



Power of humanity

34th International Conference
of the Red Cross and Red Crescent

28–31 October 2024, Geneva

SUMMARY REPORT OF COMMISSION AND ITS SPOTLIGHT SESSIONS

Commission III Enabling Locally Led Action

1) OPENING PLENARY

Date and time: 31 October 2024, 09:00–10:00

Chair/facilitator/moderator: Dr Amal Emam, Acting CEO, Egyptian Red Crescent Society

Vice-chair: Maria del Mar Pageo, President, Spanish Red Cross

Rapporteur: Anand Junior Bharratt, Suriname Red Cross, Member, IFRC Youth Commission

(A) Executive summary

Commission III explored locally led action and its power to directly address community needs. Discussions centred on the roles of National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, volunteers and the diverse range of local actors as partners and stakeholders in principled humanitarian action. It looked specifically at volunteering and social safety nets, the auxiliary role of National Societies, community health action and front-line preparedness, and improving risk sharing and innovative financing. The Commission discussed cooperation and partnerships that empower local entities through financial support, risk sharing and improved coordination with international stakeholders with the goal of fostering a more sustainable and resilient network of local actors capable of driving humanitarian efforts within their own communities. Further collaboration and sharing between local actors is also needed to scale up and advance good practice, improve sustainability and maximize collective impact.

(B) General observations and key highlights

The opening plenary session centred on the importance of locally led humanitarian action, emphasizing the need for local actors to drive decisions and shape responses based on their unique knowledge and needs. Challenges such as limited access to funding, rigid donor structures and exclusion from decision-making processes were highlighted as barriers that undermine the effectiveness of local leadership. The session called for long-term investments in local capacity, flexible funding mechanisms and equitable partnerships where international organizations support rather than dominate.

The spotlight sessions then built on the opening plenary's call to empower local actors by emphasizing the critical role of volunteers and local networks in driving resilient, locally led humanitarian responses. Spotlight Session 1 showcased how integrating volunteer initiatives into formal social safety nets can expand the reach of humanitarian assistance while building local capacity, stressing the importance of supporting volunteers through duty of care (including mental health care), fair compensation and training. Spotlight Sessions 2 and 4

highlighted the need for clear policies, strong collaboration and innovative financing to ensure local actors are equipped with the resources required to lead disaster response efforts. Spotlight Session 3 underscored the importance of community health and front-line preparedness, advocating for a multi-sectoral approach that integrates disaster risk management and health systems and for the inclusion of community health workers as vital components of the health ecosystem, with a view to improving early epidemic control, addressing health gaps and helping communities face the challenges of climate change, migration and related crises. Together, these sessions underlined the need for policy reforms, risk-sharing frameworks and sustained investment in local capacities to create a more equitable and responsive humanitarian system.

2) SPOTLIGHT SESSIONS

(A) Spotlight Session 1 – The vital role of volunteers and community-based actors in social safety nets for community resilience

10:30–12:00

Spotlight Session 1 made the point that social safety nets (SSNs) are vital lifelines required to ensure that the basic needs of people affected by crises around the world are met. SSNs are often designed and delivered by governments and supported by international organizations, but there is increasing recognition of the roles that volunteers, community-based initiatives and civil society play in providing aid, especially in response to crises. However, many vulnerable people and communities are not covered by existing social protection schemes.

The Burundi Red Cross and the Red Cross of the Democratic Republic of the Congo highlighted that volunteers are a fundamental part of how National Societies deliver life-saving assistance and support their communities in responding to and recovering from shocks. The YMCA emphasized that there are also other models of volunteering outside of the Movement that offer interesting insights and additional opportunities for engagement for SSNs in crisis-affected places. Under these diverse models, volunteers and volunteer-based organizations can and do help extend assistance to vulnerable communities not covered by existing social protection programmes.

Despite extensive research on SSNs and volunteering as separate fields, the intersection of the two is underexplored. Integrating volunteer-driven initiatives into formal SSNs offers opportunities for collaboration, enhancing the reach and impact of assistance. However, this approach requires contextual sensitivity, strong operational frameworks and sustained investment. It was noted that it is crucial to engage young volunteers meaningfully and recognize their contributions beyond serving as low-cost labour.

Key themes for advancing these efforts include exploring how volunteering strengthens local capacity and extends aid through informal SSNs, identifying opportunities to connect institutional systems with community-driven initiatives for greater synergy, encouraging governments to better support and collaborate with volunteer networks and investing in integrated frameworks that both recognize the invaluable contributions of volunteers and empower communities.

