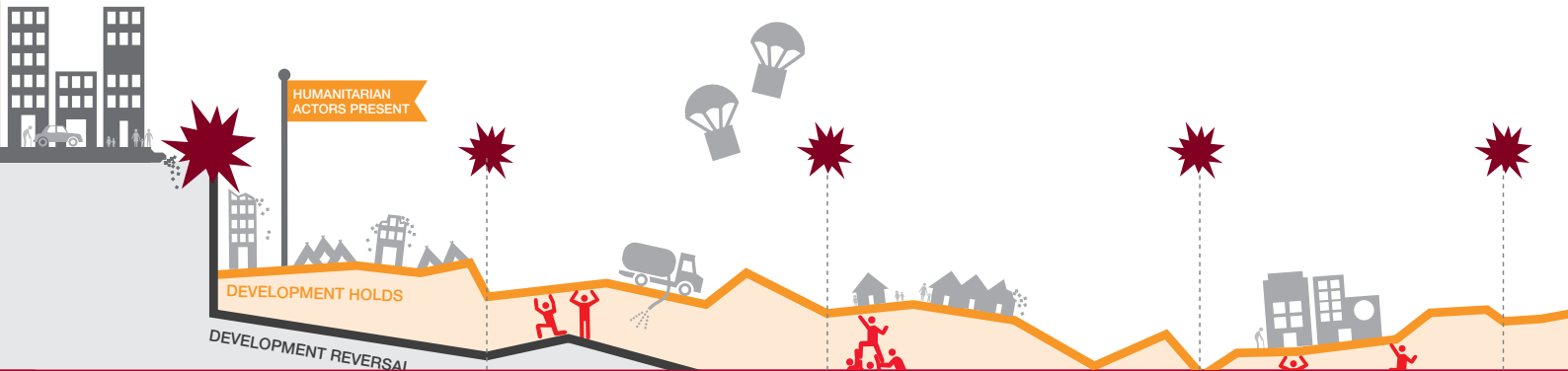




# PROTRACTED CONFLICT AND HUMANITARIAN ACTION

## SOME RECENT ICRC EXPERIENCES



ICRC

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# **PROTRACTED CONFLICT AND HUMANITARIAN ACTION**

**SOME RECENT ICRC EXPERIENCES**

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## FOREWORD

I frequently visit our operations in protracted conflicts around the world. I worked as a delegate in several of these places when I first started with the ICRC many years ago, and the conflicts affecting them continue today. The purpose of this new report is to show how the ICRC thinks and works in long-term humanitarian operations of this kind.

In 2016, the conflict in Syria entered its fifth year. The ICRC has been working in Afghanistan for 28 years, in Somalia for 32 years and in Gaza since 1948. In South Sudan, one of the countries studied for this report, the ICRC has been permanently active for 36 years. We also have a long history in Lebanon – from the early days of the Palestinian refugee crisis in 1948, through the protracted civil war from 1975–1990 and in various conflicts that have affected the country over many years.

Frequently, I present long-service awards to ICRC staff who have worked with the ICRC in their country's conflicts for ten, twenty and sometimes thirty years. Yet, the public still tends to imagine humanitarian work as sudden emergency programming in which humanitarian agencies “go in” quickly to save lives and then “hand over” to development agencies.

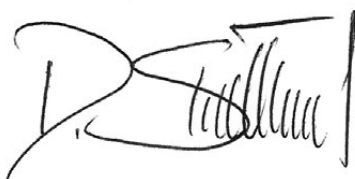
This is not the experience of the ICRC and the many National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies with which we work around the world. Many National Societies operate in crisis mode for decades. This report describes a more realistic picture of humanitarian action in protracted conflict and explains some of the operational theory that governs the ICRC's approach. It is primarily an operational reflection on some of our assistance programmes.

Effective operations in protracted conflicts are an institutional priority for the ICRC. As I write, some 20 ICRC delegations are operating in protracted crises and around two thirds of the ICRC's budget is spent in protracted conflicts. The ICRC is by no means alone in this effort.

In 2015, the ICRC cut the word “emergency” from its annual appeal in recognition of the fact that our work is often a mix of urgent and long-term programming. Prolonged humanitarian action in conflicts of various kinds means that a simple binary paradigm of relief and development is giving way to more realistic policies that recognize the need for both when people are struggling to survive in conflicts that last for decades.

Sustained humanitarian programming – that is relevant to people's protracted needs and encompasses short and long-term goals – requires predictable and flexible multi-year strategizing and investment.

A particular objective of this report is to give more operational detail about how the ICRC plans, works and identifies success in its distinct humanitarian approach to people's suffering and needs in protracted conflicts. The report shows the kind of things we do, and explains why we do them. I hope it gives some useful field-oriented insight into the ICRC's approach to all those who are interested, invested and involved in the work of the ICRC.



Dominik Stillhart, Director of Operations

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report draws on some recent operational experiences of the ICRC to describe the theory and practice of the ICRC's approach to humanitarian assistance in protracted conflict. The ICRC spends about two thirds of its budget on protracted conflicts. The average length of time the ICRC has been present in the countries hosting its ten largest operations is more than 36 years. Protracted conflicts are a major source of human suffering and a cause of protracted displacement, migration and development reversals.

The report contributes to important humanitarian policy discussions on the relief-development relationship, the urbanization of humanitarian response, multi-year planning and humanitarian financing. Chapter 1 starts with theoretical and legal analysis of protracted conflict. Chapter 2 examines the damaging effects of protracted conflict on State and society. Chapter 3 describes the ICRC's "combined approach" to short and long-term needs. Chapter 4 looks at key areas where the ICRC is determined to improve its performance and some important international policy changes that will help it do so.

### KEY MESSAGES IN THE REPORT

**Protracted conflicts are not new but there are key features that are specific to our times.** Many wars in history have been long. The ICRC has routinely operated in protracted conflicts in the last 70 years but particular trends can be observed in protracted conflicts today. Many long conflicts are largely urban in nature and involve new forms of technology that influence tactics and communications differently. Today's conflicts affect middle-income countries as much as poorer countries. They attract a large humanitarian sector and a more diverse, 24/7 global media sector. Today's conflicts are also viewed by States and civil society in a much more conscious way through the lens of international law – notably, international humanitarian law (IHL), international human rights law and refugee law.

**Protracted conflicts are characterized by their longevity, intractability and mutability.** Some are based on a single conflict. Others are a series of multiple conflicts. The parties to long conflicts typically fragment and mutate over time. Conflict often ebbs and flows unevenly across a country, with varying moments of intensity. A conflict may also be reframed with different goals over time and be internationalized in a variety of ways.

**Lack of respect for IHL is a major source of human suffering in protracted conflicts.** Even when IHL is not violated in the conduct of hostilities the humanitarian consequences of these conflicts can be great because of widespread displacement, the cumulative impact on basic services and livelihoods over time, and the sharp increase in "war poor" populations.

**The humanitarian consequences of protracted conflict are severe and can be immediate and cumulative.** People's experience of a protracted conflict typically involves immediate direct suffering as a result of attacks, deprivation and displacement, and more indirect suffering due to the cumulative deterioration of basic services, life chances and livelihoods. People's needs cut across many different sectors and extend over many years.

**Humanitarian action may respond to urgent need and long-term need, as long as it is humanitarian in purpose and impartial in nature.** Protracted conflict is not a legal term in IHL. Nor does IHL differentiate between the concepts, in international policy, of relief, early recovery and development. Humanitarian action according to IHL transcends these categories and may include a range of activities to aid people's survival, their means of survival and their dignity. The ICRC engages across this spectrum of activities in accordance with its fundamental principles and IHL.

### Today's protracted conflicts create some new challenges for humanitarian action.

This is especially the case in cities, where urban infrastructure and systems pose large-scale technological and staffing problems for the maintenance of vital inter-connected services. The intensity and longevity of protracted conflicts also create greater expectations of sustainable and individualized services across a wide range of vulnerable groups. The absence of development investment makes it difficult to build strong local partnerships to ensure humanitarian continuity during and after conflict.

**The ICRC responds to needs in protracted conflict by implementing a “combined approach” that operates in the short and long terms to meet immediate needs and mitigate cumulative impact.** This involves working with two timelines simultaneously – one that plans week to week, and another that thinks two to five years ahead. The ICRC works quickly to address immediate needs and also works deeply with regard to the various health, water, livelihood and protection systems that ensure people's survival and dignity.

**Agility and proximity remain critical to the ICRC's operational approach, which must be able to adapt to the fluidity of armed conflict.** Staying close to affected people as their locations and situations change is essential. So, too, is a diverse “palette of activities” that enables the ICRC to remain relevant to people's changing needs.

