strengthening the auxiliary role of National Societies in health and care through the revision and update of Red Cross/Red Crescent constituting laws, as well as sectoral laws, policies and agreements, given that the auxiliary role is most valuable when its contents are clearly defined.



Providing direct or indirect contributions to create an enabling environment to facilitate the work of the National Society in the health sector.

# THE INTERNATIONAL RED CROSS AND RED CRESCENT MOVEMENT

The International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement (the Movement) is a global humanitarian movement comprised of three independent parts, united by a central purpose: to help without discrimination those who suffer and thus contribute to peace in the world:



The **International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC)** acts before, during and after disasters and health emergencies to meet the needs and improve the lives of vulnerable people.



ICRC

The **International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC)** protects the lives and dignity of victims of armed conflict and other situations of violence.



**191 National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies** act as auxiliaries to the public authorities of their own countries in the humanitarian field and provide a range of services.

## THE INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE

Every four years, representatives from all components of the Movement and all States parties to the Geneva Conventions are brought together in the **International Conference of the Red Cross and Red Crescent** to undertake joint commitments and advance in humanitarian action. The International Conference takes decisions in the form of resolutions, which it endeavours to adopt by consensus. **Recent resolutions pertaining to health and care include:**

### **Resolution 3 “Time to act: Tackling epidemics and pandemics together” (33IC/19/R3)**

Adopted during the 33rd International Conference in December 2019.

This Resolution calls on all components of the Movement, as well as all States parties to the Geneva Conventions, to work towards a comprehensive and coordinated approach to epidemic prevention, detection, response and recovery, and to submit progress reports on the Resolution’s online reporting form. The primary focus shall be on strengthening collaboration between National Societies and their public health authorities on building early warning and rapid response capacity in hard-to-reach, vulnerable, underserved, and high-risk communities.

### **Resolution 2: “Addressing mental health and psychosocial needs of people affected by armed conflicts, natural disasters and other emergencies” (33IC/19/R2)**

Adopted during the 33rd International Conference in December 2019.

This Resolution calls on all components of the Movement, as well as all States parties to the Geneva Conventions, to increase efforts to ensure early and sustained access to mental health and psychosocial support services by people affected by armed conflicts, disasters and other emergencies.

# THE FUNDAMENTAL PRINCIPLES

## 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 among 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 continue 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.



## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- Search 'Guide for Parliamentarians' on [ifrc.org](http://ifrc.org)
- Guide for Strengthening the Auxiliary Role through Law and Policy: [disasterlaw.ifrc.org/media/1771](http://disasterlaw.ifrc.org/media/1771)
- Contact details for your country's National Society: [ifrc.org/national-societies-directory](http://ifrc.org/national-societies-directory)