

Evaluation of ICRC's Athens Delegation 2016-2024



Executive Summary

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Executive Summary

Background

The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) Athens Delegation will close by the end of 2024, about 10 years after the ICRC first set up a dedicated field operation in Greece. The decision to establish an operational presence in Greece was taken following a request from the Greek government, at a time when humanitarian needs aligned with institutional opportunity. As record numbers of vulnerable Syrians were arriving in Greece, the ICRC sought out how to work in a non-traditional ICRC context.

Over the years, the Athens Delegation has implemented a set of programs addressing migrants who have been separated from their families, gone missing, been deprived of liberty, or died (the Protection of the Civilian Population sub-program closed in 2022). The ICRC has cooperated with the Hellenic Red Cross to strengthen its Restoration of Family Links response and worked to improve the acceptance of the ICRC and relevant actors' support for the law.

As the ICRC is closing the Delegation, it has commissioned an independent external evaluation of the Delegation's work since 2016. The summative evaluation supports both accountability and learning. Conducted between May and October 2024, the evaluation addresses two overarching objectives: to (1) examine the relevance of the Delegation's work and its effectiveness, and (2) to identify lessons learned on program sustainability and the ICRC's relevance in ensuring migrants' protection. The evaluation findings rely on the review of ICRC internal documents – narrative and quantitative monitoring data; strategies; reports; and meeting minutes – as well as perception data gathered through semi-structured interviews with 50 key informants and validation meetings.

How Relevant Was the Work of the Athens Delegation?

The Athens Delegation identified areas in which the ICRC had clear added value in responding to the priorities and needs of vulnerable migrants, starting with substitution and support as the defining modes of action. For example, the ICRC was the only actor in Greece that supported the management and identification of human remains, whether it addressed Family Links Network cases or built the capacities of forensic and investigative authorities with technical advice, training, and material donations. In administrative detention, the ICRC's monitoring of conditions and its capacity support for the better provision of health care also filled relevant gaps. In most of these areas, where the ICRC successfully built a relationship with technical counterparts, it was able to influence not only their practices but also procedures to ensure more sustainable results.

However, the Delegation did not consistently and promptly move from substitution and support to achieving formal changes in procedure, regulations and laws, which held higher prospects for sustained improvements. For example, the integration of the law in the armed forces' curricula could have happened earlier, as could the specialization of legal advisers and discussions about the legal-normative framework related to families of the missing.

The evaluation observed the big effort made in the ICRC's partnership with the Hellenic Red Cross at both the technical and leadership levels. The Delegation prioritized short-term efficiency in the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement ("the Movement") response

to address the needs of affected people, and doing so left only few opportunities to build the capacities of the HRC Tracing Division.

Did the Delegation Achieve Its Objectives?

There are several cases in which the evaluation plausibly observes the ICRC's contribution to incremental positive change in the detention and missing migrants' programs, even if the baselines for such change – that is, government functions and capacities in this field – were initially limited and further strengthening of national policies and systems is needed. Regarding missing migrants, the Delegation supported reforms to centralize forensic services under the Ministry of Justice, achieved positive results in the search for presumably dead or detained migrants, and enabled better management of dead migrants and higher rates of identification. Regarding migrants in detention, the Delegation has facilitated better procedures on conditions of detention, contributed to legislative change on the detention of unaccompanied minors, improved the capacity of the service provider for health care in detention, and contributed to establishing health in detention as an academic specialization.

Meanwhile, there is insufficient data on the Delegation's contribution to increased capacity of relevant national authorities on International Humanitarian Law, and on effects with respect to the protection of the civilian population.

The ICRC's efforts towards supporting a strong and efficient Restoration of Family Links program within the Hellenic Red Cross have led to technical improvements. The evaluation found however that there were also challenges from within the National Society that limited the possibility to develop the program to its full potential.

Which Factors Explain the Delegation's Performance?