### The ICRC aims to improve its general approach in protracted conflicts in five ways.

It will develop its *multi-year approach* to focus more on outcome goals in protection and assistance. It will increase its ability to absorb *multi-year financing*. It will concentrate on securing *development holds* against the development reversals of protracted conflict. It will seek partnerships that can ensure *humanitarian continuity* during and after conflict, and it will deepen its *engagement with affected populations*.



P. Krzysiek/ICRC

## INTRODUCTION

This report contributes to international policy discussions about humanitarian operations in protracted conflict. Protracted conflicts are at the heart of many of the most pressing needs in humanitarian operations today – from civilian suffering and protracted displacement to sustainable services and resilient communities. These raise important issues for humanitarian policy, and this report uses some of the ICRC’s experience – especially in relation to our assistance programming – to discuss the relief-development nexus, multi-year planning, humanitarian financing and designing operations that remain relevant to people’s needs.

Protracted conflicts are a major driver of current humanitarian needs. This is evident in the sheer scale of time and resources spent in such situations as a proportion of the ICRC’s global operations. The average length of time the ICRC has been present in the countries hosting its current top ten operations is now more than 36 years, and approximately two thirds of the ICRC’s budget is spent in protracted conflicts. In 2013, 66% of official humanitarian assistance from Development Assistance Committee (DAC) donors went to countries that had been receiving substantial humanitarian aid for eight, or more consecutive years.<sup>1</sup>

The ICRC’s Institutional Strategy for 2015–2018 prioritizes improved performance in protracted conflicts. The Strategy emphasizes the challenge of how “the protracted character of these conflicts gives rise to long-term needs in terms of education, health care, food security, water, electricity, law and order”.

This report sets out some of the ICRC’s learning and experience gained from implementing our assistance programmes in order to share it with humanitarian organizations, donors, and other actors present in protracted conflicts. It presents several findings from recent field studies, and operational reflections, and gives practical examples of the ICRC’s approach.

Chapter 1 gives some historical, legal and theoretical background to the ICRC’s understanding and experience of operating in protracted conflict. In chapter 2, the focus moves to the damaging effects of protracted conflict on State and society alike. Chapter 3 examines how the ICRC responds to humanitarian needs that arise in protracted conflict. Chapter 4 looks at certain key areas where the ICRC is determined to improve its performance, and some important policy changes that will help us do so.

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<sup>1</sup> Global Humanitarian Assistance Report 2015, *Development Initiatives*, Bristol, 2015, p. 98



# 1. WHAT IS PROTRACTED CONFLICT?

Protracted conflicts are not new. Many armed conflicts in history, probably the majority, have been long wars. One of the earliest works of European history, written in the fifth century BCE, is the detailed history of a protracted conflict. Thucydides' famous work, *The Peloponnesian War*, is a year-by-year account of a long and vicious conflict between Athens and Sparta that lasted for 27 years, from 431 to 404 BCE. Armed conflicts have not suddenly got long. Wars have typically been long as well as short. Non-international armed conflicts, or civil wars, are especially persistent.

In the last 70 years, the ICRC has had experience of long and short wars. Protracted conflicts in places like Ethiopia, Mozambique, Angola, Guatemala, Colombia, Cambodia, Sudan, South Sudan, Liberia, Sierra Leone, Former Yugoslavia, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Lebanon, Iran-Iraq, Israel-Palestine, Afghanistan and Somalia have been the norm for the ICRC since 1945. Short wars like the Six-Day War and the Yom Kippur War between Israel and Arab States, the Falklands/Malvinas conflict, the 1991 Gulf War, and the international armed conflicts in Southern Lebanon in 2006 and in Georgia in 2008 have also characterized the period since 1945, often as particular episodes in the structure of longer unresolved conflicts.

Today, conflicts in Syria, Yemen, Ukraine, the Central African Republic (CAR), Mali, Nigeria and countries of the Lake Chad region comprise international and non-international dimensions and look likely to form the next wave of armed conflicts that may run for many years.

Long conflicts may not be new historically but today's protracted conflicts do have some novel features that are specific to our times. Compared with 20 years ago, the conflicts in which the ICRC now finds itself working are largely urban. They involve new forms of technology that influence tactics and communications differently. They affect middle-income countries as much as poorer countries. They engage a significantly larger humanitarian sector and a more diverse, 24/7 global media sector. These conflicts are also viewed by States and civil society more consciously through the lens of international law – notably, IHL, international human rights law and refugee law.

## THE CHARACTERISTICS OF PROTRACTED CONFLICT

There is not yet a commonly accepted international definition of what constitutes a protracted conflict, or how long a conflict has to last to become "protracted". The phrase emerged in the 1970s in the work of the Lebanese professor, Edward Azar, who distinguished protracted social conflicts by their *intractability* and *longevity* – the former characteristic being responsible for the latter. In the ICRC's experience, these are the two distinctive features of protracted conflict, but several other key characteristics are also significant.

### DIFFERENT TYPES OF PROTRACTED CONFLICT

The longevity of a protracted conflict can take two main forms. Protracted conflict can be marked by the longevity of one main conflict, or a series of many different conflicts. Some conflicts, like those in Israel-Palestine, Sri Lanka and even Colombia, involve the linear protraction of a singular conflict. Many other protracted conflicts more typically involve a tangled history of several different and sometimes simultaneous conflicts over the same territory. Some of these conflicts have grand political aims. Others have very local goals. Many have strong criminal and economic dimensions, and many involve a range of micro-conflicts that take advantage of a larger armed conflict to settle personal scores.

This more typical phenomenon of multiple and mutating conflicts suggests that situations in which the ICRC works may, strictly speaking, be more accurately described using phrases like *countries of chronic conflicts* or *long multiple conflicts* than the singular term *a protracted conflict*. Such multiple conflicts have been the case in, for example, Sudan, South Sudan, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Afghanistan, Iraq and Myanmar, where protracted conflict in the last 30 years has involved a variety of distinct conflicts across different parts of these countries at different times, and with the involvement of different parties to the conflict. Some other conflicts become *frozen* – suspended in stalemate for decades, sometimes to erupt in renewed violence at a later stage.

## FRAGMENTED AND MUTATING

Most conflicts that last for many years are characterized by significant *fragmentation* and *mutation*. This involves the rise of new armed groups, splintering armed forces and recurring political factionalism. Sources of conflict also change over time. New goals and ideologies emerge, which *disrupt* and *reframe* the previous structure of conflict. Strategic reframing of this kind has been particularly salient in the last 20 years, during which time several older conflicts have been reframed by the competition between military and terrorist ideologies and a global counter-terror movement. Violent competition for natural resources and State power have also often been repackaged as a political struggle for liberation and justice.

## EPISODIC

Many long-term conflicts – both multiple and singular – involve periods of differing conflict *intensity* over time and space. The intensity of conflict is not usually constant but is often seasonal, or it *spikes* in more intense episodes. This *episodic* character is another feature of protracted conflicts and means that relative peace can last for months at a time, or exist across large parts of a conflicted territory, while violence rages in specific and frequently changing “hot spots”.

## INTERNATIONALIZED

Long non-international armed conflicts are prone to different levels and moments of *internationalization* as other States and international organizations enter the conflict in various forms – either directly, through proxies, or in internationally mandated forces. Many armed conflicts are also internationalized in a different way, by the rise of transnational armed groups that operate globally.

## CUMULATIVE IMPACT

As a protracted conflict progresses, it gradually degrades infrastructure, services, living conditions and, with them, human dignity. This cumulative impact is typically felt across all sectors – education, health care, food security, water, electricity and law and order.

## FRAGILITY

This cumulative impact soon creates extreme fragility in basic services and in social, economic and environmental systems that previously supported the civilian population. Fragility arising from political or economic shocks can itself become a new driver of armed conflict and so act as both cause and symptom of protracted armed conflict in many settings.

## THE CONCENTRATION OF SUFFERING IN PROTRACTED CONFLICT

The numbers and trends in protracted conflict today are striking in terms of the concentration and new patterns of suffering. Some countries face an overwhelming emergency.<sup>2</sup> In 2015 in South Sudan, 6.1m people out of a population of 12.3m were in need of humanitarian assistance. In Syria in the same year, 13.5m people out of a population of 22.3m were in need of humanitarian assistance. In addition, 6.6m people were internally displaced in the country – an extraordinary 29.6 per cent of the population. The concentration of conflict

2 The following figures come from four main sources: Global Report on Internal Displacement 2016, Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre and Norwegian Refugee Council, Geneva; UNHCR Global Trends Report 2015, UNHCR, Geneva; the Global Humanitarian Assistance Report 2016; and the World Bank 2015.

has led to some other exceptional figures. In 2015, 8.6 million new people were internally displaced by conflict in Yemen, Syria and Iraq. More than 54 per cent of the world's refugees in 2015 came from three countries: Syria, Afghanistan and Somalia.

