



# THROUGH HUMANITY TO PEACE

REFLECTIONS ON HUMANITARIAN ACTION  
AND PEACE FROM THE ICRC'S PRACTICE



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# ABOUT THIS REPORT

The number of armed conflicts globally is higher than ever and continues to rise. They have become harder to end and are increasingly lethal for civilians, causing unfathomable human suffering. Meanwhile, the risk of additional large-scale confrontation is fomenting fear and division. In light of this, in order to end and prevent such suffering, it is essential that the global community reinvest in international cooperation, conflict prevention and conflict resolution. Based on case studies conducted in Colombia, Northern Ireland and Yemen, and informed by academic and practitioner literature on the subject, this policy report explores the contribution of humanitarian action to prospects for peace in the operational experience of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC).

The project was led by Ariana Lopes Morey and carried out jointly with Avigail Shai, in the ICRC's Policy and Research Division. This work could not have been conducted without the support provided by the ICRC's delegations in Colombia, Northern Ireland and Yemen. We are deeply grateful to the people we met while conducting the case studies for their trust and for sharing their experiences with us, and to the representatives of organizations and authorities we consulted for sharing their perspectives.

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

All of the work of the ICRC, and of the International Red Cross Red Crescent Movement (the Movement) as a whole, is undertaken with the aim of protecting and promoting respect for human dignity. This is the essential goal of humanitarian action; it is also the foundation of sustainable peace.

While the ICRC is not a peacebuilding organization, it advocates for peace as a humanitarian institution intimately aware of the horrors of conflict. As conflicts become more numerous, prolonged and lethal, causing greater human suffering, the ICRC considers it a humanitarian imperative to make a renewed call for peace and to explore its own role in the ecosystem of actors that contribute to making peace possible.

This report brings together research on the ICRC's operational experience in Colombia, Northern Ireland and Yemen and research from recent academic and practitioner literature to explore the intersection of humanitarian action and efforts to build and maintain peace. While humanitarian principles limit the extent to which the ICRC (and other organizations) can engage directly in the political project of building peace, it is important to acknowledge that humanitarian organizations often remain present for years or even decades in prolonged conflicts and other crises, and they inevitably have an impact on the sociopolitical environment. The contribution, and the limitations, of humanitarian action to peace is therefore important to understand. This report shares the ICRC's reflections on how it contributes to the prospects for peace at the community, national and international levels. These reflections are aimed in turn at supporting more intentional engagement by the ICRC and other humanitarian organizations in the peace space while also acknowledging what goes beyond the role of humanitarian work.

The research illustrates that the ICRC contributes to prospects for peace in three main ways, and that these are connected and mutually reinforcing:

- First, when humanitarian work is designed and carried out together with, and informed by, communities, it can help restore trust between people and groups, provide alternatives to violence and support a peaceful shared vision for the future. While the ICRC's mandate and primary objectives are purely humanitarian, incorporating a conflict analysis and "do no harm" consideration into programming can serve the secondary objective of helping strengthen social cohesion.
- Second, through bilateral dialogue and humanitarian diplomacy work, the ICRC not only brings attention to pressing humanitarian concerns that may create obstacles to peace, but it can also help facilitate agreements to address those concerns and support the agreements' implementation. Relying on its long history of acting as a neutral intermediary, the ICRC can offer its legal and operational expertise, professional standards of operation and global logistical capacity to support formal and informal negotiation processes, helping to ensure that these processes are seen as credible and produce tangible outcomes. The ICRC leverages its dialogue with parties to conflicts, authorities, states and others with influence to ensure that attention is given to humanitarian concerns that, if left unattended, can obstruct progress towards peace. At times, providing a neutral and humanitarian space can bring parties together in direct communication when it would otherwise not be possible – a critical contribution to the possibility of achieving mediated solutions.
- Finally, by strengthening the knowledge, interpretation and application of international laws, and promoting respect for the norms that seek to protect human dignity, the ICRC supports a multilateral environment more conducive to peace. In this work, the organization draws on its front-line experience in responding to the impacts of conflict around the world, combined with its role as the reference organization on international humanitarian law (IHL). The ICRC works to ensure humanitarian principles are reflected in the activities of national, regional and multilateral institutions and to strengthen the capacities of those institutions, which contributes to respect for the rule of law and a more peaceful international environment.

Many of these activities are also carried out by other humanitarian organizations; thus, while this report is focused on the experience of the ICRC, its findings contribute to the reflections already being shared by others in this regard.

Working for an environment where peace can sustainably take hold is a humanitarian imperative – but making peace is not the responsibility of humanitarian organizations. While humanitarians can make important contributions, humanitarian action can never be a substitute for political solutions. The ICRC urges states to preserve fundamental norms aimed at preserving human dignity and to remember the consensus built on the desire “to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war”.<sup>1</sup> Armed conflicts are not inevitable; sustained political effort must be dedicated to their prevention and resolution. The ICRC calls for renewed political investment in peace as the best way to prevent the unspeakable suffering of war.



Benghazi, harbour (2011). People separated from their families by the conflict are reunited in operations carried out by the ICRC with support from the Libyan Red Crescent.

<sup>1</sup> Preamble to the United Nations (UN) Charter.

# INTRODUCTION

*From knowing war at close hand, the Red Cross understands better than anyone that war is inhuman, that it is just as contrary to charity as it is to justice, in that it does not necessarily lead to the victory of the righteous. There are few causes that are closer to its heart than the cause of peace.*

– J. Pictet<sup>2</sup>

War inflicts untold human suffering and devastation. But conflicts are not inevitable. The surest way to address the suffering they cause is to invest in peace by ending conflicts or preventing them from breaking out in the first place.

Yet the number of conflicts globally is trending upward; the ICRC has identified some 130 ongoing armed conflicts worldwide.<sup>3</sup> Conflicts are more protracted and internationalized and are taking an increasingly severe toll on civilians.<sup>4</sup> And conflicts are harder to end than at any point in the last 50 years.<sup>5</sup> Increasing polarization and geopolitical tensions indicate a real possibility that existing conflicts will intensify, and raise fears over the risk of additional large-scale armed conflict. Military spending continues to rise around the world, and public narratives which focus on competition and the potential for conflict further amplify fear and divisions.<sup>6</sup>

This is a worrying picture. It is further complicated by the apparent weakening or failure of existing multilateral, bilateral and private efforts aimed at preventing or resolving these conflicts. In some cases, there does not appear to be the political will to even try to resolve disputes. Indeed, humanitarian organizations, including the ICRC, often end up managing the impacts of protracted conflicts in the absence of the means or will to achieve sustainable political solutions.

Humanitarian action cannot be a substitute for political action, nor should humanitarian issues or the work of humanitarian organizations be politicized by parties to a conflict or others, including in the context of peace negotiations.

<sup>2</sup> J. Pictet, “The Fundamental Principles of the Red Cross (II)”, *International Review of the Red Cross* (IRRC), No. 211, Aug. 1979, pp. 184–197.

<sup>3</sup> The number of armed conflicts has been increasing more rapidly than the number of conflict-affected countries over the past decade, indicating an increase in countries hosting multiple simultaneous conflicts (S.A. Rustad, *Conflict Trends: A Global Overview, 1946–2024*, Peace Research Institute Oslo, Oslo, 2025). For an understanding of how the ICRC defines an armed conflict, see: ICRC, *How is the Term “Armed Conflict” Defined in International Humanitarian Law?*, ICRC, Geneva, 2024.

<sup>4</sup> Between 2015 and 2021 there was an observed trend of declining civilian deaths in conflict, but since 2022 that has reversed. UN data indicate that civilian deaths increased by 72 per cent from 2022 to 2023 (Center for Civilians in Conflict (CIVIC), *Protection of Civilians (POC) Trends Report*, CIVIC, Washington DC, 2024) and increased 40 per cent from 2023 to 2024 (UN Human Rights Innovation and Analytics Hub, *Human Rights Count: Delivering Insights with UN Human Rights Data*, UN Human Rights Innovation and Analytics Hub, Geneva, 2025). Other impacts of conflict on civilians have also increased, such as displacement, food insecurity and lack of access to health care.

<sup>5</sup> According to the Global Peace Index 2025, “conflicts that ended in a decisive victory fell from 49 per cent in the 1970s to nine per cent in the 2010s, while conflicts that ended through peace agreements fell from 23 per cent to four per cent over the same period” (Institute for Economics & Peace (IEP), *Global Peace Index 2025: Identifying and Measuring the Factors that Drive Peace*, IEP, Sydney, 2025, p. 2).

<sup>6</sup> Although the indicators of militarization had been improving for the first 16 years of the Global Peace Index’s measurement, the trend has now reversed, with increasing militarization seen in over 100 countries for the past two consecutive years (IEP, *Global Peace Index 2025*). Data also indicate that in 2024 world military expenditure increased for the 10th year in a row, and at the steepest rate year-on-year since the end of the Cold War; see: X. Liang, *et al.*, *Trends in World Military Expenditure, 2024*, Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), Stockholm, 2025.

At the same time, in practice many international humanitarian organizations, including the ICRC, are present for years and even decades in conflict-affected places, and their work often impacts on and intersects with peacemaking and peacebuilding efforts.<sup>7</sup> In the most direct sense, concrete progress on humanitarian issues can represent one step on the road to peace in the context of peace negotiations – and ignoring humanitarian issues can make it more difficult to achieve a peaceful settlement. More broadly speaking, in bearing witness to conflict's impacts on people, humanitarians call attention to the unbearable human cost of war and the need for negotiated, sustainable solutions.

A deeper understanding of the direct and indirect connections is therefore important to inform a more intentional engagement between entities involved in humanitarian and peace efforts, one that both ensures that the impacts of humanitarian action support peace rather than prolong conflict and strengthens peacemaking and peacebuilding efforts to effectively address humanitarian issues arising from conflict.

To contribute to these reflections, this report draws on first-hand research focused on Colombia, Northern Ireland and Yemen as well as on academic and practitioner literature. Based on over 115 interviews – with people living in conflict-affected areas, humanitarian organizations, mediators, peacebuilders, staff at the United Nations (UN) and non-governmental organizations, international experts and more – it explores the intersection between humanitarian action and efforts to build and maintain peace: it looks at how peace is conceptualized in literature as well as by local communities in each location, and assesses how humanitarian action may intersect with the ways in which peace is built there – including by exploring the possible negative impacts of humanitarian action.<sup>8</sup> The aim is not to assess how humanitarians and others can work more closely together to deliver peace outcomes, but to offer relevant reflections in order to support more intentional engagement by the ICRC and other humanitarian organizations in relation to efforts for peace.<sup>9</sup>

This does not mean the ICRC should or will weigh in on the politics of specific conflicts or peace processes – this would be inconsistent with the ICRC's commitment to neutrality. Yet as a humanitarian organization that has long witnessed the destruction and suffering caused by war, the ICRC has a responsibility not only to better understand its own contributions to the prospects for peace, but also to use its voice to call for peace.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Local humanitarian organizations, such as National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, are present before, during and after crises and are often intentionally engaged with sociopolitical efforts, including peacebuilding. This report focuses on the ICRC's experience as an international humanitarian organization.

<sup>8</sup> For more information on methodology, see the annex.

<sup>9</sup> Other reports and materials produced by the ICRC and partners look more closely at the opportunities and outstanding questions related to collaboration across the humanitarian-development-peace sectors. For example: ICRC, *Protracted Conflict and Humanitarian Action: Some Recent ICRC Experiences*, ICRC, Geneva, 2016; D. De Waal, et al., *Joining Forces to Combat Protracted Crises: Humanitarian and Development Support for Water Supply and Sanitation Providers in the Middle East and North Africa*, World Bank Group, Washington DC, 2021. See also: F. Schmitz-Guinote, "Q&A: The ICRC and the 'humanitarian-development-peace nexus' discussion", *IRRC*, No. 912, Nov. 2019, pp. 1051–1066.

<sup>10</sup> Indeed, the ICRC's Institutional Strategy 2024–2027 reaffirms the links between adherence to IHL, humanitarian principles and peace, the ICRC's ability to advocate for peace when the resort to war appears inevitable, and its ability to offer its services as a neutral intermediary in order to promote humanitarian aspects of conflict prevention and resolution (ICRC, *Institutional Strategy 2024–2027*, ICRC, Geneva, 2023, p. 3).

# A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE MOVEMENT AND PEACE

Peace is not a new subject for the Movement. For its part, because of its work in conflict settings, the ICRC has long been conscious of the need to mitigate the risk of prolonging or contributing to armed conflict through its presence, in line with the imperative to “do no harm” (see “Humanitarian Action and the ‘Do No Harm’ Principle”, p. 16).<sup>11</sup> At the same time, the commitment to work in accordance with the principle of neutrality limits the ICRC’s ability to work directly to build peace in armed conflict, which is ultimately a highly contested and political project.

The subject of peace, and whether and how the ICRC contributes to it, has therefore returned regularly to the organization’s legal, diplomatic and policy agenda, as well as being a regular subject of consideration by the Movement.<sup>12</sup> Since 1921, some 95 different resolutions related to peace have been passed through the Movement’s principal governing bodies, the Council of Delegates and the International Conference of the Red Cross and Red Crescent.<sup>13</sup> The latter adopts resolutions by consensus, signalling not only the Movement’s own aspirations but also the support of states as constituents. The most recent resolution on the topic of peace was passed at the Council of Delegates in October 2024, “Reaffirming the role of the Movement as a factor of peace”.<sup>14</sup>

In the first half of the 20th century, the Movement’s resolutions reflected the collective trauma caused by the devastating impact of two World Wars, and the desire to prevent suffering at such a scale in the future. An early resolution expresses conviction that the Movement will bring the support of its “moral force and prestige to the world movement towards comprehension and conciliation, the essential guarantees for the maintenance of peace, and will thus work efficaciously against war ...”.<sup>15</sup> Beyond the more idealistic statements, other resolutions specifically articulate the ways in which each Movement component may contribute to world peace. The most famous of these regarding the ICRC’s role is Resolution X from the XXth International Conference, held in Vienna in 1965. This resolution:

<sup>11</sup> “Do no harm” is a long-standing principle of humanitarian action by which humanitarian organizations commit to mitigating the possible unintended negative impacts of their presence, including the risk of prolonging conflict by bringing in resources to conflict settings and potentially contributing to the economy of war. It was articulated early on by M.B. Anderson (*Do No Harm: How Aid Can Support Peace – or War*, Lynne Rienner Publishers, Boulder, USA, 1999) and has also been developed in the work of F. Terry (*Condemned to Repeat?: The Paradox of Humanitarian Action*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, USA, 2002), among other practitioners and scholars. See the box on humanitarian action and the “do no harm” principle, below.