External factors have had a mostly impeding influence on the Delegation's work. If the Delegation has achieved its objectives, this is despite challenging context conditions. The Delegation's work has faced significant challenges due to the political context, including policies that have posed obstacles, limited progress in addressing those policies, and frequent changes in government interlocutors. Additionally, the absence of a legal status agreement and the institutional limitations and resource constraints of the National Society have further impacted its efforts.

Internal factors, that is, factors relating to the Delegation's approach, its operational presence and staff have for the most part been conducive to achievements:

- The Delegation has managed to build trust with the authorities, supported by the ICRC's reputation, staff competencies, confidential work modality, and staying power.
- The Delegation's steady investments in priority sub-programs and their regional connectedness has enabled programmatic results.

Meanwhile, inconsistent institutional support impacted innovation and learning, which were secondary corporate expectations for the Greece operation. What is more, the decision to close the prior smaller presence of the ICRC in Athens and then to open a mission within a year had an undue cost for the ICRC and by proxy its beneficiaries. Although the previous short-lived presence left a network of interlocutors, which enabled the resumption of programs, the lack of continuity in staffing and working methods caused programmatic interruptions and delays.

How Sustainable Is the Delegation's Work After the ICRC's Departure?

The initial level of progress on sustainability varies across sub-programs: areas where formal changes to tools, procedures, and policy were attained have better conditions for sustainability. “Real-life” prospects for sustainability after the Delegation's closure will primarily depend on external factors, in particular the willingness and capacity of the Greek government and other partners.

With the closure of the Athens Delegation on the 30th November 2024, the ICRC has discontinued all field activities in Greece. It will cover Greece through its Regional Delegation in Belgrade and continues to have statutory commitments for Re-establishment of Family Links, with some remote support foreseen particularly on forensics, an area which was on the cusp of attaining systemic effects. No investments are foreseen for follow-up on the Protection of Family Links (PFL) and detention sub-programs.

Conclusions, Lessons Learned and Recommendations

The ICRC's operation in Greece successfully met its primary and secondary objectives, achieving notable humanitarian outcomes and finding an operational niche in a migration context. The approaches used were pertinent, and the results positive. However, as the Delegation enhanced its reputation, it could have reinforced protection dialogue more consistently, put a stronger focus on policy-level changes within its different subprograms, and invested more strongly in the operational partnership with the Hellenic Red Cross.

The Athens mission was set up to address humanitarian needs resulting from the record arrival of people fleeing the armed conflict in Syria, amid insufficient capacities of the Greek government and the National Society. Today, it is being closed amid the organization's global budget cuts and a strategic reorientation, through a revised migration strategy (in 2023) and a stronger focus on contexts of armed conflicts and other situations of violence. The decision to close the Delegation was resolute. It did not consider alternative scenarios based on a strategic assessment of gains and losses, such as the prospect of securing for the organization privileges and immunities. Pertinently, this is visible in the failure to consider that there was a reasonable probability that privileges and immunities would finally be secured for the organization.

Lessons

- Outcomes achieved are, *in toto*, a learning regarding the organization's relevance in favor of vulnerable migrants. Skills and knowledge required to address migration-related risks in Greece did not substantially differ from those that the ICRC applies elsewhere.
- Closure processes should be better coordinated between headquarters and delegations to ensure that the notification process announcing the closure to staff and partners is well-sequenced and, ideally, led by the delegation.

