

## ICRC External Communication Doctrine (Doctrine 7)

### Contents

|  |    |
|--|----|
| <b>Introduction</b> .....  | 2  |
| <b>Rationale for revising this doctrine</b> .....  | 3  |
| <b>Definition of external communication at the ICRC</b> .....                                    | 4  |
| <b>Scope</b> .....   | 5  |
| <b>Guiding principles</b> .....  | 6  |
| Principle 1: Build trust in the ICRC to facilitate its humanitarian action.....                  | 6  |
| Principle 2: Enhance the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement's public profile..... | 9  |
| Principle 3: Communicate to influence behaviour and policies.....                                | 10 |
| Principle 4: Empower people through information.....   | 11 |
| Principle 5: Focus on people and the laws protecting them.....                                   | 12 |
| Principle 6: Broaden the ICRC's public support base.....   | 13 |
| Principle 7: Incorporate communication in all ICRC strategies.....                               | 14 |
| Principle 8: Communicate for impact and ethically.....   | 15 |
| <b>Implementation</b> .....  | 16 |

## Introduction

This doctrine falls under the category of "specific doctrines regarding the action of the ICRC" in the architecture of ICRC doctrines and replaces the previous Doctrine 7 on ICRC public communication, dating from 2004.

The doctrine emerged from a wide-ranging consultation across the ICRC to identify existing best practices in the field and at headquarters, in order to pinpoint and build upon the principles that should enable the ICRC to communicate effectively in the years to come.

The environment in which the ICRC operates and communicates has changed dramatically. Within this environment, external communication has become a true enabler of many crucial aspects of the ICRC's mission, whether in terms of acceptance, access, mobilizing political and public support in order to influence attitudes and behaviour, or securing human and financial resources.

This doctrine endeavours to rally ICRC communication staff in the field and at headquarters, field managers and other ICRC staff behind a common vision for the organization's external communication. It also seeks to ensure that the organization takes a stronger and bolder approach to public positioning and external communication. The annexed document clarifies concepts and terminology used in relation to ICRC communication.

The doctrine also sets out the framework for using and optimizing external communication for strategic purposes. It should enable managers to take decisions about the ICRC's external communication that will strengthen the organization's credibility, legitimacy and operations and achieve its objectives.

Implementation of the doctrine should, in particular, contribute to the following priorities (which are discussed in more detail in the section on guiding principles below):

- Enhance the ICRC's acceptance, security, access to local communities and meaningful response to humanitarian needs in increasingly complex and risky environments;
- Continuously adapt to the rapid pace of today's evolving communication environment and strengthen the ICRC's reputation, acceptance and positioning;
- Strengthen the ICRC's two-way engagement (both online and offline) with a range of existing and new audiences, including armed groups, the general public, communities and the private sector;
- Enhance the ICRC's ability to mobilize the financial and human resources it requires to meet growing humanitarian needs;
- Improve the impact of the ICRC's efforts to influence stakeholders and its ability to shape policy debates on key humanitarian issues by better coordinating its communication with its multilateral and bilateral engagement with those stakeholders;
- Strengthen the International Red Cross and Red Crescent (RCRC) Movement's identity and visibility, in support of improved Movement coordination and operational reach, and strengthen the ICRC's identity as part of the Movement.

Since communication is not the preserve of specialist communication staff, and since communication should be taken into account in all strategies, this doctrine targets all ICRC staff and managers developing operational strategies or communicating externally.

This doctrine will also be published to enable external audiences to understand the principles underpinning the ICRC's external communication.

## **Rationale for revising this doctrine**

The changes in the ICRC's operational and communication environment present both challenges and opportunities for the ICRC in terms of communication.

The armed conflicts and other situations of violence in which the ICRC conducts its humanitarian work are more fragmented and volatile, with an increasing number of stakeholders and actors of influence who are sometimes difficult to identify with any precision or contact directly. For instance, the rise of new armed groups with transnational links compounds the complexity of engaging with weapon-bearers and obliges the ICRC to better connect the local and global aspects of its communication.

Securing direct access to, and working in proximity with, all victims of armed conflicts and other situations of violence is a growing challenge, especially in certain contexts where the ICRC faces mistrust and misperception, and where the lack of acceptance of neutral humanitarian actors causes serious security problems. Addressing this challenge requires multi-disciplinary strategies and cross-contextual approaches, of which communication is an essential part.

The ICRC has been operating in constant crisis mode in recent years, owing to the proliferation of conflicts with enormous humanitarian needs, serious security incidents, and deteriorating acceptance of international humanitarian actors. Building on its experience, the ICRC must further invest in and strengthen its crisis communication capacity in order to effectively deal with unexpected emergencies, security incidents and reputational crises.

More and more humanitarian actors are competing for limited resources and adopting different operational approaches. This requires the ICRC to foreground its unique identity and stand out from other organizations, notably to diversify its sources of funding, but also to be better accepted and recognized for its work and to attract people who have the right profiles and humanitarian motivation to join its workforce. It also needs to better connect with emerging actors and networks of influence, including decision-makers, civil society, the private sector and the general public. Local communities, the general public and donors are all calling for greater transparency from humanitarian organizations and expect to have access to more information about their activities and for the organizations to be publicly accountable.

