

Council of Delegates 2017

REPORT ON THE WORKSHOP

Upholding independence, neutrality and impartiality in the face of State responses to contemporary global challenges

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(A) EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

From the outset, the discussions at the Council of Delegates underscored the risk of humanitarian aid being politicized. Numerous speakers emphasized that neutral, independent and impartial humanitarian action was key to preventing humanitarian action becoming part of larger and more controversial political agendas. This workshop discussed what the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement (the Movement) needed to do to uphold a principled humanitarian approach in the face of State responses to contemporary global challenges. It highlighted challenges that National Societies might face as a result of increasing nationalistic sentiments. Participants also discussed how the Movement could contribute positively to promoting non-discrimination and acceptance in an era of rising xenophobia and discrimination.

(B) GENERAL OBSERVATIONS AND KEY HIGHLIGHTS

The workshop confirmed that in recent years National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (National Societies) had been facing new challenges to maintaining their independence from States' responses to increasing migration flows. National Societies also noted that States' endeavours to fight so-called "violent extremism" have added to that challenge. The tendency towards attempting to advance national and political interests through humanitarian assistance was confirmed. In this regard, the workshop strongly stressed that National Societies (and the Movement as a whole) did not exist to endorse, to legitimize, or to help authorities further their political objectives, but to assist them impartially in the humanitarian field.

We had to be aware of the changing nature of inter- and intra-State responses, in which States were blurring human rights and creating a vicious circle of violence. There needed to be a clear strategy while recognizing the need to advance the rule of law and human rights.

The false links made between violent extremism and migration must be broken and the rhetoric countered with fact and evidence. Conflating those fleeing violent extremism and those perpetrating violent extremism was erroneous and must stop. Popular rhetoric, isolated incidents and anecdotal evidence could not be the basis for legal frameworks. Policies must be shaped on the basis of the needs of migrants and not conflated with security.

(C) KEY POINTS RAISED ON GUIDING QUESTIONS

What are the challenges faced by Movement components and in particular by National Societies in maintaining their independence, in light of their role as auxiliaries to their governments in the humanitarian field?

With governments implementing an increasingly security-based approach to migration, National Societies shared their experiences of being approached to implement activities or to share confidential information related to migrants that would be a breach of the principles of humanity, independence or even neutrality. One National Society noted in plenary that family reunification (or Restoring Family Links services more broadly) were being "politicized,

restricted and denied", and insisted on the importance of Restoring Family Links services remaining humanitarian in nature.

Some National Societies shared the concern that restrictions or directions put on funding arrangements also challenged the principle of impartiality or neutrality, as barely hidden political agendas are pushed through via funding schemes (e.g. to contain migration flows or prevent "violent extremism"). One National Society shared how important it was for them to ensure that their work with marginalized groups was clearly distinguished from their government's agenda to fight "violent extremism". Several participants welcomed the June 2017 [Background Note and Guidance for National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies on "Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism \(P/CVE\)"](#), which provides practical guidance to National Societies and a useful tool to help them explain to the authorities their position vis-à-vis such agendas. A participant noted in that respect that while the merits of the P/CVE approach was not problematic as such, it was the social and political context in which it was taking place that was problematic, creating potential perception risks. Each context being different, this called for a country-based interpretation guided by the Fundamental Principles. In the context of the humanitarian response to acts of terrorism themselves, another participant highlighted the tension between protecting volunteers, which may at times entail restrictions on movements, and the principles of humanity and impartiality.

The workshop also highlighted the importance of paying special attention to the principle of unity, especially in countries or communities that had disintegrated or fragmented owing to the effects of conflict and violence.

What are the key recommendations to ensure respect for the Movement's principled humanitarian action in the current global context?

The key recommendations resulting from the debate can be summarized as follows:

- Keeping focused on **addressing humanitarian needs** lays the groundwork for discussing humanitarian issues rather than politicizing the debate.
- It is necessary to be ready to **turn down funding opportunities** or refrain from implementing certain activities that could affect our impartiality, neutrality or independence. The acceptance and trust of the people we help is key for our security and access. Trust can easily be lost if we do not follow the compass of the Fundamental Principles.
- It is a balancing act to be independent from the authorities and at the same time their auxiliary in the humanitarian field. Understanding the auxiliary role is key, both for National Society staff and volunteers and for the authorities, at all levels. In this regard, there must be ongoing **training of staff and volunteers** on the Fundamental Principles and the auxiliary role. **Communication on our Fundamental Principles** is essential.
- **There must also be a constant**, positive and open dialogue with the authorities in which we are clear about the conditions under which we provide humanitarian assistance and we explain the importance of the principles of independence, neutrality and impartiality and how it is in their benefit. We must insulate ourselves from governments' political agendas and be able to be critical, as constructively as possible, of State policies and their humanitarian implications.
- Having a **legal foundation** is key for all National Societies in maintaining their independence. It must be in writing and recognized by the government.
- The Movement must not shy away from reminding States about their obligation to allow National Societies to abide by the Fundamental Principles at all times. National Societies must also draw on the support of peer National Societies and the Geneva-based institutions to promote this obligation.
- There must be a common understanding of the strength of **being part of the Red Cross and Red Crescent network** and applying the same approach. But being in a network also

entails obligations towards each other and a coherent application of the Fundamental Principles to ensure we gain access to and acceptance from everyone, in particular in fragile contexts.

- **Volunteers are central to promoting the Fundamental Principles.** We should make sure we invest in raising awareness of the Fundamental Principles within communities. We must involve volunteers from different backgrounds in the day-to-day work and show them first hand that they can work together. We should protect them.
- **National Societies have a role to play** in combating xenophobia, and the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) has a role in working with National Societies and their volunteers to build their capacity in this regard.
- **Young people and volunteers have an important role to play in fighting xenophobia and discrimination and promoting a culture of non-violence and peace.** Young people can be powerful actors of behavioural change, promoting a culture of non-violence and peace. Involving the affected communities is also key in terms of connection and social inclusion.
- **Volunteers are crucial** to reaching out to the ‘anxious middle’ in the migration debate, in order to ensure that negative perceptions against migrants are mitigated.
- National Society programmes promoting non-violence and social inclusion must include an understanding of the variables that affect violence in the communities concerned, and engaging with young people to create a space for dialogue on what they can do against violence. To fight social exclusion, National Societies can carry out skills-building mechanisms and vocational training, and invest in learning and training opportunities to increase the number of working young people. "Do no harm" must be the guiding principle of all National Society programming. With regard to migration, National Society programmes should also engage with refugees and migrants to break down negative perceptions.
- Evidence is important for a lot of the work we need to do. We cannot just argue on moral authority. We need to back it up with facts and the impact we have on the ground.

(D) CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The Fundamental Principles are our compass. They protect and guide us. In order for our strictly humanitarian and impartial action to be respected:

We must have a **clear legal foundation** and understand it.

We must think **long term**.

We must **constantly communicate** with internal and external stakeholders.

We must have the courage to **say no**.

We must make use of the full **potential of our international network**.

We must always base our words and acts on **needs and evidence**.

We must understand and practice our **auxiliary role**.

We must invest in the strength of our **youth and volunteers**.

With the Fundamental Principles as our guide, we have the potential to shape humanitarian action rather than be shaped by the political debate.