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Strengthening the resilience of urban communities

Principles of Action

BACKGROUND DOCUMENT

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BACKGROUND DOCUMENT

Strengthening the resilience of urban communities: Principles of Action

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Urbanization is reshaping the humanitarian landscape. Cities concentrate both risks and opportunities, with growing exposure to climate related hazards, public health challenges, social inequalities, and economic pressures. Globally, an estimated 1.1 billion people live in informal settlements, 1.4 billion in low elevation coastal zones, and around 2 billion are exposed to natural hazards. Urban pressures affect approximately 4.6 billion people, illustrating the scale of vulnerability in urban contexts. Urban areas concentrate vulnerabilities such as informal settlements, infrastructure deficits, social fragmentation, and exposure to hazards including floods, heatwaves, earthquakes, and displacement.

Recognizing these challenges, the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement has intensified its engagement on urban resilience. Building on previous commitments and the 2022 Council of Delegates Resolution on Urban Resilience, a Strategic Advisory Group was set up to oversee the work of Movement Urban Resilience Working Groups (MURWG) established to identify priority actions to strengthen the Movement's role in urban contexts. This work is distinct from work towards the implementation of the Resolution and Solemn Appeal on War in Cities adopted by the Council of Delegates in 2022 and 2024 and regulating the Movement action to prevent and respond to the humanitarian impacts of war in cities.

Five thematic working groups examined key dimensions of urban resilience, including: strategic partnerships and resource mobilization; the auxiliary role at municipal level; community engagement and volunteering; operational models and service delivery; and research, innovation, and knowledge management.

Consultations, surveys, and working group deliberations demonstrate strong commitment across National Societies to scale up urban resilience work. However, they also reveal systemic challenges, including limited branch capacity in urban areas, fragmented knowledge management, insufficient engagement with municipal authorities, and constrained access to innovative financing.

"National Societies need to move beyond implementation and position themselves as conveners and strategic partners within urban systems."

The findings highlight that strengthening urban resilience requires a strategic shift in how the Movement operates in cities. National Societies must increasingly act not only as implementers but also as conveners, enablers, and advisors within complex urban systems. This involves building stronger partnerships with municipalities, empowering communities, investing in flexible volunteering models, and strengthening research, innovation, and learning.

The recommendations emerging from the working groups call for enhanced technical support, strengthened branch capacities, improved resource mobilization, and stronger collaboration across the Movement and with external partners.

1) INTRODUCTION

Urbanization is one of the defining global trends of the twenty-first century. Cities concentrate both opportunities and risks. Rapid urban growth, climate change, environmental degradation, and social inequalities increasingly expose urban populations to complex and interconnected hazards. Vulnerable populations in cities often face overlapping risks, including precarious housing, limited access to basic services, health hazards, and exposure to disasters. Informal settlements, inadequate infrastructure, and social marginalization further exacerbate vulnerability, particularly for migrants, displaced populations, women, youth, and older persons.

"Urban risks are interconnected and cannot be addressed through isolated interventions."

For the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, strengthening urban resilience is therefore essential to effectively support vulnerable communities. National Societies already play a critical role in urban areas through disaster preparedness and response, health services, social assistance, and community engagement. However, the complexity of urban systems requires new approaches that go beyond traditional humanitarian response.

The global urban survey conducted in June-July 2025 showed that National Societies are increasingly responding and adapting to these realities. According to consultations conducted with National Societies, 62% reported expanding their urban work following the COVID-19 pandemic, and 69% now implement long-term urban activities. At the same time, 31% of National Societies reported accessing funding at the city level, while 22% are exploring innovative or market-based financing approaches. These trends demonstrate growing engagement but also highlight gaps. Only 11% of National Societies currently engage in research or play a role in influencing urban policy, indicating an important opportunity to strengthen the Movement's strategic engagement in cities.

Effective humanitarian action in urban settings also requires strong partnerships, coordinated approaches, and sustained engagement with local institutions. Urban resilience is also increasingly recognized within global policy frameworks, including the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction, the Sustainable Development Goals, and international climate adaptation agendas. Strengthening the Movement's role in urban resilience therefore contributes not only to humanitarian objectives but also to broader global efforts to reduce risk and protect vulnerable populations.

Building on previous Council of Delegates commitments and growing engagement across the Movement, this background document outlines the key findings and recommendations emerging from recent consultations and the work of the Movement Urban Resilience Working Group.

2) BACKGROUND

Recognizing the growing importance of urban resilience, the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement has progressively strengthened its engagement in urban contexts over recent years.

Building on commitments adopted in the 2022 Council of Delegates Resolution on Urban Resilience, the Movement Urban Resilience Working Group (MURWG) was established to support collective reflection and identify practical pathways for strengthening the Movement's role in cities. The MURWG brought together representatives from the IFRC, the ICRC, and a number of National Societies. Its work was structured around thematic consultations, a global survey with feedback from 39 National Societies, and exchanges of operational experiences.

Five thematic working groups were established to examine key dimensions of urban resilience:

1. *Strategic partnerships and resource mobilization*
2. *The auxiliary role of National Societies at municipal level*
3. *Community engagement and volunteering in urban contexts*
4. *Operational models and service delivery in urban systems*
5. *Research, innovation, and knowledge management*

The consultations demonstrated strong interest among National Societies in strengthening their engagement in cities. At the same time, they highlighted capacity gaps, knowledge needs, and opportunities to strengthen coordination and partnerships across the Movement.

The findings and recommendations from these five working groups create the backbone of the Principles of Action that are presented to the Council of Delegates for adoption.

The action by the Movement to prevent and respond to the humanitarian impacts of war in cities remains governed by the Resolution on War in Cities and its annexed Movement Action Plan, and the Resolution and Solemn Appeal on War in Cities adopted by the Council of Delegates in 2022 and 2024.