<sup>12</sup> The connection between the ICRC and early movements for peace is described in detail by D. Palmieri (“‘Si vis pacem, impera bellum’: The ICRC, international humanitarian law and peace”, *IRRC*, No. 927, March 2025, pp. 1023–1043).

<sup>13</sup> All past resolutions of the International Conference and the Council of Delegates are accessible online ([blogs.icrc.org/cross-files/international-conferences](https://blogs.icrc.org/cross-files/international-conferences)). The International Conference is the supreme deliberative body of the Movement, where the High Contracting Parties to the Geneva Conventions come together with the components of the Movement to discuss key matters of humanitarian concern and to make joint commitments. It is a unique, non-political forum in which the Movement components have the same voice as states. The International Conference aims to: contribute to adherence to and development of IHL; improve the safety, security and dignity of individuals by strengthening legal frameworks and policies; and, shape the global humanitarian agenda. See more at: [rcrcconference.org/about](https://rcrcconference.org/about). The Council of Delegates gathers all the components of the Movement to discuss matters concerning the Movement as a whole. The Council of Delegates sets common strategies and ensures alignment within the Movement on approaches to global humanitarian issues. See more at: [rcrcconference.org/council-of-delegate](https://rcrcconference.org/council-of-delegate).

<sup>14</sup> See: Council of Delegates, *Resolution: Reaffirming the Role of the Movement as a Factor of Peace*, CD/24/R7, International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, Geneva, 2024: [https://rcrcconference.org/app/uploads/2024/10/CoD24\\_R7-Res-Peace-EN.pdf](https://rcrcconference.org/app/uploads/2024/10/CoD24_R7-Res-Peace-EN.pdf), accessed 8 October 2025.

<sup>15</sup> Resolution XXV of the XIVth International Conference, Brussels, 1930.

*“encourages the International Committee of the Red Cross to undertake, in constant liaison with the United Nations and within the framework of its humanitarian mission, every effort likely to contribute to the prevention or settlement of possible armed conflicts, and to be associated, in agreement with the States concerned, with any appropriate measures to this end”.<sup>16</sup>*

Resolution X was passed in response to the ICRC’s action during the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962. At that time, the organization offered its services as a neutral intermediary to the secretary-general of the UN, with the hopes of supporting efforts to avoid nuclear confrontation between the United States and the Soviet Union.<sup>17</sup> The envisioned role, of verifying that Soviet ships were not carrying nuclear weapons, took the ICRC “clearly outside the conventional and traditional field of operation”,<sup>18</sup> and the decision was not taken without intense debate. In the end, the devastating human cost of a potential nuclear confrontation outweighed the possible risk to perceptions of the institution’s neutrality. Though the ICRC was finally not called on to play this role, at the International Conference in 1965 states affirmed the correctness of the ICRC’s action in those circumstances and considered it “desirable” that the ICRC act as an intermediary for the maintenance of peace.<sup>19</sup>

Shortly after this, in 1969, the International Conference passed Resolution XXI, further affirming the ICRC’s and National Societies’ roles in efforts to prevent or resolve conflict. This resolution states that:

*“in cases of armed conflicts or of situations that are a threat to peace the ICRC shall, if necessary, ask the representatives of the National Societies of the countries concerned to meet together or separately with the ICRC to study the resolution of humanitarian problems involved and in agreement with the Governments concerned to examine what contribution the Red Cross could make to preventing the outbreak of conflict or achieving a ceasefire or cessation of hostilities”.<sup>20</sup>*

Important examples of the Movement reflecting on its role in efforts to maintain peace over time include three round tables convened by the ICRC in 1933, and then in 1967 and 1969, to review the practical possibilities of making a contribution to the spirit of peace, and the World Red Cross Conference on Peace in 1975, which in turn led to the adoption by consensus of the Programme of Action of the Red Cross as a Factor of Peace. The Programme of Action identifies specific roles for the ICRC, International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) and National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies.<sup>21</sup> Among other activities which

<sup>16</sup> Resolution X of the XXth International Conference, Vienna 1965.

<sup>17</sup> T. Fischer, “The ICRC and the 1962 Cuban missile crisis”, *IRRC*, No. 842, June 2001, pp. 287–309.

<sup>18</sup> *Idem*, p. 294.

<sup>19</sup> In 1963, at the Centenary Congress, the ICRC submitted a detailed report entitled *The Red Cross as a Factor for World Peace*, which addressed the part it had been called upon to play during the crisis in the autumn of 1962. In regard to that role, the Council of Delegates in 1963 adopted Resolution XXIV, deeming it “desirable that the Committee respond to the call made upon it simultaneously by States in conflict to act as intermediary or assist in the proper discharge of the obligations they have undertaken, thus contributing to the maintenance of peace”. This was confirmed by states in 1965, in Resolution X, which noted Resolution XXIV of 1963 “with satisfaction” and reaffirmed the request of the ICRC. See: ICRC and League of Red Cross Societies, “The Red Cross and Peace”, *IRRC*, No. 203, March 1978, p. 77.

<sup>20</sup> Resolution XXI of the XXIst International Conference, Istanbul, 1969.

<sup>21</sup> “The International Committee of the Red Cross with or without League cooperation, is asked: 22.1 To ask representatives of National Societies to meet to discuss ways of solving humanitarian problems and, in accord with Governments concerned, to consider what the Red Cross could do to prevent the outbreak of conflict or bring about a ceasefire or cessation of hostilities. 22.2 In accordance with Resolution No. X of the XXth International Conference of the Red Cross (Vienna, October 1965), and if it believes such a course possible, to make a direct appeal to the Governments concerned and even to the Secretary-General of the United Nations when an armed conflict appears imminent.” League of Red Cross Societies, *Report of the League of Red Cross Societies on the World Red Cross Conference on Peace (Belgrade, 11–13 June 1975) and Programme of Action of the Red Cross as a Factor of Peace*, League of Red Cross Societies, Geneva, 1978: [https://library.icrc.org/library/docs/CI/PX\\_1975\\_002\\_ENG\\_002\\_LG.pdf](https://library.icrc.org/library/docs/CI/PX_1975_002_ENG_002_LG.pdf), accessed 8 Oct. 2025. For additional reflections from the Movement on the question of peace, see: ICRC and League of Red Cross Societies, “The Red Cross and Peace”.

the Movement considers a contribution to the spirit of peace, such as the promotion of the Fundamental Principles and of IHL, the ICRC's role to make humanitarian efforts towards conflict prevention or resolution, as articulated in Resolutions X (1965) and XXI (1969), was again reaffirmed in the Programme of Action.<sup>22</sup>

In another example, this time from the 1990s, of how this has been put into action, the ICRC had an important role in preventing the outbreak of renewed violence in Chiapas, Mexico, between the Zapatista National Liberation Army (*Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional*, EZLN) and the government. Relying on the acceptance of its presence and mandate, the ICRC acted as a neutral intermediary between the parties – at their request – in 1994 and again from 1998 to 2000, alongside its efforts to provide a humanitarian response together with the Mexican Red Cross. Specifically, the parties called upon the ICRC to establish a presence in “free zones”, where the organization's main role was that of a “guarantor of neutrality” – firstly, to enable federal medical staff to provide health services in safety in the EZLN-held region, and secondly to support and facilitate direct bilateral negotiations between the EZLN and the Mexican Peace Commission. The ICRC's presence as a guarantor was also critical to facilitating elections in the EZLN's territory once the parties agreed to this; without those elections, there was a high risk of major humanitarian consequences, such as a mass exodus of civilians or a resumption of armed hostilities.<sup>23</sup>

The value of the ICRC's contribution to peace has been recognized most publicly through the award of four Nobel Peace Prizes, the last of which was shared with the IFRC.<sup>24</sup> Less well known is that, since 1934, the ICRC has been mentioned in some 150 legal instruments promoting peace (for example, peace accords and ceasefire agreements) and National Societies have been mentioned in approximately 20.<sup>25</sup> The majority of the references to the ICRC relate to its mandate to work with detainees and prisoners of war, including to facilitate their release as part of the implementation of an agreement. Others refer to the ICRC's provision of technical support to authorities – for example, strengthening their forensics capacity to enable work on the identification and dignified return of mortal remains, or providing legal support in the interpretation and application of IHL, in order to help authorities fulfil their obligations in the aftermath of conflict. Still other references represent parties' commitment to respect the work of humanitarian organizations, including the ICRC, on behalf of the affected population. This is an acknowledgement that humanitarian work supports the rebuilding of the social fabric by helping to address ongoing suffering caused by conflict, which if left unaddressed can obstruct reconciliation and fuel grievances.<sup>26</sup>

In sum, the ICRC and the Movement have long been part of the broader ecosystem of entities and efforts for peace.

<sup>22</sup> *Idem*.

<sup>23</sup> See: B. Mégevand, “Entre insurrection et gouvernement: L'action du CICR au Mexique (janvier-août 1994)”, *IRRC*, No. 811, March 1995, pp. 107–121.

<sup>24</sup> The first Nobel Peace Prize ever was awarded to Henry Dunant, in 1901, in recognition of his efforts to bring humanitarian relief in wartime, including through the establishment of the ICRC. A second and third prize were awarded to the ICRC in 1917 and 1944. For further discussion on the ICRC's efforts – and shortcomings – during the World Wars, see, e.g.: D. Palmieri, “An institution standing the test of time? A review of 150 years of the history of the International Committee of the Red Cross”, *IRRC*, No. 888, Dec. 2012, pp. 1273–1298. Finally, a fourth Nobel Peace Prize was awarded in 1963 – to the ICRC and the IFRC jointly – at the 100th anniversary of the ICRC's founding. See: [www.nobelprize.org/prizes/peace/1963/red-cross/facts](http://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/peace/1963/red-cross/facts).

<sup>25</sup> Based on research conducted through public peace databases, including the Language of Peace Database by UN Peacemaker and the University of Cambridge, the Peace Accords Matrix by the Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies at the University of Notre Dame, and the Peace Agreements Database (PA-X) by the University of Edinburgh. Combined, these databases cover the timeframe from 1934 to 2024.

<sup>26</sup> For an exploration of how local humanitarian work contributes to prospects for peace in South Sudan, through the example of the South Sudan Red Cross, see: S. Bunse, C. Delgado and M. Riquier, *Towards Humanitarian Action that Intentionally Promotes Peace in South Sudan*, SIPRI, Stockholm, 2024.

# PEACE: THE CONCEPT AND ITS MEASUREMENT

There is no universally agreed definition of the term “peace” and no clear way for contributions to peace to be measured. Peace has been described in many ways, including as a continuum, an objective and a process.<sup>27</sup> While not exhaustive, this section briefly highlights some widely agreed theories on the concept and measurement of peace, based on a review of the academic and practitioner literature; these theories help frame the discussion of how humanitarian action can contribute to building and maintaining peace.

The most common distinction in the literature is that made between “negative peace” – understood as the absence of direct forms of violence, such as armed conflict – and “positive peace” – the more expansive notion, encompassing elimination of indirect violence to foster human potential and well-being.<sup>28</sup> Negative peace has traditionally been the dominant focus in peace literature, notably in literature from the Global North, likely because it is more easily quantified.<sup>29</sup> The Global Peace Index, for example, provides an evaluation of the “peacefulness” of countries based on indicators that measure various aspects of negative peace.<sup>30</sup> Still, despite the impossibility of quantifying or defining it comprehensively, positive peace has become widely accepted as the more relevant concept, as it allows for a more holistic representation of individuals’ and communities’ experiences and priorities and enables differentiation of the quality of peace that exists in countries with no armed conflict but with very different domestic environments.<sup>31</sup>

Positive peace has been described as the “attitudes, institutions and structures that create and sustain peaceful societies”.<sup>32</sup> Given the breadth of the concept, positive peace is often discussed by practitioners and academics alike in terms of the actions or conditions required to achieve it, for example, promoting and respecting human rights and the rule of law, strengthening institutional legitimacy and inclusive governance, and providing for justice and accountability, among others.<sup>33</sup> From a humanitarian perspective, the focus on attitudes, institutions and structures highlights that aspects of positive peace can be strengthened

27 See for example: P. Diehl, “Exploring peace: Looking beyond war and negative peace”, *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 60, No. 1, March 2016, pp. 1–10; C. Davenport, E. Melander and P. Regan, *The Peace Continuum: What It Is and How to Study It*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2018; P.F. Diehl, G. Goertz and Y. Gallegos, “Peace data: Concept, measurement, patterns, and research agenda”, *Conflict Management and Peace Science*, Vol. 38, No. 5, Sept. 2021, pp. 605–624; R. Caplan, *Measuring Peace: Principles, Practices, and Politics*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2019.

28 The concepts are widely attributed to Johann Galtung and were further developed by Quincy Wright. There is some discussion of which forms of violence should be considered in the notion of negative peace, and whether it should include, for example, psychological or structural violence. There is however consensus that it should refer at a minimum to the absence of all physical forms of violence (sometimes called the “minimalist” approach to negative peace). Davenport, Melander and Regan, *The Peace Continuum*; P. Firchow and R. Mac Ginty, “Measuring peace: Comparability, commensurability, and complementarity using bottom-up indicators”, *International Studies Review*, Vol. 19, No. 1, March 2017, pp. 6–27.

