



Nigerian 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. Case studies of several National Societies' activities in this field were undertaken as part of this working group.

This case study examines the Nigerian Red Cross' auxiliary role at the municipal level, focusing on its legal and policy foundations and operational arrangements. It identifies factors for effective engagement, challenges, and key enablers which strengthen impact at a local level. The focus of this case study is on disaster and emergencies as this is, first, where the background of interviewees lay and, second, the primary focus of utilisation of the auxiliary role. 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 three individuals 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 NIGERIA

Nigeria operates with three tiers of government: federal, state and local. There are 36 states bound through a federal agreement, one Federal Capital Territory and 774 local government areas (LGAs). Local government areas vary significantly in size, population, and resources.

LGAs were created through a series of reforms in 1976. They are assigned responsibilities for public services such as fire services and community health programmes. National governments have also made formal commitments to empower LGAs to undertake practical disaster risk reduction actions under frameworks such as the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction (SFDRR, 2015–2030);ⁱ and the federal level National Emergency Management Agency (NEMA) has a statutory mandate to support states and LGAs in disaster response and recovery.ⁱⁱ Despite these responsibilities, LGAs' autonomy in decision-making and spending has previously been limited. In 2024, the Supreme Court granted LGAs financial autonomy, allowing them to receive federal allocations directly and operate with greater independence.ⁱⁱⁱ Nevertheless, Nigeria's governance system remains highly centralised, which continues to shape the way the Nigerian Red Cross engages with municipal authorities.

In each of the 37 states the Nigerian Red Cross has branch offices run by branch secretaries. Under each branch, there are divisions, mapped to the 774 LGAs, run by Divisional Secretaries.

INTRODUCTION

The Nigerian Red Cross Society (NRCS) is widely recognised as a trusted and capable humanitarian actor across Nigeria, with a long history of disaster response, health programming, and community engagement. The Nigerian Red Cross Society Act of 1960 provides a strong legal foundation for engagement with public authorities in the humanitarian field. While formal mandates are embedded at federal level, their practical application and recognition at municipal level vary significantly.

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

1 Limited understanding of NRCS's auxiliary role among some municipal authorities as well as NRCS staff.

2 Uneven municipal capacity and resource constraints, hindering the consistency in implementation of the auxiliary role.

However, NRCS's auxiliary role at the municipal level is strengthened by its extensive branch and volunteer network, participatory community approaches, and its prominent recognition at federal level. NRCS' strong model of embedded volunteers act as a bridge between communities and local government, enabling community consultation and effective programme delivery. This operational presence, coupled with NRCS's reputation as a "household name" among authorities and communities, underpins its legitimacy and influence.

LEGAL AND POLICY FRAMEWORKS

Nigeria has a strong national foundation for the auxiliary role of the Nigerian Red Cross Society (NRCS), which is formally recognised by the state and embedded within the country's disaster management and humanitarian coordination system.

The Nigerian Red Cross Society Act 1960 is the principal national legal instrument formally recognising it as an "auxiliary to the public authorities in the humanitarian field."ⁱⁱ The Act outlines the Society's mandate to prevent and alleviate human suffering, promote health and social welfare, and assist the authorities in times of disaster or conflict. This legal recognition provides the foundation for NRCS's engagement with government institutions at all levels.

Operationally, the NRCS's auxiliary role is expressed most clearly within Nigeria's disaster risk management architecture. The National Emergency Management Agency (NEMA), established in 1999, serves as the coordinating body for disaster preparedness, mitigation, and response. It is mandated that the Nigerian Red Cross has a representative on the governing council.^{iv} The National Disaster Response Plan (NDRP), developed by NEMA in 2002, outlines the roles and responsibilities of various agencies involved in disaster response in Nigeria. It explicitly points to NRC in functioning as a federal agency: "for purposes of the NDRP, any reference to Federal agencies with respect to their responsibilities and activities in responding to a disaster, generally means Federal departments and agencies, as well as the Nigerian Red Cross Society."^{viii}

In each of the 37 states, there is a State Emergency Management Agency (SEMA). There is then the Local Emergency Management Committee (LEMC). The number of LEMCs varies depending on the number of LGAs in the state. The level of responsibility, autonomy and capacity that the LEMCs have, however, varies.

WHAT DRIVES EFFECTIVE ENGAGEMENT WITH MUNICIPAL AUTHORITIES?

Trickle down of national legal recognition

The national mandate that the Nigerian Red Cross has through the Nigerian Red Cross Society Act is fundamental in its relationships at a state and local municipal level.