3) ANALYSIS/PROGRESS

Five working groups, convened under the leadership of National Society chairs, engaged over a nine-month process of discussions, exchanges, and collective reflection on their respective thematic areas. Through this participatory approach, each group consolidated its findings and developed recommendations, which were captured in dedicated outcome reports. The combined outcome of this collective effort formed the foundation of the principles of action presented in this resolution. These principles aim to support National Societies, in undertaking effective urban action and in contributing to the resilience of vulnerable urban communities, with the backing of the IFRC and ICRC, in line with their mandates. A brief summary per working group is presented below and full reports are available with IFRC urban resilience team, as well as working group chairs.

A) Strategic Partnerships and Resource Mobilization

Urban contexts require diverse and sustained partnerships. Municipal authorities, development actors, financial institutions, and civil society organizations all play a role in shaping resilience outcomes.

The consultations highlight that National Societies bring significant strengths to this ecosystem, including strong community outreach, operational experience in fragile contexts, and recognized humanitarian legitimacy. However, they are not always positioned strategically within urban partnerships, and their role is sometimes insufficiently understood by external actors.

"Our added value is clear, but it is not always clearly articulated to external partners."

Barriers include unclear operational profiles, limited strategic engagement, and challenges in navigating complex environments. While grant based funding remains central, there is growing potential to expand engagement with innovative financing mechanisms.

A more strategic and value driven approach to partnerships and resource mobilization is required to strengthen the Movement's positioning in urban resilience.

B) Strengthening the auxiliary role at municipal level

Cities are increasingly where humanitarian needs are concentrated and where responses are coordinated. Municipal authorities play a central role in disaster risk management, service provision, and long-term resilience planning.

The consultations confirmed that the auxiliary role of National Societies at municipal level is both critical and feasible, but highly dependent on context.

"*At city level, trust and sustained presence matter more than formal agreements alone."*

In practice, credibility, operational performance, and sustained relationships are more decisive than formal legal frameworks alone. Community trust is a key asset, positioning National Societies as intermediaries between communities and local authorities.

Many National Societies express strong interest in strengthening their municipal engagement, but face constraints related to resources, technical capacity, and access to advocacy tools.

C) Community engagement and volunteering in urban contexts

Community engagement is central to building resilience in urban areas. However, urban contexts require approaches that reflect complex social dynamics, diverse actors, and evolving forms of participation.

The consultations highlight the importance of applying systems thinking to understand urban structures and dynamics. Effective engagement requires participatory approaches and continuous interaction with communities.

"Urban volunteering requires flexibility, new skills, and different ways of engaging people."

Volunteering models need to evolve to include more flexible and diverse forms of engagement. National Societies can play expanded roles as conveners, enablers, advisors, and innovators.

D) Operational models and service delivery in urban systems

Urban resilience depends on integrated approaches that address interconnected systems and risks. National Societies need to adapt their operational models to reflect this complexity. This includes strengthening their presence within urban communities and engaging in partnerships that enable integrated service delivery across sectors.

Collaboration with municipal authorities is essential to align humanitarian action with city level systems and priorities.

E) Research, innovation, and knowledge management

Research, innovation, and knowledge sharing are critical to scaling urban resilience efforts. While many National Societies demonstrate innovation in practice, these experiences are not systematically captured or shared.

"We generate experience, but we do not systematically capture or share it."

Strengthening collaboration with academic institutions and partners can support more evidence-based programming and advocacy. Improved knowledge management systems are needed to ensure that lessons learned are effectively disseminated.

4) RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS

Strengthening the Movement's engagement in urban resilience will require sustained attention and increased investments in several areas. These include strengthening urban branch governance, volunteering and auxiliary role, developing technical guidance and necessary capacity, facilitating knowledge exchange across National Societies, supporting pilot initiatives that demonstrate scalable urban resilience approaches and design and delivery of quality urban programming at scale.

Additional resources may also be required to support research partnerships, innovation initiatives, and engagement with municipal authorities and international urban networks. Mobilizing diversified funding sources, including innovative financing mechanisms and partnerships with development actors, will be essential to support these ambitions.

5) IMPLEMENTATION AND MONITORING

Implementation of the recommendations outlined in this document will require coordinated action across the Movement. The IFRC will lead together a core group of National Societies and in collaboration with the ICRC the development of technical guidance, capacity-building initiatives, and knowledge-sharing platforms.

Progress will be monitored through regular reporting mechanisms and exchanges within the Movement and thematic working groups. Opportunities for peer-to-peer learning and

collaborative initiatives will be facilitated at regional and global levels. Updates on progress and implementation may be presented to future Statutory meetings.

6) CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Urbanization, climate change, and growing inequalities are reshaping the humanitarian landscape. Cities are increasingly where crises unfold and where resilience must be strengthened.

The consultations and working group findings highlight that the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement has a unique role to play in supporting vulnerable urban communities. With its extensive national presence, trusted community relationships, and humanitarian mandate, the Movement is well positioned to contribute to inclusive and sustainable urban resilience.

"*National Societies need to move beyond implementation and position themselves as conveners and strategic partners within urban systems.*"

To fully realize this potential, National Societies must strengthen their engagement with municipal authorities, empower communities, invest in flexible volunteer models, and develop new partnerships and collaboration models across stakeholders.

The proposed resolution aims to support this transformation by encouraging stronger collaboration across the Movement, strengthening technical support and knowledge sharing, and mobilizing resources to scale up urban resilience initiatives. By strengthening its collective action in urban contexts, the Movement can enhance its ability to protect vulnerable populations and contribute to safer, more resilient cities.