29 N.P. Gleditsch, J. Nordkvelle and H. Strand, “Peace research – just the study of war?”, *Journal of Peace Research*, Vol. 51, No. 2, March 2014, p. 155; Diehl, “Exploring peace”, p. 4. Diehl asserts that authors in the Global South have given greater attention to positive peace in scholarship than authors in the Global North, and notes a relative disinterest in the Global North in concepts of inner or spiritual peace.

30 Including, for example, access to small arms, domestic and international conflict, terrorism, weapon imports and military expenditure (IEP, *Global Peace Index 2025*).

31 Such as North Korea and Sweden. See: Diehl, “Exploring peace”.

32 IEP, *Positive Peace Report 2024: Analysing the Factors that Build, Predict and Sustain Peace*, IEP, Sydney, 2024.

33 Caplan’s *Measuring Peace*, for example, asserts that “ideas (about peace) and practices (of peacebuilding) ... may be mutually constitutive” such that practitioners often define and measure peace with reference to their professional role and mandate (p. 32). This is seen also in the way that some practitioner organizations describe their areas of work as constituent parts of peace, for example: the International Labour Organization describing [peace as necessarily based on social justice, including employment and decent work](#), and the World Food Programme highlighting [food assistance as a pathway to peace](#).



Valle del Cauca, Colombia (2011). This school is “protected” by white flags that signify the community doesn’t want armed actors in the area.

while conflict is ongoing, even in the absence of traditional peacemaking efforts; these are often areas where humanitarian work intersects with efforts to build peace.

Another commonly cited element of peace from the practitioner literature is its multidimensional and multi-levelled nature. The distinction made between the notions of “big P” peace – which puts the attention on high-level political agreements and processes – and “little p” peace – which focuses on bottom-up, grass-roots work – is a commonly-used framing that brings attention to the many entities that must be involved, and at various levels, in defining, measuring and building peace.<sup>34</sup> Peace cannot be achieved at one level alone or by one type of entity if it is to be sustainable, and the efforts made at different levels must be connected and mutually reinforcing in order to be sustainable and effective. Research indicates that top-down approaches focused solely on institution-building and governance, for example, are less effective than those integrating bottom-up work and local ownership.<sup>35</sup> And peace agreements negotiated between parties must address the impacts of conflict on communities and provide them with tangible improvements in order to enjoy widespread support and legitimacy.

<sup>34</sup> Firchow (*Reclaiming Everyday Peace: Local Voices in Measurement and Evaluation after War*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2018) introduced the concepts of “big P” and “small p” peacebuilding, and these terms have been taken up by practitioner organizations like the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC, *Exploring Peace within the Humanitarian-Development-Peace Nexus (HDPN)*, IASC, Geneva, 2020) and Interpeace (*Peace Responsiveness: Delivering on the Promise of Sustaining Peace and the Humanitarian-Development-Peace Nexus*, Interpeace, Geneva, 2021). This distinction aligns with similar distinctions made between “Track 1” peacebuilding (the high-level negotiation process carried out at the top level, often with international endorsement or facilitation) and Tracks 1.5 (top-level but informal processes), 2 (with influential figures from academia, religious groups, and more) and 3 (grassroots-level). See for example: German Federal Foreign Office and Initiative Mediation Support Deutschland (IMSD), *Basics of Mediation: Concepts and Definitions*, Federal Foreign Office / IMSD, Berlin, 2017.

<sup>35</sup> K.M. Osland and M. Peter, “UN peace operations in a multipolar order: Building peace through the rule of law and bottom-up approaches”, *Contemporary Security Policy*, Vol. 42, No. 2, March 2021, pp. 197–210.

Indeed, more recent academic and practitioner literature has also highlighted the importance of articulating definitions of peace that are specific to and reflective of the experience of local communities, highlighting that there can be no single, global definition of peace that will be valid for all people.<sup>36</sup> Work by organizations and projects such as the Everyday Peace Indicators (EPI) highlight the significant differences that may exist regarding the notion of peace even among communities in the same country or region.<sup>37</sup> International practitioners, who have been characterized by one author as “beholders” of peace, must be cautious not to impose a definition of the concept, nor a methodology for how to achieve or measure it, on those who are to be the “owners” of the peace.<sup>38</sup>

For the ICRC, as an institution with an international legal identity, a first reference point in the consideration of peace is the law. IHL clearly sets out criteria for establishing the existence of an armed conflict, but there is no similar way to establish the existence of peace. While it would be simplest to define peace as the absence of armed conflict within the meaning of IHL, this approach would not accurately reflect the needs, perspectives and experiences of people affected by armed conflict or other violence, who are at the heart of the ICRC’s work and for whom peace is a much more expansive and varied notion. Nor, as seen from the above, would it accurately reflect the literature on the topic.

As part of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, the ICRC uses the definition of peace found in the Statutes of the Movement:

*“...by its humanitarian work and the dissemination of its ideals, the Movement promotes a lasting peace, which is not simply the absence of war, but is a dynamic process of cooperation among all States and peoples, cooperation founded on respect for freedom, independence, national sovereignty, equality, human rights, as well as on a fair and equitable distribution of resources to meet the needs of peoples.”<sup>39</sup>*

The definition acknowledges that lasting peace is not a static condition but requires ongoing collective work; it is not limited to interstate relationships but also considers cooperation between peoples; its foundation is in the respect for human rights and dignity, and it is achieved in part by ensuring that the needs of all people are met.

<sup>36</sup> For example, Firchow and Mac Ginty, “Measuring Peace”.

<sup>37</sup> EPI utilizes participatory methodology to identify indicators that communities use to assess peace and conflict in their location. The choice of indicators helps reveal community priorities and how communities see their own experiences. The data collected by EPI are therefore complementary to top-down peace efforts. See: <https://everydaypeaceindicators.org>.

<sup>38</sup> F. Olonisakin, “Measuring peace: ‘Beholders’ versus ‘owners’ of peace?”, *Ethnopolitics*, Vol. 19, No. 3, May 2020, pp. 324–328. On the importance of local ownership and community involvement in all aspects of peacebuilding, especially in defining peacebuilding’s aims and objectives, see also: C. De Coning, “Adaptive peacebuilding”, *International Affairs*, Vol. 94, No. 2, March 2018, pp. 301–317.

<sup>39</sup> Statutes of the Movement (adopted by the 25th International Conference at Geneva in 1986, amended in 1995 and 2006).

# THE ICRC'S CONTRIBUTION TO PROSPECTS FOR PEACE

Taking the Movement's definition together with the elements of peace noted above, the ICRC developed an analytical framework for reflecting on the primary ways in which its activities contribute to an environment conducive to peace. The actions fall into three broad, mutually reinforcing and complementary categories, at the local, national and international levels:

- working with communities based on “do no harm” considerations and informed by conflict analysis, *which can strengthen cohesion and complement grassroots peacebuilding efforts*
- facilitating humanitarian dialogue between parties to a conflict and with other authorities and influential actors, *which can support formal and informal peacemaking and peacebuilding processes*
- promoting respect for laws and norms that centre the protection of human dignity, *which contributes to national, regional and global environments in which peace is more likely.*

The ICRC speaks of “its contribution to an environment conducive to peace” or of “prospects for peace”, acknowledging that peacebuilding is not the mandate of the organization nor its main objective. The language further acknowledges that there are a multitude of actors and influences that may contribute to or undermine the prospects for peace, and it is impossible to draw conclusions about the impact of any one entity on specific outcomes. Finally, drawing on research into its own history and operational experience, the ICRC recognizes that many of the actions explored here are also undertaken by others involved in humanitarian, development and peace work at various levels, and the conclusions drawn may also be relevant to them.

## STRENGTHENING SOCIAL COHESION

For peace to be sustainable and meaningful for people, it must be felt at a local level, responding to the needs and lived realities of individuals and communities. As identified by people affected by conflict, the peace literature and practitioners, one important component of peace is the degree of social cohesion in societies affected by or transitioning out of conflict. Social cohesion is inherently relational. It is reflected in relationships at different levels, both between individuals and groups and between communities and institutions of the state. Strengthening social cohesion can help repair harms experienced during conflict, and it can also help prevent a slide into future cycles of violence.<sup>40</sup>

There is growing effort to reflect on how humanitarian work can contribute positively to social cohesion.<sup>41</sup> Many international humanitarian organizations, including the ICRC, work closely with local communities, often for long periods of time. A critical element of doing such work well is to have a nuanced understanding of the dynamics of a conflict (often called a “conflict-sensitivity analysis”) in order to mitigate the risk that humanitarian organizations may contribute to, or exacerbate, tensions in the communities where they work. This is a minimum requirement of humanitarian programming as part of the “do no harm” approach.

<sup>40</sup> Interpeace, *How Humanitarian Response Can Strengthen Resilience to Violent Conflict and End Need: Insights and Recommendations*, Interpeace, Geneva, 2016. It is important to note also that the umbrella term of “social cohesion” is used to describe a very broad concept that is constantly changing and that humanitarian work contributes in a relatively limited way to it, as noted in S. Levine (“There’s no such thing as social cohesion! What aid actors need to understand about the social relations of displaced people”, ODI Global, 4 Jan. 2024).

<sup>41</sup> Peacebuilding organizations often refer to this as “peace responsiveness”. See for example: Interpeace, *Peace Responsiveness*.

The ICRC is present, often for decades, in communities on all sides of a conflict's front lines, undertaking humanitarian protection and assistance work designed to mitigate human suffering. Strengthening social cohesion is not an objective in itself, but the organization often integrates a social-cohesion analysis in its work to improve the quality and impact of its programming. Integrating such analyses can also amplify and contribute to peacebuilding and, indeed, in some cases it may be difficult to distinguish humanitarian work from community-based peace work at this level. The principal – and critical – distinction for the ICRC is that humanitarian programming must always retain the primary objective of meeting identified humanitarian needs, and in a way that reaffirms the organization's neutrality, which is an essential principle that enables acceptance of the ICRC's work. The evaluation of humanitarian needs must be done independently, and assistance cannot be made contingent on integrating or achieving peace outcomes. Consideration must also be given to perception risks for humanitarian organizations if they are seen by armed groups to be implementing a peace agenda rather than a humanitarian one.

### HUMANITARIAN ACTION AND THE “DO NO HARM” PRINCIPLE

The “do no harm” principle, which derives from medical ethics, describes the obligation to minimize and prevent the inadvertent harm that one's actions may cause. Despite intentions to alleviate suffering, humanitarian organizations can also inadvertently have significant negative impacts on the communities and environments in which they work, including a negative impact on the prospects for peace. This includes the ICRC's humanitarian work. Various studies have been conducted in past decades to explore the negative impacts of humanitarian and development aid in order to inform organizations' efforts to address them.<sup>42</sup> Risks include inadvertently fuelling the political economy of war, contributing to aid dependency among communities, and adopting strategies that meet human needs but have a negative impact on the natural environment with long-term implications, to name just a few.

While the intention to do no harm appears straightforward, it is complex in practice, requiring a careful analysis of the interplay of various actors, influences and variables in a rapidly changing environment. It requires an evaluation of both short- and long-term predicted impacts of one's actions and the difficult choices of what and how to prioritize: is a short-term, life-saving intervention acceptable if it reinforces aid dependency? Is an urgent food distribution justifiable if it potentially contributes to the political economy of war? What kinds of risk-mitigation measures have a chance of success, and how much would they take from already strained budgets? These are rarely easy decisions. The “do no harm” principle helps organizations to articulate and frame their efforts, from the field to headquarters, to mitigate the unintended negative impacts of their work to the best of their ability, knowing it will never be possible to truly do no harm. In addition to these efforts, it is important to try to maximize the positive impact humanitarian action can have, informed by the same risk assessment and complemented by an evaluation of opportunities and knowledge of best practices, to which this report aims to contribute.

In practice, in addition to its protection and conflict-sensitivity analysis, the ICRC has tools (e.g. individual and household-level surveys designed to draw out data on cohesion, inclusion and sources of community support) that integrate social-cohesion considerations which it can use when designing programming.<sup>43</sup> Where existing social cohesion is strong, the ICRC has an opportunity to capitalize on social ties to build a sustainable impact. On the other hand, a low level of social cohesion might lead the ICRC to engage differently,

<sup>42</sup> For examples, one recent review analysing 36 development and humanitarian aid initiatives since 2001 assessed the likelihood of aid contributing to heightened risk of violence in conflict-affected states. See: C. Zürcher, *The Impact of Development Aid on Organised Violence: A Systematic Assessment*, International Initiative for Impact Evaluation, New Delhi, 2020.

<sup>43</sup> An overview of the social cohesion and inclusion tool that the ICRC uses can be found in: ICRC, *Economic Security Indicators Cookbook*, ICRC, Geneva, 2021, pp. 302–307. The tool provides guidance and indicators, which are to be adapted to the specificities of the circumstances.

analysing the drivers and impact of fragmentation to see how its economic security, water and sanitation, health or other programmes might help to build greater cohesion. Such programmes tend to focus on practical shared objectives, such as improving the management of shared resources, establishing mechanisms for dialogue or building socio-economic resilience. Often, these programmes are undertaken in cooperation with National Societies, which maintain an ongoing presence in their communities and can strengthen the underlying analysis, as well as the reach and effectiveness of programming.

For example, in Casamance, Senegal, the ICRC worked with communities in two villages that were affected by both national conflict dynamics and the exacerbating impact of environmental degradation associated with climate change. Both villages were exposed to risks from weapon bearers present in the surrounding area, and at the same time were struggling to maintain traditional farming and pastoralist practices owing to increased salination of agricultural land. This meant reduced availability of both food and fodder for livestock – and increased competition for scarce resources. At the time work began in 2019, the two communities described a total breakdown in relations and in some cases even violent confrontation between them. Supported by the Senegalese Red Cross Society, the ICRC helped to facilitate negotiations over many months, first to understand the communities' humanitarian needs and then to reach a community-led and -owned agreement on how to address them. Based on a strong conflict-sensitivity and protection analysis, a project for the joint construction of dykes in both villages was developed. The programme provided people from both villages with a source of income, more reliable water access, improved harvests and slowed salination of arable land; and by engaging in negotiations and carrying out the construction work together, community members also perceived relationships between them to be restored and trust improved.

