Rakhine Reflection Study: Supporting Principled Humanitarian Response in a Protracted Crisis

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Myanmar reflection study

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Analytical summary

“Learning from the support the International Federation of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies provided to the Myanmar Red Cross Society in the context of acute and protracted crises resulting from internal violence and displacement in Rakhine state.”

Background

The study summarised in this paper was jointly commissioned by the International Federation of the Red Cross Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) and the British Red Cross (BRC), in collaboration with the Myanmar Red Cross Society (MRCS), and was conducted by a team of three independent consultants.

The study explores the extent to which the support of the IFRC has enhanced MRCS capacity to be a relevant and effective national and local actor, delivering a principled response to affected communities in Rakhine state in Myanmar, covering the period 2012-2018.

The methodology included a desk review of over five hundred policy and programme documents, interviews with two hundred key informants internal and external to the Red Cross Red Crescent Movement (the Movement), as well as MRCS staff and volunteers in Yangon and Sittwe. The team was able to visit program locations within Sittwe township.

The study reviews some key aspects of the support IFRC provided to the MRCS in the context of humanitarian emergencies in a protracted crisis resulting from internal violence and displacement in Rakhine state. It focused on support in the areas of infrastructure, coordination, organisational development and programming. Across these complementary and interdependent categories, the study maintains a focus on the application of humanitarian principles. This broader analytical framework helped to illustrate how the investments made in both infrastructure and other elements of organisational development also contributed to a positive impact at the programme level. Broader areas of support included assistance with the legal base, specifically the Red Cross law adopted in 2015, and in the areas of coordination and communication.

This document aims to summarise the key learnings of the original study, to identify overarching themes and to propose messages to promote and support effective principled humanitarian action in complex crises. Some additional analysis is provided to contribute to the discussion on the role of National Societies in the humanitarian-development nexus and to demonstrate how sustained engagement from the international components of the Movement can help National Societies to operate through a nexus framework in a principled way.
IFRC Capacity Building and Support

The ability to support the organizational development of a National Society is a key comparative advantage of the IFRC. In Myanmar, IFRC’s direct support and coordination role enables MRCS to strengthen its capacity to respond to crises while also navigating complex situations of violence as an effective and principled humanitarian agency.

This section details what this support looks like and sets out the challenges and the opportunities of such an approach specifically looking at the Myanmar operating context as well as the organizational needs and priorities for MRCS.

Infrastructure

Infrastructure provides the foundation from which an organisation can work, although this is often deprioritised as donors prefer to support programme delivery.

Until 2017, IFRC contributions in Myanmar have included renovation of branch offices, warehouses and other key structures. These were funded through Disaster Risk Reduction initiatives. However, there has only been enough flexibility and funding to allow for infrastructure work to be completed at a larger scale since the introduction of the One Movement Appeal in 2017, through which the Movement in Rakhine state was able to operate under a single emblem and with a single identity.

At this time, while investment levels were at suitable scale, the short expenditure timeframes posed implementation challenges in terms of absorption capacity, given the systems and procedures used by MRCS for tendering and payments. IFRC was instrumental in ensuring that funding was allocated for infrastructure work, in line with the Organisational Development in Emergencies model in the National Society Development Framework of 2013.

Coordination

Coordination has been one of the most important areas of contribution from the IFRC in Myanmar. With restrictions on access for other humanitarian agencies and Movement partners having the strongest humanitarian presence in northern Rakhine state after the violence of 2017, the Movement had both pressure and a unique responsibility to communicate about areas where only they could have significant access. There was an outpouring of interest and funding offers, following these events, which represented both an opportunity and a challenge. The role of IFRC was critical in ensuring the necessary level of coordination, both internally and externally.

Internally

The IFRC supported a Movement approach by fostering joint context analysis, operational and technical coordination, and joint decision making, as well as capacity building of MRCS in Rakhine state. IFRC was able to implement this approach through a two-level coordination mechanism, at both a national and sub-national level that involved all Movement partners. This way of operating illustrates the comparative advantage of the Movement when international and national components work in complementary ways.

