

33rd International Conference of the Red Cross and Red Crescent (IC33) 9–12 December 2019, Geneva, Switzerland

SUMMARY REPORT FROM COMMISSION III

TRUST IN HUMANITARIAN ACTION

Context:

Trust is the foundation of humanitarian action. Access, support and respect for the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement's mission depends on the trust of the people and communities we serve, of the relevant authorities and of the general public. Trust in humanitarian action was a central theme on the agenda of the 33rd International Conference, owing to the declining trust in institutions and governments, an increase in public scrutiny, and calls for stronger integrity and accountability. This Commission sought to explore how the components of the Movement could work together with States to maintain and strengthen trust in principled humanitarian action. It provided a platform for an open and honest discussion about the respective responsibilities of Movement actors and States, resulting expectations and how to achieve a balance between mitigating the risks that are inherent to humanitarian action and the need to share residual risks. The topics of trust, accountability and integrity featured on the agendas of the Statutory Meetings and acted as a common thread connecting the Council of Delegates, the 33rd International Conference, and the IFRC's General Assembly.

The Trust Commission of the 33rd International Conference served to remind participants that the issue of trust in humanitarian action has many sides. Well-known institutions are being challenged and, as expectations change, accountability is increasingly being demanded and trust no longer a "given". The multilateral system is under increasing strain, and without trust, people may default to a narrower perspective of the world. A lack of trust can also lead to more self-centred and violent behaviour. Trust is something subjective, which can mobilize both rational and emotional dimensions. To build trust, institutions need to reassure others of their ability, integrity, dependability and purpose. They need to critically review their behaviour and ask where the focus lies: with themselves, with others, or with both? Whose interests are coming first? Trust is a *consequence* of good behaviour, not an ingredient, and while it takes decades to build, it can vanish overnight.¹

This Commission emphasized the fact that access to populations affected by armed conflict, disasters or crises requires significant trust in impartial humanitarian action by *all* parties. Trust is both a fragile and a two-way process, which means that understanding and being close to communities is essential. Furthermore, locally-led responses to disasters and crises will increasingly drive both domestic and international response. Trust is the most critical currency for the future of humanitarian action, and one which stems from humility and being truthful and transparent.

¹ This contextual summary draws upon remarks made during the opening plenary of the Trust Commission, including by representatives of the Edelman Trust Barometer and The New Humanitarian.

Overall objectives of the Commission:

This Commission sought to create a common understanding about why trust is so important to humanitarian action. The purpose was also to bring clarity about the respective responsibilities of Movement actors and States in maintaining trust in principled humanitarian action, including in terms of risk mitigation and risk sharing. The ambition was to underline the fact that everyone can and must make a difference, and to highlight concrete actions that could be taken to strengthen trust.

Chair of the Commission: Mr Georges Kettaneh, Secretary-General of Lebanese Red Cross

Rapporteur for the Commission: Mr Epeli Lesuma, Fiji Red Cross Society

Format of the Commission:

The Commission on Trust in Humanitarian Action consisted of two main plenaries (opening and reconvening) and three spotlight sessions, with the following topics:

- Community engagement and accountability
- Conducive environment for principled humanitarian action
- Integrity and risk sharing.

SPOTLIGHT SESSIONS

1. TRUST THROUGH COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT AND ACCOUNTABILITY

Date and time: Thursday, 12 December 2019, 10:30am–12:30pm

Objectives of the spotlight session:

- Create a shared understanding of the interdependence of trust and community engagement and accountability (CEA)
- Share and celebrate what constitutes successful community engagement, and the impact it can have on the quality and effectiveness of aid
- Discuss how poor community engagement can lead to trust issues
- Summarize the key benefits of the CEA resolution adopted at the 2019 Council of Delegates (which was subsequently taken note of in the 33rd International Conference Resolution “Act today, shape tomorrow”)
- Identify what leaders and stakeholders need to do to ensure that the CEA resolution is translated into action and achieves positive impact.

Summary of key issues identified and any next steps from the spotlight session:

- Participants discussed how increasing the participation of affected communities requires a shift in how decisions are made in humanitarian action and by whom (and that such decisions should involve community and local-level participation).
- The point that “change is in the hands of leaders” was made, meaning that leadership can drive the changes we need to ensure community voices are valued, listened to and acted upon.
- The need to be deliberate in engaging and encouraging diversity among Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement staff and volunteers was emphasized, together with the need to seek views from people from diverse backgrounds to inform how humanitarian action is carried out.

- Participants discussed a number of possible next steps to further the commitments and discussions of the 2019 Statutory Meetings, and CEA more broadly, including incorporating accountability mechanisms in humanitarian policies and strategies to facilitate the safe, accessible and equitable participation of communities with a focus on improving contextual analysis and listening, responding and acting on community feedback.
- Creating institutional space for humanitarian staff to reflect on community perspectives was suggested, and mandating bodies that encourage staff to change behaviour and listen differently.
- Finally, ensuring that donor funding is compatible with CEA commitments (e.g. allowing sufficient time for community participation) and enabling sustainability was encouraged. CEA should be long-term and sustainable, as a crisis cannot be the starting point for thinking about community engagement – it must be considered beforehand.

