



Nepal Red Cross Society

The auxiliary role of the Red Cross
and Red Crescent at municipal level

BACKGROUND AND OBJECTIVES

In 2010, the IFRC's 'World Disaster Report' was focused on urban risk, as National Societies (NS) increasingly shifted attention to urban areas – a trend accelerated by the Covid-19 pandemic. In 2022, the Red Cross Red Crescent (RCRC) Movement Council of Delegates adopted Resolution CD22-R11 on 'Strengthening the Resilience of Urban Communities: Our Way Forward'ⁱ supporting broader localisation goals in Resolutions 34IC/24/R3 and 34IC/24/R4.ⁱⁱ In order to mitigate worst case disaster scenarios from unfolding, Resolution CD22-R11 calls for more investment into building the resilience of urban communities in addition to scaling up the service delivery and preparedness of NSs in urban areas. To execute this well, effective engagement with municipal authorities is vital.

To advance the commitment on the Resolution, the Movement Urban Resilience Working Group (MURWG) on 'Public Advocacy and Strengthening the Auxiliary Role at the Municipal Level' was established. The Nepal Red Cross Society (NRCS) participates in this group.

This case study examines NRCS's auxiliary role at the municipal level, focusing on its legal and policy foundations and operational arrangements. It identifies examples of good practice, factors for effective engagement, challenges, and key enablers which strengthen impact at a local level. These findings will inform MURWG's drafting of 'Principles of Action' – actionable strategies for National Societies' urban resilience efforts – to be presented for adoption at the 2026 Council of Delegates.

METHODOLOGY

Semi-structured interviews with four people within the Disaster and Crisis thematic at the NRCS. The author used a snowballing approach to interviewing. Interviews lasted approximately one hour and were supplemented with materials provided often by interviewees.

MUNICIPAL LEVELS IN NEPAL

Nepal's governance structure has undergone significant transformation following the adoption of a new constitution in 2015. The constitution established a federal system of government, dividing authority across three tiers: federal, state (seven provinces, 77 districts) and local (Sthaniya Nikaya). As a result, in Nepal there are now 753 localities divided into urban municipalities (Nagarpalika) and rural areas (gaunpalikas). Urban municipalities are further divided into six metropolises, 11 sub-metropolises, 276 municipalities.^{iv}

Although legally empowered, many urban municipalities continue to face practical challenges related to human resource capacity, intergovernmental coordination, and financial autonomy. These issues are particularly pronounced in newly established or geographically remote municipalities, while more established urban centres may demonstrate relatively stronger institutional capabilities.

Urban municipalities have become increasingly central to Nepal's disaster risk governance framework. They are required to establish Local Disaster Risk Management Committees (LDRMCs), develop Local Disaster and Climate Resilience Plans (LDCRPs), and coordinate preparedness and response activities with community-based and humanitarian actors. NRCS often support municipalities in disaster response and emergency preparedness, complementing the state's efforts while operating in an auxiliary capacity.

INTRODUCTION

The NRCS is the largest humanitarian organization in the country, with a nationwide network and 1.2 million volunteers, including many trained in disaster preparedness, response, WASH, public health, psychosocial support, shelter, international humanitarian law, and more. As the largest humanitarian organization in Nepal, the NRCS is involved in key service areas such as climate, health, disaster relief, blood services, eye care, and ambulance services. In addition, the NRCS has extensive warehousing and NFRI stock across the country to provide immediate, localized response after any emergency, establishing a strong legacy in disaster risk reduction (DRR), climate, and humanitarian work in Nepal. The NRCS also has extensive experience working with Bhutanese and Tibetan refugees.

The NRCS is widely recognised as a trusted and capable humanitarian actor across Nepal. The auxiliary role is broadly respected in practice, rooted in the organisation's long history of community engagement, its visible role particularly in disaster preparedness and response, and its extensive nationwide branch network.

Key challenges identified in interviews in implementing the auxiliary role at the municipal level include:

1 / The absence of a dedicated Red Cross law – a current strategic focus for NRCS to ensure a strong legal base for the NS and to reaffirm its auxiliary roles.

2 / The disparities between different municipalities regarding capacity and funding.

This case study will explore these in more detail. However, these challenges are often outweighed by NRCS's long-standing operational credibility and consistency, strong local relationships, and its identity as an independent humanitarian organisation.