IFRC also played a critical role in promoting a joint Movement approach identified as the One Movement Appeal, which aims at maximizing the impact of the humanitarian response delivered by the Movement. One lead organisation launches an appeal for funds so that resources are allocated most efficiently and complementarity and non-competition are encouraged. The One Movement Appeal contributed to the perception of MRCS as capable of delivering an effective, principled response and represents an opportunity to learn and share lessons about joint strategic and operational mechanisms. Critically, within this model, IFRC supported the MRCS to identify the level of funding it required and allocate it in a way that was immediately useful, but also served the longer-term interests of the National Society.
Organisational development

The IFRC Strategy 2020 identifies organisational development as its first enabling action to deliver its strategic aims, and emphasizes “the primacy of a strong National Society as the foundation for all that we do”.2 In Myanmar, organizational development is not only an enabling action, but also a main programme area in the MRCS’ three year plan, alongside disaster preparedness and response, health promotion and disease prevention, and restoring family links. Organisational development work is central to operations in Rakhine state and has made a real and positive impact. The following paragraphs illustrate how.

Leadership

MRCS is highly centralised and staff and volunteers look to the leadership for direction. Inputs at the central and governance level, including support for the Organisational Capacity Assessment and Certification (OCAC) and for the establishment of the MRCS’ emergency management fund, have had a noticeable effect at the branch level of the organisation. This was particularly evident during the development and promulgation of the Red Cross law in 2015, which asserts MRCS’ independence and auxiliary status. There is still work to be done on reinforcing the identity and principles of MRCS, but volunteers in the field already react positively to the perceived increase in independence, most clearly seen in the replacement of government representatives at leadership levels with civil society agencies. As a consequence of the Movement’s shared identity in Rakhine state, the MRCS leadership is part of a collective responsibility for all Movement partners, to be regarded as principled humanitarian organisations.

Planning

With substantial changes to the identity and a new leadership for the MRCS, less familiar with the Movement and its role, it was felt as critical to have a shared organisational vision and plans. IFRC played a key role in supporting MRCS with achieving such a shared vision, both directly and indirectly. IFRC supported the OCAC and the Branch Organisational Capacity Assessment (BOCA) to identify areas of strength and needs for development, and provided technical expertise in National Society development and planning.

Equally important, particularly in a natural disaster-prone country like Myanmar, is ensuring that funding is available to respond rapidly to emergencies and to meet acute needs while securing long-term institutional investment. This has been possible thanks to a clear, shared vision of organisational identity and direction, as well as shared assessment of strengths and weaknesses. IFRC’s strategic and technical support to MRCS has been effective in this respect, as the 2011-2015 and the 2016-2020 Strategic Plans demonstrate. The latter, in particular, has been led by MRCS with support from the Movement and provides a blueprint to partners on how to support MRCS’ plans.

The review found that the four areas of focus of the plan, namely the legal base, human resources, finances and disaster management, should continue to receive attention to consolidate these investments. To contribute to long-term sustainability of this work, some aspects need further development. They include support to change processes in leadership and governance, and continued support in developing conflict-sensitive tools and skills. This is particularly important given the MRCS governance elections in 2019 and the ongoing decentralisation process.

IFRC support on organisational development continues to be a priority through this period of transition. In developing plans

Externally

Movement coordination in Myanmar is stronger than in many countries, although it is an area which still requires some development. MRCS is active, but its auxiliary role to the public authorities is not well understood by outside actors. It is known to many as a strong first responder in emergencies, but it is also still perceived, by many of the national and international interviewees for this study, as linked in some way to government.

Coordination requires time, resources and energy, but can improve the quality and coherence of the overall response, provide opportunities for MRCS to raise awareness of its activities and identity, and add a unique perspective to the humanitarian landscape. IFRC’s active and continued support to MRCS in its engagement in external coordination meetings helped the National Society to identify opportunities to address reputational and visibility issues as well as position itself in the eyes of external donors.

In Myanmar, although representation might appear weak in formal coordination meetings, this approach demonstrates that internal Movement dialogue remains regular and ongoing.
for decentralisation, IFRC should support MRCS to integrate principles as key guidance for action, including indicators for identifying success and help MRCS to start to move toward a more programme-focused model. In Rakhine, this means reinforcing the design and monitoring of resilience programmes and focusing on outcomes, in addition to outputs and processes.

Human Resources

Volunteers and staff play an equally critical role.

