

**Power of humanity**

33rd International Conference  
of the Red Cross and Red Crescent

9-12 December 2019, Geneva



**EN**

**33IC/19/XX**  
**Original: English**  
**For information**

**33rd INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE  
OF THE RED CROSS AND RED CRESCENT**

Geneva, Switzerland  
9–12 December 2019

**Responding to Shifting Vulnerabilities and Achieving the  
Sustainable Development Goals:  
How National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies Contribute**

**Background document**

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

Geneva, June 2019

## **Introduction**

The 33rd International Conference of the Red Cross and Red Crescent (International Conference) will include a focus on the important challenges facing the Movement, States and other partners in responding to “shifting vulnerabilities”, including, among others, those related to public health, armed conflicts and other situations of violence, disasters, the humanitarian impacts of climate change and large-scale movements of migrants and displaced persons. Development gains could play a crucial role in addressing the fundamental drivers of these vulnerabilities.

In 2015, UN Member States adopted the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, including 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and 169 targets setting out an ambitious and specific global agenda not only in “traditional” areas, such as poverty eradication, health, education, food security and nutrition, but also in areas related to the environment and climate change, resilience, sustainable cities, violence prevention and the rule of law. Learning from the uneven gains attributed to its otherwise very successful predecessor – the Millennium Development Goals – the 2030 Agenda also pledged to “leave no one behind” and to endeavour to reach the furthest behind first.

In adopting the 2030 Agenda, States recognized that they would not be able to achieve the SDGs without a “global partnership”, drawing on cooperation from civil society, the private sector, the United Nations system and other actors. The 33rd International Conference is an opportunity to address how National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies can contribute to this partnership.

National Societies around the world are already doing so in many ways. This is, in part, because the SDGs have embraced long-standing areas of their work, such as building disaster resilience, providing vaccinations and delivering community health promotion and water and sanitation support. It is also the case that, in recent years, National Societies have been taking newer areas of focus<sup>1</sup> to scale, for instance, climate change adaptation and dedicated support for vulnerable migrants and displaced persons.

In light of the traditional grounding of the Movement in humanitarian action, however, the existing contributions and potential for future support by National Societies in the area of development – and in addressing the root causes of shifting vulnerabilities – are sometimes not well understood. As a result, some opportunities for joined-up efforts are being missed. The proposed resolution is intended both to highlight where National Societies are already contributing and to enable efforts to be scaled up through enhanced collaboration with States and other partners.

## **Background**

In its 2018 update on global progress against the SDGs,<sup>2</sup> the UN was able to point to a number of hopeful signs. For example, according to the report, poverty overall has significantly eased, in particular through reductions in extreme poverty. Maternal mortality has decreased by 37%, and under-five mortality by 47% since 2000. The rate of electrification has increased, and unemployment has gone down. However, it also highlighted some worrying gaps, such as the fact that 29% of the global population still lacked safely managed drinking water supplies, 61% were without safely managed sanitation

---

<sup>1</sup> Some National Societies have had large-scale programmes in all these areas for many years; what is more recent is the rising proportion of National Societies globally that are making them a priority area of programming.

<sup>2</sup> United Nations, *The Sustainable Development Goals Report 2018*, <https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/files/report/2018/TheSustainableDevelopmentGoalsReport2018-EN.pdf>.

services, an increasing proportion (almost 12%) spent more than 10% of annual income on health services and 90% of least developed countries had less than one physician per 1,000 people. Disasters linked to climate change were causing increased economic damage (exceeding USD 300 billion), impacting particularly on the increasingly urbanized population and contributing to a resurgence of global hunger. The report also stated that migration rates were rising, providing a positive economic impact on both countries of origin and destination, but many migrants were very vulnerable.

In the face of these challenges, National Societies have a great deal to offer. Through a network of 160,000 local branches and 13.7 million volunteers, they work across the world, mainly at the community level, to build resilience, prepare for and respond to emergencies, improve public health and strengthen communities.

The Movement's origins are in humanitarian action, and its role in responding to the humanitarian needs of persons affected by disasters, conflicts, health emergencies and other crises is well known. We sometimes describe ourselves as "exclusively humanitarian", in the sense that we always seek to act according to our Fundamental Principles, in a neutral, impartial and independent manner. However, this should not be misunderstood to imply that National Societies do not seek to address the root causes of crisis and suffering, that they do not engage in work that might be seen to be "in the development sphere" or that they do not support and cooperate with relevant authorities in doing so.