Within the RCRC Movement, National Society participation in international operations has grown considerably in recent years, creating operational and positioning opportunities, but also challenges in terms of coordination and coherence of messaging, compliance with the Fundamental Principles, and competition for funds and visibility. The ICRC is committed to strengthening the overall reputation of the Movement and to better leveraging the influence of the Red Cross and Red Crescent brand identities.

Impactful communication is undoubtedly a challenge in a world where there is a plethora of voices competing for attention. Being heard in such an environment requires well-crafted messages supported by evidence and hard data, with specific field examples and interesting opinions. In today's world, organizations must put forward a multitude of "spokespersons" – whether or not they are formally designated as such – to convey their messages in a credible, coordinated, coherent and convincing manner, adapted to the target audience.

Above all, digital communication is the real game changer for ICRC communication. New communication technologies are increasingly shaping how people interact and communicate, individually and collectively. They have sped up the way information flows and broadened its reach, leading to an immense proliferation of data and voices. There is a definite need for the ICRC to seize the opportunities offered by technological innovation in order to scan, analyse and visualize big data in a meaningful way and thereby identify needs and gather crucial knowledge for its humanitarian action.

While traditional media remain essential vectors and influencers, social media and online platforms are becoming a key source of information for many (e.g. citizen journalists) who expect to engage directly and in real time with humanitarian organizations. People affected by armed conflict and other situations of violence themselves increasingly use online channels to convey their needs, grievances and expectations. Beyond being an additional means of engaging with affected communities (in addition to offline means), virtual access can help achieve proximity when physical access to communities is difficult.

Armed groups are also very well connected and use social media to communicate with their supporters, humanitarian organizations and the media. This can be a challenge, as they sometimes have their own agenda when communicating about the ICRC and may spread wrong or negative information which needs to be countered in real time. But it can also provide great opportunities for dialogue and engagement, especially when face-to-face interaction is limited due to security constraints.

And finally, legal and policy debates on humanitarian action are increasingly taking place in the online sphere, while digital fundraising is also a fast-growing sector for all organizations.

New technologies can be further leveraged by the ICRC in order to: improve access to and analysis of information to better understand its operating environment; engage better with armed groups; ensure proximity to communities; influence debates around armed violence and humanitarian action; and fundraise effectively.

Face-to-face interaction with communities, belligerents and other parties cannot, however, be fully replaced by technology. New technologies are also not yet universally available; many communities are still not connected to the internet and can only be reached through traditional offline means. These means therefore remain very relevant and must not be neglected in the ICRC's communication strategies. They should, wherever possible, be combined with digital means to achieve optimum impact.

### **Definition of external communication at the ICRC**

For the ICRC, external communication is the exchange of information and public messages between the organization and its different external audiences, which ultimately helps to ensure respect for the lives and dignity of people living through armed conflict and other situations of violence.

External communication is a cross-cutting activity that is an integral part of the ICRC's operations and positioning work. By raising the ICRC and the Movement's public profile and managing their reputation, it enhances their capacity to mobilize political support for their action and positions, build and deepen trust, and secure human and financial resources. It strengthens the ICRC and the Movement's acceptance, security and access to people in need.

External communication efforts focus on people affected by armed conflict and other situations of violence and the humanitarian problems they face or may face in the future, with an emphasis on the protection provided by IHL and other relevant legal frameworks. External communication also raises the public profile of the humanitarian response provided by the ICRC and its National Red Cross and Red Crescent Society partners.

External communication is carried out by all ICRC staff through multi-dimensional strategies combining various online and offline communication tools and channels tailored to specific objectives and audiences (e.g. face-to-face interaction, traditional and social media, audiovisual material, events, print production, etc.).

## **Scope**

This doctrine encompasses various aspects of external communication: public relations, media relations, operational communication, crisis communication, community engagement, donor engagement and fundraising, campaigns, branding, environment scanning, market research, relationship management, outreach, networking, public affairs and online engagement.

The doctrine should be implemented by all ICRC staff insofar as it applies to their respective roles and responsibilities. Communication specialists, however, should take the lead in developing communication strategies and implementing activities such as environment scanning, media relations, and online and operational communication, and should advise other departments on implementing their communication activities. Communication specialists should also work on enhancing the communication skills of other departments and National Societies.

Internal communication – a strategic dimension of corporate communication, in support of ICRC management – is not covered by this doctrine. It will, however, be mentioned where links are relevant, especially in relation to building the capacity of all staff to represent the organization adequately. Unless indicated otherwise, the term “communication” refers in this document to “external communication.”

Bilateral dialogue – the ICRC’s primary means of interaction when it comes, for instance, to protection issues – is addressed in other policies. Bilateral interaction (through online or offline means), however, does have a place in communication strategies and is covered by this doctrine insofar as it is used to convey the ICRC’s public positions or information that can be made public in order to achieve communication objectives.

## Guiding principles

Eight guiding principles are set out below. The first four principles cover the goals of ICRC communication and provide guidance on achieving those goals. Principle 5 concerns the focus and substance of ICRC communication (what the ICRC communicates about), while principle 6 looks at the ICRC's target audiences. Principles 7 and 8 relate to the way in which the ICRC communicates.