“ *The Act gives us a platform to exercise our support in Lagos.*”

Disaster Management Professional

Despite the absence of formalised seats on every state or local emergency board, interviewees highlighted that this federal mandate trickles down, giving NRCS legitimacy and recognition in practice at municipal levels. Interviewees described how municipal authorities, local emergency committees, and even police and fire services increasingly accept NRCS as a legitimate partner in disaster preparedness and response because of its recognised national role, even in the absence of formal MOUs or policy documents at the municipal level.

In practice, the trickle-down effect manifests in several ways. Branches and divisions are routinely invited to attend local emergency meetings, participate in joint training, and contribute to municipal disaster planning. Municipal authorities often treat NRCS as a lead or supporting actor during local emergencies, relying on its volunteers and infrastructure to supplement government response. The presence of a recognised national mandate thus amplifies the Society's influence locally.

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The main reason why we can do what we do and we have this acceptance is because we've been recognised by this act of parliament that we are the responder always.”

Disaster Management Coordinator

Embedded, community-based volunteer network

A central enabler of NRCS's auxiliary role at the municipal level is its extensive, embedded volunteer network, which provides both local knowledge and social legitimacy. NRCS's volunteer structure is designed for both operational efficiency and accountability.

Each Division (mapped to the 774 LGAs) has smaller detachments of approximately 30 volunteers. These are led by a Commandant, who reports to the Divisional Secretary. This hierarchical framework ensures that volunteers can act autonomously in communities while maintaining clear lines of oversight, aligning local action with municipal and national priorities. This strong community presence has given rise to the popular expression: “The Nigerian Red Cross lives wherever you live.”^{ix}

NRCS also employs participatory approaches to deepen engagement and ensure community ownership. Programmes begin with community engagement and entry through Community Engagement and Accountability (CEA) processes, during which objectives are explained and local buy-in is sought. Following this, Community Resilience Committees are established, comprising representatives of youth, women, people with disabilities, and other community members. The community leaders link directly with these committees, facilitating ongoing collaboration. In many cases, these committees actively lead activities, demonstrating the depth of local buy-in and ensuring that interventions are both relevant and widely accepted.

That NRCS has such strong and established community links means that it provides a clear conduit, supporting its relationship with municipal authorities, with government actors seeking NRCS to implement programmes at municipal level as they see them very much as a crucial interface.

The strength of these community links also makes NRCS a crucial link between communities and municipal authorities.

Government actors increasingly seek NRCS to implement programmes at the municipal level, recognising NRCS as a trusted partner and effective interface between communities and local government structures.

This dynamic was clearly illustrated in public health responses in 2023 and 2024. Through the support of the IFRC, NRCS mobilised hundreds of volunteers across key states. During the 2023 cholera outbreak in Lagos, NRCS worked closely with the local government, with Ministry of Health health educators running the volunteer training. The effectiveness of this collaboration and community engagement meant that, during a subsequent diphtheria outbreak in Lagos, municipal authorities pre-allocated a set number of volunteer slots for NRCS. This reflected formal recognition of the Society's extensive network and established credibility in coordinating community-based responses.

Household name and institutional brand with municipal authorities

A key enabler of NRCS's auxiliary role at the municipal level is its established reputation and "household name" status among local authorities and government actors. Over years of consistent engagement and service delivery, NRCS has become widely recognised as a trusted, reliable partner in disaster response and community programmes, creating operational legitimacy that extends beyond formal legal mandates.

“*Trust that has been developed over years by the community and government.*
Disaster Management Coordinator

Interviewees highlighted how municipal officials expect NRCS involvement in emergencies, reflecting deep institutional recognition. For example, in Lagos, NRCS' sustained advocacy with the Commissioner for Special Duties and the Commissioner for Information meant that both officials became active NRCS members and volunteers, participating in leadership courses and events such as the Society's 50th anniversary celebrations.

This demonstrates the personal and institutional buy-in that underpins NRCS's credibility with local government.

Flexibility and responsiveness of decentralised structures

While formal frameworks and agreements exist to guide implementation and compliance, the "household name" status itself provides NRCS with legitimacy, enabling seamless collaboration with municipal authorities, police, emergency management committees, and other government actors. This entrenched reputation facilitates access, coordination, and influence at the municipal level, making it a critical enabler of the Society's auxiliary role.

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...the government actors, including the police and disaster management authorities at municipal level, do not question our legality because we are known as auxiliary to the government.