Ultimately, volunteering and SSNs are complementary systems that, when aligned, can deliver stronger humanitarian outcomes. Governments and organizations must work together to foster trust, collaboration and sustainable partnerships that respect local contexts and empower all contributors.

(B) Spotlight Session 2 – Working together with States and local authorities in managing and strengthening the auxiliary role across all levels

10:30–12:00

In the introduction, the Syrian Arab Red Crescent (Syrian Arab RC) and the Ecuadorian Red Cross (Ecuadorian RC) outlined how their auxiliary relationship with the State allows them to play a crucial role in addressing health, disaster response and infrastructure needs and in advocating for improved disaster laws and the fulfilment of human rights. For the Syrian Arab RC, this includes emergency medical support and major projects to rehabilitate water facilities, while for Ecuadorian RC it involves ensuring the national blood supply and reaching remote communities with health care and disaster response. Both speakers highlighted that the trust they enjoy from the State and communities is key to facilitating their humanitarian action as auxiliaries, especially in areas the government cannot reach.

Common facilitating factors included nationwide coverage, partnership and adherence to the Fundamental Principles. The importance of adaptable, locally relevant strategies to fill gaps in State capacity was also noted.

This was followed by group discussions on seven themes related to the auxiliary role:

- legal base
- municipal level
- humanitarian access
- the principle of independence
- fragile contexts
- advocacy
- the humanitarian–development nexus
- partnerships.

The conclusions stressed the importance of clear legislation to define National Society roles and ensure effective collaboration with governments. Trust, rooted in the understanding that National Societies maintain their independence and neutrality in the performance of their auxiliary role, is vital, especially in politically sensitive contexts. It is essential to build branch capacity through advocacy and humanitarian diplomacy and foster balanced partnerships with the IFRC and the ICRC to enhance National Society capabilities and maintain global consistency. Regular training and awareness-raising for both volunteers and government representatives were recommended to ensure National Societies remain effective, credible and respected partners.

(C) Spotlight Session 3 – Community health action and front-line preparedness: Learning from the past to shape the future

10:30–12:00

The panellists and keynote speaker emphasized that health encompasses not only the absence of disease but also mental wellbeing, requiring a holistic, multi-sectoral approach. Effective health responses must integrate sectors such as food security and education to address the broader determinants of health. Strengthening primary health care within communities was highlighted as critical to controlling epidemics at their source. Investments in local health services are necessary to close socio-economic and geographical gaps, ensuring equitable access to care.

Preparedness and coordination were underscored as fundamental to effective health responses. Health emergencies start in communities but also end in communities. A multi-hazard approach that integrates disaster risk management into health systems was deemed essential, as was the inclusion of community health workers (CHWs) as vital components of the health ecosystem. Investment and the strengthening of local services delivered by front-line workers and volunteers are key to ensuring health resilience and security.

Reinforcing the capacity of local volunteers and CHWs and enabling them to provide life-saving services effectively, including to last-mile and vulnerable communities, helps to ensure safe and healthy communities, decrease the burden on the formal health sector and contribute vitally to the health and resilience fabric. To maximize their impact, CHWs and volunteers working in front-line preparedness need proper training, dignified pay and ongoing support. Collaboration between organizations such as the Red Cross and Red Crescent and public authorities was cited as crucial to strengthening health services, requiring commitment, resources and proactive engagement from all stakeholders.

Addressing the contextual realities of different regions, such as the maternal health challenges in South Sudan or community trust issues in Mexico, was recognized as critical. These examples highlight the need for tailored approaches that prioritize community engagement, trust building and targeted training. Lastly, the panel emphasized the importance of safeguarding the wellbeing of care providers themselves, ensuring their mental health, safety and capacity to continue delivering essential services.

The session concluded with a strong message that there is “no health without peace”, stating that health is a political choice and urging leaders and citizens to be active and accountable, with a view to delivering on as yet unfulfilled promises signed in multiple forums.

(D) Spotlight 4 – Overcoming barriers on financing and risk sharing to foster locally led action

10:30–12:00

Advancing risk sharing and financing for locally led humanitarian action requires efforts to build trust and foster honest discussions about the risks involved. Local actors must be given the space and confidence to engage in these conversations and collaborate with donor and intermediary partners to develop mutual support strategies. Establishing trust is essential, as are explicit commitments to locally led action in institutional strategies, which should include a proactive focus on collaborative rather than unilateral risk management approaches as they consider the need to equitably share the burden of preventive measures and risks.

