

An Ambitious Project to Address a Major Humanitarian Problem



From left to right: Hang Vo, Tracing Service of the Australian Red Cross; John Pinney, Vice-President, Australian Red Cross; Fatima Gailani, President, Afghan Red Crescent Society.

Whenever people need to restore family links, the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement responds quickly and efficiently.

The vision statement of the draft Movement Strategy on Restoring Family Links (RFL) provided the underlying theme for the working group debates on the second day of the Bangkok conference. The working groups are at the heart of the consultation process on the draft Strategy. They give National Societies the opportunity to make comments on the text, raise issues they feel have not been sufficiently tackled and include the specific regional perspective of Asia and the Middle East.

Participants raised several questions related to the vision statement: apart from armed conflict and natural disasters, in what other types of situations is the Movement planning to provide RFL services? What is the responsibility of individual Movement components when it comes to translating the vision into reality? There was some concern that the vision might be too ambitious.

Was the Movement at risk of biting off more than it can chew? Dev Ratna, Secretary-General of the Nepal Red Cross injected a note of caution, warning that to assume overall responsibility for restoring family links, as suggested by the vision statement, might be too big a task for the Movement.

Progressing at different speeds

Others drew attention to the multitude of situations in which RFL needs occur. The question of migrants was raised. Temanuri Tiree of the Kiribati Red Cross explained that recently a young Kiribati woman had been handed a five-year prison sentence on the other side of the world, in Bermuda. What, Ms Tiree, asked, can the Movement do to help this woman who is without any contact with her families. She also reminded participants that the staff and resources of small National Societies such as the Kiribati Red Cross are limited.

There was agreement that for the Movement to translate this ambitious vision into practice, the particular circumstances of each country needed to be taken into account. As Yiyi Gong of the Chinese Red Cross pointed out, different National Societies would likely progress at different speeds depending on the realities they faced.

The Working Groups discussed the following Strategic Objectives

- Improving capacity and performance in restoring family links
- Enhancing coordination mechanism and the effectiveness of Movement cooperation
- Strengthening the responsibility of the Movement in restoring family links

This point was also picked up by Marco Kirschbaum of the ICRC Protection Department in Geneva who stressed that National Society RFL programmes should be developed to respond to existing needs rather than to prepare for every eventuality that could arise.

Who's owns' RFL activities

The question of ownership of RFL programmes came up repeatedly during the working group debates. On the opening day of the conference, John Pinney of the Australian Red Cross had described RFL as part of the "core business" of every National Society. However, Dr Jayalakshmi Tarakad Subramanian of the Indian Red Cross cautioned that the mapping of RFL capacities in the Movement had clearly shown that much remains to be done in this respect. Participants in the working group on the third strategic objective agreed that RFL activities ought to have a solid base in the statutes and development plans of National Societies. To enhance ownership also means making RFL activities better known and accepted internally, among governance, staff and volunteers.



From left to right: Bruce McRae, ICRC Kabul; Dr Ejje Fahed, Secretary-General, Jordan Red Crescent; Yong-Hoon Rheem, Director, Korea Red Cross.

Capacity-building and training

Across the board, participants emphasized the challenges of building more capacity inside National Societies. The need for training and resources was emphasized. Haider al-Etawi of the Iraqi Red Crescent explained that in his experience

cooperation with the ICRC was of key importance in this respect. Other participants suggested that the Federation could play a more active role, while Ahmad Rayan Barayan of the Saudi Arabia Red Crescent said that National Societies themselves could do more to exchange experiences and expertise. One idea on the table would be to set up regional RFL centres that could support a number of National Societies.

Spreading the word

There was agreement among participants on the need to communicate effectively the Movement's role and aspirations to outside stakeholders including governments, other humanitarian organizations and, above all, people looking to locate or restore contacts with family members. This matters because other actors are increasingly active in this field but also because, as Fatima Gailani of the Afghan Red Crescent explained, RFL activities are a powerful tool when it comes to enhancing the image and acceptance of a National Society.

Corazon Alma de Leon of the Philippines Red Cross was one of several participants stressing the importance of raising awareness of RFL services through the media. She added that her National Society had its own radio programme that could be used to this end. Fawzi Oussedik of the Qatar Red Crescent drew attention to the potential of new communications technologies when it comes to ensuring that the Movement's objectives and programmes are known by the public.

Looking ahead

Not surprisingly, most participants were already trying to envisage how they could translate the elements of the draft Strategy into practical steps and activities. While the working groups clearly indicated that there was strong overall support for the Strategy several participants were at pains to underline the importance of concrete measures to implement it. Taking note of the exhaustive list of actions contained in the Strategy, several speakers mentioned the need to establish an order of priorities and timetables for individual components of the Movement.