In Colombia, the ICRC's presence in remote communities that are highly affected by conflict and underserved by state institutions has enabled the organization to provide a range of support that contributes to both strengthened ties between communities and a strengthened social contract between communities and the state (see "Spotlight: The ICRC in Colombia", p. 25). Some of its work is done in partnership with the Colombian Red Cross, which has been actively supporting peacebuilding in Colombia since the 2016 accord.<sup>44</sup> Among other work, the Colombian Red Cross has provided support for the training and reintegration of former Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) combatants with pre-existing medical education; the former fighters then take up work in health outposts in remote, underserved areas where conflict-affected communities lack access to health care. As part of these efforts, it is important to ensure that communities are properly consulted and accept the presence of demobilized fighters in their area, and that the safety of demobilized fighters is also considered, as they have at times been the targets of revenge violence.

In situations of post-conflict transition, unresolved issues between communities can increase the chances that conflict re-emerges or that violence will be used to resolve differences. In such cases, facilitating dialogue and work to re-establish social bonds can help to prevent such violence and to consolidate peace, by reducing tensions and building understanding of shared challenges. The ICRC's work in post-conflict Northern Ireland provides an interesting example (see the following section, "Spotlight: The ICRC in Northern Ireland").

The ICRC's presence in communities provides it with a deep understanding of the humanitarian impacts of conflict on peoples' lives, an understanding which it can draw on in its dialogue with parties to conflict and other stakeholders, and which guide its work to strengthen respect for the laws and norms that protect human dignity. These aspects are explored in more detail below.

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<sup>44</sup> The Colombian Red Cross has adopted a Peacebuilding Policy (2018) that outlines its vision for this work.



## SPOTLIGHT: THE ICRC IN NORTHERN IRELAND

The Belfast/Good Friday Agreement, signed in 1998, is widely regarded as a landmark success in bringing the three-decade-long conflict in Northern Ireland to an end. Yet questions persist about the extent to which the agreement fully addressed the drivers and impacts of the conflict, including: ongoing sectarian divisions; limited socio-economic prospects for marginalized communities; the transition of remaining armed groups; and legacy issues around truth and justice.<sup>45</sup> The Belfast/Good Friday Agreement was described by a high-level interlocutor with first-hand knowledge of the negotiations as “a magnificent achievement, but one that ended the war, not the conflict. A formula was found to stop people killing each other but not to understand each other.”<sup>46</sup>

While a diverse range of those interviewed agreed that Northern Ireland was post-conflict, there was consensus that the peace in Northern Ireland was incomplete: many communities had not seen a clear peace dividend (citing, for example, ongoing segregated schooling, the lack of a truth and reconciliation process, poor socio-economic indicators for working-class nationalist and unionist communities, and specific gendered impacts of the conflict), providing ground for grievances – and sectarian violence – to continue.

Following extensive consultations, the ICRC opened its office in Belfast in 2011 in order to respond to the ongoing humanitarian impacts of sectarian violence, based on its humanitarian right of initiative.<sup>47</sup> It had a previous history of visiting detainees in Northern Ireland, particularly during the 1970s and 1980s, which provided it with a strong understanding of community-level dynamics (though the visits ended by 1999).<sup>48</sup> Its work from 2011 onward was from the beginning limited to those areas where it could make a distinct contribution based on its mandate and expertise: supporting community-based protection, engaging with armed groups and authorities on humanitarian concerns, working in detention and on missing people, and cooperating with the British and Irish National Societies.

Community-based work has been and continues to be key to building a more lasting peace in Northern Ireland. Recognizing the important work of an active civil society, the ICRC identified existing community organizations already engaged in mediation, and provided conceptual tools, training and financial support to amplify their work for violence prevention, which addressed humanitarian impacts while also improving

<sup>45</sup> See e.g.: R. O’Connell, F. Ní Aoláin and L. Malagón, “The Belfast/Good Friday Agreement and transformative change: promise, power and solidarity”, *Israel Law Review*, Vol. 57, No. 1, May 2023, pp. 4–36; G. Davies, *Supporting Communities’ Humanitarian, Protection and Peace Mediation in Northern Ireland*, ODI Global, London, 2025.

<sup>46</sup> ICRC interview, Northern Ireland, 19 April 2025.

<sup>47</sup> G. Loane, “A new challenge or a new role? The ICRC in Northern Ireland”, *IRRC*, No. 888, Dec. 2012, pp. 1481–1502.

<sup>48</sup> Prior to the onset of the conflict, known as the “Troubles”, the ICRC had carried out detention visits in Northern Ireland and Ireland as early as 1923. See: F. Perret and F. Bugnion, *History of the International Committee of the Red Cross*, Vol. 4: *From Budapest to Saigon, 1956–1965*, ICRC, Geneva, 2018.



the prospects for sustainable peace.<sup>49</sup> One community-based mediator reflected: “I had very black and white views when I started [the mediation work]. But through the practice and training in [humanitarian] mediation, I saw that it got results – using the humanitarian principles, looking for the good in people”.<sup>50</sup> The ICRC worked to build rapport with these organizations from both communities, hosting a neutral space in which they could come together to address specific incidents or risks of communal violence using an agreed humanitarian framework for dialogue. People remarked that the ICRC’s provision of an alternative, purely humanitarian framing for conversations helped community groups to overcome entrenched positions and find mediated solutions to tensions between or within communities. A colleague from the British Red Cross who saw this work in action noted: “You have to see it to believe it, to grasp the meaning of it – how these totally opposing groups come together and become willing to exchange, share, build a relationship.”

The mediation spaces had real protective impact, in many cases preventing escalation of violence, and, in some cases, saving lives. Here the combination of local and international organizations was important. The community-based actors had the deep contextual knowledge, but often received no technical or financial support to develop and maintain their capacities; and the support and presence of the ICRC, as an international organization, provided greater visibility and credibility, which helped local actors to feel better protected to engage in mediation work with groups that are the subjects of domestic criminal and counter-terrorism legislation. The ICRC complemented its support to community-led efforts by engaging directly with armed groups in protection dialogue on humanitarian principles and legal obligations and by addressing outstanding humanitarian issues with authorities in order to inform more systemic change at the policy level.

While the ICRC ceased financial support to community groups in 2022 and made a phased withdrawal in 2024 from direct operations, it continues to foster peer-to-peer support, including by establishing the Frontline Humanitarian Negotiators Network to ensure sustainable humanitarian negotiation and mediation services for communities. It also continues to engage community groups, armed groups and authorities on humanitarian issues of concern, and to work with the National Societies. There is still a long road ahead to strengthening lasting, meaningful peace for people in Northern Ireland. In the words of one diplomat, “the key lesson is that peace is not an event, it’s the work of generations.”<sup>51</sup>

Interviewees recognized that as a humanitarian organization the ICRC could not, and should not, continue its presence indefinitely, yet they saw the value in its remaining engaged in a limited capacity to support efforts to address outstanding humanitarian issues as a neutral international organization in a highly polarized environment. It was able to make an important contribution to the environment in which peace is being built based on the recognition of its principles, mandate, expertise and deep understanding of ongoing humanitarian issues, informed by its work in detention and its long-term community engagement.

<sup>49</sup> Research conducted for this report, further supported by Davies, *Supporting Communities’ Humanitarian, Protection and Peace Mediation in Northern Ireland*.

<sup>50</sup> ICRC interview, Northern Ireland, 22 April 2024.

<sup>51</sup> ICRC interview, Northern Ireland, 23 April 2024.

## A HUMANITARIAN VOICE IN THE POLITICAL ARENA

It is widely agreed that humanitarian issues can serve as entry points and confidence-building measures for peace talks because they aim to reduce suffering and address harms that are experienced by people on all sides of a conflict. These issues can bring parties to the table and – when addressed successfully – may increase trust in an existing process and enable progress on more contentious political issues. Moreover, humanitarian concerns must be addressed in order to mitigate the grievances that can fuel conflict and prevent sustainable resolution. As one civil society representative put it, “there won’t be peace unless humanitarian issues are dealt with.”<sup>52</sup>

Humanitarians advocate for an idea of what is “right” based on the principle that every person has inherent human dignity that must be protected even in the most challenging times. Along with international human rights law, IHL represents the articulation of this fundamental belief and as such is a profoundly moral body of law that echoes views from around the world; its content and unifying purpose reflect many pre-existing codes of warfare and cultural norms. It is by respecting the humanity of others that we preserve our own. And because respect for human dignity is and must be central to prospects for sustainable peace, humanitarian organizations’ efforts to ensure attention to humanitarian issues at the political level – including providing expertise on their resolution, and facilitating agreements the parties reach – are another important contribution.

### The Role of Neutral Intermediary

Perhaps the most well-known role the ICRC plays at the political level is its work as a neutral intermediary. With the agreement of the parties to a conflict, the ICRC can serve as a neutral intermediary providing its good offices to facilitate the resolution of disputes, help implement an agreement or otherwise facilitate communication between the parties.

The Geneva Conventions assign the ICRC specific roles as a neutral humanitarian organization.<sup>53</sup> They also explicitly reserve the right of any impartial humanitarian organization, including the ICRC, to offer its services to the parties to the conflict.<sup>54</sup> Additionally, the Statutes of the Movement, which were adopted by the International Conference – and by states as its members – reaffirm the ICRC’s specific role as a neutral intermediary in Article 5(3): “The International Committee may take any humanitarian initiative which comes within its role as a specifically neutral and independent institution and intermediary, and may consider any question requiring examination by such an institution.”<sup>55</sup>

The ICRC has been playing the role of a neutral intermediary almost since its creation. As early as 1870, the ICRC set up the Basel agency to exchange information on prisoners held by belligerents in the Franco-Prussian war.<sup>56</sup> Since then, the ICRC’s work as a neutral intermediary has taken many forms, from participation in mechanisms established for the search of missing people, to the negotiation of safe or “neutralized” zones for the protection of medical activities, to the evacuation of the wounded and sick.<sup>57</sup>

The ICRC evaluates on a case-by-case basis the role it might play as an intermediary to mitigate the suffering caused by conflict and, in some cases, to support the resolution of conflict in line with its mandate. In addition to facilitating humanitarian aspects of agreements that parties reach among themselves, the ICRC may make substantive proposals for agreement in its areas of expertise, such as processes to address the risks of people going missing and to search for them, or the treatment and conditions of release of detainees and prisoners of war. Its commitment to humanitarian principles, long experience, established professional standards, operational and logistical capacity, and recognized role as the reference organization on IHL have been highlighted as some of the reasons why it is trusted to act in this capacity in conflicts around the world.

<sup>52</sup> ICRC interview, Northern Ireland, 24 April 2024.

<sup>53</sup> For example, the ICRC’s Central Tracing Agency is mandated under the Third and Fourth Geneva Conventions to collect and forward information on protected persons falling into the hands of a party to an international armed conflict. By collecting and sending information between parties to an international armed conflict, the Central Tracing Agency serves as a neutral intermediary and trusted repository of information. See also: H. Obregón Gieseken and X. Londoño, “Looking for answers: Accounting for the separated, missing and dead in international armed conflicts”, *Humanitarian Law & Policy*, 11 April 2022.

<sup>54</sup> GC I–IV, Art. 9/9/9/10. In addition, Art. 23 (GC I), Art. 14 (GC IV) and Art. 60(2) (AP I), for example, explicitly refer to the ICRC’s role as a neutral intermediary providing good offices.

<sup>55</sup> See footnote 38.

<sup>56</sup> C. Cotter, “The ICRC as a neutral intermediary: Historical and contemporary perspectives”, *Cross-Files*, 24 March 2022.

<sup>57</sup> A historical overview and further examples can be found in Cotter, “The ICRC as a neutral intermediary”.



Marib, airport (2023). Operation of release and repatriation of persons detained in connection with the conflict in Yemen.

One example comes from Yemen. There, the Office of the Special Envoy of the Secretary-General for Yemen (OSES-GY) proposed the negotiation of an agreement for an all-prisoner exchange between the parties to the conflict. The resulting Prisoner Exchange Agreement (PEA) was later integrated into the Stockholm Agreement of December 2018, although it had been negotiated in advance as a confidence-building measure in the lead-up to more substantive peace talks. Once the parties had agreed to engage in prisoner releases, the ICRC was invited to support the implementation of the agreement as an organization with a mandate to work in detention, operational presence in the country, protection expertise with respect to release operations, and the acceptance of the parties involved. There were clear humanitarian reasons to be involved, in addition to which the ICRC shared the hope that progress on the PEA would enable progress on more comprehensive efforts for conflict resolution and ease some of the suffering caused by more than ten years of conflict. The platform for negotiation established by the PEA remains the only mechanism that brings parties into direct communication and which they invoke themselves, maintaining a vital thread of communication which has resulted in two large prisoner-release operations that provided a sense of hope to Yemenis (see the following section, “Spotlight: The ICRC in Yemen”).

Another example is the preliminary agreement between the government of Colombia and the FARC on the issue of missing people. It was negotiated in October 2015 with the parties’ aim of building confidence in the ongoing peace process that would lead to the final, comprehensive peace accord in 2016 (see “Spotlight: The ICRC in Colombia”, p. 25). The issue affected some 100,000 families who, represented by victims’ organizations, had made clear that this issue, and others that most affected victims of the decades of conflict, needed to be addressed in the peace processes for them to be seen as legitimate.<sup>58</sup> Addressing the question outside of the formal talks was seen as a way to protect the political process if the humanitarian negotiations were to stall or become compromised.<sup>59</sup> Both Colombian representatives and international guarantors of the negotiation on the missing noted the value of the ICRC’s participation in these parallel talks, given that the organization is a technical expert body with a widespread presence whose involvement increased the trust of both parties in the negotiation space. This is reflected in the content of the agreement, which notes the request to the ICRC for its support in designing and implementing work plans for the search for, identification of and dignified return of remains of missing people to their family members.<sup>60</sup>

<sup>58</sup> Figure from the data collected by the Unit for the Search for the Missing (*Unidad de Búsqueda de Personas Dadas por Desaparecidas*): [unidadbusqueda.gov.co/listado-personas-desaparecidas](https://unidadbusqueda.gov.co/listado-personas-desaparecidas).