“ *The Nepal Red Cross Society enjoys a strong relationship with authorities at all levels based on its auxiliary role... the Nepal Red Cross Society is a trusted counterpart in local initiatives”*
Nepal IFRC Country Network Plan 2024.”



LEGAL AND POLICY FRAMEWORKS

Although Nepal does not currently have a dedicated Red Cross law, NRCS' auxiliary role is implicitly recognised at all levels of governance and reinforced through policies and frameworks, particularly the national disaster risk governance framework.

The Disaster Risk Reduction and Management Act (DRRMA) 2017^{vi} is the cornerstone of Nepal's disaster governance legislation. It establishes a comprehensive structure for DRR and management across all levels of government and names key actors and responsibilities. NRCS is explicitly recognised in this structure.

At the federal level, NRCS is a designated member of the Disaster Management Executive Committee. This Committee plays a central role in formulating and implementing national disaster policies and coordinating response efforts. At the district level, NRCS is named as a member of the District Disaster Management Committees. These formal designations within statutory disaster coordination bodies reflect NRCS's integral role in Nepal's disaster risk management system and reinforce its auxiliary status in both principle and practice.



Federal government make the model policy then municipal and provinces follow... they can elaborate and contextualise based on specific needs.

Disaster and Emergency Professional, NRCS

There is also the Anticipatory Action Community of Practice (CoP), a coordination mechanism in the leadership of the Government of Nepal. NRCS sits as co-chair and is supported by Danish Red Cross. The IFRC Country Network Plan 2024 for Nepal highlights this CoP as an avenue for focus,

“strengthening through more engaging dialogue programmes at Federal and Provincial levels”.^{vii}

Further, in the sphere of disaster and crisis, health programming, youth engagement and climate action, there are joint initiatives between IFRC and NRCS with the Ministry of Federal Affairs and General Administration (MoFAGA) to promote municipal-level DRM assessment tools, training of local authorities, and integration of DRR into municipal development plans.

While the absence of a Red Cross law leaves some gaps in formalisation and legal clarity – particularly outside disaster-related mandates – the instruments above demonstrate how the auxiliary role is already embedded within Nepal's legal and policy architecture particularly in the field of disasters and emergencies. This forms a basis for deeper formalisation, especially as municipalities gain more autonomy and are increasingly responsible for frontline response and planning.

WHAT DRIVES EFFECTIVE ENGAGEMENT WITH MUNICIPAL AUTHORITIES?

Embedded local networks

The Nepal Red Cross Society is consistently embedded in municipal-level disaster governance mechanisms, e.g. Local Disaster Risk Management Committees (LDRMCs), often participating as a permanent and expected presence. While some of these engagements operate informally, the regularity and consistency of NRCS's participation has led to deep institutional familiarity at the local level.

The deep familiarity allows NRCS to work in close coordination with local governments from the earliest stages of developing a programme and response. Rather than arriving with pre-determined activities,

NRCS typically starts by engaging with municipal authorities to understand development priorities and align programming accordingly. This approach strengthens municipal ownership of interventions and fosters a sense of partnership, with NRCS seen as reinforcing local governance. This joint ownership improves coordination and resource-sharing but also increases the likelihood of municipal co-investment, scaling, or replication of successful models. The auxiliary role at local level, in this sense, is not merely about service delivery – it becomes a mechanism for shaping local governance itself.

Close coordination is also strengthened by stakeholder mapping. By identifying actors already engaged, or interested in engaging, in disaster risk management. NRCS facilitates inclusive coordination. Working with local organisations enhances mutual understanding of priorities and support efficiently using local resources.

That NRCS is very much locally embedded enables it to serve as a convenor. Through mechanisms such as joint scoping missions and vulnerability assessments, NRCS brings together diverse actors to ensure inclusive planning and response. In doing so, NRCS plays a crucial role in bridging community needs with local government mandates – particularly in municipalities with limited capacity or resources.

Efforts are underway in some areas to formalise these relationships through Memorandums of Understanding (MoUs), which can enhance predictability, accountability, and joint planning.

Community trust and widespread awareness

NRCS's reach across Nepal is underpinned by its extensive network of local NRCS branches and volunteers. This decentralised grassroots presence has fostered a high degree of trust

– positioning NRCS as a uniquely credible and impartial actor in the humanitarian landscape.

There is widespread public familiarity with NRCS, reinforced by its inclusion in the school curriculum. Many young people aspire to become volunteers, with several interviewees noting that this early exposure to RCRC principles helps embed the organisation within the fabric of community life.