While all eight principles must be implemented, it should be noted that they are at different degrees of implementation. Some (principles 1, 5, 7 and 8) are a continuation of existing best practice in external communication, while others (principles 2, 3, 4 and 6) are new principles whose full implementation should change current ICRC practice.

### ***Principle 1: Build trust in the ICRC to facilitate its humanitarian action***

**By raising the ICRC's public profile and managing its reputation, communication enhances the organization's capacity to mobilize political support for its action and positions, build and deepen trust, and secure human and financial resources. The ICRC's external communication enhances acceptance, security and access to people in need.**

**The ICRC's core identity must be communicated consistently and coherently in order to enhance the global ICRC brand.**

**The ICRC's communication must at all times reflect the RCRC Fundamental Principles of humanity, impartiality, neutrality and independence and is ultimately determined by what is in the best interest of the victims of armed conflicts and other situations of violence.**

The ICRC's external communication contributes to the organization's mission to ensure respect for the lives and dignity of people living through armed conflict and other situations of violence. External communication plays a key role in enhancing the ICRC's visibility and presence in the public arena, building engagement among its existing supporters and attracting the interest and support of new supporters, managing its global reputation and positioning, and ultimately facilitating its overall action.

A strong reputation is critical to fulfilling the ICRC's mandate, especially as its action is based on an "acceptance model." It can only act and pursue its humanitarian mission meaningfully if its role is understood and accepted. The ICRC's efforts to foster security and access and to influence policies and behaviour (see principle 3 below) can only be successful if the organization has broad support and is perceived as trustworthy and credible.

The ICRC must demonstrate the unique and independent nature of its work within the wider humanitarian response and assert its position as a leading humanitarian organization working in armed conflict and other situations of violence and as a reference on IHL and humanitarian action.

In order to do so, the organization's global brand identity must be constantly leveraged and strengthened and conveyed consistently and coherently throughout the world through its communication, action and behaviour in order to bring its image into line with its desired identity.

ICRC communication should be aligned with its brand identity, i.e. it should:

- reflect the ICRC's vision: *A world where everyone respects human dignity during armed conflict and other situations of violence*;
- project an image consistent with the Fundamental Principles, particularly humanity, neutrality, independence and impartiality;
- encapsulate the ICRC's defining characteristics in images, style and words:

HUMANITARIAN: unbiased, trustworthy, no political or religious agenda, global

CARING: empathetic, inclusive, bringing hope

DETERMINED: committed, tenacious, experienced, effective, professional, fulfilling its mandate, consistent, adaptable, accountable, credible and honest

- adopt a tone that reflects the ICRC's identity: compassionate, professional, evidence-based, action-oriented, field/people-focused, respectful and multicultural.

While the ICRC must ensure that its global brand identity is conveyed coherently, it nevertheless chooses which aspects of that identity to emphasize depending on the activities it has in a given context and on the interests, sensitivities and expectations of its audience. It therefore constantly adapts the way it communicates its brand identity to local perceptions, languages and traditions (see principle 8).

ICRC managers and other staff developing communication strategies need to constantly gauge, measure and strengthen the ICRC's reputation at a global and local level. They should identify gaps in perception (desired vs perceived identity) and address them accordingly. It is also important to detect signals and identify and listen to critical voices (often voiced by individuals/groups through social media platforms) that could have an impact on the ICRC's reputation and ability to operate. Dialogue and engagement with communities affected by armed conflict and other situations of violence help the ICRC to better understand its operating environment, anticipate reputational risks, build trust, and ultimately facilitate its action.

The ICRC also monitors its reputation among its own staff, all of whom at their own level represent the organization vis-à-vis external audiences. The ICRC manages staff relations with care. Through its internal communication, it builds staff's ownership of, and adherence to, the ICRC's global brand and empowers them to convey it adequately to the outside world.

A strong and credible presence in the public sphere is also essential in order to mobilize the financial resources needed to implement the ICRC's mission. An ongoing dialogue with ICRC donors on both operational and policy issues builds steadfast support among donors and secures ad hoc financial aid for emergencies. Ultimately, all ICRC external communication efforts influence donors' perception of the organization, and therefore the funding they decide to allocate to the ICRC.

Similarly, profiling the ICRC as a professional humanitarian organization and employer, as well as managing the ICRC's reputation and visibility, are essential to attract individuals who might want to work for the ICRC - and to retain existing staff. Attracting people who have the right profiles and humanitarian motivation is critical to meeting the challenge of staffing the organization worldwide.

The ICRC should pay particular attention to the way it is perceived in terms of effectiveness, efficiency, transparency and accountability, which are key reputation drivers for its main stakeholders. By doing what it says, and saying what it does, the ICRC proves its transparency, predictability and trustworthiness. Through its communication, the ICRC can demonstrate that its confidential approach to handling information on violations of IHL and other relevant legal frameworks is not an impediment to transparency. This can be achieved by communicating publicly on information that is not of a confidential nature, explaining why it cannot share confidential information in a clear and intelligible way, and being open about its own dilemmas and challenges.

The ICRC's reputation is intertwined with the reputation of its Movement partners. Any positive and, in particular, negative exposure inevitably has an impact on other components of the Movement. The ICRC therefore needs to participate in the overall management of the Movement's reputation (see principle 2 below).