<sup>59</sup> ICRC interview, Bogotá, 7 Feb. 2025.

<sup>60</sup> “... We have agreed to request the support of the International Committee of the Red Cross in the design and implementation of special humanitarian plans for the search, location, identification and dignified return of remains to family members” (translated by author). Government of Colombia and FARC-EP, *Comunicado Conjunto #62* [Joint Communiqué No. 62], Government of Colombia / FARC-EP, Havana, 17 Oct. 2015.

## SPOTLIGHT: THE ICRC IN YEMEN

When asked about the meaning of or requirements for peace, Yemeni people highlight many issues: security and stability, the ability to live without fear and anxiety, freedom of expression and of movement, eradication of structural violence fomented by the conflict, rebuilding of Yemen's infrastructure, the release of people detained in relation to the conflict, the opening of roads throughout the country, resumption of the payment of public servants' salaries, and the alleviation of food insecurity and other basic needs.<sup>61</sup> Perceptions of peace are similar between women and men; differences are seen more often according to region and the conditions in the areas where respondents live. Importantly, Yemenis consistently highlight that building peace requires a much more inclusive process than has been seen so far. Many note that even the language of peace can be perceived as serving the agendas of foreign organizations and elites rather than Yemeni society.<sup>62</sup> And women, who play a fundamental role in contributing to mediation, social cohesion and de-escalation in various ways, continue to be critically under-represented in peace talks.<sup>63</sup>

The ICRC has been present in Yemen since 1962, when it offered medical assistance and visited prisoners of war in the context of the North Yemen Civil War. Its long history in the country is one of the most important factors in its acceptance by communities and parties to the conflict today, facilitating its physical presence across the country. The ICRC undertakes a range of humanitarian operations for people affected by armed conflict in the country, such as support to health facilities and the provision of food, essential household items, cash assistance, livelihood support and livestock vaccinations.<sup>64</sup> There are clear connections between the ICRC's range of humanitarian activities and the humanitarian aspects of peace described by Yemenis, from rebuilding infrastructure to meeting basic needs.

The focus of this case study was on the PEA – one part of the Stockholm Agreement.<sup>65</sup> While the Stockholm Agreement is not a peace accord, it was a notable mediated achievement in a complex and high-intensity conflict and a good example of how humanitarian issues can act as entry points for negotiation and dialogue. The Stockholm Agreement has three tracks that address what were seen as urgent humanitarian issues at the time, and which were intended to support confidence-building between the parties for future talks: i) the exchange of all prisoners – including those arbitrarily detained and others held in relation to the conflict; ii) a cease-fire in Hodeida to enable restored use of the ports (in order to prevent imminent famine); and iii) addressing the humanitarian situation of Ta'iz. The PEA was in fact negotiated in late 2017 and was intended to support progress in negotiations on the latter two issues. One interlocutor with first-hand knowledge felt that it was successful in that regard, as it “helped move the needle on getting agreement on the rest”.<sup>66</sup>

Once the PEA was successfully negotiated, the ICRC was asked to participate in its implementation. Individuals with first-hand knowledge indicate that the ICRC brought a combination of: presence across the country; acceptance by all parties inside and outside Yemen (access to Ansarullah was extremely limited for other organizations); the logistics capacity to carry out large release operations; a recognized mandate; detention and protection expertise; and extensive experience as a neutral intermediary. This meant that the ICRC's participation helped to secure the parties' confidence in the process and the agreement's successful implementation.

While progress has been hard-won, two large detainee-release operations took place as a result of the PEA, in October 2020 and April 2023, resulting in the release of 1,925 people (a total of 2,144 people when counting unilateral releases carried out aside from the major operations). These operations were enormous achievements. Not only did they require difficult negotiations over the lists of individuals to release and the logistics to carry out simultaneous releases from multiple locations, but most importantly they had a tremendous humanitarian impact – on the people released and their families and communities. They demonstrated a

61 See for example: M. Alkubati, H. Jafar and E. Al-Eryani, *Grassroots Voices: Women and Everyday Peacebuilding in Yemen*, Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies, Sana'a, 2023; Office of the Special Envoy of the Secretary-General for Yemen (OSESGY), “Yemeni perspectives on the peace process and inclusivity”, OSESGY, 8 March 2024.

62 Alkubati, Jafar and Al-Eryani, *Grassroots Voices*, p. 34; Yemen Policy Center, “Let's change the way we talk about peace in Yemen: The kaleidoscope provides some new perspectives”, Yemen Policy Center, June 2022.

63 Alkubati, Jafar and Al-Eryani, *Grassroots Voices*, p. 5.

64 More detail is available in: ICRC, *Annual Report 2023: Volume II*, ICRC, Geneva, 2024.

65 For the text of the PEA, see: UN Mission to Support the Hudaydah Agreement (UNMHA), “Prisoner exchange agreement”, UNMHA, n.d..

66 ICRC interview, online, 10 Dec. 2024.



commitment by the parties to respect the humanity of the “enemy”. One high-level interviewee felt that “it was symbolically important .... It gave hope, and it eased suffering.”<sup>67</sup>

The success of the PEA should not be overstated, yet in important ways it has built confidence between the parties. Its platform for negotiation remains the only mechanism that brings parties into direct communication, and – notably – it is invoked by parties themselves. One expert observed, “Yemenis always talk about ‘not cutting the thread’ between them. Release operations create a moment of a little bit less hatred, and have an enduring impact by keeping that thread of connection between warring sides that may allow for reconciliation. [The operations] are not going to change parties’ demands in mediation, but they help keep the respect for basic norms.”<sup>68</sup>

Critically, the release operations also demonstrated that an agreement between parties can lead to tangible outcomes. A diplomat with first-hand knowledge said they were “a way of showing parties they could work together, they created some trust in the idea that delivering is possible on other issues”.<sup>69</sup> Importantly, ensuring that humanitarian considerations and protection standards were respected in the release operations helped to avoid potential harm that could have exacerbated grievances. In addition to its support for release operations, the ICRC has also worked closely with the parties to establish the Subcommittee on the Dead under the same mechanism, in order to bring needed attention to the matters of the missing and the dignified management of the dead – important issues that, if left unattended, could obstruct the possibilities for peacebuilding moving forward (see “The ICRC and the Missing”, p. 32).

Prior to the PEA, the ICRC had a small but vital role in contributing to the efforts to establish a peace process. It provided support for the first diplomatic visit to Yemen after the takeover of Sana’a in 2015, which enabled a Swedish ambassador to lay critical groundwork for the later talks that led to the Stockholm Agreement. While the ICRC, in line with its neutrality and independence, was not involved in the substance of those initial meetings, its facilitation of safe movement and introductions – with the prior agreement of all involved – was a necessary step in the long process of initiating a formal political dialogue. Organizations such as the ICRC with broad presence and acceptance in locations with ongoing armed conflict can help those involved in peace processes who wish to ensure their work is better informed as to the conflict dynamics and resulting humanitarian impacts, and who need help preparing for the risks of working in conflict-affected territories.

Given the complex and changing nature of the conflict in Yemen and of the entities involved, it is difficult to draw definitive conclusions about the ICRC’s contribution to an environment conducive to peace there. As one diplomat observed, “there were many occasions where things could have taken a different direction. The realization of the talks in Stockholm was due to a combination of a lot of diligent work done by many parties – and luck.”<sup>70</sup> Still, the research demonstrates that addressing a humanitarian issue and ensuring the integration of humanitarian principles has been important to supporting prospects for peace.

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<sup>67</sup> ICRC interview, online, 10 Dec. 2024.

<sup>68</sup> ICRC interview, online, 9 Dec. 2024.

<sup>69</sup> ICRC interview, online, 12 Dec. 2024.

<sup>70</sup> ICRC interview, online, 10 Jan. 2025.

### Raising Humanitarian Perspectives and Convening Dialogue

Outside of its role as a neutral intermediary, the ICRC's regular diplomatic work includes efforts to engage with states and peace and development actors to share its analysis of humanitarian issues. There is often a gap between top-down and bottom-up approaches to building peace that the ICRC is well placed to help bridge. Often it is one of few organizations that have: detailed knowledge of conditions on the ground on all sides of a conflict; the ability to engage in direct talks with all relevant groups (parties to the conflict, affected communities, political guarantors, national authorities and other agencies); and recognized technical and legal expertise. Within the bounds of the confidential approach, sharing an analysis of the humanitarian situation enables the ICRC to help ensure that outcomes reached at the political level – whether formal or informal agreements, policies or other mechanisms – take account of affected people's perspectives and needs; this in turn helps ensure that those outcomes are seen as more legitimate and inclusive. A high-quality conflict analysis is critical to effective peace work.<sup>71</sup>

In Northern Ireland, the ICRC engages diplomatically with political actors to address humanitarian issues in a way that supports prospects for more meaningful peace. These actors often do not engage with community groups with whom they are not politically aligned, especially when these groups are criminalized or socially ostracized. The ICRC, thanks to its mandate to engage with all, can help fill this gap in order to prevent ill-adapted responses that could be counterproductive to the society's goals for reconciliation. The ICRC has engaged with authorities in an effort to shape policies and practices to align with the applicable legal frameworks and take a people-centred approach, so that those policies and practices better address communities' needs and do not exacerbate grievances that fuel more violence. The question of members of paramilitary-style groups' transition to civilian life is one such issue, where a humanitarian and human-rights approach must inform the path forward in order to ensure a balance between reconciliation, accountability and ongoing security concerns.

The ICRC can also act as a convenor of a trusted space for parties to engage in direct communication; this plays a valuable role in the prospects for conflict resolution. Research has shown that creating and maintaining spaces for direct engagement with the "other", when kept in place over time and even when not producing visible results, can be "quietly catalytic", providing space for representatives to become better acquainted with each other and with ideas and proposals, and enabling progress when the time is right.<sup>72</sup> In a time of increasing dehumanization and more prominent narratives centring fear and division, protecting spaces for neutral dialogue is more important than ever. It is precisely that ability to keep open channels of communication based on neutrality and respect – and with humanitarian imperatives in mind – which contributes to an environment more conducive to cooperation. The ICRC has seen the impacts of such spaces, not only between parties to a conflict but also at the multilateral level to enable progress in the development and strengthening of international laws and norms designed to address humanitarian issues, which also strengthens the prospects for international cooperation and conflict prevention. This is further explored in "Promoting Respect for Human Dignity by Strengthening Laws, Norms and Institutions", on p. 28.

<sup>71</sup> R. Mac Ginty, "What works? Effectiveness in mediation and peacemaking", *Effective Peacebuilding Initiative*, 27 Nov. 2024.

<sup>72</sup> Mac Ginty, "What works?".

## SPOTLIGHT: THE ICRC IN COLOMBIA

Over Colombia's many decades of conflict, the popular understanding of "peace" has changed. Historically peace was considered primarily a state-driven objective relating to the imposition of order. Later, widespread social mobilization and democratic institution-building led to a greater emphasis on human rights and dignity, justice, and the recognition of and reparations for victims as key components.<sup>73</sup> Recent literature on the requirements for sustainable peace in Colombia therefore highlight not only the state's institutional strength and capacity to ensure rights and governability but also civil society's strength, the distribution of land, equity, accountability and transparency.<sup>74</sup> Another important element is the concept of "territorial peace" (*la paz territorial*), which emphasizes the lived experience of those affected by conflict in rural areas, in terms of quality of life, social and environmental conditions and interconnection, and the need to rebuild the social contract.<sup>75</sup> When asked about peace for this research, Colombians spoke about safety, alternatives to violence and trust-building but also about opportunity (economic and social), spiritual and religious expression, community-building and belonging.

The shift in the popular understanding of peace to be more people-focused was seen in the historic 2016 accord between the FARC and the government of Colombia, which addresses issues such as social equality, rural development and victim reparations. As a civil society leader observed, "peace became about recognizing the dignity of the individual. Here is where the idea of 'humanitarianism' comes in."<sup>76</sup>

The signing of the 2016 agreement was lauded in the international community as an increasingly rare example of bringing an armed conflict to a negotiated end. Given the years of negotiation necessary to reach the 2016 agreement, and coming after several unsuccessful rounds of talks, it was critical to demonstrate that the agreement could produce tangible, reliable outcomes, and that the work of the institutions would produce results – peace dividends – for affected people.

The ICRC provided support for the negotiations of that accord as a neutral intermediary, including by transporting FARC representatives to the talks in Havana and by aiding the negotiation of humanitarian agreements, for example on missing people. In the years since, it has also provided technical, legal and financial assistance to the three state institutions created by the accord – the Truth Commission, the Special Jurisdiction for Peace, and the Unit for the Search for the Missing (UBPD)<sup>77</sup> – as well as Corporación Humanitaria Reencuentros (Reencuentros), the organization established by former FARC fighters to search for missing people. The ICRC's provision of capacity-building with the Special Jurisdiction for Peace has been central to the ability of the latter's judges to provide both accountability for violations of IHL and amnesty as provided for in the Geneva Conventions. This is done in line with the ICRC's humanitarian mandate and at the same time contributes to transitional justice efforts.

A major humanitarian issue addressed by the agreement is that of missing people. Interviews with communities, local associations of family members of the missing, employees of local government institutions and others all emphasized that addressing the psychosocial, financial and other impacts of having a family member go missing is an important aspect of peacebuilding – and that while people continue to go missing, peace will remain out of reach. The ICRC's confidential dialogue with each party to a conflict in order to prevent or minimize the occurrence of disappearances (and other violations of IHL) is relevant to prospects for peace in this respect. The ICRC works with the UBPD and Reencuentros to improve their technical capacity

<sup>73</sup> ICRC interview, Bogotá, 7 Feb. 2024; ICRC interview, Bogotá, 9 Feb. 2024.