Volunteers are the backbone of MRCS operations. However, for a number of reasons including sectarian tensions, this resource is quite weak in Rakhine state, leading MRCS to rotate volunteers from other parts of the country to respond in rapid onset emergencies and resilience programming. There are benefits to this approach, such as the dissemination of the Fundamental Principles among the pool of volunteers, acquisition of new skills and increased commitment among volunteers. However, the experience gained by those that have deployed in emergencies and then go back to their original homes, is not retained at the branch level that has to deal with the emergency. Moreover, the investment in training the pool of volunteers to work in rapid onset emergencies and resilience programmes is constant.

Humanitarian Diplomacy can also be pursued through public communications though it has been made more challenging by a range of views within the Movement partners about appropriate choices of language and areas of intervention. Polarising public communications can put access to affected communities at risk, either because of government restrictions or lack of acceptance of local communities.

The vast majority of paid staff are project-funded, which can contribute to short-term mind-set, instability and loss of talent once the project runs out of funds and comes to an end. To counter this, the review recommended to provide both volunteers and staff with professional development opportunities, to work on salary rationalisation, and to develop stronger and more diverse volunteer engagement models in Rakhine state that allow people from all backgrounds to work side-by-side and increase opportunities for better community relations.

Communication

Internal and external communication is an area where IFRC has provided considerable support to MRCS -incorporating strategy, planning and delivery.

Yet, documents like the strategic plan, for example, do not refer to a strategy for disseminating information about change, and none of the key informants interviewed for the review talked about how major changes in the organization are conveyed from Yangon to Rakhine State. In light of the decentralisation process, more can be done to support how internal information can be disseminated among staff and volunteers from the leadership level to the local one, particularly focusing on the change in institutional identity and the dissemination of the Fundamental Principles.

Communication with affected communities and public communication could also be improved. It would be more effective to identify the appropriate channels to reach people on the basis of an accurate review of the contexts and the preferred channel of communication utilised by the different communities. Often, for example, in natural disaster-prone regions such as Sittwe, radio is likely to be a particularly useful tool.

Public communication, on the other hand, can be a more challenging issue, as Movement partners need to find a common position and language on sensitive issues. This has been a challenging issue for many organisations.Taking the joint decision to be vocal about abuses of human rights, for example, might come at the cost of losing access to affected communities, and of potential further restrictions from the Government of Myanmar. A decision to remain silent, on the other hand, may pose the risks of real or perceived complicity with such abuses.

The dilemma is real and common to many humanitarian actors. National Societies face this problem in a particular way, as they are auxiliary to their authorities and therefore perceived to be naturally close to their Governments. Creative solutions are debated by various agencies in the humanitarian sector, and include support to local protection initiatives, “reflecting more broadly on how local knowledge on access can be better harnessed to serve those in need” or “sharing these experiences [to] help improve outcomes”. In Myanmar, a start in this direction could be acknowledging and addressing the issue by putting in place a clear process for articulating and developing the position of the Movement on specific issues, and identify, for example, a shared language for public communication on politically sensitive terms.

Linked to communication, although pursued mostly through private dialogue, is humanitarian diplomacy. IFRC defines it as the act of: “persuading decision makers and opinion leaders to act, at all times, in the interests of vulnerable people, and with full respect for fundamental humanitarian principles”. Humanitarian diplomacy is identified as an area of focus in the MRCS three-year plan, which is an example of best practice. However, there are no clear objectives linked to this activity and therefore what the strategic approach with the Government of Myanmar, as well as with other relevant Governments, including donor Governments, could be. This aspect needs to be further supported and developed into a plan with specific, measurable objectives, particularly with the aim of improving the situation in Rakhine state and mobilise support from decision makers and opinion leaders to the National Society and the Movement to work towards this aim.
Funding

The “boom and bust” phenomenon is common to many countries affected by disasters or other cyclical crises. Overwhelming funds arrive at moments of crisis and then dry out when things calm down.

Evidence from past crises suggests that the provision of crisis specific and project-focused support has often left the National Society weaker, as it has often focused on short timeframes and the implementation of time-bound activities without sufficient consideration for its ongoing and long-term activities.

To address these issues, IFRC has supported MRCS to diversify its funding mechanisms and financial sustainability. As a result of this support, MRCS introduced a new policy which systematically includes a 7% core cost to all projects to help with cost recovery.

IFRC also supported MRCS in developing the emergency management fund to help remedy this situation, by prepositioning disaster preparedness stock, and by developing diversified funding sources to ensure financial sustainability. This type of support is included in IFRC Myanmar Operational Plan 2018 and in the Rakhine community resilience programme 2018-2019.