***Principle 2: Enhance the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement's public profile***

**Wherever appropriate, the ICRC positions itself as part of the Movement on joint operations, activities and themes, and ensures its communication is consistent with and complements that of its Movement partners. It actively contributes to the management of the Movement's overall reputation, especially when integrity issues arise. The specificity of the ICRC within the Movement is emphasized, in particular in areas where it has a unique mandate.**

In general, affected communities and the public make little distinction between the various Red Cross entities. Even with specialized audiences, the different Movement components' reputations are inevitably interlinked. This intertwined identity presents both opportunities to harness and risks to manage in terms of reputation, acceptance and access.

A strong Movement identity and visibility fosters better Movement coordination and operational reach. It also enhances the Movement's influence in the humanitarian sector and ability to mobilize financial and human resources. Well-coordinated communication also fosters an understanding of the Movement's wider work among communities who do not always make the distinction between the different components.

The ICRC contributes to efforts to promote understanding and manage the identity and reputation of the Movement as a whole, and coordinates its communication with Movement partners wherever possible. It positions itself jointly with Movement partners on common themes, operations and activities and develops joint narratives together with other components of the Movement, emphasizing their common ground while recognizing their distinctive characteristics. The ICRC's communication with Movement partners reflects the Movement's position as the leading humanitarian network enjoying global reach and working in proximity to those in need, as well as the Movement's brand positioning statement:

*"We are the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement.*

*We are a global humanitarian network which helps people prepare for, deal with and recover from crisis.*

*Whether you are facing natural or man-made disasters, armed conflict or health and social care issues, Red Cross and Red Crescent volunteers and staff are there to help, without adverse discrimination.*

*Guided by our Fundamental Principles, we mobilize the power of humanity to save lives and relieve suffering."*

The ICRC shares its communication expertise, along with its concrete experience of putting the Fundamental Principles into practice, with its Movement partners. It also supports National Societies' own communication efforts and expects the same in return. The Movement's communication efforts (including capacity building) are built around the strengths and skills of the partners involved.

While it is not an objective as such to systematically set the ICRC apart from the rest of the Movement, especially when targeting the general public and audiences not familiar with the ICRC, the ICRC's uniqueness (even within the Movement) remains an important asset in certain situations. In particular, the ICRC generally distinguishes itself from the rest of the Movement in its interaction with belligerents and the authorities.

In general, the ICRC's uniqueness within the Movement is emphasized in areas where this is required by its mandate, such as in relation to its dealings with authorities on respect of IHL or its role as a neutral intermediary. In certain situations, however, publicly associating the ICRC with other components of the Movement could cause reputation or acceptance problems and endanger its access to people in need. In other situations, National Societies or the International Federation may also prefer to avoid being publicly associated with the ICRC, for example to preserve their relationships with the authorities or to protect their fundraising if the ICRC is perceived as communicating on controversial or sensitive issues. In such cases, the ICRC avoids joint positioning with the National Society or International Federation but seeks to ensure that its messaging is consistent with that of its Movement partners.

***Principle 3: Communicate to influence behaviour and policies***

**Communication – as a means of influence – is used as part of the ICRC's persuasion efforts, in line with its preferred mode of action. Communication helps shape attitudes, behaviour and policies (in relation to operations and global issues), and complements bilateral and multilateral dialogue.**

Raising awareness about global humanitarian issues through thematic campaigns, focusing on a particular humanitarian situation, or taking other public communication initiatives, can help put those humanitarian issues on the political and public agenda and make policy influencers and decision-makers consider and address those issues (such as by adopting a new treaty).

Through its public campaigns and other communication initiatives, the ICRC can also rally support for its positions on humanitarian issues and mobilize others to act.

In some cases, the ICRC may strategically decide – after duly weighing up the risks and benefits – to use a certain degree of public pressure to influence behaviour or policies, for example to convince fighting parties to grant it access to people in need, or to amplify the voice of families of missing persons calling on the authorities to take action to ascertain the fate of their loved ones.

Communication contributes to the ICRC's humanitarian diplomacy in certain situations by amplifying what is said at the diplomatic level and thereby enhancing the ICRC's credibility. Such communication efforts are just one part of wider multi-dimensional influence strategies on specific issues. To have impact and influence on the political choices of States, armed groups and other entities, communication must be well coordinated with bilateral and multilateral humanitarian diplomacy to deliver consistent messaging, predictability vis-à-vis those it wishes to influence, the right timing, and the use of the right communication vectors and channels.

While such efforts primarily target decision-makers and leaders of influence, ICRC communication campaigns also seek to reach out to interested members of the public and to generate informed and favourable public opinion on those issues, thereby influencing attitudes, behaviour and policies.

Global or regional positions communicated through campaigns and other communication initiatives must be grounded in the ICRC's operational realities and draw on concrete field examples to be credible and legitimate and actually influence policy.

In many situations, communication is also used proactively to deflect or dissipate the pressure being applied on the ICRC by certain sectors of society or by the authorities, and to mitigate the potentially negative repercussions of communication by others. Given the nature of the environments in which it operates, the ICRC must constantly manage conflicting expectations and pressures by different stakeholders with opposing agendas. In such situations, the ICRC needs to independently and proactively choose when and how to communicate and to keep control of the messaging that concerns the organization, in line with its operational strategies. In this way, it avoids being boxed into a defensive reactive position and keeps the focus on the issues (rather than the ICRC becoming the misplaced focus of attention).