<sup>74</sup> See: J. Ríos Sierra, G. Bula Escobar and R. Brocate Piron, "Estado, estado de derecho y violencia armada en Colombia (2000–2011)", *Revista de Paz y Conflictos*, No. 6, March 2013, pp. 6–31.

<sup>75</sup> A concept popularly credited to S. Jaramillo, then Colombian high commissioner for peace, but also used by practitioners and scholars. See for example: S. Pfeiffer, *Territorial Peacebuilding in Colombia: The Opportunity to Do What Has Not Been Achieved Before?*, The Norwegian Peacebuilding Resource Centre, Oslo, 2015; L. Peña, *Paz Territorial: Conectando Imaginación Moral e Imaginación Geográfica*, Instituto Colombo-Alemán para la Paz, Bogotá, 2019.

<sup>76</sup> ICRC interview, Bogotá, 9 Feb. 2024.

<sup>77</sup> The system also includes reparations and guarantees of non-repetition. See Government of Colombia, "Sistema integral de verdad, justicia, reparación y no repetición", Función Pública, Government of Colombia, Bogotá, n.d.: <https://www.funcionpublica.gov.co/eva/gestornormativo/manual-estado/sistema-verdad.php>, accessed 28 March 2025.



and collaboration. It also plays an important complementary role, as it receives information about people who have gone missing after the signing of the 2016 accord. The ICRC has recorded almost 2,000 new cases of missing people since then (as not all cases are reported, the real incidence is likely much higher).<sup>78</sup> While it works to bridge the gap, the ICRC is also advocates that another humanitarian, non-judicial institution be mandated to work on these cases going forward.

At the community level, the ICRC has provided support for state institutions – such as the Unit for Attention and Integral Reparations to Victims, the local ombudsman’s office and the UBPD – to reach remote communities in order to improve community members’ access to the reparations and other assistance available to them. In these cases, it has provided support to enable these institutions to fulfil their mandates, strengthening the social contract and the realization of tangible outcomes from the formal peace agreement and contributing to the concept of territorial peace. And where state services are less accessible, the ICRC’s own protection and assistance activities across the country were also found to contribute to an environment more conducive to peace: the ICRC’s work to provide support for livelihoods that provide alternatives to violence, ensure communities have access to basic services and clarify the fate and whereabouts of the missing, and simply its ongoing physical presence, were all cited by communities as providing a sense of hope and accompaniment, which they identified as central to the meaning of peace. In the words of one public servant, “when we talk of peace, the population needs to feel, ‘I wasn’t alone, I wasn’t ignored, I was accompanied.’”<sup>79</sup>

For example, in 2023 the ICRC began supporting a women’s economic cooperative in a rural part of Caquetá, from developing their business model to starting up operations producing dairy products locally for sale in neighbouring areas. The project aimed to aid a community that was under the control of a non-state armed group (NSAG) and, as a result, faced restrictions on movement and on the types of work available. The cooperative has provided livelihood support to many households in the area, but more importantly it has become a centre of community-building and agency. The members of the association have become spokespeople for the community with local authorities; they identify possible solutions to issues the community faces (such as youth involvement in armed groups), and they have created a space for sharing difficult feelings and rebuilding a sense of trust among neighbours. One woman said, “We know that sometimes people choose a certain path because they have no other option, they don’t see another way. We [the women’s association] want to, and can, offer an alternative.”<sup>80</sup>

<sup>78</sup> Figures up to end-2024, as per ICRC, *Retos Humanitarios 2025: Colombia*, ICRC, Bogotá, 2025, p. 8.

<sup>79</sup> ICRC interview, Bogotá, 9 Feb. 2024.

<sup>80</sup> ICRC interview, Caquetá, 13 Feb. 2024.

Unfortunately, the work to foster peace is being done in the context of ongoing armed conflict. In 2025, the ICRC identified eight ongoing non-international armed conflicts in Colombia involving the government, FARC factions not signatory to the 2016 agreement, and other armed groups; this presents enormous humanitarian (and peacebuilding) challenges.<sup>81</sup> In new peace talks the government has held with some of these groups, IHL has become a shared framework for discussion on key questions. For example, ceasefire agreements that have been concluded have made respect for IHL a requirement. The ICRC provides technical advice and training on IHL to any negotiating team that requests it, in order to facilitate the dialogue between parties to conflict on humanitarian issues. Of course, the use of IHL as a reference framework does not guarantee success in new peace talks (and talks in late 2024 and early 2025 have faced major challenges), but stakeholders directly involved in or with close knowledge of negotiations have confirmed its value for enabling progress in the dialogue.

In addition, the ICRC has promoted unilateral humanitarian commitments by NSAGs as a protection measure, noting that confrontations between NSAGs are currently the primary driver of humanitarian needs in Colombia. These commitments relate to humanitarian concerns such as the prevention of disappearances, the protection of health care and the non-recruitment of minors. The ICRC delegation has observed a certain openness to discussing these questions among NSAGs, which at times call their commitments “gestures of peace”, a sign of recognition that these humanitarian measures are critical to establishing an environment conducive to negotiations and eventual conflict resolution.

On the other hand, it should be acknowledged that, owing to its mandate to support compliance with IHL, the ICRC tends to put a greater emphasis on the perspectives of states and NSAGs, as they are the entities most often subject to IHL's application. While this is understandable, at least one interviewee observed that in Colombia, a pluriethnic society, indigenous perspectives on issues such as the protection of the environment and reparations are becoming increasingly important to reflections on building peace, and these perspectives are not easily accommodated by an approach centred on parties to a conflict. In addition, the 2016 peace accord is notable for its attention to gender-specific concerns, which have been identified as central to the chances of success of peace agreements.<sup>82</sup> Yet the ICRC's development of expertise in bringing a gender analysis to IHL is relatively recent in the context of its long history. This has limited its engagement with state institutions and civil society groups that focus on the intersections of gender and conflict.<sup>83</sup> This points to some of the constraints on how much the ICRC can contribute to prospects for peace, even while its role has been widely appreciated.

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<sup>81</sup> ICRC, *Retos Humanitarios 2025*.

<sup>82</sup> M. Joshi, “Does the implementation status of gender provisions affect the implementation of a peace agreement? Evidence from Colombia's 2016 peace agreement implementation process”, *Policy Studies Journal*, Vol. 00, No. 0, Dec. 2024, pp. 1–12.

<sup>83</sup> An overview of the ICRC's recent work on gender and IHL is available at: [www.icrc.org/en/law-and-policy/gender-and-ihl](https://www.icrc.org/en/law-and-policy/gender-and-ihl).

## PROMOTING RESPECT FOR HUMAN DIGNITY BY STRENGTHENING LAWS, NORMS AND INSTITUTIONS

The normative foundation of international cooperation is respect for human dignity and the rule of law. The rule of law, institutional legitimacy and effectiveness, and governance capacity have been identified in the literature, and accepted by academics and practitioners alike, as key indicators of peacefulness. For example, the Institute of Economics and Peace identifies “well-functioning government” as one of eight pillars of positive peace, a concept that includes the rule of law and government effectiveness, openness and transparency. These are statistically among the strongest predictors of peace; among 24 positive peace indicators, the rule of law by itself has the highest direct correlation with peacefulness.<sup>84</sup> Another illustration comes from the UN’s Sustainable Development Goal 16 (peace, justice and strong institutions), which sets targets for: promotion of rule of law and access to justice; development of effective and accountable institutions; improved inclusivity of global governance; and the existence of independent national human rights institutions. Sustainable Development Goal 16 is likely the most representative vision of the international community’s understanding of a peaceful society.

The ICRC’s work to strengthen respect for human dignity through application and development of the law and the bolstering of norms and institutions can contribute to an environment more conducive to peace. It has worked over many decades and at various levels to promote the development, dissemination, implementation and application of IHL and an understanding of its intersection with other legal frameworks and cultural and religious norms that inform and reinforce its protections.<sup>85</sup> It does much of this work with both states and NSAGs. The organization has a recognized mandate under the Geneva Conventions and the Statutes of the Movement to “work for the understanding and dissemination of knowledge of international humanitarian law applicable in armed conflicts and to prepare any development thereof”, and to “maintain and disseminate the Fundamental Principles”, in cooperation with National Societies.<sup>86</sup> This work has always been seen by the Movement as one of its most important contributions to the prospects for and spirit of peace: at the core of both IHL and peace work is the fundamental principle of humanity. Though it has a particular role with respect to IHL, the ICRC’s efforts here complement the work of many other actors focused on strengthening the rule of law and norms and standards aimed at protecting human dignity at the national, regional and global levels.

The previous sections have considered the ways in which the ICRC can contribute to the prospects for peace in specific communities and in the context of specific peace processes. This section explores how the ICRC contributes to making national, regional and global environments more conducive to peace by promoting international laws, standards and norms that focus on respect for humanity. This is especially important at

<sup>84</sup> IEP, *Positive Peace Report 2024*, p. 8. Various other indices and frameworks that measure peace likewise emphasize the importance of governance and rule of law; this includes the Eirene Peace Indicators Database, which groups thousands of peace indicators into five categories, one of which is governance. Recent institutional reports also underline the practical and policy relevance of rule of law for conflict prevention. The *Pathways for Peace* report (UN and World Bank, *Pathways for Peace: Inclusive Approaches to Preventing Violent Conflict*, World Bank, Washington DC, 2018) highlights how inclusive, accountable governance and legal systems are critical to preventing violent conflict and sustaining peace. See also: A. Day and J. Caus, *Rule of Law and Sustaining Peace: Towards More Impactful, Effective Conflict Prevention*, UN University, New York, 2021; A. Potter, *The Rule of Law as the Measure of Peace? Responsive Policy for Reconstructing Justice and the Rule of Law in Post Conflict and Transitional Environments*, Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue, Geneva, 2004; K. Mross, C. Fiedler and J. Grävingholt, “Identifying pathways to peace: how international support can help prevent conflict recurrence”, *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 66, Issue 1, March 2022, pp. 1–14.

<sup>85</sup> The ICRC has explored the intersections of religion, culture and IHL for many years, including the intersections of IHL and Islamic law, Buddhism and cultural factors connected to compliance. See: F. Terry and B. McQuinn, *The Roots of Restraint in War*, ICRC, Geneva, December 2018; ICRC, *Islamic Law and International Humanitarian Law*, ICRC, Geneva, 2025; ICRC, “Project on the interface between Buddhism and IHL”, *Religion and Humanitarian Principles*, 2 March 2020.

<sup>86</sup> The Fundamental Principles of the Movement are humanity, impartiality, neutrality, independence, voluntary service, unity and universality (Statutes of the Movement, Art. 5.2(a) and (g) and Art. 5.4(a)).

a time when the mechanisms the international community has developed for conflict resolution and prevention are facing considerable challenges. In the words of one senior legal expert, “multilateralism is under massive stress. There is an existential fight around the norms, including IHL. And this stress on norms affects the protection of peace.”<sup>87</sup>

### National Level

At the national level, the ICRC can provide technical, operational and financial support to institutions involved in carrying out humanitarian activities or those that enable a state or party to meet its obligations under IHL and international human rights law. It engages with militaries and police forces on the use of force, for example, helping to shape training exercises and manuals. In this way, it seeks to support the prevention of violations of international law and standards applicable to the use of force in armed conflict or other violence, and this may in turn help to prevent and address grievances that can fuel or prolong conflict. It also works with ministries of justice and foreign affairs and national legislative bodies to ensure IHL is reflected and adequately interpreted in domestic law and practice, and it engages in legal advisory work with national authorities and courts. These efforts – supporting institutions’ capacity to carry out their work in line with international law and norms aimed at protecting life and dignity – while undertaken with humanitarian objectives, also often contribute to the overall strengthening of those institutions and norms.

In addition to its direct engagement with and support of institutions, the ICRC also engages with academia and civil society because their work to promote respect for the rule of law and protective norms is complementary and mutually reinforcing. It also engages with community leaders and religious representatives in order to enrich its understanding of how IHL reflects and intersects with the identities, motivations and values of specific communities and to draw out shared understandings of the ethical limits on war. Given the valid criticisms of isolated, top-down international efforts to support or strengthen the rule of law,<sup>88</sup> this community-level engagement – together with the work ICRC does to raise community-level realities at the political-level dialogue, as noted above – means it can act to help bridge the gap between top-down and bottom-up approaches to peacebuilding.

### Regional Level

The ICRC furthers this work to promote IHL into normative frameworks at the regional level. For example, since 1992 the ICRC has been helping with the promotion of IHL and its integration into the legal instruments, decisions, policies and activities of the constituent bodies of the African Union (then named the Organization of African Unity).<sup>89</sup> The ICRC is also the only international humanitarian organization that briefs the African Union Peace and Security Council annually, to report on humanitarian concerns and help

<sup>87</sup> ICRC interview, Northern Ireland, 24 April 2024.

<sup>88</sup> Osland and Peter (“UN peace operations in a multipolar order”, pp. 197–199 and 202–204) argue that in today’s multipolar world, peacebuilding efforts that prioritize the rule of law and bottom-up engagement are more effective and politically feasible than traditional liberal, top-down approaches. They emphasize the need for local ownership and institution-building that aligns with domestic realities. Avramović (“Peace and the rule of law: A brief theoretical overview”, *Nauka Bezbednost Policija*, Vol. 27, No. 2, Jan. 2022, pp. 95–99) offers a theoretical critique of universalist legal models, warning that externally imposed, Western-style rule-of-law frameworks can be counterproductive when they clash with local values or are introduced coercively. He stresses the importance of context-sensitive and culturally grounded legal development. Complementing these perspectives, Bayerlein, Kamin and Krahmann (“From negative to positive peace: How norms relate to different peace dimensions”, *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding*, Vol. 19, No. 4, Dec. 2024, p. 521) use cross-national data to question the assumption that public support for rule-of-law norms correlates directly with peace. They find that while people in both conflict and post-conflict countries express high support for such norms, this does not always translate into peace outcomes, suggesting that implementation strategies matter more than norm promotion alone.