Internal displacement is a dominant form of suffering in today's protracted conflicts, with 40.8 million people internally displaced (IDPs) as a result of conflict in 2015. Many of these are now urban IDPs living in middle-income countries. Most of these people have now become poor, even if they were not poor prior to their displacement.

## PROTRACTED CONFLICT AND INTERNATIONAL HUMANITARIAN LAW

Protracted conflict is not a legal term, and there is no definition of it in international humanitarian law (IHL) because the law is not strictly interested in the length of an armed conflict but rather in its conduct and consequences.

### HUMANITARIAN CONSEQUENCES

A lack of respect for IHL in the conduct of the parties involved causes enormous civilian suffering in armed conflicts. When widespread destruction and indiscriminate targeting become central to the means and method of armed conflict in protracted conflicts, people suffer severely. The humanitarian consequences of armed conflict – like displacement, impoverishment and a lack of access to basic services – can become entrenched, even if the pattern of violence is sporadic rather than constant. Damage that goes unrepaired, lost livelihoods and continuing protection risks mean that humanitarian consequences continue to affect people for a long time.

### CONDUCT OF HOSTILITIES

The ICRC's operational experience suggests that the long-term humanitarian consequences of protracted conflicts need to be taken into account in the interpretation and understanding of a number of IHL rules. IHL seeks to prevent the long-term effects of warfare mainly by imposing limitations on the conduct of hostilities that protect civilian infrastructure from being directly attacked, or sustaining unlawful collateral damage. In prohibiting excessive incidental damage to civilian objects, it requires the parties to take into account not only the immediate but also the foreseeable *reverberating effects* of attacks.

IHL also contains some specific rules that are particularly relevant to prevent long-term effects of hostilities. For instance, it requires the mitigation of long-term effects by prohibiting the destruction of objects essential for the survival of the population, including such things as livestock, crops, water installations and irrigation works. It also requires that parties take care to protect the natural environment against widespread, long-term and severe damage. In many contexts today, the ICRC's experience confirms the long-term risks of damage to objects essential to the survival of the population. The many rules governing the delivery of health care and providing for the respect and protection of the wounded and sick are also critical to protecting the long-term life chances of combatants and civilians alike.

The *indirect* and *reverberating effects* of military operations become more predictable in a well-known environment over time, thus affecting the precautions that a party might have to take to avoid or minimize incidental civilian casualties and damage. If parties can see clear evidence of the harmful impact on the population of damaged and constantly degrading essential infrastructure they must adapt their tactics to do everything feasible to minimize infrastructure damage. Greater knowledge of likely humanitarian consequences requires more precise efforts to mitigate the known negative effects of hostilities on the civilian population.

It is the ICRC's firm conviction that if armed conflicts – long and short – were conducted in a way that respects IHL and applicable human rights, then human suffering, devastation, displacement and impoverishment caused by armed conflicts could be much reduced. But even in situations where IHL is not technically violated, the conduct of war can cause enormous damage and have important long-term humanitarian consequences, such as protracted displacement, the loss of access to basic services and the erosion of individual and community coping mechanisms.

## HUMANITARIAN ACTION

In such conditions, principled humanitarian action over the long term may legitimately become more complicated, with actors required to engage more deeply with the social and economic needs of communities enduring the entrenched impoverishment and deprivation brought about by long conflict.

In IHL, humanitarian action encompasses all protection and assistance activities that are aimed at safeguarding the survival and life in dignity of people affected by armed conflict. The longer the conflict situation, the more onerous the obligation on belligerents to protect civilians effectively from the reverberating and cumulative effects of armed conflict, or, as a minimum, to allow and facilitate the provision of not only immediate relief for survival but also more long-term and sustained protection and assistance activities.

## IHL AND THE RELIEF-DEVELOPMENT QUESTION

IHL does not use the distinctions made in international policy of relief, early recovery and development; instead, it focuses on meeting basic needs. In IHL, humanitarian action is conceived as activities for the protection of and provision of relief assistance for persons affected by the conflict.<sup>3</sup> Protection and assistance are understood as inseparable activities aimed at safeguarding people's life and dignity.<sup>4</sup>

These humanitarian activities can be rapid life-saving operations, but the longer the conflict lasts the more necessary it becomes to engage with people and communities at a structural level to enable their immediate survival and their ability to live in dignity in evidently deteriorating conditions. In these circumstances, activities that would, in peacetime, be understood, in international policy terms, as development activities will, in fact, serve to meet basic needs and fall under the definition of humanitarian action within the meaning of IHL.

Humanitarian activities are restricted by IHL to those that have a humanitarian purpose, but the longevity, depth or type of humanitarian action is not limited so long as it is impartial and gives no advantage to one or other party to the conflict. Instead, IHL understands a very wide spectrum of activities as innately humanitarian and sets no limits on the quality or longevity of these actions.<sup>5</sup> Depending on the context, a relatively sophisticated modern hospital is just as humanitarian as an impromptu mobile clinic, and cash received monthly from an ATM as part of a two-year sustainable small-business development scheme may be just as humanitarian as a sack of grain handed out as part of a large-scale food distribution. Working carefully over years with all parties to prevent violations of IHL by creating a more conducive environment for its respect, or taking decades to trace missing people are just as humanitarian as urgently responding to violations.

3 Article 9 of the First, Second and Third Geneva Conventions and Article 10 of the Fourth Convention.

4 ICRC Commentary on Article 9, GCI.

5 Subject to the consent of the parties concerned.

In armed conflict, IHL applies to all humanitarian action and this may include humanitarian engagement with long-term socio-economic programming that supports important socio-economic structures and long-term livelihood opportunities.<sup>6</sup> The ICRC's mission has always followed IHL in its long-term engagements by recognizing as humanitarian a wide range and depth of needs and interventions in and around armed conflict.

This deeper long-term approach is always guided by humanitarian principles. The ICRC is careful never to contribute to the goals of any warring party, or align itself with any particular political doctrine of development. This principled commitment to remaining needs-based and law-based protects the ICRC's wide range of activities from being partial, ideologically developmentalist and outcome-driven towards a specifically transformative vision of a progressive society. In other words, the ICRC engages in a certain number of systems-support and long-term activities but it does so with the humanitarian purpose of meeting essential needs, and not in order to pursue a particular ideology of political and social change.



It can take years to find people who go missing in the chaos of conflict and restore their links to family members. Here, a man in Akobo, South Sudan, searches an ICRC photo book for his missing loved ones.

6 The ICRC's Assistance Policy, 2004.



## 2. WHAT ARE THE EFFECTS OF PROTRACTED CONFLICT?

The President of the ICRC, Peter Maurer, has described the effects of protracted conflicts in stark terms:

**“The impact of protracted armed conflict and violence today is systematic and all-encompassing in too many countries: from the implosion of essential public services like health, electricity, water and sanitation to the eradication of what keeps a society going – education for its children, jobs for its adults, security for its most vulnerable. The longer wars last, the deeper the crippling effects of war. Within just a few years, decades’ worth of progress and development are wiped out.”<sup>7</sup>**

### THE EFFECTS ON PEOPLE

The humanitarian consequences of protracted conflict have been increasingly well documented over the last 30 years. Humanitarian organizations, social researchers, epidemiologists, food-security experts, human rights groups and journalists have reported regularly from the world’s armed conflicts. New information technology also enables people affected by armed conflict to describe their situation directly. Many of these assessments, studies, reports and evaluations of humanitarian needs in armed conflict give very practical accounts of people’s needs, vulnerability and resilience in long armed conflicts. People’s experience of suffering and survival is increasingly understood, even if it is not yet equitably and reliably responded to in humanitarian appeals and operations.

In protracted conflicts, people have multiple and intersectional vulnerabilities and needs that affect different aspects of their lives. These needs extend over years and change over time during the course of the conflict. People’s security and respect for their dignity remain essential needs, either continuously or episodically throughout protracted conflict, depending on changing patterns of conflict, threat and risk. As the armed conflict develops and spreads, the civilian population can be exposed to direct physical threats of death, injury, rape, sexual violence, exploitation and slavery, forced displacement, family separation, unlawful detention, summary execution, unlawful conscription and forced labour. The ICRC’s experience shows that each of these risks requires strategic protection programming, which takes into account the systems that create them as well as the individual incidents of violation.