***Principle 4: Empower people through information***

**Information can be a form of humanitarian service in its own right. By engaging with communities about aid services and basic rights and entitlements, and by providing the information that they need and that is of direct use to them, the ICRC empowers people affected by armed conflict and other situations of violence to take an active role in their own preparedness, relief and recovery. It also boosts communities' resilience by making them more knowledgeable and connected. Critically, two-way communication helps manage their expectations and increases accountability towards affected communities.**

Lack of access to information, conflicting information or propaganda create confusion and exacerbate the problems of people enduring armed conflict and other situations of violence.

During crises and emergencies, people urgently need information. Survival can depend on knowing the answers to questions such as: Is it safe to go back home? How can I find my family? Where can I get water and food? Where is the nearest clinic?

Effective two-way communication with communities can save lives, provide vital psychosocial support, amplify the voice of affected communities and help communities become more resilient by making them more knowledgeable and connected. The ultimate objective is that communities are able to communicate among themselves (including diaspora groups) and with the ICRC and other humanitarian organizations, find their own solutions, and access humanitarian assistance.

The ICRC provides people with timely, accurate, trustworthy and well-targeted information so that they can make informed decisions about their own lives and livelihoods and more effectively organize their own response and access humanitarian services. Through its wide range of programmes, the ICRC provides communities with information that strengthens their resilience, ranging from life-saving information, to information about services to help them meet their needs, to information that minimizes their exposure to risks.

For the ICRC, effective community engagement covers the entire spectrum of channels, platforms and tools, ranging from traditional, low-tech face-to-face contact and meetings, to posters and leaflets, to radio, TV programmes, SMS messages and telephone hotlines, to more high-tech social media, messaging apps and crowdsourcing platforms.

For example, the ICRC runs community campaigns using radio and TV broadcasts and sets up online platforms and displays posters to convey vital information to enable families to trace their missing loved ones or to inform rape victims where to seek medical and psychological support. The ICRC also engages with communities and produces communication material about livestock health and farming techniques to empower communities to become or remain self-sufficient and avoid displacement. It includes brochures in aid parcels and messages on aid items (such as survival tips on water bottles provided to migrants) and organizes community discussions on first aid and hygiene promotion.

The ICRC understands that there is no one-size-fits-all solution and that effective communication with local communities is underpinned by a coherent and coordinated multi-platform and multi-channel approach. Effective community engagement also involves teaming up with local partners such as the media, telecommunications operators and local researchers.

Dialogue and engagement with communities affected by armed conflict and other situations of violence is also essential in order to anticipate their needs, understand their circumstances and priorities, manage their expectations (i.e. what they can and cannot expect from the ICRC and who is eligible for assistance), and adapt the humanitarian response to their specific circumstances and concerns thanks to the feedback they provide. This dialogue and engagement also promotes accountability towards beneficiaries and helps anticipate reputational risks for the ICRC.

The ICRC must balance the provision of information with an assessment of the risks of sharing such information with those it is seeking to help. Thus, it may decide to facilitate communities' access to information so that they can make their own choices, rather than providing the information directly.

***Principle 5: Focus on people and the laws protecting them***

**ICRC communication focuses on the people affected by armed conflict and other situations of violence and the humanitarian problems they face, or may face in the future. It emphasizes the obligations of the authorities and fighting parties under international humanitarian law and other relevant legal frameworks to protect these people and may, in exceptional circumstances and in accordance with ICRC doctrine, resort to public denunciation of violations of the law. Communication also gives a public profile to the humanitarian response provided by the ICRC and its RCRC partners.**

The ICRC listens to people affected by armed conflict and other situations of violence. It amplifies their voices and tries to ensure that their humanitarian situation is known and addressed by those who have direct or indirect influence. While the focus of its communication is the humanitarian problems people face (or may face in the future), the ICRC endeavours to convey their needs and aspirations and to underline the resilience they show in the face of adversity (see principle 8).

The ICRC takes a public stance on priority humanitarian issues that affect people in such situations, or may affect people in the future, and on themes related to humanitarian policy and standards (see principle 3).

ICRC communication puts a lot of emphasis on international humanitarian law. Generally speaking, the ICRC publicly communicates its legal classification of situations of violence by referring to the applicable legal framework in its communications or by reminding the fighting parties of their duty to respect specific IHL norms. In some circumstances, however, it may refrain from communicating publicly about its legal classification if such communication would jeopardize the humanitarian interests of the victims. It also raises awareness of the importance and content of IHL.

The ICRC may decide, in exceptional circumstances, to publicly express its concerns about the quality of its bilateral and confidential dialogue with a party to an armed conflict, or about the quality of the follow-up to its recommendations regarding a specific humanitarian problem. It may also issue a public denunciation of a specific violation of international humanitarian law which can be attributed to a party to a conflict. “Public denunciation” means a public statement by the ICRC to the effect that acts which can be attributed to a party to a conflict – whether or not they are known to the public – constitute a violation of international humanitarian law. Such situations are governed by Doctrine 15 on *Action by the ICRC in the event of violations of international humanitarian law or of other fundamental rules protecting persons in situations of violence*, which sets out clear conditions for public denunciations.