NRCS's volunteer base, drawn directly from the communities they serve, is critical in strengthening its legitimacy. The involvement of local volunteers ensures culturally competent and inclusive responses. The involvement of local volunteers further ensures speedy response, due to people already being present on the ground. Community volunteers often also allow NRCS to operate where municipal authorities may face resistance or lack access.

A clear illustration of this trust-based model is seen in NRCS's community-led planning and implementation processes. NRCS begins the process by conducting scoping missions in collaboration with municipal authorities, civil society actors, and community members. Enhanced Vulnerability and Capacity Assessments (EVCAs) are then conducted with broad participation, including local officials and affected communities.

From these assessments, NRCS identifies needs and co-designs solutions with the community who the intervention will affect. Crucially, implementation is not led by NRCS alone; instead, the community is mobilised to contribute in-kind resources, labour, or logistical support, while municipalities are encouraged to co-invest alongside NRCS's funding.

This model not only reinforces the principle of local ownership but also strengthens the long-term sustainability of interventions. Communities that have invested their own time and resources in a project are more likely to maintain and protect its outcomes.

Flexibility and responsiveness of decentralised structures

NRCS's decentralised operational model allows local branches significant autonomy in decision-making, programming and resource mobilisation. This flexibility enables branches to respond quickly to municipal priorities, particularly in fast-changing contexts like landslides, monsoon flooding, or localised disease outbreaks. While other humanitarian actors may require approvals through central offices, NRCS branches can often act within hours.

This flexibility makes it easier to sustain ongoing collaboration with municipal officials. It helps NRCS to stay relevant and effectively carry out its auxiliary role, even without formal legal agreements at a local level.

Influence through operations and reputation

In the absence of formal municipal-level agreements or a dedicated Red Cross law, NRCS has cultivated recognition and legitimacy through decades of consistent delivery and partnership. This influence through practice has opened the door to invitations to municipal planning meetings, inclusion in local policy dialogues, and informal but durable working relationships. It also positions NRCS well for future formalisation of roles and responsibilities, should the government pursue sub-national legal frameworks aligned with federal devolution.



"We didn't need to define NRCS's role on paper; it was clear from what we were doing every day"

NRCS staff

CHALLENGES IN ENGAGEMENT WITH MUNICIPAL AUTHORITIES

Lack of legal formalisation at the municipal level

As previously discussed, despite its de facto recognition, NRCS's auxiliary role is not consistently formalised through legislation at the municipal or national level. Because Nepal does not yet have a dedicated Red Cross law, the Society's role lacks full legal recognition. Combined, this creates uncertainty around roles and responsibilities, makes collaboration dependent on personal relationships, and limits NRCS' ability to advocate for systematic inclusion in planning and budgeting processes. The lack of a legal anchor may also mean that other organisations question why NRCS is approached for certain activities.

At the municipal level, while partnerships with local authorities are often strong, they are rarely underpinned by formal agreements such as MoUs, bylaws, or municipal-level statutes that explicitly recognise NRCS as an auxiliary partner. This leaves cooperation dependent on informal relationships or project-specific arrangements, meaning there can be difficulties with projects stopping quickly or planning for future continuity, particularly when municipal leadership changes due to elections or administrative reshuffles.

Capacity and resource disparities across municipalities

Nepal's municipalities vary widely in their financial, technical and institutional capacities. While some well-resourced municipalities can engage proactively with NRCS on joint planning and training, other municipalities may lack basic disaster risk management frameworks, dedicated staff, or sufficient budgets.

For example, in some municipalities there are specific emergency funds. Where these do not exist, it can mean that time is inefficiently spent on bringing together project budgets.

This uneven playing field presents challenges for NRCS, which must navigate vastly different expectations, levels of understanding, and administrative capacities. Significant time can be spent building basic disaster risk management awareness among new local officials- time that could otherwise be spent on implementation. This disparity also complicates efforts to standardise collaboration mechanism or scale successful models across municipalities.

Political volatility and turnover

Local political dynamics significantly shape the operational space for NRCS. Changes in municipal leadership – particularly after elections – can either enhance or hinder collaboration, depending on the orientation and priorities of incoming officials. Maintaining consistent engagement in such contexts requires careful diplomacy, continuity of personnel, and long-term relationship-building.