The consequences of the “boom and bust” phenomenon include that:

a. The organisation’s funding is mobilised by projects with little to support organisational overheads and organisational development (often draining resources from the organisation’s main base)

b. Small emergencies that do not receive sufficient funding become chronic as they remain regular and ongoing

Programming

Programme design and intervention models are very different in central and northern Rakhine states. In the central areas, programmes are more developmental in focus and delivery method, while in northern areas they are more akin to emergency responses.

Particularly in central Rakhine State, the sustained support from IFRC has increased consistency with IFRC policy, practice and a principled approach, by encouraging a phased shift to resilience-based programme design and by laying the groundwork for more effective programming and impartial assessment of needs. While some adjustments are needed to avoid unnecessary complexities and inefficiencies, on the whole, the design of resilience programming has been found to be effective and appropriate.

In complex crises, it is sensible to help local institutions to become stronger and more able to absorb shocks and therefore to become resilient. National Societies, by being a part of their communities, are instrumental and strategically important to this purpose. For this reason, they are by default the ideal agencies to work within the framework of the humanitarian-development nexus. Improving the resilience of National Societies, and thus the resilience of the communities they are a part of, means “strengthening the capacity of the local communities to identify and deal with risks, vulnerabilities and their underlying causes”.

Some cross-cutting issues need to be more systematically addressed, including reviving efforts around Community Engagement and Accountability and ensuring that protection, gender and inclusion are integrated or mainstreamed into programming. Attention has been given to these issues at higher levels, including reflection, policy and training, and some progress is already visible (MRCS has appointed a gender focal point to ensure commitments are taken seriously). However, it has not necessarily filtered down to the field level. The model that is being used by IFRC to provide both formal training and accompaniment/mentoring is an effective way to transmit learning and improve programming, but gains are being lost due to lack of consistency in staff and volunteers. It is therefore critical that support in these areas is maintained through long-term, sustained, and predictable funding.

Principles

Humanitarian principles are central to all Movement components, but their application can prove particularly challenging for National Societies, due to having to balance their independence with their role as auxiliary to their government. Myanmar is a complex environment to deliver principled humanitarian action, where the actual application of the principles can be as challenging as the perception of being a principled actor.

Humanity is the fundamental principle for humanitarian action, it is the core of the values of the Movement and is immutable. The principle of humanity can be prioritised over other principles, if this means delivering assistance where others can’t. The research team that carried out the original
study found large evidence that, despite the pressure MRCS staff may come under, it persists in providing assistance to whoever is in need and was positively impressed by MRCS commitment to the principle of humanity. In Myanmar this means, for example, including Muslims among the population receiving assistance and finding ways to reinforce mutual understanding and acceptance in the community between religious groups.

Impartiality is the second immutable principle, viewed as a goal of humanitarian action and not as a tool to deliver it, like neutrality and independence. Impartiality is, however, very challenging in its implementation. An important consideration is that while a balanced approach may promote even-handedness, it does not in itself ensure that assistance prioritizes the most vulnerable. While not straightforward, the dilemma would be best addressed by supporting MRCS in acknowledging the complexities of the context and finding appropriate solutions when compromises seem unavoidable, including during planning and programme design process.

Neutrality is a principle that may be easy to explain as “not taking sides”, but complicated to apply. Being politically correct often gives an appearance of being neutral, while it can in fact be a political expedient. Avoiding a term provides a false sense of neutrality. There are no predetermined solutions and none offered here, but discussions with Movement partners on the challenges around the application of principles would provide opportunities to identify solutions and alternatives to the status quo.

However, it is important to see neutrality constantly through a humanitarian lens; in other words, as the means by which important humanitarian outcomes can be achieved. One needs to be very careful not to engage in diplomacy that results in the Movement finding itself no longer welcome in an area where it is needed. These are difficult choices.

Independence poses its challenges, too. Having formalised its independence only recently (2015), MRCS is still often perceived as very close to the Government. However, despite being requested by the Government to provide assistance in areas where other humanitarian agencies were not allowed to operate, international organisations’ perception of its independence remained positive. A key attribution factor for its real and perceived independence appeared to be the Movement approach adopted for Northern areas of Rakhine, which provided a shared identity for all Movement components. Independence can be a long journey, though. Being allowed to travel to certain communities does not spare MRCS the obligation to request travel authorisations, for example. There might be constraints in sharing information about what MRCS see in areas where others are not allowed to work, as well, which is a tremendous moral and political challenge for MRCS.