The ICRC may also decide in certain circumstances to publicly raise its concerns about IHL violations in more general terms, without resorting to a public denunciation as defined in Doctrine 15. Such public statements can cover a range of situations and are very carefully worded.

They may:

- condemn a specific act in the conduct of hostilities for which responsibility cannot be attributed;
- highlight the humanitarian impact of certain acts (such as targeting civilians or preventing access to health care) and appeal for greater respect for IHL;
- publicly deplore a general lack of respect for IHL by all sides in a given armed conflict (without attributing responsibility for specific acts/violations).

The decision to publicly raise concerns about violations of IHL is made very carefully, after having moved quickly to assess the risks and opportunities of taking such a step. In particular, there should be a careful evaluation of the expected impact (notably to prevent further violations, but also on the ICRC’s credibility and reputation) and of the potential risks for the ICRC’s acceptance, access and ability to carry out its humanitarian work.

The ICRC may invoke international human rights law (IHRL) in its public communication, but only on specific occasions because of a desire to remain closely identified with IHL. Nevertheless, the ICRC may invoke IHRL rules if this supports its objectives and offers more robust safeguards for at-risk individuals and communities.

The ICRC engages with communities affected by armed conflict and other situations of violence concerning information that is of direct use to them, with a view to strengthening their resilience (see principle 4 for more details).

Lastly, the ICRC also communicates about its humanitarian work and informs affected communities about the existence of its humanitarian services and programmes. It also foregrounds the work of its Movement partners where appropriate (see principle 2). It communicates about situations where its own capacity to act is affected, whether because it cannot reach people who need its help, or because its staff are at risk or being targeted. It also speaks out when its Movement partners are affected in this way.

Communicating about its work in a transparent manner helps the ICRC build its reputation and credibility, as well as being accountable towards beneficiaries, donors and other stakeholders (see principle 1).

***Principle 6: Broaden the ICRC's public support base***

**ICRC communication seeks to secure the widest possible support for the organization's work and positions in operational contexts and in countries with global or regional influence. Beyond targeting actors with direct or indirect influence on the fate of people affected by armed conflict and other situations of violence, communication efforts also build a public support base for the ICRC's action and positions among civil society, the private sector and the general public.**

ICRC communication has traditionally targeted authorities, weapon-bearers, affected communities and specific segments of civil society (such as academic circles, the media and religious circles), mostly in the contexts where it conducts its operations. At the international level, the ICRC regularly engages with donors, global media, think tanks and the humanitarian community in relation to its activities and on specific themes.

The basic layer of "horizontal" communication with general audiences helps create a common narrative to bridge the gaps left by more specialized "vertical" engagement with specific audiences.

To meet the challenges of today's polarized world, the ICRC seeks to broaden its reach and find ways to connect with more existing and emerging actors and networks of influence, including decision-makers, civil society, the private sector and the general public in more countries.

In operational and potentially operational contexts, the ICRC must direct its communication efforts towards the public at large. Creating a base of understanding and support for the ICRC can mitigate the operational challenges it faces when conflicts break out unexpectedly in countries where the ICRC has no or minimal presence and would otherwise not be known at all.

In contexts of global or regional significance, the ICRC should also engage with the general public, focusing on all interested members of society.

Building a wide public support base is increasingly important in a world where individuals from any country can have substantial influence over policy-makers. This is especially true of the online sphere, where bloggers or online activists anywhere in the world can build up a strong following. Identifying those who can influence areas of interest to the ICRC, following their conversations and engaging with them (including those who oppose the ICRC) is necessary to enhance the ICRC's understanding of its operating environment, manage the ICRC's reputation and broaden its acceptance (see principle 1) and strengthen its capacity to mobilize networks of influence (see principle 3).

Public communication familiarizes people with the ICRC, thereby enhancing fundraising potential. Particularly in a time of increased public scrutiny, State donors need to build domestic support for their humanitarian funding and expect the ICRC to communicate about its work both among their taxpayers and in parliamentary circles. ICRC communication also plays a decisive role in promoting awareness of, and support for, the ICRC among private individuals who are potential donors, thereby paving the way for private fundraising.

Broadening the ICRC's public support base also helps to reach out to potential future employees from a diversity of backgrounds and with the right skills and profiles. In turn, increasing the diversity of ICRC's global workforce fosters greater acceptance of the organization in certain contexts where it is sometimes perceived as too "Western."

Generating support for the ICRC and its work involves raising awareness and sparking the interest of new audiences more generally; creating favourability towards the ICRC if they see it as relevant on issues of interest to them; and engaging them in a two-way relationship. This process can only be effective if the ICRC, through its communication and engagement, can build a connection with the public and is ready to engage in open dialogue, including about the challenges and dilemmas it faces.

The choice of communication vectors and tools will be different at the different stages of this process, and depending on the target audience and objectives. For example, the homepage of the ICRC website is mostly used as a first point of contact with new audiences and needs to be clear and attractive to catch their interest. Whereas specialized internet mini-sites or online communities are used to engage with and mobilize more specialized audiences who are already familiar with the ICRC.