Alongside protection, humanitarian assistance becomes essential to address civilians’ personal, social, health and economic losses and to mitigate people’s ever deepening vulnerability as a result of the immediate and cumulative impact of protracted conflict. The damage of war can render people extremely vulnerable, either suddenly or slowly, as their homes, livelihoods and basic services are destroyed over time, or overnight. The destruction wrought by armed conflicts damages homes, medical facilities, schools, vital infrastructure, businesses, markets, farms, and critical communication links, such as roads, bridges, supply chains and telecommunications. People may also lose smaller personal

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7 Peter Maurer, Speech to the 31st session of the Human Rights Council, 1 March 2016, Geneva



Unity State, South Sudan. Women collecting sorghum and oil after an airdrop conducted by the ICRC.

assets as a result of looting, pillage and extortion, and not just once but repeatedly, in the course of a long conflict. The loss of education is a significant impact of protracted conflicts that has a devastating effect on future life chances.

The ICRC's experience suggests that one of the greatest strategic risks for people enduring protracted conflict is deepening poverty. Armed conflicts in DRC, Syria, Libya, South Sudan, Somalia and other countries have created large numbers of new "war poor" people. To assist such populations in the hard fight for survival and to fend off lasting impoverishment, humanitarian assistance needs to be multi-sectoral, well-planned and long-term. It must also remain flexible and responsive to different emergencies, such as new episodes of violence, droughts, floods, epidemics and food-price volatility. Armed conflicts and climate risk can function together to cause "double vulnerability", when scarce water sources, grazing lands, forests and other natural resources become militarily strategic objectives.

## THE EFFECTS ON THE STATE AND BASIC SERVICES

International policy typically describes States in protracted conflict as either *failed* or *fragile*. The analysis in much fragility theory coincides with the ICRC's operational experience of State services in protracted armed conflict. Even if certain States enduring protracted armed conflict had strong and effective social and economic infrastructures before the conflict, these degrade fast because of damage, supply-chain problems, staff dispersal, brain drain, late salary payments and, sometimes, international sanctions. The inevitable rise in security budgets during conflicts frequently occurs at the expense of budgets for infrastructure, health, education, agriculture, business and social services. Even when State services are sustained at pre-conflict levels, the humanitarian consequences of the conflict can put significant new burdens on them so that they struggle to cope.

## FRAGILITY

The cumulative impact of protracted conflict means that the State, local authorities or commercial companies managing key life-saving and life-building services are often under-resourced and overwhelmed. If efforts to stabilize these services fail, then infrastructure and services become increasingly *fragile systems* of public provision. Humanitarian consequences escalate dramatically as systems fail and lives are lost, or because people are forced to leave their homes to seek alternative services, often leading to protracted displacement.

Even when State systems remain strong, or private health and education providers continue to operate effectively, there may still be a number of highly vulnerable areas which the violence or discrimination caused by the conflict put beyond the reach of basic services. In many conflicts, the staff and operating systems of national authorities can be split apart by the lines of conflict, leaving former colleagues cut off from one another and unable to coordinate supplies and services.

In States that are essentially high or middle-income economies, the ICRC can find itself engaged in *situations of fragility* within otherwise capable States. These fragile situations typically arise around hard-to-reach civilian populations, or very vulnerable IDPs, refugees and migrants. Fragile systems may also be common in places of detention, in besieged areas, or in militarily contested areas, where the volatile nature of conflict leaves basic services devoid of resources and frequently under attack.

## THE EFFECTS ON THE REGION

The effects, including humanitarian consequences, of armed conflict have always spread beyond national borders. Today, the international impact of armed conflicts – especially conflicts in which there is a sustained lack of respect for IHL – is obvious in the very large-scale movement of migrants and refugees. The flow of people across State borders means that neighbouring countries are often severely affected by the consequences of conflict, even when they play no direct part in hostilities. This situation has been familiar to many countries in Africa, the Middle East and Asia for the last 50 years. Many States in Europe are once again experiencing what it means to cope with the humanitarian consequences of conflict.

The overspill of the humanitarian consequences of conflict from one country to another may put enormous social, economic and political pressure on neighbouring States and States far away from the armed conflict. This pressure and disruption can also last for decades. Countries like Lebanon, Jordan, Greece, Italy and many others are struggling to cope with arrivals *en masse* of refugees and migrants – many of whom have had extremely dangerous journeys from their place of origin and arrived more vulnerable than when they left.

The arrival of large populations increases costs and requires additional infrastructure investment in host countries. The arrival of people from countries experiencing protracted conflict may also cause significant national anxiety about the risks to social cohesion and economic opportunity. This anxiety can be politically manipulated to create new social conflicts within the host State. Without strong humanitarian leadership from governments and politicians, States managing the consequences of conflict may also become vulnerable to serious tensions.



Near the border with Austria. Refugees and migrants are seen in transit.

## THE EFFECTS ON HUMANITARIAN ACTION

Although the ICRC has worked in long conflicts for many decades, there are certain features of today's protracted conflicts that require us to adapt our operations. The essential challenge of protracted conflict is not new but the ICRC is now noting several characteristics which suggest that today's protracted conflicts are posing new challenges of scale and complexity.

### THE CHALLENGE OF URBAN INFRASTRUCTURE AND SYSTEMS

Our work in water, sanitation, housing and energy supply makes clear that the ICRC's response to conflict is increasingly taking place in dense and complicated urban spaces that are heavily dependent on complex critical infrastructure for service provision.<sup>8</sup> The increasing number of urban IDPs also puts new pressures on particular localities.

The large *scale* of urban infrastructure, as well as its *technical sophistication*, is a continuous challenge for the ICRC. Urban infrastructure is also *inter-connected*. Energy installations run lighting and heating for many different public and private facilities, and also ensure provision for vital water and sewerage infrastructure. Health-care, education, domestic and business infrastructure all depend on energy, water and sewerage provision. Today, the sheer number of conflicts being waged in parallel around the world in urban areas is stretching the ability of the ICRC and other actors to respond, and pushing the sector to rethink the way it works in cities.

<sup>8</sup> For more detail, see ICRC 2015, *Urban Services in Protracted Armed Conflict: A call for a better approach to assisting affected people*, International Committee of the Red Cross, Geneva

The fragility of inter-connected infrastructure is evident from the ease with which it can be destroyed and degraded. Aerial bombardment – which has returned as a significant feature of contemporary armed conflict – can destroy infrastructure fast. Systems also deteriorate rapidly due to a lack of component parts and the flight of skilled staff. Fragile and deteriorating public services render millions of people extremely vulnerable in urban areas of all sizes. The design and sustainability of resilient infrastructure is a major challenge for the ICRC as it cooperates with authorities to ensure the means of survival for people in cities.



Part of a large-scale water-treatment system in Gaza.

Significant parts of our operations now focus on keeping municipal or national *systems* going to reach hundreds of thousands of people. This large-scale systemic approach is strategically and technically different to the way we have often worked. In the past, we might have designed and constructed small, rural bore-holes to reach thousands of people. Today, we are overseeing the design and maintenance of urban systems that support millions of people in urban areas of the Middle East and in fast-growing cities in Africa.

### THE GREATER SOPHISTICATION OF SUCCESS

The ICRC has developed a greater understanding of the *specificity* of protection and assistance needs that may arise in particular groups, such as victims of sexual violence, children, IDPs, migrants, the elderly, persons with disabilities and host communities. This expansion of target groups demands a precision in humanitarian response that is now the norm in long-term humanitarian operations and donor demands. Today, the ICRC has a wider *palette of activities* in protracted programming, which stretches from food security to mental health, and from missing people to large-scale infrastructure repair. In health, the ICRC is increasingly responding to non-communicable diseases that require sophisticated treatment.

The emphasis on meeting deep needs, supporting systems and reaching more precise target groups inevitably raises the bar for measuring humanitarian effectiveness. Donors rightly demand reporting on outcomes as well as outputs. Affected people themselves, also rightly, have increasingly high expectations of the quality and complexity of care they receive. The ICRC's own professional ethics also demand that our operational teams and their various partner organizations fulfil the full mission of the ICRC, so that we do the job properly in protracted conflict and not just part of the job.

Our work on sexual violence is an example of this more intricate and individualized response. A full response to sexual violence must combine risk-reduction programming to prevent violations against those at risk, community-based sensitization to avoid rejection and stigma, and multi-dimensional survivor care that reacts in a timely and sensitive way to treat each survivor individually. Every survivor may need a mix of medical care, psycho-social support, livelihood support and long-term monitoring. To provide each of these requires considerable expertise. Similarly sophisticated and individually-focused programming is required for work with war-wounded, persons with disabilities and separated families. Identifying, supporting, treating and reintegrating caseloads of individuals is continuous long-term work that requires effective multi-sectoral systems. Operational success in these fields, as in many others now, has to be gauged in terms of good process and individual outcomes.

