



ICRC

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International Committee of the Red Cross

Assistance: general introduction

Extract from ICRC special report: assistance

Protection and Assistance - the ICRC's unique position

The ICRC's mission is to attempt to ensure at all times the protection and assistance of civilian and military victims of armed conflict and internal violence.

The ICRC acts on the basis of a specific mandate conferred upon it by the States party to the Geneva Conventions and its Additional Protocols. The mandate outlines the two main axes of any ICRC action: protection and assistance of victims of armed conflict and internal violence so as to preserve their physical integrity and their dignity, and to enable them to regain their autonomy as quickly as possible. Often complementary and mutually essential, both are based on the fundamental Red Cross/Red Crescent principles, such as neutrality, impartiality and independence, respect for which gives the ICRC its unique character, and without which it would be impossible to work.



The term "protection" encompasses any ICRC activity aiming to protect people caught up in an armed conflict from the dangers, abuses and suffering to which they are exposed in order to preserve their rights, offer support and ensure that they are heard. The first line of protection remains the law, which is why the ICRC sets great store by increasingly comprehensive rules capable of assuring the protection of victims of war and makes representations to the relevant authorities involved in a conflict aiming at preventing or ending violations of humanitarian law.

The primary aim of ICRC assistance operations is to protect the victims' lives and health, to ease their plight and to ensure that the consequences of conflict - disease, injury, hunger, displacement or exposure to the elements - do not jeopardize their future. ICRC action very often necessitates a multifaceted strategy to respond to the many varying needs which arise and which differ according to the particular region or crisis.

In an armed conflict, it is not the provision of assistance as such which gives the ICRC its unique character, but rather the combination of assistance and protection forming two sides of the same coin. When the services of a neutral intermediary are necessary in times of war, protection is a prerequisite for the success of any assistance operation and vice versa. If the efforts of the ICRC or other institutions succeed in protecting a camp for

displaced people from enemy attacks, but the displaced people then die from an epidemic, the protection has no meaning. Conversely, what good would it do to set up medical facilities in a camp which is constantly under attack. In wartime, assistance itself often falls victim to the atmosphere



Ref. SD-D-00081-10

of hostility and mistrust. It must therefore be protected, and a right of passage and distribution must be agreed upon between the parties to the conflict.

In certain conflicts, unlawful tactics may be used by either side, such as blockades, cuts to the water system, and the deliberate destruction of crops or essential infrastructure, which can seriously affect the civilian population. Before providing assistance, the ICRC here attempts to gain acceptance of responsibility from the parties concerned to prevent or end violations of international humanitarian law.

The ICRC's approach to assistance

Modern-day complex humanitarian emergencies, with outbreaks of extreme violence - organized and occasionally politically-motivated - often go hand-in-hand with other tragedies, such as famines, epidemics, economic crises and political instability. The combined effects prolong victims' insecurity to a point which is at times difficult to bear and hamper efforts by humanitarian organizations trying to minimize the harmful consequences.



Ref. YU-D-00044-05

The wide range of different contexts (i.e., geographic, ethnic, political, economic etc.) which provide the setting for such crises, translate into extremely varied needs and the humanitarian responses must therefore be suitably adapted and diversified. From a strategic or human resources point of view, a sophisticated and specialized approach is imperative, making increasing use of highly skilled staff from different working backgrounds. Moreover, short-term emergencies can extend for years, humanitarian needs may change over time and lessons may be learnt from past actions or operations. It must also be remembered that the interests of the donor community and the media are not always the same as those of the victims.

ICRC assistance for victims of armed conflict and internal violence seeks to preserve or restore living conditions with a view to reducing dependence on outside aid and enabling victims to maintain an adequate standard of living. It may include food and/or medicine, but usually builds in the capacity to deliver essential services, such as the construction or repair of water supply systems or medical facilities, the training of primary health care staff, surgeons or orthopaedic technicians, etc.

Assistance activities are also intended to reduce the risk of morbidity and mortality among victims of armed conflict and internal violence as rapidly and effectively as possible. After an impartial field assessment, priorities for intervention are set according to the "Assistance Pyramid" concept, illustrated below.



The "Assistance Pyramid" establishes that preference should be given to the foundations. Access to water, food and other essential goods for survival become the main priorities, ahead of hygiene and access to medical care. Obviously, such an approach should always be mindful of local cultures and customs.



Ref. HK-D-00076-14

Over the years, there has been increasing acceptance of the interrelation between emergency and development activities, leading to a broader approach towards humanitarian assistance. This can be seen across the range of ICRC activities. Rehabilitation has become an integral part, and along with it, the growing recognition that a well-planned withdrawal from an operation is as important as its rapid launch. It takes as a premise the realization that one of the prerequisites for victims' success in rebuilding their lives and recovering their dignity is their ability to be as self-sufficient as possible. ICRC assistance programmes have thus been extended to cover a broader range of activities, including for example, the distribution of seeds, agricultural tools, and fishing tackle, or the provision of veterinary medicine.

This integrated approach presents a victim-oriented response, based on joint analysis by experts from a wide range of backgrounds. Together, they identify the priorities for intervention in order to provide the most appropriate response to the different humanitarian needs in a given context.

To facilitate co-ordination of its assistance activities, the ICRC has recently adapted its internal organizational set-up to the realities in the field. The former Health and Relief Divisions have been reorganized and a new structure has been created; the Health and Relief Division (OP/SANSEC) is responsible for assistance and the Logistics Division (OP/LOG) is in charge of logistical matters.