All ICRC staff represent the organization in all sorts of professional and private circumstances, for example within their own communities. Training and internal communication must constantly enhance their knowledge and ability to represent the ICRC appropriately and convey a positive and accurate image of the organization, both in direct interaction and through their personal social media profiles. In operational contexts in particular, well-trained and well-informed ICRC staff can identify potential perception issues and either address them directly within their communities or flag the issue internally so that appropriate action can be taken.

***Principle 7: Incorporate communication in all ICRC strategies***

**External communication is a cross-cutting activity that is an integral part of the ICRC's operations and positioning work. It supports the ICRC's four overlapping approaches: prevention, protection, assistance and cooperation.**

Communication supports prevention when it aims to secure acceptance, security and access for the ICRC and to build an environment conducive to compliance with international humanitarian law (IHL) and other relevant norms.

Communication supports protection when it is part of a strategy to prevent or put an end to actual or probable violations of IHL and other bodies of law that protect people in armed conflict and other situations of violence.

Communication supports assistance when it is part of the ICRC's efforts to preserve the lives and/or restore the dignity of individuals or communities adversely affected by armed conflict or other situations of violence. As such, it is focused on meeting their essential needs and reducing their exposure to risks.

Communication supports cooperation when it is part of efforts to boost the skills of National Societies, enhance the ICRC's coordination with other components of the RCRC Movement and optimize the impact of the Movement's action.

***Principle 8: Communicate for impact and ethically***

**ICRC communication is timely, proactive and predictable and uses compelling figures and specific examples for impact. It is contextualized and adapted to the expectations, sensitivities and interests of its various audiences.**

**ICRC communication is also truthful, accurate and respectful. It preserves the dignity of communities affected by armed conflict and other situations of violence.**

External communication is connected with operational realities at the local, regional and global level and is based on contextual analysis and research of how the ICRC is perceived and of humanitarian issues and trends, and on a sound understanding of who has direct and indirect influence on those issues and trends.

The ICRC communicates proactively, independently choosing its messages, timing and tools to achieve its communication objectives, rather than responding to public pressure in a reactive manner.

The timing of the ICRC's communication is strategically planned and coordinated with both its operational and humanitarian diplomacy efforts and events in the outside world. The right timing means being in sync with the expectations and interests of its audiences, so that the ICRC can take advantage of media and public interest in certain issues. It also means being well coordinated with the bilateral/multilateral dialogue taking place in various fora in order to avoid surprising parties with whom a confidential dialogue is taking place, and to ensure consistent messaging.

When the ICRC seeks to improve audience understanding, acceptance and engagement, be it at the operational level or the global/regional level, the interests, sensitivities and expectations of those audiences are taken into account and the ICRC's communication efforts adapted accordingly (in terms of messaging, tools and vectors).

The ICRC continuously adapts the way it communicates to the realities of the contexts where it works. For example, it does not use the same language and approach in an armed conflict as in another situation of violence. It is aware that certain concepts that are core to its identity – like “neutrality” or “impartiality” – may not have the same positive connotations in all cultures, and need to be explained in terms that are more familiar and positive in such cultures in order to gain support for its work. The ICRC also carefully selects images that will be meaningful for its various audiences and chooses which aspects of its brand identity to emphasize, depending on the activities it has in that context, and on the local perceptions, language and traditions.

As part of this agile contextualization process, the ICRC regularly reassesses the issues on which it is ready to engage and seeks ways to connect its priorities with its audiences' interests and concerns, while staying within the organization's expertise and field experience – thereby coming across as relevant and legitimate and strengthening its credibility. It identifies emerging issues by analysing its environment, agrees on its public stance on those issues, and develops narratives and messages that can be conveyed as part of coordinated multi-dimensional strategies adapted to each audience and context.

The ICRC needs to be flexible enough to move swiftly to seize opportunities offered by ongoing policy and public debates in order to put across its distinctive experiential perspective on topics relevant to its current and future action. It also needs to weigh in on the debates taking place, and be ready to share its doubts and challenges in relation to emerging issues, even when a consolidated policy may not yet exist.

Through its acts and communication, the ICRC always shows respect for people and their right to privacy. Texts and images portray people affected by armed conflict and other situations of violence as dignified humans, not as objects of pity or curiosity. Their needs and aspirations are underlined, as is their resilience in the face of adversity.

ICRC communication gives a lot of space to personal stories of people and communities affected by armed conflict and other situations of violence. Real-life examples from the field are essential for telling compelling stories that will move the ICRC's various audiences, whether with the objective of mobilizing support for the ICRC or influencing attitudes on a specific issue. However, revealing a person's name, quoting them or publishing images of them should never put them at risk and should be done, wherever reasonably feasible, with their informed consent, in compliance with the ICRC's data-protection framework and the "do no harm" principle. Particular care is taken with vulnerable groups, such as minors, patients and detainees.

Journalists (and other audiences) know that they can trust the information communicated by the ICRC and expect the organization to provide them with compelling figures and trends, or to give estimates based on its knowledge and expertise on the ground. It does not exaggerate or invent facts and quotes. The ICRC's credibility is founded on the accuracy and reliability of the facts and figures it provides, and its reputation as being unbiased and trustworthy.