### THE SUPERFICIALITY OF THE RELIEF AND DEVELOPMENT DISTINCTION

From its experience of providing needs-based protection and assistance for populations over the long duration of protracted conflict, the ICRC is increasingly unconvinced by simple distinctions between relief and development programming and financing. Relief and development serve more as bureaucratic funding distinctions than a genuine reflection of the reality of a needs-based approach. The ICRC recognized this formally in 2003 in a new doctrine around transition, which noted that the ICRC "is increasingly incorporating certain development-inspired strategies into its operational reasoning".<sup>9</sup> This is also why, in 2015, the ICRC cut the word "emergency" from its annual appeal to emphasize that the needs it meets and the work it does are more holistic and continuous than current financing categories imply.

Humanitarian action involves not only urgent life-saving action but also ensuring people's means of survival and their right to a life with dignity. Context defines the necessary response. Often, a combination of urgent short-term interventions and more long-term activities and system-building, carried out in parallel, is required. At times, medium and long-term activities to support infrastructure and services are the most appropriate response to meet the urgent needs of individuals.

### THE ABSENCE OF DEVELOPMENT INVESTMENT

Even though people's needs in protracted conflict may be long-term and dependent on the continuity of development infrastructure and basic services, development investment and agencies often have an inconsistent and limited presence, or are totally absent. In the ICRC's experience, this absence is explained by a number of issues, such as sanctions, concerns about staff security and operational feasibility. It may also be because the government partners of development institutions have lost access to territory where projects would be carried out.

Development continuity is still necessary in protracted conflicts. Low development investment in protracted conflict means that humanitarian organizations like the ICRC are frequently left to sustain vital indispensable assets on short-term humanitarian budgets. Imaginative combinations of humanitarian-development finance may achieve significant *development holds*, or even development gains. Experience in South Sudan, Lebanon and Somalia suggests this is particularly likely, in two ways.

9 Marion Harroff-Tavel (2003), *Do Wars Ever End? International Review of the Red Cross*, 85(851), pp 465-496.

First, as described above, it is rare that the entire territory of a country is threatened by the same intensity of armed conflict. In South Sudan, it has been possible to continue development activities in many areas of the country. Armed conflict itself has not been the main brake on a gradually expanding development effort. When development has been reduced, or “frozen” in these relatively peaceful areas, development actors have been responding more to the risks of weak governance than the risks of violence. Fragility, rather than security, has inhibited development. This shows why a simplistic link between protracted conflict and the impossibility of development is ill-founded. There may be many areas within a protracted conflict where development investments focused on basic needs make sense.

Secondly, the ICRC’s relative success in maintaining functioning services and essential infrastructure over many years in conflicts like Somalia, Syria, DRC and South Sudan suggest that development finance and expertise could be highly complementary to humanitarian action in these areas. Effective development partnerships with humanitarian organizations could support strategic humanitarian action with development financing of hospitals, primary health-care networks, livelihoods, small-business continuity, informal education, places of detention, water, sewerage and electricity infrastructure. Savvy development thinking could also shape financing instruments to improve supply-chain development and reduce foreign-exchange costs. In protracted conflicts, these are two areas where short-term humanitarian approaches usually end up costing considerably more than necessary.

More creative development support in these two ways could prevent some of the chronic development reversals and entrenched impoverishment that so often characterize protracted conflicts.

## **THE IMPORTANCE OF LOCALIZATION AND PARTNERSHIP**

The ICRC has always worked with local actors and has long experience of the value of national and local partnerships. Principles of localization and subsidiarity are integral to the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement. Long-term and often structural engagement with a society enduring armed conflict naturally pulls the ICRC deeper into national and local partnerships, typically with the relevant authorities, National Societies, local communities and local commercial contractors. These partnerships add enormous value to the ICRC’s mission in the form of local knowledge, proximity, economies of scale and because such partners are permanent rather than transitory actors. Such partnerships can also reduce the risk of dependency in humanitarian action.



The ICRC and the Syrian Arab Red Crescent (SARC) working together in a buffer zone on the edge of the besieged city of Moademiyeh.

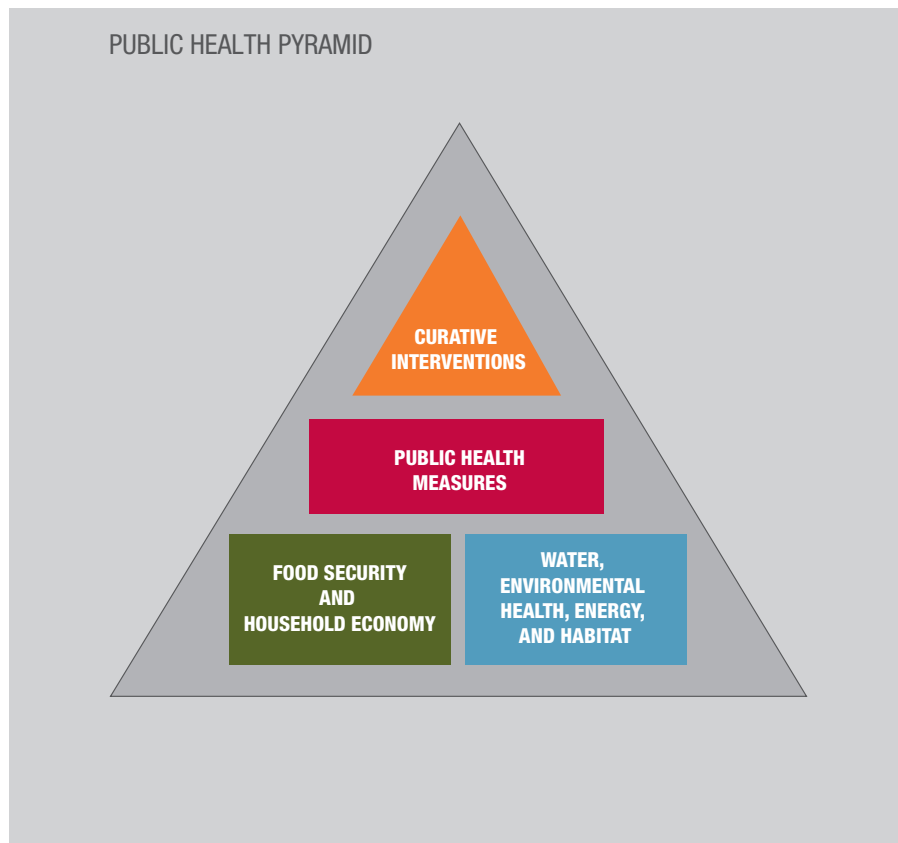
Partnering is an increasingly strategic skill for the ICRC. Achieving effective complementary local partnerships is, rightly, a major preoccupation for all international organizations because of increasing recognition of the contribution of national and local actors in humanitarian response. Forming successful partnerships takes time and expertise. Alongside their obvious benefits, they can be operationally challenging for all sides for a number of reasons.

- Strong State authorities and local partners may bring political pressures that challenge humanitarian principles of impartiality, neutrality and independence.
- National and local partnerships may frequently involve an asymmetry of capability that is extremely challenging and time-consuming for all parties. This asymmetry needs to be addressed over the long term in major capacity-building programmes that require strategic thinking, operational adaptation and cultural changes on both sides.
- A growing ideology of localization among host governments and in international civil society risks imposing a new dogma of localization in humanitarian action that lacks nuance with regard to complementarity of local and international partnerships. In the ICRC's experience, much effective humanitarian action involves well-judged and principled synergies between national and international action. A dogmatic rather than practical approach to localization may work against the interests of those at risk as a result of armed conflict.

In light of these new features of today's response to protracted conflict, it is now necessary to look in more detail at the way in which the ICRC is responding to them and other traditional dynamics of long conflict.

### 3. HOW DOES THE ICRC RESPOND TO PROTRACTED CONFLICT?

The ICRC's approach to humanitarian assistance in protraction has been clearly framed in our earlier policies of rehabilitation, relief-development continuities and early recovery. These policies centre on our *combined approach*, based on our fundamental principles, which meets immediate and longer-term needs, usually via *parallel programming* of various kinds, and by moving judiciously between the ICRC's varying *modes of action* – especially substitution, mobilization, capacity-building and persuasion.<sup>10</sup>



The public-health pyramid in the diagram above has inspired the ICRC's assistance programming in recent years. It shows the need to prioritize a combined approach that involves deeper, system-wide engagements with regard to food security and public health alongside immediate curative interventions in relation to emergency medicine and urgent food supply.

