



RESTORING FAMILY LINKS

PRESENTING THE STRATEGY
FOR A WORLDWIDE NETWORK



ICRC



Yoshi Shimizu/International Federation

RESTORING FAMILY LINKS

Each year hundreds of thousands of people are separated from their loved ones as a result of war or natural disasters. In these catastrophic situations families are torn apart, entire populations are displaced or forced into exile, the elderly are left behind, children are lost amid the chaos, many people go missing and the dead may remain unidentified.

Of all the suffering caused by war or natural disasters, perhaps the bitterest anguish stems from not knowing what has happened to a loved one. When people are separated by conflict or disaster, everything possible must be done to establish their whereabouts, restore contact between them and if need be reunite them. This task is essential – and the challenges are great.

The International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement (the Movement) has longstanding experience and expertise in this area. The Movement's Family Links Network, which is comprised of the National Societies' tracing services, the tracing agencies in ICRC delegations and the ICRC's Central Tracing Agency, is well placed to address the needs of people without news of their families.



RESPONDING TO CHALLENGES

For many years, the Movement has provided essential humanitarian services with the aim of restoring family links (RFL). It has reunited countless families, organized the exchange of family news, traced individuals worldwide, and registered both children and adults to prevent their disappearance. In coordination with national authorities, it has collected, managed and forwarded information on dead and missing persons.

Today, the work of RFL takes place in an ever-changing environment to which the Movement must respond and adapt. The changing nature of armed conflict and other violence, the increase in the number of natural and man-made disasters, massive displacement and migration, and the emergence of new technologies all have an effect on the approach adopted by the Movement in its RFL activities.

To ensure that the Family Links Network responds to these changes, the Movement has developed a 10-year strategy which is based on the strengths and knowledge of the tracing services of individual National Societies and the experience and expertise of the ICRC.

The International Federation is also committed to supporting the Family Links Network by integrating RFL activities in disaster management and in the overall institutional development of National Societies.

"The Red Cross was so important in helping bring back to life someone that I had presumed was dead. Until the last day of my life I will remember what the Red Cross has done for me..."

Beneficiary, Edmonton, Canada



Pedram Yazdi/ICRC



Thomas Pizer/ICRC

OFFERING A RANGE OF SERVICES

Restoring family links is a term that covers a wide range of activities, all designed to alleviate the pain of separation among loved ones.

These include:

- organizing the exchange of family news
- tracing individuals
- registering and keeping track of individuals to prevent their disappearance and to enable families to be informed about their whereabouts
- reuniting and repatriating families
- collecting, managing and forwarding information on the dead
- promoting and supporting the establishment of mechanisms to clarify the fate of persons unaccounted for

RFL services require committed staff and volunteers who receive proper training and coordination. It is essential that the same skills and approaches be adopted by the entire Movement so that RFL services are consistent and can be effective all over the world.

"I lost my wife and my two sons long ago. My whole existence has been filled with sadness, but today I have been brought back to life... I am not alone anymore. I am with my brother at last. This is a dream come true."

Salih Ashgar, Darfur, Sudan



Bernt Apeland/ICRC



Boris Heger/ICRC

STRENGTHENING THE FAMILY LINKS NETWORK

The Movement has set an ambitious goal for RFL services:

Whenever people are separated from, or without news of, their loved ones as a result of armed conflict, other situations of violence, natural disaster or other situations requiring a humanitarian response, the [...] Movement responds efficiently and effectively by mobilizing its resources to restore family links.

To ensure that it can meet this goal, the Movement adopted a 10-year RFL Strategy in 2007. The Strategy provides for concrete action to build capacity and raise the level of preparedness. It seeks to develop a consistent approach that will enhance RFL work both locally and worldwide.

The RFL Strategy covers crucial elements such as needs assessment, resources (human, technical, and financial), communication, accessibility and ownership of the service by individual National Societies and the Movement as a whole.

It encourages the Movement to make the necessary long-term investment to ensure that the Family Links Network is robust and meets the needs of the individuals and populations concerned, and to enhance and effectively use skills and resources.

"I thought my little brother was dead, but thanks to the Red Cross, I can now embrace him."

Adelina, Guatemala



Boris Heger/ICRC



Virginia de la Guardia/ICRC

IMPROVING PERFORMANCE

The ultimate aim of the RFL Strategy is to better meet the needs of individuals and entire populations by improving the performance of the Family Links Network.

There are three main objectives in the Strategy:

1. Improving capacity and performance

This requires long-term commitment to enhance and use skills and resources. Building capacity requires coherent methodology, effective mobilization of human resources, training and systematic exchange of information to ensure that the best practices are employed.

2. Enhancing cooperation and coordination within the Movement

Improving capacity to respond rapidly in emergencies, enhancing cooperation and coordination within the Movement at all times and strengthening interaction with the authorities and other organizations are necessary to improve performance across the Family Links Network.

3. Strengthening support for restoring family links

To lead in the field of RFL, the Movement must place its work on a solid foundation, encourage and motivate staff and volunteers to adopt its vision and practices, and improve communication so as to assume a strong position in the humanitarian sector.



Wojtek Lembryk/ICRC

TAKING CONCRETE ACTION

The RFL Strategy is supported by a plan of action which provides for concrete steps to be taken by National Societies. It focuses on the following actions:

- understanding RFL and the related needs of separated and missing people
- strengthening programme ownership for RFL activities
- raising the profile of RFL and enhancing its positioning
- improving RFL capability and services
- improving cooperation between National Societies and across the Family Links Network as a whole
- coordinating more effectively and consistently
- understanding and improving coordination with authorities and other organizations providing services in this field



Kishor Kayastha/ICRC

Relieving the pain

Everyone has a right to know what has happened to a missing relative and to communicate with family members from whom they have been separated. As the only organization with a worldwide Family Links Network, the Movement is well positioned to assist separated families. Implementing the RFL Strategy will enable the Movement to fulfil its responsibilities toward them and reduce their suffering.



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