ICRC communication is predictable and consistent with what might be expected of the organization. It communicates and acts in accordance with its mandate and policies and explains in a transparent manner how and why it takes certain action.

## **Implementation**

As previously stated, ICRC communication is an integral part of the organization's strategies. It is linked to operational realities at the local and the regional level, while at the same time strengthening the ICRC's global reputation (principle 1), supporting global influence strategies (principle 3) and widening its public support base (principle 6).

While the guiding principles set out in this doctrine are for the most part interrelated and complementary, dilemmas may occasionally arise when it comes to implementing them. For example, building trust in the ICRC and its staff, and securing access, acceptance and security for its staff, may at times be at odds with efforts to bolster global influence and positioning. Or it may sometimes be a challenge to enhance the global ICRC brand while ensuring the contextual relevance of the ICRC's communication. Another recurring dilemma for the ICRC is whether or not to speak out. Not speaking out can also pose a challenge in terms of the organization's reputation. These dilemmas should be resolved on a case-by-case basis, after a careful assessment of the risks and opportunities and taking into account all the considerations.

Leveraging the multiplicity of ICRC spokespersons and ensuring consistent messaging from them all means giving delegations sufficient autonomy and empowering all staff to communicate on behalf of the ICRC, provided they have the right guidance.

There is no risk-free communication, but risks can be managed and opportunities leveraged when cross-cutting communication strategies are developed. This requires the involvement of the relevant colleagues and departments in the field, and also headquarters when contexts or issues of global significance are at stake. If the colleagues concerned are unable to reach a consensus, the decision should be referred up the hierarchical chain.

Careful assessments are carried out regularly, weighing the expected positive impact of communicating, in terms of global influence and positioning, against the potential risks for the ICRC's acceptance, access and ability to carry out its humanitarian work on the ground. These assessments make good use of environment scanning and perception research.

Communication initiatives are regularly measured and evaluated according to specific targets and indicators as part of the overall strategies they support. These include quantitative and qualitative outcome measurements (such as media coverage, tracking of key messages, online and audiovisual statistics) as well as impact measurements (has the communication strategy actually had the desired impact on attitudes, policies or behaviour?). Regular lessons-learned exercises are built into the communication cycle and can trigger changes in tactics and strategy.

The possible wider repercussions of communicating or not communicating are also considered, including how communication initiatives will affect the ICRC in other contexts, how they will affect the ICRC's global credibility and reputation and what the historical consequences may be. The ICRC may be held accountable years later for what it said or did not say, as was the case in relation to the Shoah after the Second World War and the Rwandan genocide. In 1995, the ICRC had to publicly acknowledge its moral failure for not speaking out during the Second World War. In the case of Rwanda, the ICRC publicly talked about a "genocide" from the outset and was therefore in a much better position when it came to the 20-year commemorations in 2014, despite being unable to do anything to stop the Rwandan genocide.

Silence is in itself an act of communication. Silence can be carefully chosen within a communication strategy in certain circumstances. In some cases, the ICRC chooses to wait for a more appropriate time to communicate, or to leave time for and exclusively focus on its bilateral dialogue on operational issues (primarily access and protection). However, this approach comes with its own risks, namely that others might communicate on the ICRC's behalf, that the ICRC might lose control of the messaging, or that its silence may be misinterpreted.

When the ICRC decides to speak out about violations of IHL (see principle 5), it should ensure that reliable and verifiable sources confirm that the violations did indeed take place. Its statements should be timed carefully and be well coordinated with its bilateral confidential protection dialogue with the parties to the conflict. Public statements on IHL violations should be broadly aligned with the substance of such bilateral dialogue. Wherever possible, the parties concerned should be notified in advance of the publication of such statements, as should ICRC staff, so that they are able to explain the ICRC's public statements to their outside contacts.

The reaction of external audiences – at the local and the global level – should be anticipated, taking into account that they may have differing views on what constitutes a denunciation and may be particularly sensitive to certain wording. The choice of tools and vectors for making the ICRC's concerns known should be made carefully, as this may also have an impact on how the statement is perceived. Contingency measures and a risk-mitigation plan should be put in place.

The analysis and decision on whether or not to speak out usually has to take place in a very short time frame. Statements will usually only receive media coverage, have an impact and be credible if they are issued in a timely manner in the immediate aftermath of the incident in question.

Communication strategies and activities must avoid harmful effects on affected communities, thereby respecting the "do no harm" principle which is one of the cornerstones of its protection work. Ultimately, ICRC communication is governed by the same criteria that apply to all its other strategies and activities – namely that the best interests of the victims of armed conflict and other situations of violence come first (see principle 1).

All ICRC staff should have an understanding of this doctrine, to help them confidently represent the ICRC and its positions vis-à-vis external audiences and explain choices that are made about whether or not to communicate on a given issue. If staff have a clear understanding of the ICRC's external communication doctrine, it is likely that they will understand and accept the guidance and restrictions that the organization asks them to respect, in particular when communicating privately on social media.

The doctrine will be incorporated in training and communicated to staff as appropriate. Various tools will be developed to convey the aspects that are most relevant to managers, communication staff, other specialist staff, and the wider workforce.

As mentioned earlier, an implementation roadmap will also set out the priorities for action in order to fully implement all eight principles.