These instances can become real threats to the humanitarian principles, and compromises may sometimes be made - but many of these are, for the most part, unavoidable. While there may have been situations requiring balancing of the application of the other humanitarian principles, the principle of humanity has always been prioritised.

Creating a forum for internal debate and discussion on sensitive issues will enable open dialogue and opportunities to brainstorm about solutions. IFRC could support MRCS to integrate principles as key guidance for action, including indicators for identifying their successful application, particularly in developing plans for decentralization.

The principle of voluntary service is vital in Myanmar, particularly for branches, which are heavily reliant on volunteers. In Rakhine State deployed volunteers have created an impressive record, with continuous support over a six-year period. This shows good solidarity and reinforcement of the principles, but could be advanced even further with a more diverse base of volunteers. Greater efforts should be made to bring Muslims in as Red Cross volunteers.

Unity and Universality: In some respects the principles of unity and universality are more prominent in Myanmar than in most countries, due to the Movement and the One Movement Appeal. All the Movement partners interviewed agreed that the partnership has had a huge benefit in increasing mutual understanding. Tripartite meetings and other mechanisms were established to ensure good communication. Given that each partner – including other National Societies – brings its priorities and perspectives, overwhelming MRCS with competing demands would be a significant risk. There is a lot of work to do in Myanmar, and MRCS’ capacity is not unlimited. The review team recognised that IFRC’s efforts to manage these demands have been important and, for the most part, appreciated. By insisting partners provide support through multilateral and agreed channels, IFRC has been able to ensure greater coherence.

Principles in a context like Rakhine can change substantially; the number of lives the Movement is able to save, if applied appropriately, so these issues are absolutely critical and contribute to the very credibility of the Movement as a humanitarian agency. MRCS and Movement partners would benefit from more open acknowledgement of compromises and challenges. A systematic support to MRCS to enhance its ability to navigate a deeply complex environment, face the pressures and find creative ways to remain principled is vital. The IFRC and other Movement partners can help identifying opportunities to sustain a principled approach, internally within the National Society, and externally with communities, the Government and with the international donor community as well.

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"Humanity is the fundamental principle for humanitarian action, it is the core of the values of the Movement and is immutable."
Recommendations

The review offers a set of recommendations, all based on the assessment that the ability of a National Society to become a relevant and effective national and local actor, delivering a principled response in a complex crisis, needs to be combined with appropriate approaches to capacity strengthening at local and national levels.

The recommendations are matched by enabling actions. The areas they cover are summarised below, including only some of the suggested enabling actions.

1. IFRC support to MRCS

The MRCS has been a vital and integral part of the culture of the nation as it evolved from colony to sovereign state, and from military rule to democracy. It continues to both shape and be shaped by the society it is rooted in. The study found that it was a robust and impressive institution, with considerable commitment to organisational development and change. In this it has a solid support base from all its Movement partners, particularly the direct support and coordination role played by the IFRC.

There have been important shifts in the extent to which Movement partners work together in Myanmar in the past two years, particularly with the inception of the Movement approach in northern Rakhine State. IFRC has played an important convening role and has helped MRCS maximise the benefit of this, including by channelling unrestricted funding to badly needed infrastructure repair.

IFRC has helped manage demands on MRCS during this process and ensured greater coherence, by insisting on all Movement partners taking a joint approach to their work. Maintaining this support is vital for enabling MRCS to be increasingly empowered in leading the humanitarian response and reinforce its credibility as a principled humanitarian agency.

2. Organisational development

IFRC has made several contributions in providing long-term support to organisational development processes. Better continuity could be achieved, however, with more consistent support. The recommendations offered in the study included a commitment to providing an organisational development delegate for at least the next few years.

At the same time, IFRC should begin to slowly shift its focus from organisational development to programme quality, coherence and impact. This transition could be included in the next strategic planning process and into a long-term change management strategy and plan.

3. Programming, technical focus and quality

IFRC has also made important contributions to helping MRCS shift to more holistic programming in central areas of Rakhine State. Technical support through international and regional guidelines and processes as well as accompaniment on the ground have helped move from a series of stand-alone, sector-specific interventions to a resilience approach. This is contextually appropriate and fits with the wider priorities and policy framework of the humanitarian community in Myanmar and of the Federation globally.