<sup>89</sup> “As the guardian of IHL, the ICRC played an important role in supporting the promotion and incorporation of IHL at the [Organization of African Unity] since the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding with the organisation in 1992, which signified a formal commitment for collaboration and provided legal basis for continued engagement when the [Organization of African Unity] morphed into the [African Union].” See: Amani Africa, *Review of the Integration and Implementation of IHL in African Union Policies and Activities*, Amani Africa Media and Research Services, Addis Ababa, 2022, p. 3. The ICRC has also supported the drafting and negotiation of the African Union Convention for the Protection and Assistance of Internally Displaced Persons in Africa (the Kampala Convention), and the drafting of the Common African Position on the Application of International Law in Cyberspace.

inform the African Union's efforts to tackle the challenges to peacebuilding on the continent. The ICRC also has memoranda of understanding with regional bodies in Asia, Latin America, Europe and the Middle East, which outline cooperation for information exchange and sharing of expertise, notably the promotion of IHL and humanitarian principles. Through all of this work, the ICRC seeks to strengthen not only the knowledge, development and application of international law, with an emphasis on IHL, but also the consensus on the need to protect human dignity in conflict.

## IHL AND PEACE

It is important to recall that IHL is just one part of an international legal architecture with peace at its centre and is anchored in the moral belief in equality and dignity. When states adopted in 1977 the Protocol I additional to the Geneva Conventions, they proclaimed "their earnest wish to see peace prevail among peoples." There is no contradiction between applying humanitarian restraint in warfare and working in earnest for peace.<sup>90</sup>

As such, IHL neither legitimizes war nor sees it as inevitable. While it does not govern the legality of going to war nor addresses how peace should be restored, IHL can help enable a path out of conflict and support more lasting peace.

IHL is specifically designed to limit the humanitarian consequences of armed conflict. And while each conflict is different, how a war is fought – the impact it has on the social fabric, the experience of civilians, the impact on critical infrastructure and on the natural environment – will shape the requirements for a return to sustainable peace. Therefore, respect for IHL during and after hostilities can be an important factor in contributing to the likelihood of reaching a sustainable outcome, by removing at least some obstacles to peacemaking. For example, the prevention of atrocities, protection of civilians, exchange of prisoners and the sharing of information on the fate and whereabouts of the missing, among other provisions, can help support more lasting peace by addressing some of the causes of suffering and division that make reconciliation harder to achieve. Protection of critical infrastructure and of the environment can reduce the material cost of war, making socio-economic recovery more likely and helping to deliver peace dividends.

IHL also contains specific provisions that can enable a pathway out of war when parties decide to take them up, for example, providing a legal basis for the negotiation of "special agreements" – including ceasefires, detainee releases, amnesty agreements and peace accords – between the parties. These provisions create opportunities to build trust between adversaries through dialogue, for example on prisoners of war and the missing. More broadly, IHL establishes an internationally sanctioned framework within which two warring sides can relate simply as "parties", without prejudice to their views on who is at fault for the conflict, or the legal status and legitimacy of the enemy.

While the above demonstrates that there is an intrinsic connection between IHL and peace, it must be recalled that adherence to IHL is and remains a legal obligation for parties to a conflict, independent of any potential peace dividends.

<sup>90</sup> States expressed "their conviction that nothing in [the] Protocol or in the Geneva Conventions of 12 August 1949 can be construed as legitimizing or authorizing any act of aggression or any other use of force inconsistent with the Charter of the United Nations". See preamble of: ICRC, *Protocols Additional to the Geneva Conventions of 12 August 1949*, ICRC, Geneva, 2010.

## Global Level

The work at the national and regional levels is anchored in the standards set in multilateral forums. The ICRC has been influential in shaping the interpretation and development of IHL globally and in contributing a humanitarian perspective to the development of multilateral consensus on key issues related to peace. In particular, the ICRC has made an important contribution to international legal developments related to disarmament and the regulation of weapons. Since increasing militarization is correlated with increased geopolitical tensions, disarmament is widely believed to contribute directly to prospects for global peace.<sup>91</sup> This was the key motivation for placing disarmament so prominently in the UN Charter in 1945 and why it is expressly recalled in disarmament treaties.

While the ICRC does not comment on the legality or legitimacy of states resorting to use of force, it does raise with states the legal and ethical limits on the means and methods of warfare. Indeed, the ICRC is effective at this level because it relies on its legal expertise, its status as the reference organization on IHL and its operational experience in areas affected by armed conflict and other violence, where it witnesses first-hand the real impacts of weapons and methods of warfare. The combination provides the ICRC with the legitimacy to speak about the humanitarian impacts of means and methods of warfare, and about the meaningful application of and respect for the letter and spirit of relevant international law.

The ICRC has promoted multilateral disarmament on humanitarian grounds since the First World War, when it called for a ban on chemical weapons, whose horrific effects its delegates had witnessed in field hospitals. The organization has since been instrumental in the adoption of almost all humanitarian disarmament treaties, such as the Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons and its Protocols, the Anti-Personnel Mine Ban Convention, the Cluster Munitions Convention and the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons, as well as the Arms Trade Treaty. The ICRC's call for a treaty on autonomous weapon systems has been made in the same spirit.<sup>92</sup>

Prohibition and elimination of weapons that are likely to have indiscriminate effects or cause unnecessary suffering, or which otherwise raise significant ethical concerns, is a highly effective tool for supporting compliance with IHL and preventing suffering. This has been demonstrated, for example, by the remarkable success in reducing huge numbers of anti-personnel landmines and cluster munitions, and the normative impact that treaties banning these weapons have had on global attitudes to their use.<sup>93</sup>

A particularly important example of the ICRC's humanitarian disarmament work laying the foundations for future peace has been its call to prohibit and eliminate nuclear weapons. Its position is, in legal terms, that it is "extremely doubtful" that nuclear weapons could ever be used in accordance with the principles and rules of IHL and, in moral terms, that any use of nuclear weapons would be "abhorrent to the principles of humanity and the dictates of public conscience".<sup>94</sup> This position was informed by the harrowing account of the catastrophic human costs of the use of such weapons, provided by the delegate sent to Hiroshima in August 1945 and the first foreigner to arrive to witness their effects.<sup>95</sup> Shortly after, the ICRC called for nuclear weapons to be "abolished".<sup>96</sup> Throughout the Cold War, the ICRC and the entire Movement repeated

<sup>91</sup> Liang *et al.*, *Trends in World Military Expenditure*.

<sup>92</sup> Joint call made with UN secretary-general. See: ICRC, "Joint call by the United Nations secretary-general and the president of the International Committee of the Red Cross for states to establish new prohibitions and restrictions on autonomous weapon systems", ICRC, 5 Oct. 2023.

<sup>93</sup> There have been some recent changes in these broadly positive trends, demonstrating again the need for sustained political commitment on the issue. See: ICRC, "ICRC president: Civilians will pay the price if global commitment to ban landmines allowed to fracture", ICRC, 16 June 2025.

<sup>94</sup> For the ICRC's legal and policy position on nuclear weapons, see: ICRC, "The ICRC's legal and policy position on nuclear weapons", *IRRC*, No. 919, June 2022, pp. 1477–1499.

<sup>95</sup> F. Bilfinger, "ICRC report on the effects of the atomic bomb at Hiroshima", *IRRC*, No. 899, July 2016, pp. 859–882.

<sup>96</sup> On 5 September 1945, the ICRC publicly expressed the wish that nuclear weapons be banned. From 1948 on, the entire Movement, through International Conferences, called for the prohibition of weapons of mass destruction, including nuclear weapons. In a communication to states party to the Geneva Conventions in 1950, the ICRC stated that "the mere assumption that atomic weapons may be used, for whatever reason, is enough to make illusory any attempt to protect non-combatants by legal texts. Law, written or unwritten, is powerless when confronted with the total destruction the use of this arm implies" (ICRC, "Atomic weapons and non-directed missiles: ICRC statement, 1950", ICRC, 21 Jan. 2022).

their call to “absolutely prohibit” nuclear weapons. In 2010, the then ICRC president Jakob Kellenberger made a public appeal to states to negotiate a treaty to prohibit and eliminate nuclear weapons entirely, citing the profound questions these weapons raise about the point at which the right to use such weapons must yield to the interests of humanity.<sup>97</sup> The organization’s renewed and intentional diplomatic efforts in the period following Kellenberger’s speech are described as having as being among the key drivers of the adoption of the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons. The ban on nuclear weapons continues to be regarded by many as the cornerstone of a peaceful global order.

## THE ICRC AND THE MISSING



Kuwait City, international airport (2020). Signing of an agreement for the return of mortal remains supervised by the ICRC between Rabee Al Adsani, President of the Ministry of Prisoners and Missing Persons of Kuwait and Major General Hazim Qassim, representative of the Iraqi Ministry of Defense.

People go missing in all conflicts and on all sides of a conflict; without information about the fate and whereabouts of loved ones, individuals, families and whole communities are left with open wounds that cause immense and ongoing suffering. Clarifying the fate and whereabouts of missing people is intimately connected to efforts to achieve sustainable peace, reflected in the fact that dozens of peace processes have addressed the issue, as is the case between Iraq and Kuwait and in Sri Lanka, Colombia, Peru, the Balkans and the Caucasus, among others.

<sup>97</sup> The precedent for the position on nuclear weapons had been set by an earlier ICRC president, C. Sommaruga, who in the 1990s took up a strong position in favour of a ban on anti-personnel mines based on the suffering that ICRC field staff were observing, primarily among civilians.

IHL confers obligations to prevent people from going missing and act when they do, including to investigate and, where relevant, prosecute war crimes that lead to people going missing. Importantly, these obligations continue to apply even after the end of an armed conflict. Underpinning these obligations is people's right to know the fate and whereabouts of their family members – families' right to and desire for this information is a powerful driver of action. Recent research undertaken by the ICRC shows that families searching for missing relatives play an important yet unacknowledged role in advancing peacebuilding. With a strong motivation to contact the other side in search of information about loved ones, families can be the first to build relationships across the divide of conflict. And through an experience and acknowledgement of shared pain, in some cases they have developed over time empathy that humanizes those on the other side and supports the prospects for peace.<sup>98</sup>

At the community level, together with National Societies, the ICRC plays a direct role in efforts to search for the missing and to support families and family associations. As a neutral intermediary, the ICRC also chairs multilateral coordination mechanisms on missing people, facilitating dialogue and cooperation on this subject between parties to conflict. It also serves an important technical advisory function to authorities to support efforts for prevention. The ICRC also strives to build and sustain attention to the issue nationally, regionally and globally, including to relevant legal obligations, and works to strengthen standards that ensure that cases are handled professionally and with dignity. For example, the adoption of UN Security Council Resolution 2474 in 2019 and of Organisation of Islamic Cooperation Resolution No. 5/50 in 2024, to which the ICRC contributed its expertise, reinforces the importance of addressing the issue of missing people for preventing and resolving conflict. In light of the strong connections between work on missing people and peacebuilding, the ICRC has also produced guidance for mediators on how this question can be appropriately and effectively integrated into peace processes; the guidance draws on the ICRC's technical, operational, legal and policy experience and expertise.<sup>99</sup>

### On Transitional Justice

In considering strengthening laws and norms in connection to peace, it is important to address the subject of transitional justice. "Transitional justice" refers to a country's response to the legacy of large-scale, serious human rights violations, with an emphasis on recognition of victims and promotion of possibilities for peace and reconciliation.<sup>100</sup>

Humanitarian and transitional justice actors may have distinct objectives, but in important ways their work is complementary. In particular, both prioritize the needs and perspectives of victims and affected people. For its part, IHL relates to transitional justice in that the law of armed conflict requires parties to investigate serious violations of its rules and, if appropriate, prosecute those accused. Both seek to hold perpetrators to account and to provide victims with access to justice. Transitional justice can have additional aims or mechanisms for addressing truth-seeking, reparation and guarantees of non-repetition.

The ICRC supports the humanitarian objectives of transitional justice, though its involvement in specific processes is necessarily limited. It does not participate in, or provide evidence for, any legal proceeding or fact-finding process, whether domestic or international. This approach has been reaffirmed and granted protection under international law. It is essential to ensure the ICRC can continue to access conflict-affected people, including civilians and people deprived of liberty, and to engage with the parties to a conflict. However, this does not mean that the ICRC is neutral on the subject of accountability for violations of IHL. The ICRC strongly urges states and parties to conflicts to adhere to their obligations to investigate and respond to violations.

<sup>98</sup> See: S. Robbins and J. Stockwell, "Addressing missing persons arising from armed conflict as a driver of peace: Towards a research agenda", *IRRC*, No. 927, March 2025, pp. 1108–1131. Further primary research on the same topic from these authors is forthcoming in 2025.

<sup>99</sup> The ICRC's guidance for mediators can be found online; see: [missingpersons.icrc.org/index.php/library/guidance-mediators-addressing-fate-missing-persons](https://missingpersons.icrc.org/index.php/library/guidance-mediators-addressing-fate-missing-persons).

<sup>100</sup> International Center for Transitional Justice (ICTJ), *What Is Transitional Justice?*, ICTJ, New York, 2009.

To assist the efforts of states and parties to conflicts to implement these obligations, the ICRC provides technical, financial and other forms of support to domestic institutions with the aim of improving the integration of international legal obligations into domestic law and the capacity of members of the judiciary and judicial institutions to interpret and apply the law. In light of its expertise in addressing humanitarian issues that intersect with transitional justice, such as the missing or the granting of amnesties,<sup>101</sup> the ICRC can both advise local authorities and facilitate peer-to-peer exchange between representatives from countries facing similar issues in order to foster the sharing of good practices and frank exchanges on challenges.