There are also difficulties of reputational risk as a result of increasing politicisation. While NRCS strives to remain neutral and impartial, its local branches are deeply rooted in communities where political affiliations often overlap with civil society leadership. In some cases, municipal chapter presidents or volunteers have prior political ties, which can introduce political agendas – or the perception of partiality – into NRCS activities. This has the potential of jeopardising trust with communities and authorities, particularly during times of political tension.

Moreover, each political transition requires NRCS to reaffirm its relevance and auxiliary role, as new mayors or ward chairs may be unfamiliar with its mandate, legal basis, or past contributions. This makes ongoing orientation and relationship-building essential to maintain operational access and protect the integrity of its principled approach.

Ambiguity around mandates and expectations

While NRCS is formally auxiliary to public authorities in the humanitarian field, in practice it is often seen as a direct service provider—particularly where municipal capacity is limited. This creates ambiguity about whether NRCS is acting as an implementing partner, technical adviser, or substitute for government functions. Such ambiguity can cause confusion among both authorities and communities. When NRCS works closely with municipalities and co-brands activities, it may be difficult for the public to distinguish between the responsibilities of government and those of NRCS. This has implications for neutrality, particularly in post-conflict settings where maintaining a clear identity separate from state actors is essential to preserving community trust.

Given NRCS' deep integration into public life, with many individuals volunteering from a young age, institutional boundaries can sometimes become less distinct – particularly when volunteers are also involved in political parties. While there is a formal requirement for those elected to public office, such as Mayor, to step down from portfolio positions within a NRCS committee, other overlaps can occasionally arise due to the NRCS's broad presence in communities. These may sometimes lead to misunderstandings, despite NRCS maintaining its commitment to neutrality and independence.





ENABLERS



Clearer legal and policy frameworks to operationalise the auxiliary role at local level

While NRCS is widely recognised and trusted by municipal authorities, the absence of national legislation that explicitly defines and protects the auxiliary role at the local level limits consistency and sustainability. A Red Cross law should clarify the respective responsibilities of local government and NRCS. These must be accompanied by practical guidance for municipal actors and NRCS staff alike.



Formalising cooperation through local-level agreements

In the absence of formal MoUs, collaboration often relies on personal relationships and goodwill. Local-level Letters of Cooperation or standardised agreement templates, would enhance continuity across political cycles and staff turnover. These should include provisions for joint planning, budget co-financing, and community engagement.



Aligning with municipal priorities and planning cycles

NRCS's ability to act as a credible partner is strengthened when its work is seen as contributing to municipal development goals. Continued investment in early consultation with municipal authorities – particularly during planning and budget-setting cycles – will support deeper institutionalisation and co-ownership of activities.



Investing in staff capacity and relationship-building mandates

To sustain municipal engagement, NRCS staff must be supported with training on the auxiliary role. This could include defining staff roles with explicit relationship-building responsibilities and creating dedicated focal points for municipal engagement.



Raising awareness about the auxiliary role

Continued sensitisation of local authorities and communities on the distinct but complementary nature of NRCS's role from government will be essential, particularly in politically sensitive settings.

References

ⁱCouncil of Delegates of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement (2022) Strengthening the resilience of urban communities: Our way forward.

Ibid.

ⁱⁱGovernment of Nepal (2015) The Constitution of Nepal. https://ag.gov.np/files/Constitution-of-Nepal_2072_Eng_www.moljpa.gov._npDate-72_11_16.pdf [Accessed 6 Jun. 2025].

ⁱⁱⁱNepalog, no date. Local levels in Nepal. <https://nepalog.com/state-structure/local-levels-in-nepal/> [Accessed 6 Jun. 2025].

^{iv}IFRC (2024) Nepal IFRC Country Network Plan 2024.

^vGovernment of Nepal (2017) Disaster Risk Reduction and Management Act.

^{vi}IFRC (2024) Nepal IFRC Country Network Plan 2024

Please note: This document was authored by Emma Cookson (policy and advocacy consultant) on behalf of the International Federation of the Red Cross Red Crescent (IFRC). The views expressed are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official positions or policies of the IFRC or its member National Societies.

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.



The International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) is the world's largest humanitarian network, with 191 National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies and around 15 million volunteers. Our volunteers are present in communities before, during and after a crisis or disaster. We work in the most hard to reach and complex settings in the world, saving lives and promoting human dignity. We support communities to become stronger and more resilient places where people can live safe and healthy lives, and have opportunities to thrive.