The development of the current programmes has resulted in some inefficiencies and missed opportunities, however, and increased support from IFRC in rationalising these would go a long way toward consolidating benefits and eliminating duplication. This might also help address some of the deficiencies in quality that were identified in the study, while helping MRCS complete the roll out of the Planning, Monitoring, Evaluation and Reporting (PMER) framework, to help with monitoring and follow up. It will be important to ensure, in this process, that protection, gender and inclusion are systematically mainstreamed through programmes.

4. Principles and visibility

In addition to benefitting from physical and financial resources, MRCS has had the opportunity to learn a great deal in this latest phase of its work in Rakhine State. Importantly, this has included the application of principles in violence-affected areas, and of skills related to negotiating access and gaining acceptance from local communities. Collaboration with Movement partners in northern Rakhine State has been particularly useful in this regard, as the complexity of that environment has been a particular challenge, but work in central Rakhine State also poses real ethical and principled dilemmas. IFRC and Movement partners have provided important support through working together on-the-ground, but also by supporting tripartite talks and reflection on particularly challenging issues like the risk of forced repatriation and relocation. Additional
scenario-based planning with MRCS leadership would help further reinforce institutional learning and change. Embedding learning about principles and their application by MRCS would also be furthered by the development of internal and external communications strategies on some of these key issues, helping raise awareness of the principles, and particularly the relatively recent independence of MRCS from government. Importantly, IFRC can also help MRCS reflect on how to maintain better continuity of staff in affected areas, as learning that is being transferred is now often being lost due to constant rotation.

The follow up on the recommendations requires a holistic approach to organisational development that is systematically integrated into programming and activities and leverages on the comparative advantages of the national and international Movement components.

The review articulates the recommendations in detail and in each of the focus area listed above. This paper does not go into such detail, but it is worth noting here that the 2019 elections are viewed by the research team to be an opportunity to invest more and better in managing the changes and the decentralisation process. Moreover, while developing plans for decentralization, IFRC could support MRCS to integrate humanitarian principles as key guidance for action, including indicators for identifying success. At the same time, specific activities could be included in the strategic planning (i.e. IFRC support to new members’ orientation on the priorities identified for 2020, the development of a new strategic plan, continue to support trainings, peer to peer support for leadership at headquarter and branch level) in order to help leadership and governance, particularly in decentralised posts, to work towards the delivery of principled responses.
The Movement response in Rakhine has given MRCS a valuable opportunity to gain experience and exposure in navigating a complex context of an acute protracted crises resulting from internal violence and displacement. Some key overarching themes emerge from this review, which can be leveraged to form the basis for an influencing strategy about how the “the Movement provides a noteworthy model of a global humanitarian network that connects local, national and international levels in a complementary manner”. It is precisely this model that enables Movement national and local components to operate in some of the most complex environments amidst the inevitable tensions between their auxiliary role and adherence to humanitarian principles.

The essential element of this model of complementarity is the centrality of organisational development. The IFRC role in supporting National Societies, such as the MRCS, is seen as critical for the success of this approach. Such an approach to provide consolidated approach to the National Society can also be seen as an application of the principle of unity, particularly prominent in Myanmar due to the Movement approach and the One Movement Appeal.

In Myanmar, IFRC is providing substantial support at multiple levels to MRCS and Movement partners more widely. This includes a good balance of supporting MRCS’ capacity to deliver rapid emergency interventions and to continue its growth and development in terms of management and governance. Equally important is how support from the international components of the Movement, namely IFRC, ICRC (and also, to various degrees, partnering National Societies) contribute to develop the “soft skills” necessary to build a strong local structure that is auxiliary to the government while also able to remain principled. This balance is critical for National Societies, and often challenging. The politics of the country where National Societies operate will inevitably affect how agencies operate in that environment, particularly national ones, and potentially put them under pressure to perform in certain ways or support certain groups, or accept compromises and limitations in the application of their guiding principles, for the sake of preserving access to those in need.