2. CREATING A CONDUCIVE ENVIRONMENT FOR PRINCIPLED HUMANITARIAN ACTION

Date and time: Thursday, 12 December 2019, 10:30am–12:30pm

Objectives of the spotlight session:

- The aim was to explore how to build a conducive regulatory environment at the global, national and local levels to enable effective and principled humanitarian action.

Summary of key issues identified and any next steps from the spotlight session:

- Participants discussed the crucial role of States in building an enabling regulatory and legal environment and the importance of ensuring dialogue among the main stakeholders in the spirit of mutual responsibility and trust.
- The absence of a comprehensive legal framework can create bureaucratic delays, which slow down the humanitarian response. Having a solid legal framework in place at the domestic level that pertains to disaster risk management and response (e.g. disaster law) can help clarify roles and responsibilities and provide the necessary legal facilities to carry out the response.
- Having a framework in place that follows international guidance, such as the “Guidelines for the domestic facilitation and regulation of international disaster relief and initial recovery assistance” (also known as the “IDRL guidelines”), can ensure that the roles, responsibilities and legal facilities for international actors are provided for, thereby both facilitating and regulating international support.
- The session discussed how a legal base is essential for strengthening and positioning National Societies’ distinct and privileged status in defining their domestic roles as auxiliaries to the public authorities in the humanitarian sphere.
- The regular review of National Societies’ organizational capacity and accountability, legal base and statutes, gender equity, and diversity and inclusion among staff and volunteers were noted as essential elements for building well-positioned and well-trusted organizations.
- The session discussed the crucial responsibility of States to ensure that their security and political interests do not impede impartial humanitarian action. Security and political concerns, which can lead to sanctions and counter terrorism measures, must not weaken the application of IHL, for example, nor obstruct the provision of humanitarian assistance.
- It was noted that a whole-of-government dialogue, together with humanitarian organizations, is essential for enabling impartial humanitarian action, including when sanctions and counter-terrorism measures are imposed.
- The discussions resulted in a number of possible next steps and considerations, including a proposal to establish a systematic global monitoring and review of the impact of sanctions and counter-terrorism measures on principled humanitarian action, to ensure that the issue is duly recognized and high on the humanitarian agenda (i.e. that the protection of humanitarian space and action should be better coordinated at the global level).

- It was suggested that sanctions and counter-terrorism measures should not affect humanitarian action, and that IHL and humanitarian principles need to be protected in all circumstances. Their impact should be systematically assessed, and clear humanitarian exemptions established, to enable principled action by local humanitarian organizations.
- Finally, the need for the UN, EU and other sanctions regimes to be more consistent in preserving space for humanitarian action was emphasized.

3. INTEGRITY AND RISK SHARING

Date and time: Thursday, 12 December 2019, 10:30am–12:30pm

Objectives of the spotlight session:

- Demonstrate what is being done by Movement components and other humanitarian actors to live up to high standards of integrity
- Identify connections and tension points in the way integrity is practised by humanitarian actors by sharing and understanding the different perspectives and risks
- Begin a dialogue on what needs to be done together to strengthen integrity and manage compliance requirements, while enabling principled humanitarian action.

Summary of key issues identified and any next steps from in the spotlight session:

- The discussion emphasized that the components of the Movement must demonstrate the highest standards of integrity, as unethical behaviour can greatly erode the public's trust in humanitarian action, including with the communities that the Movement serves.
- The Movement is responsible for ensuring service delivery in accordance with the Fundamental Principles, the Code of Conduct and comprehensive statutory, regulatory and policy framework requirements, as these are the foundation of principled humanitarian action.
- It was noted that donors have an important role to play by incentivizing and supporting integrity-related processes and mechanisms, while at the same time ensuring that their compliance requirements do not result in a transfer of risk that would hamper an organization's ability to deliver principled humanitarian action.
- In moving forward, it was suggested that humanitarian organizations invested in ensuring that staff, volunteers and people affected by crises know and understand policies and guidance related to integrity, including what to do when confronted with misconduct.
- It was suggested that humanitarian organizations should be able to identify and act swiftly in response to allegations of misconduct. They must also demonstrate that they are striving for excellence and are willing to learn and improve.
- The importance of humanitarian organizations and donors work together to ensure that compliance requirements are met and seen to be met, without impacting negatively on an organization's ability to deliver principled humanitarian action, was noted.
- Finally, the session emphasized that humanitarian organizations and donors can and must work together to ensure that residual risk is shared rather than transferred down to national and local organizations.