Disaster Management Coordinator





CHALLENGES IN ENGAGEMENT WITH MUNICIPAL AUTHORITIES

Limited awareness of auxiliary role among local actors

Despite recognition at senior levels, NRCS sometimes encounters misunderstandings about its mandate and privileges based on the auxiliary role at municipal operational levels. For example, volunteers have reported being stopped at toll gates by police and required to pay fees, with officers unaware that NRCS personnel are legally exempt under their auxiliary mandate. Such incidents illustrate that knowledge of NRCS's auxiliary role does not always trickle down to front-line actors. Addressing this challenge requires sustained training, advocacy, and public communication to ensure both authorities and communities understand NRCS' unique role.

Resource constraints and uneven decentralisation

NRCS's effectiveness at the municipal level is constrained by limited funding and uneven distribution of resources amongst municipal authorities reflecting broader structural challenges in Nigeria's federal system. Interviewees reported that local governments often lack sufficient financial and operational capacity for activity and engagement may be slower or less effective, as most of the funding is at federal level and expected to trickle down. Alongside the impact on programme implementation, this also impacts engagement with partners such as NRCS, and awareness of their roles and mandate, due to less funding and capacity at local level to do partner engagement.

“*In the NEMA Act it stipulates that we [NRCS] should also be at the local board level. But we haven't been called upon. We have not been enjoying that opportunity to meet them at that level.*

Disaster Management Coordinator

In part reflecting the federal government structure and the focus of advocacy at federal and state level, NRCS local-level staff and volunteers may have limited exposure, training, or education on auxiliary responsibilities. Without dedicated resources

for advocacy, promotion, and capacity building at municipal levels, NRCS faces difficulties in mainstreaming its auxiliary role and ensuring consistent, effective engagement with local authorities.

“*We need to do more at branch level. We have the legal instruments but we need advocacy and orientation on them.*

Disaster Management Coordinator

Interviewees noted that greater funding could enable NRCS to identify and support focal points within municipalities, who would have responsibility for embedding and mainstreaming the auxiliary role at that level. In the absence of such focal structures, engagement often depends on personal relationships or ad hoc coordination, rather than being institutionalised within municipal systems.

Lack of formalised local agreements

Legal recognition and agreements at federal level does not always translate into formalised arrangements at the state or municipal level. In most cases, there are no signed MOUs or written policies that define NRCS' specific roles, authorities, and expectations in relation to local government structures. As a result, collaboration often remains informal and dependent on personal relationships or ad hoc opportunities.

Both the cause and the result of this is lack of clarity over how local government and NRCS can work together, and some tension as to parameters. One interviewee stressed that formal partnerships could be supported through joint training between local government and NRCS.

“*Let them know we are not competitors we are giving them support. When emergency strikes we can be on the same page.*

Disaster Management Coordinator

Enablers



Strengthen local understanding and awareness of the auxiliary role

NRCS could provide targeted orientation sessions for municipal officials to clarify its auxiliary status and role within disaster management and local coordination frameworks. They could also build on existing relationships with government actors -- such as the Ministry of Information -- to raise public awareness of the NRCS mandate and strengthen recognition of its auxiliary role.

Where NRCS already has strong operational relationships, it could integrate auxiliary role awareness into existing activities, helping to reinforce its engagement in municipal-level decision-making forums.



Designate and resource focal points for municipal engagement

NRCS could identify or establish dedicated focal points at both divisional and municipal levels. These focal points would serve as the primary contacts for municipal authorities, maintain ongoing dialogue and facilitate integration of NRCS programmes into municipal planning processes.

Providing adequate resources (including advocacy materials), training, and formal recognition for these roles within NRCS branches would strengthen institutional capacity, promote continuity, and ensure that municipal engagement is sustained. By institutionalising focal points, NRCS can enhance coordination, improve awareness of its auxiliary role, and reinforce its position as a trusted partner at the municipal level.



Invest in sustained relationship-building and visibility

NRCS's municipal relationships have been strengthened through consistent engagement, including direct dialogue with local authorities as well as symbolic actions such as government officials becoming NRCS members. Continuing to invest in these relationships through regular meetings, visibility activities, and participation in municipal events will help maintain recognition and trust. Public communication and education initiatives could also reinforce NRCS' identity as a neutral, trusted humanitarian actor within communities which in turn will enhance relationships with municipal authorities.



Develop municipal-level MoUs or framework agreements

Formal agreements at municipal level could help provide clarity and continuity, particularly in a context where formal legal and policy frameworks are well established at federal level but less so at a local government level. Establishing even loose, locally tailored MoUs or framework agreements can provide something concrete for branches to point back to, helping to reinforce NRCS legitimacy and ensure that roles, responsibilities, and coordination mechanisms are explicit. This may be supported through other less formal routes such as developing joint training between local government and NRCS to increase partnership working.

References

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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.