While there might be compromises in the application of humanitarian principles, in specific contexts it may be challenging to avoid them completely. In Myanmar and specifically in Rakhine state, the very principle of humanity, however, was not compromised. Humanity is the motivating principle of the Movement, a call to action, from which the other principles derive and are not subordinate. Said differently, the other principles describe the way in which the Movement goes about giving effect to the principle of humanity. Strong and confident National Societies will be able to acknowledge situations where trade-offs may be necessary, have in place processes to mitigate them, and identify solutions to address them.

Thus, organisational development efforts should focus on supporting principled approaches as this is where some among the most difficult questions and dilemmas might arise. Such support cannot be injected during isolated times of crisis, but needs to be sustained in the long term to ensure that National Societies are not caught unprepared when an operating environment becomes highly politicised. The ability to do so is strengthened by strategic long-term investment in creating a space for Movement agencies to have dialogue on the application of the humanitarian principles in that specific context and through the implemented programmes, for example, such as in the tripartite meetings Movement partners hold in Myanmar. Additionally, the ability to deliver a principled response can be reached by fostering a favourable external environment, through humanitarian diplomacy and ongoing internal multilateral coordination – a role that international components of the Movement can support.

The unpredictability of funding is a key constraint towards a type of organisational development that goes beyond programme activities but builds structures that address the ‘long game’ and appropriate to a protracted crisis context. While support from Movement partners is essential in sustaining operational capacity in times of crisis, consistent and flexible funding best supports National Societies to invest strategically in their own long-term organisational development. It is therefore key that funding is not only available and sufficient, but also accountable, transparent and multi-year, if the aim is to have an effective, principled, and reliable local and national humanitarian actor.

The auxiliary role of a National Societies means a continuous
presence, before, during and after a crisis, making it the ideal actor to work within the humanitarian-development nexus approach. While this discussion has gained traction in recent years and in reality development and humanitarian assistance increasingly operate concurrently, the auxiliary role does not automatically guarantee that the National Society will be able to support the humanitarian and development goals of the public authorities at all levels. The National Societies’ remit as auxiliaries to their authorities is to position themselves primarily as humanitarian organisations, driven by humanitarian principles. Sustained engagement from the international components of the Movement is critical to this effect and can help National Societies operate within the nexus in a principled manner. This, however, requires substantial coordination and does not happen overnight.

A National Society will rely on its volunteers, embedded in the community, to understand needs and reach the most vulnerable. It will be able to engage in dialogue with state and non-state actors to negotiate access mainly because of its modus operandi, not just because of its special mandate as auxiliary. To be able to operate in such a way both at national and local level, the international components of the Movement (ICRC, IFRC and other participating National Societies) will have to put efforts and investment throughout time. They will have to work to strengthen cooperation and coordination, and enact an approach of complementarity in order to ensure that a National Society is empowered to take the lead on principled decisions.

“Importantly, although it is clear that no one has all the answers, the Movement is reflecting together on the most complex issues and challenging one another to deliver better, more principled programming. This report focuses a great deal on processes and systems, but it should be remembered that these exist solely to serve one goal: to protect life and health and ensure respect for every human being”

– Myanmar Reflection Study
References

The Fundamental Principles of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement

**Humanity** The International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, born of a desire to bring assistance without discrimination to the wounded on the battlefield, endeavours, in its international and national capacity, to prevent and alleviate human suffering wherever it may be found. Its purpose is to protect life and health and to ensure respect for the human being. It promotes mutual understanding, friendship, cooperation and lasting peace amongst all peoples.

**Impartiality** It makes no discrimination as to nationality, race, religious beliefs, class or political opinions. It endeavours to relieve the suffering of individuals, being guided solely by their needs, and to give priority to the most urgent cases of distress.

**Neutrality** In order to enjoy the confidence of all, the Movement may not take sides in hostilities or engage at any time in controversies of a political, racial, religious or ideological nature.

**Independence** The Movement is independent. The National Societies, while auxiliaries in the humanitarian services of their governments and subject to the laws of their respective countries, must always maintain their autonomy so that they may be able at all times to act in accordance with the principles of the Movement.

**Voluntary** service It is a voluntary relief movement not prompted in any manner by desire for gain.

**Unity** There can be only one Red Cross or Red Crescent Society in any one country. It must be open to all. It must carry on its humanitarian work throughout its territory.

**Universality** The International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, in which all societies have equal status and share equal responsibilities and duties in helping each other, is worldwide.
Where we are:
British Red Cross
44 Moorfields
London
EC2Y 9AL

redcross.org.uk
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