<sup>10</sup> The ICRC: Its Mission and Work, March 2009, Reference

## A COMBINED APPROACH

The ICRC's commitment to resilience means our practice is always sensitive to the dilemma of aid dependency and the sustainability of humanitarian response. As early as 1998, ICRC policy stated that "emergency responses cannot be equated with short-term operations".<sup>11</sup> We have usually adopted a variety of actions that play short and long in protracted conflicts. All ICRC teams in protection, water and habitat, economic security and health prioritize *sustainable improvement* and strengthening resilience above simply meeting essential needs. This thinking builds on the ICRC's 2004 Assistance policy, which promotes a public-health "pyramid strategy" that focuses on building fundamental improvements in food security and public health (at the bottom of the pyramid) while maintaining urgent interventions to treat hunger and physical wounds where necessary (at the top of pyramid).<sup>12</sup>

Most ICRC operations meet urgent life-saving needs and support long-term structures simultaneously, typically using a single platform from which they can work short and long at the same time. In South Sudan, a one-off air-drop distribution in an isolated district can be the opportunity from which to launch a long-term tracing programme to restore family links (RFL) for thousands of displaced people attending the distribution. One recent distribution enabled 1300 people to inspect photos of missing people before the distribution began. Satellite phones and Red Cross messages then allowed 150 of these people to contact missing relatives they had recognized and re-establish contact after months or years of lost contact, proceeding to family reunification in some cases. This is a common example of leveraging a long-term protection programme from a short-term relief platform.

Ensuring sustainable systems in protracted conflict not only maintains people's health and livelihoods but also enables the population to avoid protection risks. A functioning education system in armed conflict is essential to keep children off the streets and to pass on essential information on how they can protect themselves. Engaging in the school system can ensure children are less vulnerable to recruitment, sexual violence, early marriage, enforced labour and weapons indoctrination.

The ICRC's initial emphasis on urgent needs is an operational starting point and does not obscure the fact that people often excel at surviving and adapting. People that the ICRC helps often develop strategies of resilience that are highly functional and enable them to maintain some recognizable form of their pre-conflict lives, or they make difficult new lives in strategies of flight and migration. People's agency in situations of protracted conflict demand that the ICRC work with them with a dual purpose of meeting their needs and supporting their own sources of resilience.

11 World Food Summit. Food Security in Armed Conflicts – The ICRC's Approach and Experience, *International Review of the Red Cross*, 36(315) – <https://www.icrc.org/eng/resources/documents/misc/57jncy.htm>

12 Pierre Perrin (1998), The Impact of Humanitarian Aid on Conflict Development, *International Review of the Red Cross*, 38(323)

## MEETING IMMEDIATE NEEDS AND MINIMIZING CUMULATIVE IMPACT

A major strategic challenge in a conflict of long duration is the debilitating effect of its cumulative impact. This cumulative impact is typically felt across all sectors, from health care and food security to water, electricity, education and law and order. The gradual degradation of conditions and human dignity cannot be addressed by simple relief activities but calls for a more sustained and structural response that focuses on people's direct and indirect needs. The ICRC's Water and Habitation (WATHAB) Unit has developed a model of cumulative impact in protracted conflict that now guides the ICRC's assistance response in many situations and adds to the ICRC's combined approach in action.<sup>13</sup>

The aim of the ICRC approach is to respond quickly and effectively to the direct and indirect needs caused by armed conflict, while simultaneously developing activities that provide a sustainable response to cumulative needs. Humanitarian operations that enhance the resilience of a service provider, or a community can constitute a response that mitigates cumulative impact effectively. In this way, these operations act as *development holds*, i.e. they hold off further development reversals.

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<sup>13</sup> ICRC 2015, *Urban Services in Protracted Armed Conflict: A call for a better approach to assisting affected people*, International Committee of the Red Cross, Geneva

## DEVELOPMENT HOLDS IN PROTRACTED CONFLICT

WITH HUMANITARIAN ENGAGEMENT

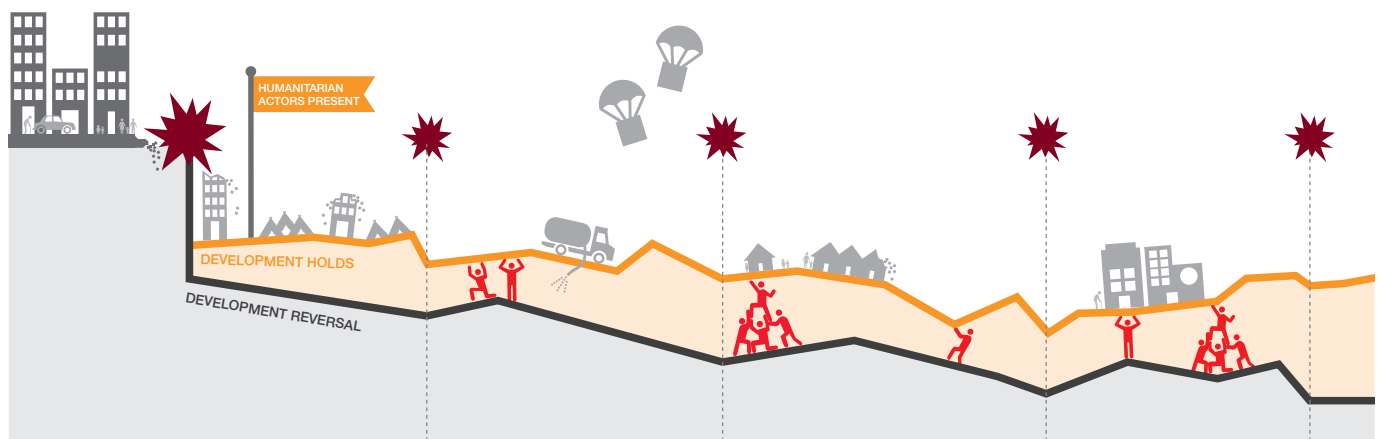


Figure 1 shows ICRC operations with partners engaged in development holds as a situation is deteriorating.

## DEVELOPMENT HOLDS IN PROTRACTED CONFLICT

WITH DEVELOPMENT INVESTMENTS

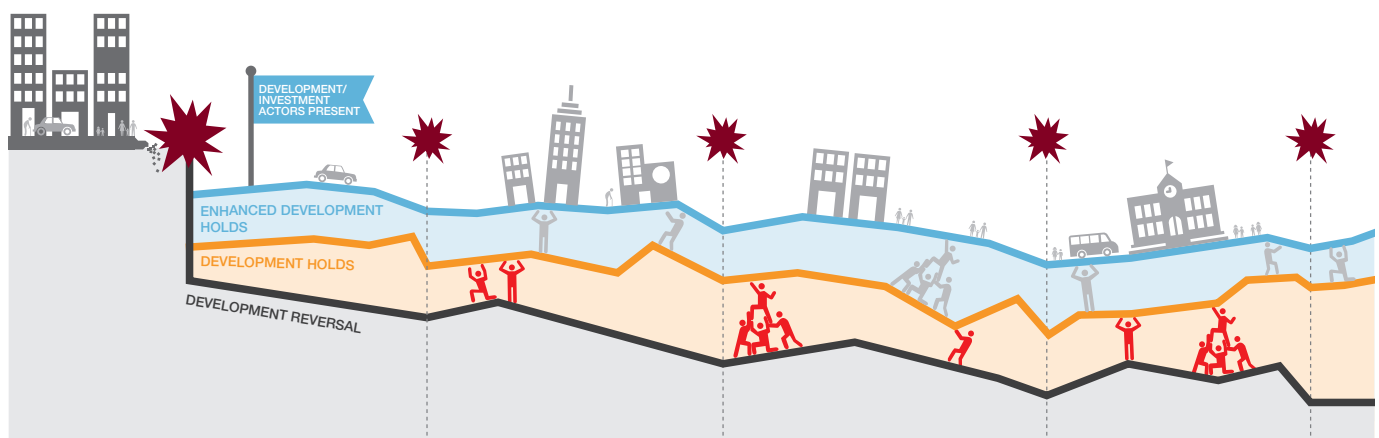


Figure 2 shows the potential for greater development holds when other actors are present and commit multi-year investments to prevent further development reversals.