Meaningful investment in the institutional capacity of local actors is crucial for sustainable progress on localization commitments. Strengthening their ability to manage risk ensures that they are equipped to take on greater responsibility in humanitarian responses. This requires a shift from token gestures to sustained efforts that empower local organizations, enabling them to operate effectively and independently within their communities.

Innovative financing offers a powerful opportunity to support locally led action, provided it is backed by strong partnerships, accessible data and technical expertise. When effectively utilized, these mechanisms can offer predictable funding, redistribute risks more equitably and enhance governance structures. Equipping local actors with the skills and tools needed to harness these financial models will ensure they are better placed to access these and other risk-sharing solutions that can make the humanitarian system more equitable and impactful.

Ultimately, creating equitable risk-sharing frameworks and empowering local actors requires alignment between strategic commitments and practical actions. This involves fostering robust collaboration, investing in local capacity and leveraging innovative financing to transform how humanitarian responses are delivered, ensuring they are locally driven, sustainable and effective.

3) RECONVENING PLENARY: CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This session, moderated by the director of the Active Learning Network for Accountability and Performance (ALNAP), reflected on two decades of discussions and initiatives around locally led humanitarian action since the Indian Ocean Tsunami response in 2004. While the humanitarian sector has made strides in policy commitments, networks and increased representation of national leaders, progress on localization has been slower than desired. The discussion highlighted several key elements crucial to advancing locally led humanitarian action. The panellists from the Ugandan government and the United States government emphasized the importance of mindset shifts, advocating for recognition of local actors' capabilities and the need for a transformative approach within donor organizations. Key to this transformation are capacity sharing, collaborative co-design and a focus on quality funding that aligns with the Grand Bargain principles. Pooled funding mechanisms were also cited as essential for equitable financing and risk sharing to ensure local leadership is supported with adequate resources. The panellists from the Akkar Network for Development and the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) added that genuine local leadership requires both intentional efforts and systematic change, stressing the importance of improving processes while empowering local actors to lead disaster response and recovery efforts.

Despite the progress, challenges remain in the humanitarian sector, particularly in shifting perceptions and securing evidence-based support for capacity-building initiatives. The moderator highlighted the need for better technical programming and accountability to populations, while others called for efforts to move beyond words and demonstrate real action in localization, such as by implementing anticipatory approaches and making insights available on global knowledge platforms. The panellist from the Ugandan government emphasized that local actors, including those in Uganda, are increasingly advocating for change, urging international organizations and donors to show tangible commitments to localization. The complex nature of change in the sector requires continuous efforts, evidence collection and the creation of opportunities to realize the full potential of locally led action.

The session ended on a strong note with the recommendations from the spotlight sessions (below), which complement the commitments set out in the resolution "[Enabling local leadership, capacity and delivery in principled humanitarian action and strengthening resilience](#)", also adopted at the 34th International Conference.

Recommendations	
<p>Spotlight Session 1: The vital role of volunteers and community-based actors in social safety nets for community resilience</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Develop operational frameworks to align volunteering and social safety nets as a transformative social catalyst for vulnerability reduction and resilience. b. Ensure volunteers are recognized as key players in resilience building, offering them fair treatment, robust support and meaningful engagement as partners and not just as cost-efficient resources.

Recommendations

Spotlight Session 2:

Working together with States and local authorities in managing and strengthening the auxiliary role across all levels

- c. Anchor the auxiliary relationship between National Societies and the public authorities on a robust legal foundation, mutual trust and clear communication, underpinned by ongoing humanitarian diplomacy and partnerships with the IFRC and the ICRC.
- d. Reinforce the auxiliary role of National Societies, enabling them to maintain their neutrality and fill critical service gaps in complex environments where government reach or access to formal services is limited.

Spotlight Session 3:

Community health action and front-line preparedness: Learning from the past to shape the future

- e. Invest in and strengthen the capacity of front-line workers and volunteers to provide critical, life-saving services, particularly in underserved areas.
- f. Recognize and support front-line workers and volunteers as essential contributors to resilience, ensuring they have mental health care, protective equipment, capacity building, supervision and fair remuneration.

Spotlight Session 4:

Overcoming barriers on financing and risk sharing to foster locally led action

- g. Build trust with local actors through open discussions about risk sharing and invest in institutional capacity to enable effective locally led humanitarian action.
- h. To create sustainable, locally led action, stakeholders must focus on i) fostering enabling policy environments and risk sharing and ii) refining funding processes to alleviate the burden on local organizations and increase financial access.