The new Health and Relief Division is divided into three Units: Economic Security, Water and Habitat, and Health Services. Each staffed by people with the necessary professional expertise and skills, they serve as focal points, giving support to the delegations in the field. This new structure has been designed to promote synergy among the complementary services, refocusing efforts on the victims and helping to develop a more coherent institutional public health policy, a better definition of responsibilities and greater efficiency.

Operational challenges

When devising and carrying out assistance programmes for conflict victims, humanitarian

organizations almost systematically come up against numerous different constraints, several of which are detailed below.

Security environment

By definition a conflict is a dangerous context where the ability to guarantee the security of both victims and humanitarian players is limited. Questions such as access to victims, the success of an assistance programme and appropriate logistical pipelines are all too often dependent on the evolution of the conflict. A programme may therefore be scaled down or even stopped for reasons which have nothing to do with the needs of the victims. Also, volatile security conditions may result in huge variations between the initial assessment and planning of a project, and the actual realisation.



Ref. AF-D-00059-19

Political environment

Any assistance programme takes place against a political backdrop and people may wish to bring political pressure to bear on, or even profit from an assistance operation. Humanitarian organizations should therefore aim to maintain constant dialogue with the different parties to the conflict to explain the reason for a particular action and to prevent outside political manipulation or even the misappropriation of part or all of the relief supplies.

Exit strategies

How do you prevent a system from collapsing when aid agencies withdraw from a context? One of the rationale behind an emergency operation is that it involves a humanitarian organization acting as a replacement for local structures so as to ameliorate the problems which have been identified. This often entails carrying out programmes which are difficult to manage (i.e. maintenance of an urban water system, distributions to several thousand people, hospital management etc.), which local structures were already unable to cope with on their own before the conflict. In order to prevent major external assistance to a system further weakened by conflict from suddenly coming to an end when the political situation improves, it is essential that hand-over and withdrawal strategies are part of assistance plans from the very start. Current debate on post-conflict and emergency-rehabilitation-development issues focuses on these very points.

Professionalism

Humanitarian work and assistance programmes of all kinds require the services of large numbers of skilled people from different backgrounds with the necessary professional expertise and individual abilities to draw up and implement increasingly sophisticated projects. As a result, it is vital to be able to call upon a permanent pool of experienced and motivated specialists of all disciplines. Proper staff recruitment and training are therefore closely linked to the success of any operation.



Ref. YE-D-00047

Logistics

Any assistance plans are destined to fail unless a proper logistical setup is in place to supply the amounts of material required in the appropriate time frame. Meteorological, geographic, security and procedural factors can present major challenges in this respect.

Worldwide logistics

In order to carry out its operations, the ICRC has at its disposal throughout the world 3,000 trucks and other vehicles and 950 warehouses. In addition, 15 planes and between two and five ships are operational at any one time. The value of ICRC field and emergency stocks on average amounts to 60 million Swiss francs, and its yearly purchases are worth some 250 million Swiss francs.

The Logistics Division was created as a unit distinct from the Health and Relief Division in December 1998; in 1999 the number of expatriate logisticians in the field increased from 40 to 140, backed up by approximately 2,000 local staff (purchasers, fleet managers, medical logisticians and warehouse managers). About 50% of the effective field logistics is stocked by the National Societies. Two ICRC logistics centres are operational worldwide, one in Nairobi (specializing in relief, with an emergency food and non-food stock sufficient to cover 100,000 people for three months), and one in Geneva (specializing in medical and water and sanitation equipment). Between them, in 1999 they enabled the ICRC to respond rapidly to the crises in the Balkans (dispatching 25,000 tonnes of aid per month), East Timor and Angola.

The principal difficulty the Division is currently encountering is the development and deployment of the information technology essential to the management of logistics and related reporting. Another challenge facing the Division is the better control of costs in the operational zones, where conditions are highly changeable. For example, the number of vehicles in its fleet needs to be recalculated both during and after a major crisis, or, in difficult security contexts, supplies need to be delivered rapidly in order to reduce the reserves kept in the field, lest they pass their expiry date or are looted.

Humanitarian coordination

Whereas this may seem self-evident to the international community and donors, given the nature of humanitarian catastrophes and the huge numbers of organizations keen to develop programmes, perfect humanitarian coordination is not always possible. The intention here is not to analyze the reasons why, but rather to stress the importance the ICRC, its partners in the Movement and other humanitarian players place on ensuring that programmes are not developed or planned which duplicate existing programmes. Essentially this entails avoiding targeting the same beneficiaries several times over. Over the last few years, efforts to create a standardized approach and a code of conduct for humanitarian work have been stepped up. To this end, the ICRC is one of the initial parties behind the "Code of Conduct for the International Movement of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies and NGOs during relief operations in disaster situations". The organization also supports the basic technical standards developed as part of the "SPHERE" project, which seeks to develop a set of universal minimum standards for all kinds of assistance operations.

Working in harmony with partners



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An increasing number of operations are conducted within the framework of the Movement, such as in the Balkans, and more National Societies are contributing to ICRC activities, especially in the form of delegated projects. To lead such joint operations effectively requires the harmonization of logistical procedures and the standardization of equipment. It still often happens that the telephone and radio systems of different partners are not compatible with the ICRC's, that the goods distributed to the same beneficiaries are of varying quality, and that there are disparities in reporting formulas, making it impossible to collate consolidated statistics. Similarly, the ICRC needs to ensure that its activities carried out in conjunction with the

World Food Programme are
complementary, in order to avoid
duplication or shortages.

