

## ICRC Restoring Family Links Conference, Kyiv 2006

On the second day of the RFL regional conference in Kyiv, delegates convened in three different working groups led by a chair and a rapporteur. Each of the working groups was assigned one strategic objective to examine. The three groups actively engaged in debating the overarching RFL vision and one of the strategic objectives meant to implement it.

### **Strategic Objectives:**

- 1-Improving capacity and performance in restoring family links of the national society
- 2-Enhancing coordination mechanisms and the effectiveness of Movement cooperation
- 3-Strengthening responsibility of the Movement in Restoring Family Links

At the end of each session, each working group spelled out recommendations in view of feeding the draft ten-year RFL strategy (2008-2018).

### **"Let the vision be ambitious"**

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

All conference delegates agreed with the rationale behind the vision and said it was in accordance with their mandate. The vision was adopted by consensus. However, several

delegates voiced the need to nuance it, especially in Working Group 1.

Among the suggestions made, Neville Jefferies, Head of Refugee and International Tracing and Message Service from the British Red Cross; and resource person in Working Group 1 said that

*"On the one hand, the vision is quite challenging operationally but on the other, it comes across as rather poor in terms of communication".*

Therefore, the trick would be to work on a vision that is operationally achievable but that strongly resonates with people at the same time. It would be therefore necessary to inject in it some feeling, "passion" and humanity.

Sir Nicholas Young, chief executive of the British Red Cross and Chair of Working Group 1 forcefully underlined the importance of expressing the scale of the issue at hand. According to him, the vision does not strongly portray to someone outside the Movement what we are really talking about. "It does not give any feeling of how serious the problem is, there is no sense of scale and of how many persons are in need of RFL services, and how many have been separated from their loved ones...are we talking of tens of thousands or millions?"

He proposed the following illustrative statement to back the Movement's vision: "Across the world, millions of families suffer the pain and anguish of separation because of conflict, migrations and natural disasters..." Indeed, such statements would undeniably give a sense as to the scale of RFL needs and the importance of the issue



*Sir Nicholas Young, Chief Executive of the British Red Cross.*

within the Movement and outside it.

Isabelle Van Bunnem from the Belgian Red Cross argued that apart from the word “whenever”, we should include in the vision statement the words “wherever” and “whomever”. Clearly, this would broaden the scope of our RFL activities and mandate as impartial and universal.

Many amongst the conference delegates emphasized the importance of keeping the vision “short and simple”, accessible and understandable by all.

**Need for RFL rapid response mechanisms**

The Italian Red Cross representative, Ms Anna Rita Roccaldo, stressed the fact that one of the weaknesses of our RFL humanitarian response is often slow. To respond quickly to RFL needs would be an important achievement, “let us focus on quick response mechanisms,” she added.

The Bulgarian representative, Ms Sofia Stoimenova argued that even the media have started reconnecting separated families and have invested in this respect.

Often the argument of the media is that the Movement traces people in times of conflict and natural disasters but that the media should take upon itself the task of tracing people in times of peace. This is problematic, as in times of peace, it is the role of



*Rafaello Muller, ICRC Tashkent and Madame Roza Shayahmetova, Secretary General, Red Crescent Society of Kyrgyzstan.*

the National Society to trace missing persons and re-establish family links.

Others argued that the question at hand really is whether the Movement is trying to bring back together every family that was separated from its loved ones or if the Movement should limit itself to the most vulnerable people, whether in conflict or natural disaster situations.

Bernard Betrancourt, ICRC Georgia, pointed his finger to the problem of implementation of the vision. His experience has demonstrated that technology advances would definitely help in our implementation processes.

**RFL regional challenges: Europe and the Caucasus**

From the discussions in the three working groups, it appeared that a very important RFL caseload is linked to the Second World War, especially for Russia and Ukraine. Several RFL activities are essentially related to migration issues. For the German and Moldovan National Societies, the main RFL caseload is linked to migrants. Bringing back together families separated by migration is a very important part of their task.

**Additional resources needed**

Valdis Nagobads from the Latvian Red Cross mentioned the scarcity of volunteers on the ground. His national society is in dire need of more volunteers, it currently operates with only one staff. “The Latvian Red Cross needs more capacity to do the RFL job”...

**The RFL Network is not only a fire brigade...**

As Asa Molde board member of the Swedish Red Cross and rapporteur in one of the working groups put it: the RFL network is not only a fire brigade operating in emergencies



*Bernard Betrancourt, ICRC Georgia; Sofia Stoimenova, Bulgarian Red Cross; and Elkhon Rachimov, Azerbaidjan Red Crescent.*





*Neville Jefferies, British Red Cross and Emmanuel Rousseau, French Red Cross.*

but also a long term commitment and an ongoing task. Our role is not only the “here and now”; we should not forget that our strength lies in our sustainability. Sustainability is what differentiates the Movement from all others actors.