## COST OF REBUILDING TO PRE-CONFLICT LEVEL

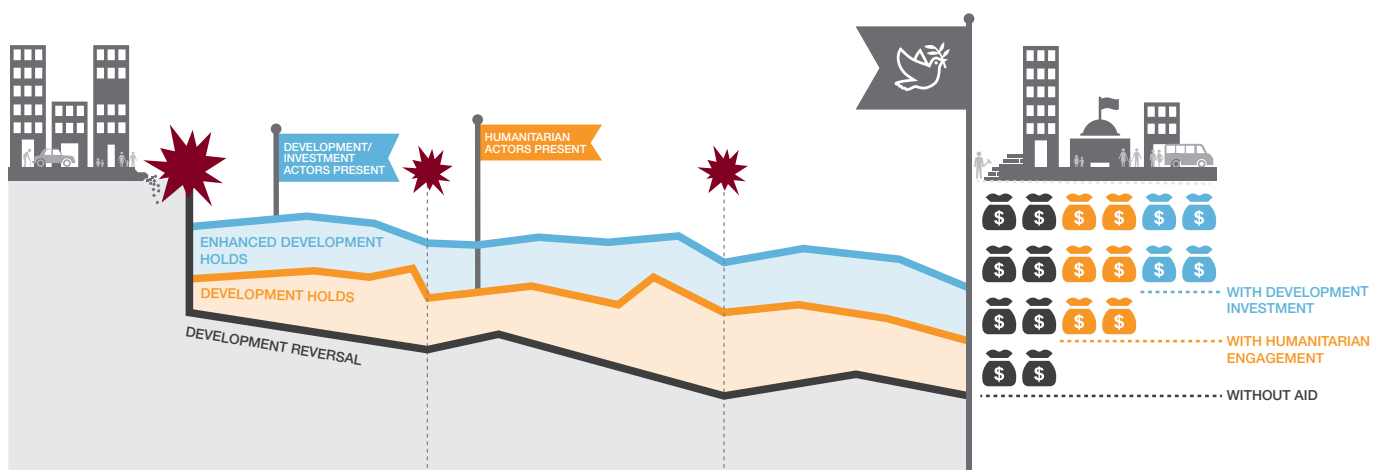


Figure 3 shows the reduced costs of conflict and the lower price of recovery and reconstruction when all actors engage in development holds.

## WORKING SHORT AND LONG

ICRC teams must plan with two horizons simultaneously in mind in order to respond to immediate needs and mitigate cumulative impact. As one ICRC manager put it: “I work with two timelines: one is week to week and the other is two years ahead.”

Working along short and long timelines, the ICRC is able to adapt its activities rapidly: scaling up emergency response when conflict intensifies, or developing resilience-based programmes, and often doing both at once. This allows the ICRC to leverage length, depth, agility and partnership in its protracted operations for maximum humanitarian impact.

In its water and sanitation response in Bangui, the ICRC started long-term planning at the same time as it began water-trucking to meet immediate needs. Similarly, our economic security engagement in South Sudan also tries to operate in depth around the protracted crisis of food security. Food distributions are not sufficient. The logic of deep and long-term needs in this crisis demands an approach to protecting livelihoods and environment that is framed more in terms of food security than food supply. Whenever possible, the ICRC’s operational focus in protraction moves from survival to *the means of survival*, and from feeding individuals to working with communities and authorities to sustain the food system on which they depend by vaccinating and treating cattle, injecting cash and developing high-quality seed-supply chains.<sup>14</sup> For more information, see Box 6.

Health priorities also require combinations of short and long-term approaches to meet immediate needs and mitigate cumulative impact. An ICRC hospital in South Sudan may provide urgent surgery for war-wounded victims of armed conflict while simultaneously training medical personnel to improve treatment and disease prevention in the area, and securing their government salaries. The upgrading of a government hospital offers the dual opportunity to treat war-wounded and reach out to surrounding conflict-affected communities suffering the humanitarian consequences of reduced health services in the wake of government budget cuts, non-payment of salaries and the flight of skilled personnel.

A medical programme can also facilitate other ICRC activities. Alongside the work of the permanent medical team, first-aid training for armed forces can be delivered cross-line from this fixed medical platform. So, too, can important IHL training and dialogues with all parties. These programmes work to address immediate protection concerns, develop first-aid capacity within the conflict and aim to build a long-term environment that is more conducive to respect for IHL.

<sup>14</sup> This approach is central to the ICRC’s Assistance Policy, Doctrine 49 (2004), which emphasizes the need to give civilian populations the means to recover their dignity and livelihoods.

## SAMPLE OF ICRC 'PALETTE OF ACTIVITIES' TO MEET SHORT, MEDIUM AND LONG-TERM NEEDS

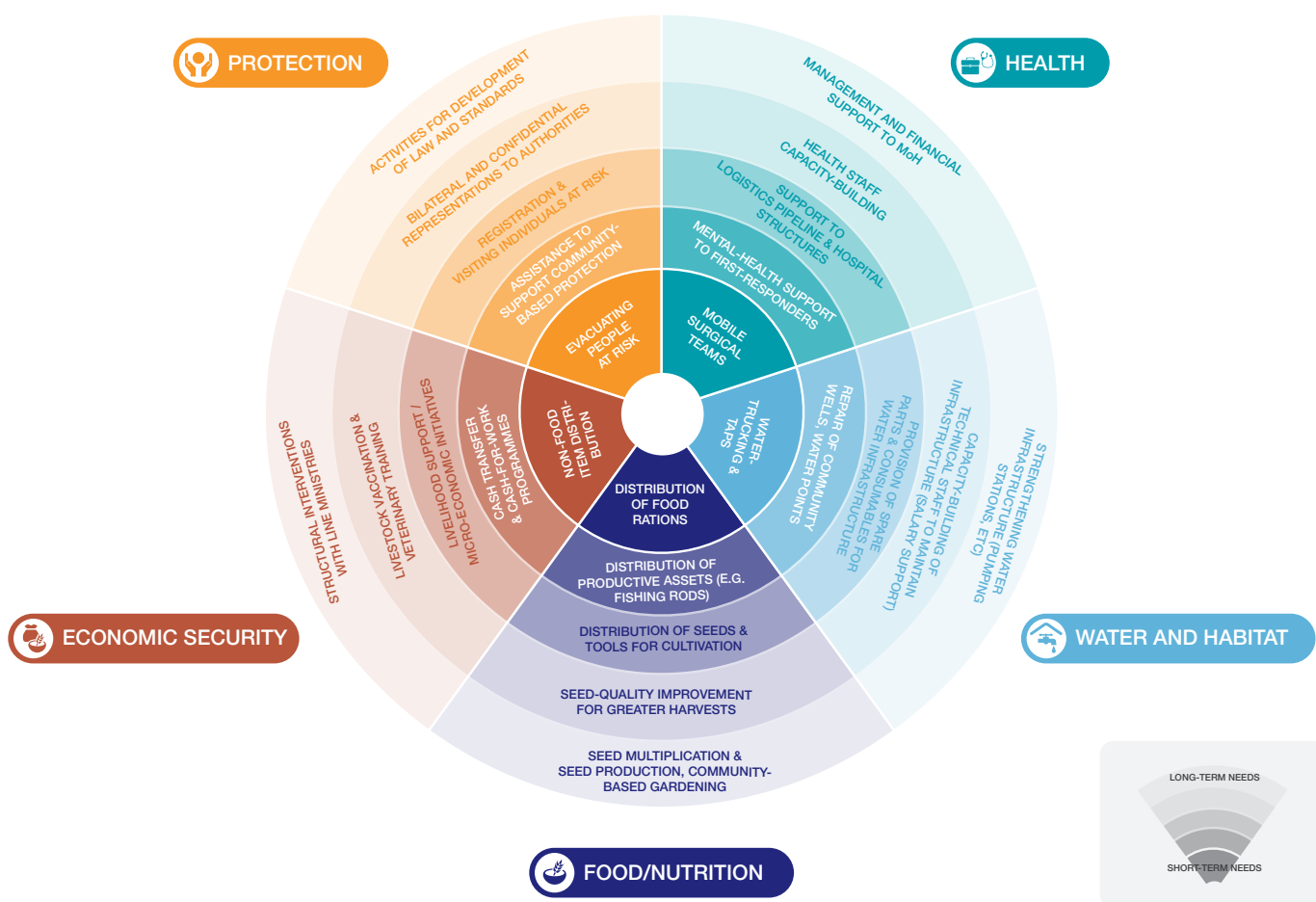


Figure 4 shows the ICRC's 'palette of activities'.

## WORKING DEEP

An important way in which the ICRC aims to meet long-term needs in a smart response is by prioritizing *depth* of engagement. Nothing is more profound than urgently saving a life but experience shows that a deeper engagement with social, economic and governance structures in protracted conflict can ensure, if not sustainability, then more *resilient systems* that continually save lives throughout the duration of the conflict, often at lower cost. The ICRC's structural engagement prioritizes *resilience* by focusing on deep human needs around the means of survival: access to services; individual empowerment; economic opportunity; livelihood systems; reliable health, water, waste and energy infrastructure; and a protective environment that reduces IHL violations.

A deep approach involves working *on* the context and not just *in* the context. ICRC programmes in protracted conflict combine work at depth in two main ways. First, structural-support projects involve technically deep interventions that ensure access to basic services by large groups of people. Secondly, small-scale and highly personalized projects focus on deep impact on individual lives.

