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Council of Delegates of the International
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COUNCIL OF DELEGATES
OF THE INTERNATIONAL RED CROSS
AND RED CRESCENT MOVEMENT

Antalya, Turkey
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**Working Towards an International Red Cross and Red Crescent
Movement Approach to Epidemics and Pandemics**

BACKGROUND REPORT

Document prepared by
the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Ten years on from the commitment included in Resolution 1 of the 30th International Conference of the Red Cross and Red Crescent “to strengthen health systems and develop national health plans with the involvement of National Societies, and to include the empowerment of volunteers and affected groups”, the 2017 Council of Delegates provides an opportunity to review the role of the Movement components in response to the ongoing risk posed by infectious diseases, old and emerging alike.

The resolution will therefore propose the development of a plan of action for how the Movement will work with governments and communities to improve national preparedness and response to epidemics and pandemics and support States’ efforts to strengthen core capacities in accordance with International Health Regulations, where relevant. This will contribute to the adoption of a Movement approach to epidemic and pandemic prevention and control at the 33rd International Conference in 2019.

1) Introduction

The outbreak of Ebola in West Africa is just one of several epidemics experienced so far in the 21st century that had catastrophic potential. These include the four major outbreaks of Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS) in Saudi Arabia and the Republic of Korea, the pandemics of H1N1 and H5N1 influenza and Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS). In addition to these emerging threats, we have seen regional outbreaks of yellow fever, ongoing cholera outbreaks, continuing polio transmission despite global control efforts, significant increases in the incidence of dengue and the ongoing spread of Zika across the globe. These all serve as a stark reminder of the threat to humanity posed by both old and emerging communicable diseases.

2) Background

Epidemics are often a symptom of underlying weaknesses in the health system and water and sanitation infrastructure and of poverty and inequity. They not only cause illness and death but can also impact the security and economy of affected communities.

The overarching direction of improved epidemic response is therefore grounded in strengthening resilience and building capacity at all levels, including in communities, National Societies, government and within the humanitarian architecture.

The resolution is purposefully focused on activities and actions where the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement creates specific added value to existing capacities and therefore has a strong focus on community approaches and localized response.

Within the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, there is enormous potential to contribute to individual, community, national, regional and global health security – as defined by WHO¹ – through effective epidemic prevention and control.

3) Analysis / Progress

The Movement has a long and extensive history in the prevention and control of epidemics. On a yearly basis, National Societies around the globe are involved in mobilizing communities, caring for the sick and protecting the vulnerable from a wide variety of

¹ WHO defines Global Health Security as the activities required, both proactive and reactive, to minimize vulnerability to acute public health events that endanger the collective health of populations living across geographical regions and international boundaries.

infectious agents. Often, National Society volunteers are the core of multi-lateral response, working and coordinating with government and UN agencies to ensure local engagement and acceptance. This was exemplified in the recent West Africa Ebola crisis, where more than 6,000 volunteers engaged in frontline activities in the most seriously affected countries, and thousands more across the region. Their efforts have been widely acknowledged as crucial in turning the epidemic around and bringing it under control. However, Ebola also highlighted weaknesses in the health and humanitarian system, both internally and externally, in the ability to detect, respond to and control infectious disease outbreaks. The Ebola crisis is a call to action to improve our preparedness and response to the increasing threat of large-scale outbreaks.

In response to the Ebola crisis in 2015, a High-level Panel on the Global Response to Health Crises was convened by the UN Secretary-General. This panel notes that “the high risk of major health crises is widely underestimated, and that the world’s preparedness and capacity to respond is woefully insufficient. Future epidemics could far exceed the scale and devastation of the West Africa Ebola outbreak.” It goes further, acknowledging that “despite the significant threat, global efforts to prepare for epidemics have been woefully insufficient. The global instrument negotiated to ensure early warning and pandemic response, the International Health Regulations (2005) (IHR), has only been fully implemented by one third of its 196 States parties” (Report of the High-level Panel on the Global Response to Health Crises, 2016).

In the light of these findings and lessons learnt at an organizational level, many agencies, including WHO and a number of government public health agencies, have undergone significant change to ensure they are “fit for purpose” and able to detect and respond to outbreaks more effectively. Despite these significant changes and investment, a notable gap in community-level prevention and response capacity remains.

Acknowledgment of the risk posed by disease outbreaks is a significant step forward that now needs to be matched by sustained progress towards improved capacity. The International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement is in a unique position to support this improved capacity through strengthened responsiveness to local threats and increased surge capacity to meet regional and global crises, following core humanitarian principles and the imperative to save lives and improve health resilience.

4) Conclusion and recommendations

The purpose of the resolution is to support Movement components in planning and implementing a structured, comprehensive, predictable and coordinated approach to epidemic prevention, detection, response and recovery in close cooperation with States and other partners.

The resolution will facilitate the development of a common approach by National Societies and partners, within countries and across borders, to ensure maximum impact of all epidemic control investments and successful control and response activities, ultimately saving lives and building health resilience with the most vulnerable.