In fact, the IFRC's member National Societies are expected to adopt a new ten-year strategy ("Strategy 2030") just prior to the International Conference, setting out strong ambitions to play a key role in addressing the drivers of major global challenges. Moreover, individually, as auxiliaries to the public authorities, National Societies are uniquely placed to support the authorities' efforts to mitigate these negative drivers.

While National Society priorities and programming vary from country to country, the proposed resolution aims to point out areas in which the large majority of National Societies are active and where there are opportunities for scaled-up action in cooperation with States and others to overcome gaps in the achievement of the SDGs. As States organize their development plans and strategies around the SDGs, it will be helpful for the authorities and National Societies in each country to develop a clear mutual understanding of those areas where National Societies are well placed to support progress.

Of course, the SDGs are not the only global normative framework to which National Societies seek to make significant contributions. Others include the critical field of international humanitarian law, which is extensively addressed elsewhere in the International Conference, as well as a number of recent global "roadmaps" in various sectors, such as the Sendai Framework on Disaster Risk Reduction, the Paris Agreement on Climate Change, the New Urban Agenda, the Global Compacts on Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration and on Refugees, and the International Health Regulations. For the purposes of this resolution, however, it was decided to focus on the SDGs, in light of their comprehensive nature.

### **Analysis**

The proposed resolution focuses on 10 of the 17 SDGs (although a number of National Societies may well be contributing to others).

### **Strengthening resilience, reducing disaster risk and adapting to climate change**

National Societies contribute, in particular through their work in strengthening resilience (including support for livelihoods), reducing disaster risk and supporting climate change adaptation, to the achievement of SDGs 1 (ending poverty), 2 (ending hunger), 11

(sustainable cities), 13 (climate change) and 15 (environment). In 2018 alone, the IFRC and National Societies invested a total of 207 million Swiss francs in disaster risk reduction (DRR) projects, which were implemented in 160 countries and reached 52 million vulnerable people. The IFRC network's outreach and investment in DRR has more than quadrupled since 2009. In the most recent mapping, it was also noted that 72% of DRR-related projects were considered "climate-smart" (in the sense that they not only raised awareness of climate risks but made direct use of climate and weather information in risk analysis and action) or "climate-aware" (in the sense that they raised community awareness of climate risks). National Societies are also increasingly engaged in nature-based solutions, such as reforestation and anti-desertification, and in innovative approaches such as forecast-based financing to promote early action in the event of imminent extreme weather events. Likewise, over the last decade, the IFRC network has developed expertise and research in the area of disaster law which it is actively sharing with relevant authorities.

Through the One Billion Coalition for Resilience (1BC), the IFRC and its members are also working with UNICEF, WFP, the UN Connecting Business initiative, Interpeace and a range of regional and national partners to increase collective action on resilience building by advancing network-wide partnership and community action strategies. As an example, in India, the government has asked the Indian Red Cross Society to help it ensure that every secondary school student in India learns first aid – with the goal of engaging more than one million schools.

Notwithstanding this progress, National Societies see an urgent need to scale up efforts in light of the accelerating impacts of disasters driven by climate change (and compounded by the growing numbers of people – now over 880 million – living in slums and informal settlements which are highly exposed to disaster impacts). Guided by the IFRC's Community Resilience Framework, National Societies are particularly well placed, through their volunteer base, to engage with communities with a view to them assessing their own vulnerabilities and capacities and developing plans of action to ensure that early warning leads to early action at the community level and to promote an integrated approach to climate change adaptation and disaster risk management.

Many, but not all, National Societies are systematically included in their government's inter-agency committees related to disaster risk management and have their roles reflected in national disaster risk management laws, policies and plans. Fewer have been systematically included to date in planning and fora for climate change adaptation, including in the processes for developing National Adaptation Plans and Nationally Determined Contributions to the Paris Agreement.

### **Promoting public health, including through access to water, sanitation and hygiene**

National Societies likewise have much to offer in supporting States in the achievement of SDGs 3 (healthy lives) and 6 (water and sanitation). The largest number of people reached by National Societies are those served through public health programmes. In 2017, such programmes directly reached nearly 103 million people around the world.