To take the example of the missing, the ICRC takes a comprehensive approach to prevent people from going missing, clarify their fate and whereabouts and address the needs of their families. It provides technical advice to local institutions and authorities for developing and strengthening regulatory frameworks. This includes shoring up forensic capacities and medico-legal systems, national mechanisms for searching for the missing and related data-collection processes. The ICRC has also acted as a neutral intermediary and observer in the transfer of human remains between parties to a conflict (see the preceding section, “The ICRC and the Missing”).

Searching for missing people to determine their fate and whereabouts, on the one hand, and ensuring criminal accountability for serious violations of IHL that result in people going missing, on the other, are closely intertwined yet distinct objectives.<sup>102</sup> The ICRC and swisspeace, a practice and research institute dedicated to advancing effective peacebuilding, have looked at a range of countries’ experiences and worked with a broad array of human rights and missing people organizations to develop guidance on how to ensure the complementarity of search and investigation.<sup>103</sup> It is important to have clear procedures at the establishment of any transitional justice mechanism to ensure that both humanitarian and accountability objectives are met.

<sup>101</sup> Rule 159 of customary international law provides that “[a]t the end of hostilities, the authorities in power must endeavour to grant the broadest possible amnesty to persons who have participated in a non-international armed conflict, or those deprived of their liberty for reasons related to the armed conflict, with the exception of persons suspected of, accused of or sentenced for war crimes.” See the ICRC’s Customary IHL Database: [ihl-databases.icrc.org/en/customary-ihl](https://ihl-databases.icrc.org/en/customary-ihl).

<sup>102</sup> For more on the ICRC’s position on addressing the issue of missing people, including enforced disappearances and justice, see: H. Obregón Gieseken and X. Londoño, “Sustaining the momentum: working to prevent and address enforced disappearances”, *Humanitarian Law & Policy*, 26 Aug. 2021.

<sup>103</sup> ICRC and swisspeace, *Ensuring Complementarity in the Search for and Investigation of Cases of Missing Persons, Including Victims of Enforced Disappearances*, ICRC, Geneva, 2024.

# REFLECTIONS ON THE HUMANITARIAN CONTRIBUTION TO PEACE

All of the ICRC's efforts – to prevent violations of IHL, to promote humanitarian principles and norms that centre the dignity of all people, and to strengthen laws and institutions for that purpose – are aimed at preventing and mitigating human suffering as an end in itself, while recognizing that such suffering can easily fuel the grievances of future conflicts or prevent the end of conflicts already underway.

This research focused primarily on the ICRC's work and how the organization can contribute, directly or indirectly, to prospects for peace while remaining within the bounds of its humanitarian mandate. It forms part of the ICRC's overarching effort to reflect with more intention on the connections between humanitarian work and the prospects for peace, in order to strengthen those connections where possible. This is not in contradiction with the principles of neutrality and independence – humanitarian organizations will always have an impact on the sociopolitical environment in which they work, and it is therefore important to fully explore that impact, both to mitigate any unintended negative impacts and to strengthen the positive ones.

While some of the findings are specific to the ICRC, others apply more broadly to humanitarian organizations and other groups who also see and address the real-time impact of conflict on people. These contributions, summarized below, can complement or bolster broader efforts to build and maintain peace at the local, national, regional and global level. To contribute effectively requires greater awareness from humanitarian organizations of the ways they can and do already impact the wider environment, and more intentionality in engaging with other organizations and in undertaking their humanitarian work.

## How Humanitarians Contribute to Prospects for Peace

Though it is by no means exhaustive, this report summarized several ways that humanitarian organizations can contribute to prospects for peace:

- **Strengthening social cohesion:** In the context of a “do no harm” approach and conflict analysis, which is a minimum requirement for a high-quality humanitarian response, humanitarian organizations can integrate objectives aimed at strengthening social cohesion into programming where these align with humanitarian objectives. This can complement work done by communities themselves or by peace practitioners to promote trust and reconciliation in places affected by conflict and violence or transitioning out of conflict.
- **Shining a spotlight on humanitarian issues in conflict prevention and resolution:** Suffering at any scale can drive grievances before and during conflict and impede reconciliation and conflict resolution. Humanitarians can bring attention to the impacts of conflict on the affected population with mediators, political and peacebuilding organizations, and other stakeholders with influence, which helps to ensure these impacts are appropriately addressed, including as part of formal peace processes. Addressing the impacts on affected people makes the outcomes of those processes more likely to be sustainable and seen as credible.
- **Contributing to respect for and promoting laws and norms that centre human dignity:** Humanitarian organizations often advocate for stronger respect for the rule of law and for protective norms – for example, limits on and responsibilities around the use of weapons or respect for individual rights. This is important because respect for the rule of law domestically and internationally is strongly correlated with peace, as are protection of human dignity and recognition of our shared humanity.

### The ICRC's Distinct Contribution

Along with the contributions all humanitarian organizations can make, the research also shows several specific ways that the ICRC has been able to contribute to prospects for peace. The ICRC's ability to make these contributions is based on the combination and complementarity of: its mandate, deriving from the Geneva Conventions and the Statutes of the Movement; its legal and technical expertise across key areas relevant to prospects for peace; its long-standing operational presence and logistics capacity; its mode of action, particularly its confidential dialogue; its right of humanitarian initiative and role as a neutral intermediary; its ability to draw on experience across regions and over decades; and, its long-standing partnerships with National Societies as part of the Movement. The ICRC's contributions include:

- **acting as a neutral intermediary to facilitate dialogue between parties to a conflict** on humanitarian issues, often in support of formal processes led by others. Addressing humanitarian concerns can bring parties to the table and provide a basis for further dialogue on the deeper political issues. Moreover, coming to an agreement on humanitarian issues, and successfully implementing these agreements in the context of talks, can build trust in the value of negotiating and in the reliability of the other party.
- **shaping the development of IHL and other protective norms and standards.** For example, multilateral work on humanitarian disarmament and the regulation of new weapons are examples of leadership on issues that can contribute to a more peaceful international environment. The ICRC's specific role in disseminating IHL and its work, alongside National Societies, to support the integration of IHL into domestic law contributes to respect for the rule of law nationally, regionally and globally, which is strongly correlated with peace. Ongoing efforts to deepen support for IHL among states (for example, the Global Initiative to Galvanize Political Commitment to IHL) and other actors are critical to this work.
- **leading and convening spaces for dialogue.** Acting as a neutral, trusted convenor, and drawing on its established legal and operational expertise, the ICRC can bring together states with divergent views to engage on specific issues of direct relevance to peace, in a neutral space. This is often done in partnership with others. Providing neutral spaces for dialogue in a world where such spaces are increasingly rare, and polarization more common, has real value.
- **leveraging confidential, bilateral dialogue to contribute legal, technical, operational and policy expertise** so as to enable parties and authorities to address the humanitarian impacts and drivers of conflict, including in the context of specific peace processes. Drawing on its operational presence in communities, the ICRC can often provide a nuanced perspective on the humanitarian impacts of a conflict as well as its experience of how they have been addressed in other situations.
- **sharing analysis and facilitating safe access for peace actors.** Through its access and acceptance, often a result of its long-standing presence, the ICRC has been able to facilitate access for peace actors, which in turn enriches their understanding of conflict dynamics and impacts, and can help them to build their own relationships with relevant parties.

Doing this well is complex and demands careful assessment of risks and sensitivities. And it may not be possible for the ICRC, or other humanitarian organizations, to take up each of these potential roles if to do so would put at risk humanitarian objectives or the safety and security of personnel. However, the research shows both that it is of clear humanitarian value to engage in these ways, and that the ICRC has itself benefited from doing so – for example, through increased awareness of and support for its mandate and activities.



Colombia, 1996. The ICRC acts as a neutral intermediary between government and opposition, with the support of the Colombian Red Cross.

### Areas for Further Reflection

The features of armed conflict are constantly changing owing to influences including emerging technologies, geopolitical shifts and the exacerbating impact of climate change and environmental degradation, to name just a few. Understanding how these and future developments will impact conflict-prevention and resolution efforts is essential for peace actors. It is also essential for principled humanitarian organizations seeking to strengthen their contribution to prospects for peace and to deliver high-quality humanitarian responses. Some of the aspects that humanitarian organizations including the ICRC might explore further include:

- how to strengthen humanitarians' conflict analysis, by integrating an understanding of critical cross-cutting issues such as gender, climate, environment and technology, in order to improve foresight and programming
- how to better listen to and engage with diverse groups who affect how peace is made and sustained (communities, parties to conflict, young people, women peacebuilders, security actors and others) to inform their respective responses and identify complementarities
- how to build deeper support for IHL and protective norms, including by engaging with both critiques of and emerging developments in this body of law.

As one diplomat observed, "peace is a continuum, not a process. The fire might be out but the embers need to be dampened – there's a duty of care to the future that humanitarians need to acknowledge."<sup>104</sup> The ICRC will continue to seize opportunities to promote humanitarian aspects of conflict prevention and resolution, to strengthen respect for IHL, norms and humanitarian principles, and to support social cohesion in its programmes where possible. It recognizes the responsibility it has to contribute to the prospects for peace – as a humanitarian imperative, considering the ICRC's role within the Movement and in light of its long-term presence in countries where efforts to build and strengthen peace are undertaken over decades.

But this must be accompanied by collective, renewed political investments in preventing and resolving conflicts and in reaffirming the respect for human dignity and rule of law as the foundations of international cooperation and peace. This is the surest way to address the suffering caused by war and to protect people affected by armed conflict and other violence.

<sup>104</sup> ICRC interview, Dublin, 16 April 2024.

# ANNEX: METHODOLOGY

The objective of this study was to articulate the ICRC's position on the connection between humanitarian action and peace, providing historical and conceptual clarity, a review of the organization's practice in its activities, and takeaways and reflections of interest to humanitarian and peacebuilding organizations.

We therefore set out to answer two primary questions:

- i) *In what ways does the ICRC contribute to an environment being more conducive to peace?*
- ii) *How can the ICRC better leverage and strengthen these contributions given that conflicts are growing in number, lasting longer and becoming more lethal, thus causing more suffering?*

To address these questions, and following an ethics review process, a literature review and primary research was conducted. The literature review included both internal and public ICRC documents, including documents from its archives, statutory documents, academic publications, and practitioner reports and articles. The review sought to assess: approaches to the definition and measurement of peace, including national and local conceptualizations of peace specific to three chosen case studies, as well as the Movement's and the ICRC's long history engaging with peace (through policy and operational practice). Primary research was then carried out in three countries: Colombia, Northern Ireland and Yemen (though security conditions in Yemen required that the case study be carried out virtually). These case studies represent three distinct regions, different types and stages of conflict, and varying forms of ICRC activities. In these countries, semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions were carried out with a mix of local authorities, diplomatic representatives, UN stakeholders, community groups, civil society groups and leaders, former members of armed groups, National Societies, other humanitarian and development organizations, think tanks and ICRC staff.

The focus of the research is on the experience of the ICRC, with the understanding that some of the contributions it makes to prospects for peace can also be made by other humanitarian organizations. It should be noted that this work does not seek to establish that the ICRC's activities do or should take peacebuilding as a primary objective; rather, it seeks to better understand the impact that the organization's presence has on the political environment for peace, acknowledging that it is not possible for a large international organization (that engages with all parties to conflict and is often present for decades) to have no impact. The report provides a snapshot of the ways in which the ICRC contributes to prospects for peace, drawing out our main findings and key questions that require further reflection. It does not and cannot provide an exhaustive review of all of the ICRC's contributions to prospects for peace.

While our primary focus was on drawing out lessons and examples of positive contributions, the possibility of negative impacts on peace efforts was explicitly considered, in line with the ethical responsibility to do no harm.<sup>105</sup> The potential negative impacts of humanitarian action more generally (e.g. harmful contributions to political economies of war or tacit legitimization of harmful government policies) are not the subject of the report, however, and are not considered in depth here.

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<sup>105</sup> See footnote 11.

## SELECT STAKEHOLDERS CONSULTED<sup>106</sup>

### Colombia

- Special Jurisdiction for Peace
- Unit for the Search for the Missing (UBPD)
- Unit for the Attention and Integral Reparation to the Victims (UARIV)
- Corporación Humanitaria Reencuentros
- Colombian Red Cross
- Norwegian Red Cross
- Association of Relatives of Detained and Disappeared Persons
- Association of Rural Women Entrepreneurs
- Association of Relatives and Victims of Forced Disappearance in Caquetá
- Ombudsman's office in Florencia
- National ombudsman's office
- *Pastoral*, Florencia
- UN Verification Mission in Colombia

### Northern Ireland

- WAVE Trauma Centre
- AIMS Project
- Social Change Initiative
- Strabane AYE
- Irish Department of Foreign Affairs
- Northern Ireland Office
- Resolve RP
- Action for Community Transformation (ACT)
- Creggan Enterprises
- British Red Cross
- Tim Chapman, visiting professor at University of Strathclyde
- Kieran McEvoy, professor at Queen's University Belfast
- Fidelma Ashe, professor at Ulster University
- Kris Brown, lecturer at Ulster University
- Former representative of Sinn Féin
- Anti-GFA Republicans

### Yemen

- April Longley Alley, former senior political adviser to the Office of the Special Envoy of the Secretary-General to Yemen (OESGY)
- Muin Shreim, former deputy head of mission, OESGY
- Current representative of OESGY

### Additional expert perspectives

- Fionnuala Ní Aoláin, former UN special representative of the secretary-general on the promotion and protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms while countering terrorism, and professor at Queen's University Belfast
- Jacques Moreillon, former director-general and honorary member of the ICRC
- Representative of the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue
- Representative of the International Center for Transitional Justice (ICTJ)
- Representative of the Institute for Security Studies (ISS)
- Representative of Interpeace
- Representative of Stockholm International Peace Research Institute
- Representative of UN University
- Representative of the European Institute of Peace (EIP)

<sup>106</sup> This list is incomplete, as some participants chose to remain anonymous.

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