Some leading global corporation started an online website to trace people during the Tsunami & Katrina natural disasters. They do it only when cameras are on, i.e., the first days of the tragedy. As soon as cameras are off, everyone loses interest but the Movement pursues its tedious work to re-establish family links....

Jefferies reinforces this argument stating: “We would not let go, we would persist and persist and persist... this is an important element of the Red Cross/Red Crescent RFL response... ten, twenty, sixty years later we would still be working on a case, determined to resolve it”.

## Coordination, cooperation & fundraising

**A vision is an attempt to describe what we want the world to look like.**

**We at the Red Cross/Red Crescent, want to see a world where families are reunited as quickly as possible. By also encouraging others to help us in this task, we can achieve our vision in the long term, Sir Nicholas Young, British Red Cross.**

The question of engagement with the Movement as well as external actors and key stakeholders was discussed at length in the three working groups.

What is our role in relation to TV programs, UNHCR and Save the Children Fund for instance? Do we have some kind of supervisory role? Does the ICRC maintain its RFL lead role in conflict and natural disaster situations? If we want to be more ambitious on RFL activities, the Movement could mobilize others and provide leadership and guidance. It needs to mobilize those who are not in the club to support us so that we can work efficiently and rapidly.

Representatives from the Russian Red Cross and Uzbekistan Red Crescent reminded that the ICRC Central Tracing Agency, in its function as coordinator and technical adviser on RFL, should provide training and support materials on RFL to National Societies. Iolanta Mikhailova from the Russian Red Cross insisted on this point: “we consider that the ICRC should organize more systematic and interactive training to the RFL staff of National Societies”.

Working Group 3 also raised the issue of increasing sources of funding and diversification. Approaching corporate organizations could be one additional venue to explore.

## Increasing political will

**Increasing political will within the Movement remains a key issue**

It is important that the Federation, in particular its senior level, endorse the RFL strategy and its political will to support it. There would be a need for senior level Federation support to



*Shygyry Subashi, Albanian Red Cross; Eduard Abegg, ICRC Geneva; and Victor Kolbanov, Belarus Red Cross.*

this endeavour, an official declaration of support.

Anna Rita Roccaldo, Italian Red Cross deplored the fact that “tracing was always done in silence” and not considered a priority. We should probably work on “in-reach” within our own national society and not only on “outreach” to external stakeholders.

**Integration of RFL in disaster preparedness programs**

The issue of integrating RFL activities in disaster preparedness programs was raised on several occasions. Many representatives of National Societies stated that RFL activities were not considered as a priority by their top management. The ICRC should perhaps advocate more stubbornly for RFL activities within the Movement.

“Building the capacity of the tracing department should be an integral part of the general capacity building of any National Society,” argued Elkhan Rahimov, Red Crescent of Azerbaijan.

Several National Societies called for more interest from the Federation in RFL issues, particularly in relation to its organizational development responsibilities. Valentina Sosnovaya, Belarus Red Cross and Federation representative at the conference highlighted this point stressing on the Federation’s readiness to address this issue and systematically include RFL in strategic and contingency planning as well as in disaster preparedness and response plans.

It was unanimously agreed that:

- RFL should remain results-oriented.
- RFL is not only about unifying families but also about making sure that families are not separated in the first place.
- RFL should be considered as a priority service by the top management of ICRC, National Societies and the Federation
- RFL should be included in NS organizational development plans and become an integral part of disaster preparedness programmes.
- if we want funds for the RFL service we should be able to promote its activities.

Paul-Henri Arni, ICRC Kiev, forcefully argued that RFL should not be asleep and suddenly wake up whenever there is an emergency, it should be getting ready at all times, remain action-oriented and results-focused.

**A human face needed for RFL**

Johannes Guger from the Austrian Red Cross said “our working group managed to fill the strategy document with life...”. For all conference delegates, the strategy at this stage

is a very important document... however, implementation of the draft strategy remains the main challenge.

The Movement needs to make sure that the political will of National Societies improves and integrates the importance of this service. **This conference should be a wake-up call for all components of the Movement. The RFL network should get the attention it deserves.**

Many important issues were covered in the three working groups. The second day of the conference was a strong measure of consensus to strengthen the RFL vision and make it more compelling.

Many conference delegates expressed the need to give visibility to RFL activities in order to raise awareness in the public sphere. The next twelve months will be crucial in terms of communication efforts to get the RFL message across the Movement, in the build up to the council of delegates. The Movement needs to grab every opportunity to genuinely raise the interest of people on the subject.

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