In pursuit of Sustainable Development Goal 3, States are intensifying their efforts to achieve universal health coverage – the idea that everyone, everywhere, should have access to essential health-care services whenever they need them, without it causing them financial hardship. The National Societies' wide-ranging efforts to promote public health can play an important role in achieving this goal, particularly for hard-to-reach segments of vulnerable populations – including those in complex emergency settings. The upcoming UN High-Level Meeting on Universal Health Coverage is expected to provide an important impetus to this effort. There is an opportunity for stronger alignment and cooperation between National

Societies' programmes for their health staff and volunteers and the State-led strategies and approaches at the national and local level.

Likewise, SDG 6 sets out a path for cooperation in the life-saving areas of water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH), areas in which National Societies have been working hard to scale up efforts, including through the IFRC Global Water and Sanitation Initiative, which has mapped 694 WASH projects in 80 countries, working with 111 National Societies and with a target to reach 30 million people by 2030. Moreover, as experience has shown in many recent outbreaks (e.g. Ebola in the Democratic Republic of the Congo; measles in the Philippines; and cholera in Mozambique), Red Cross and Red Crescent volunteers can play a life-saving role in the response to epidemics and pandemics.

While many National Societies have strong links with their respective Ministries of Health, fewer have their role and potential systematically included in national health laws, strategies and plans.

### **Promoting safer migration, sustainable cities, accessible education and peaceful and inclusive societies**

Migrants are mentioned in various parts of the 2030 Agenda. The National Societies' work is particularly relevant to Target 10.7, with regard to promoting safe, orderly and regular migration. In 2017, National Societies provided humanitarian services to over 3.6 million migrants, with services ranging from food and water to legal and other critical information and advice, first aid, basic health care, psychosocial support, restoring family links and social inclusion, among others. In 2017, the IFRC network adopted an ambitious four-year global strategy specific to migration, aimed at scaling up the services they can deliver, strengthening connectedness across migratory trails and identifying those most vulnerable and marginalized and their particular needs. National Societies in a number of countries are now reaching out to their authorities to clarify their roles and ability to serve all vulnerable migrants, whatever their legal status, including through the establishment of humanitarian service points.

National Societies have also been working closely with municipal authorities to enhance equitable access to basic services and promote safer, healthier and less violent cities, consistent with SDG 11. A number of National Society municipal branches (for instance, in the cities of Semarang, Ternate, Luganville and Mawlamyine) have stepped up to co-lead city resilience coalitions in support of city authorities. Likewise, in Dar-es Salaam, the Tanzania Red Cross Society partnered with municipal authorities, meteorological institutions, the World Bank and academia to develop a city flood risk management system that incorporates forecast-based action for the most vulnerable, and the Kenya Red Cross Society brokered a community-based fire management system with the local authorities which reduced fires by 60% in the Mukuru informal settlement in Nairobi. There are important opportunities for more such collaboration efforts in cities around the world.

Youth is a common theme of National Society contributions to SDGs 4 on education and 16 on peaceful and inclusive societies. Over 70 National Societies support their young volunteers in implementing youth-led projects in these and other areas. It is a little-known fact that National Societies are not only active in promoting safer schools and in the reconstruction and recovery of educational facilities after disasters, but also important providers of education themselves. A recent mapping found that some 80 National Societies run over 24,000 educational institutions around the world, including over 900 at pre-primary level, over 1,500 at primary level, over 21,000 at secondary level and over 492 at tertiary level as well as over 70 institutions for people with special needs and over 140 learning spaces of other kinds.

National Society educational initiatives also include training and materials on humanitarian principles and values, international humanitarian law and peace-making skills for young people.

### **Resource implications**

National Societies can leverage multiple types of resources to support their work – most crucially, the willingness of individuals to volunteer their time to strengthen the safety and well-being of their own communities – as well as private donations. However, financial support from governments for key service delivery – as well as support from development donors – will be critical in a number of contexts to enabling National Societies to scale their work up and reach their full potential in order to tip the balance on key targets of the SDGs.

### **Implementation and monitoring**

Implementation of this resolution will depend on follow-up action between States and their National Societies at the national level. Pledges in this respect will be a helpful way to set out a clear path for dialogue to strengthen cooperation. The resolution calls for a follow-up report to be prepared for the 34th International Conference in 2023.

### **Conclusion and recommendations**

Through this resolution, it is hoped that States and National Societies will come to a stronger mutual understanding of the National Societies' current role in supporting the achievement of the SDGs and the potential for scaling up this work if resources can be found. Such an understanding can support strengthened arrangements for cooperation between National Societies and relevant authorities, particularly in development planning, and various means to promote this are included in the draft resolution.