- Responsible exit requires time, which has to be weighed against other constraints. For example, more time to close the Delegation would have reduced risks that progress made is being lost, but could have also led to early staff departures. The tension can best be addressed by preparing for exit in time. Program strategies should discuss exit, and project a gradual progress from substitution to supporting national systems and facilitating more sustainable change, such as legislative reform. The Athens Delegation had 1.5 years for closure, which rightfully was longer than some other closure processes, and did allow for making progress and orderly departure. In the final year of operation, the closure decision created additional momentum, and a sense of priority among partners.
- Institutional scrutiny should better facilitate reflections on exit. Budget cuts affecting the Delegation led to strategic decisions in the field to consolidate programs that had already proved their worth or promised significant results, while eliminating or deprioritizing those that did not. Incentives to reflect on exit were less pronounced.
- Greater predictability would have been needed to open and close the operation in Greece. Decisions about opening and closing the field operation in Greece lacked predictability and transparency, in part because the ICRC lacks formal criteria, and because related considerations were not documented.
- Alternatives to the full closure could have been considered and weighed against expected gains – an alternative possibility would have been to retain in Greece a very small presence.

Recommendations

Opening and closing of ICRC presence

Target audience: Department of Operations

Priority 1: Improve predictability, transparency, and accountability on decisions to open and close delegations.

- Develop formal criteria to open delegations (for internal use). These do not need to be too detailed to maintain flexibility, but they should at least make explicit the rationale for opening a Delegation, the outcome of discussions with the host government, the operating National Society and other relevant actors (e.g., IFRC), as well as aspects related to the ICRC's legal status. Update the rationale over time, if needed.
- Consolidate existing guidance on closure and ensure these reach the relevant delegations. The Accountability to Affected People Unit's document on "People-Centric Processes Ensuring Inclusive & Accountable Exits" can serve as the basis for this.

Priority 2: Improve institutional oversight of strategic choices made by delegations. Although delegations are "given considerable autonomy to decide how best to help victims

of conflict and other situations of violence,”¹ these choices should be made explicit to ensure institutional alignment and increase accountability.

- Assign seasoned leaders to new missions and delegations who can confidently lead related discussions in the early, crucial years of a new operation.
- Facilitate decisions on appropriate modes of action, and coherent protection, prevention, and cooperation approaches, all of which should consider program sustainability. For example, encourage delegations to put in place processes to comply with the guiding principles on the ICRC's prevention approach.
- Review how the Planning for Results (PfR) and Monitoring for Results (MfR) documents can better support the transparency on, as well as the reporting and monitoring of these decisions. For example, field delegations may be required to make their choices explicit in their PfR document. For better monitoring of changes over time, reporting through the MfR and PfR should become more consistent, without frequent changes of indicators.

Strategic considerations for migration

Target audience: Department of Operations

Priority 3: Continue to support the ownership and appropriation of ICRC's refocus in the area of migration, visible in the recent palette of services and its July 2024 Orientations on the ICRC's refocused engagement on the protection of migrants. An upcoming opportunity for this is the development of the Global Action Plan for the implementation of the Movement Migration Strategy.

Continuity of engagement with specific program areas

Target audience: Heads of *Métiers*

Priority 1: Ensure remote support on Protection of Family Links casework, given that the ICRC will continue to cover Greece. To do so, allocate designated PFL and forensic time reporting on Greece.

Priority 2: Complement the Prevention Policy with instructions and guidance on operationalization, to support Delegations applying the policy throughout their sub-programs and to prioritize, over time, working on formal changes in procedures, regulations and law to increase the prospects of sustained improvements.

Priority 3: *Métiers* should ensure that country-level strategies are being created in line with institutional guidance, that they are updated when changes in context to require, and that they consider sustainability. For this, strategies should include success indicators and options for responsible exit.

1 ICRC, "The ICRC – Its Mission and Work" (2020), p. 12.

Cooperation engagement strategies

Target audience: Department of Mobilization, Movement and Partnerships

Priority 1: Review the ICRC's cooperation policy, and the relevant cooperation approach, to promote clearer demands for field operations regarding their cooperation with local partners, especially the operating National Societies.

Priority 2: Lead and document a 'lessons learned' exercise that identifies Movement approach and coordination related to challenges and best practices on issues regarding compliance with the Movement statutory regulatory framework based on previous experiences including that of the Athens Delegation. Include Operations in these reflections.

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