**BOX 1****Working short and long in Iraq**

The ICRC has been in Iraq since 1980, responding to humanitarian needs resulting from decades of various conflicts, from the Iran-Iraq war to today's conflict. At the outset of its operations, it was impossible to predict how the situation would evolve and the ICRC started with a short-term perspective. But over time we have adapted quickly and become increasingly creative at meeting short-term needs while also expanding support for services that will be critical to people's lives over the medium and long terms.

One important way of doing this has been by supporting local service-providers. For 25 years, the ICRC has directly assisted the repair and rehabilitation of water-supply infrastructure by training staff and supplying spare parts and consumables to ensure service continuity. The ICRC's partner service-providers serve residential customers, hospitals and schools. Displaced people and refugees have also been a priority. In 2015, the ICRC was able to install water tanks and tap stands and provide

them with trucked water from the main system as part of the IDP response in the Al Ramadi camp, Al Amal camp, and in the informal settlements around the Caravan camp in Anbar. This ensured the IDPs had access to water for urgent needs and is a good example of how the ICRC leverages a long-term system to meet an urgent short-term crisis.

The arrival of large displaced populations placed huge stress on the main water service in the towns of Amiriyah, Nukhieb and Habbaniyah, so the ICRC upgraded the water-supply infrastructure in these areas with the Khalidiyah Directorate of Water. This ensured a more reliable supply of water for approximately 21,900 local residents in these areas, while securing the water supply for approximately 37,000 IDPs in the camps. This part of the programme demonstrates how the ICRC leverages long-term improvements from a short-term crisis.

**PRIORITIZING AGILITY AND PROXIMITY**

Combined and parallel programming has always recognized that the *fluidity* of a situation determines the mode in which the ICRC operates and so shapes the particular short-long mix required in any context. Fluidity is the rate at which conflict flares, fixes and fades across a protracted conflict. The rate of violence determines how ICRC teams may operate in different *modes* as fighting and risk vary across the surface of a conflict. The fluidity of conflict in South Sudan means the ICRC may be carrying out long-term veterinary capacity-building with the Ministry of Animal Resources and Fisheries in stable areas, while urgently distributing supplies to recently displaced and hard-to-reach people in other areas. In Syria and Yemen during 2015, the ICRC estimated that its relief/development mix, or short/long split, was 80/20. In Lebanon and Jordan, different situations enable more sustainable refugee and IDP health and livelihood care, so the split was reversed, at 20/80.

Agility is the best way to maintain proximity to affected populations in a changing context. The ICRC aims to remain agile even in those apparently stable areas where it engages in long-term structural support and resilience activities. In 2012, the ICRC partnered with a teaching hospital in Malakal in Upper Nile state in South Sudan, where it was providing trauma surgery and community outreach services, as well as capacity-building programmes for local medical personnel. When renewed armed conflict suddenly displaced the civilian population of Malakal and damaged the hospital, the ICRC team followed the community and re-established its medical services in the nearby towns where IDPs were gathering. This ensured that ICRC teams stayed close to people and relevant to their needs.

This example is explored in Box 2, where two different types of operational platform in South Sudan are compared. Regardless of the different levels of volatility, the ICRC teams in each place remained determined to combine short and long activities to meet the needs of their respective civilian populations. The ICRC actively seeks out and takes advantage of opportunities to build up long-term activities, even before the conflict has ended, to mitigate cumulative impact that would otherwise increase the severity of humanitarian needs.

## BOX 2

### Fixed and floating strategies in two villages of South Sudan

The ICRC has been present in Sudan, including what is now South Sudan, since 1980. In 2014–2015, the humanitarian situation varied across South Sudan, so the ICRC adapted its strategy to the fluidity of the situation and according to people's needs and operational opportunities.

In Upper Nile state, the ICRC's presence was relatively fixed in Maiwut, where the security situation is generally calm and people maintain relative normality in their lives. In this environment, the ICRC was able to develop a strong hospital programme with out-patient, intensive-care, emergency, maternity, surgical and pharmacy services. The ICRC is committed to a four-year investment in the hospital, so the long-term priorities are to ensure the infrastructure is sound and fit for purpose, and that the staff has as much exposure as possible to learning opportunities. The hospital also treats war-wounded patients injured during fighting in the region, or medically evacuated there by the ICRC from further afield. Here, a primarily fixed long-term platform also served as a launch for important short-term activities.

Unity state was severely affected by ongoing hostilities and required rapid adaptations based on an operational logic of "*follow, float, fly*", which aimed to ensure humanitarian continuity where people needed it most. The town of Leer suffered multiple

attacks and changed hands between government and opposition forces. The ICRC in Unity was originally based in Bentiou but it evacuated to Leer in early January 2014 to *follow* the displaced civilian population as it moved south down the main road.

Despite several major attacks on and evacuations from Leer, the ICRC established an effective *floating* platform that remained there, providing protection and assistance for approximately one year. Sporadic and increasingly violent attacks forced the ICRC to remain very mobile. It organized fast-moving short-term distribution of emergency food and non-food items to civilians by air transport supported by rotating ground crews, while unable to maintain a major permanent presence in the town. Even in such a volatile situation, the ICRC teams managed to incorporate some more resilient and long-term programming in the area, including cattle vaccination, hand-pump repair and restoring family links between people who had been separated in attacks from previous years.

All these activities, their commodities and their teams came in and out by air – the critical *flying* dimension of the strategy, which made possible the ICRC's operational agility and proximity in a context of minimal road logistics and recurring conflict.

## BUILDING PARTNERSHIPS

An essential part of the ICRC's combined approach is partnering and institution-building with National Societies of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and the relevant authorities in the armed conflict.

The ICRC partners with a range of authorities, including water boards, hospitals, local administrations and technical services, ensuring that its independence and neutrality are respected in every partnership. One example of a long-short combination is the ICRC's orthopaedic facilities. These meet recurrent urgent needs through long-term institution-building of national centres and the transfer of specialized technical capacity to national or local authorities. The ICRC's preference is to mobilize and build the capacity of the relevant authorities rather than substitute for them, but sometimes substitution is necessary to meet needs.

The ICRC is privileged to be able to rely on a strong network of National Societies around the world. National Society staff and volunteers have a strong knowledge of their communities, their needs and the most effective ways of working. National Societies are typically front-line first responders and work alone, or together with the ICRC in a spirit of mutual capacity-building. Examples of strong Movement partnerships are provided in Box 3a.

In its partnerships, the ICRC supports mutual learning, knowledge-transfer and local ownership, wherever possible. Depending on the context and the capacities of its partner, the ICRC may add most value as a hands-on implementer, or it may be more effective by providing financial support and technical oversight for a local contractor.

**BOX 3a****Partnership within the Movement**

In Lebanon, the Lebanese Red Cross (LRC) is recognized as a principled and highly effective responder to health and disaster needs that enjoys access all over the country. Volunteers are highly motivated, well-trained and experienced. In recent years, demand for the LRC's emergency medical services has grown dramatically. The ICRC supports the renewal and upgrade of the LRC's fleet of ambulances by providing 30 per cent of its required budget, thus helping the LRC continue to meet needs.

The Somali Red Crescent (SRC) plays a critical role in the provision of health care across Somalia, operating hospitals and public-health clinics that provide primary health services, immunizations, nutritional support, and care for victims of sexual violence. When insecurity and volatility in the situation forced some of these clinics to close, the ICRC helped the SRC open

new clinics and upgrade the facilities of those that were able to remain open.

In South Sudan, the National Society has been just as affected as the local population by recent violence, meaning that volunteers of the South Sudan Red Cross have been displaced, wounded and even killed. Despite the insecurity and trauma, many volunteers remain incredibly committed to their role in the community and in the Movement. The ICRC relies on these committed individuals to help it organize the ground distribution of food delivered by airdrop for thousands of families, and to help people identify and contact missing relatives via the ICRC's Restoring Family Links programme. Thinking long, the ICRC hopes to support the National Society in rebuilding itself and developing new branches in the future.

**BOX 3b****A long-term partnership in Gaza**

The ICRC began supporting the water sector in Gaza in 2006 by providing technical, operational and financial support for the Coastal Municipalities Water Utility (CMWU). The Gaza Strip was plagued by regular power outages, partly due to damage to the only power plant in Gaza in June 2006. A sewage lagoon collapsed in Beit Lahia in March 2007, causing the death of four people in a vulnerable downstream community. The limited number of donors made the ICRC's activities particularly important.

The ICRC prioritized its support for the rehabilitation and upgrading of essential infrastructure, as well as the urgent need to ensure wastewater treatment to secure the groundwater on which Gaza residents rely for domestic and agricultural supply. This involved the construction of interim wastewater treatment plants in Rafah, Khan Younis, and Wadi Gaza. Support to the CMWU was later expanded to strengthen municipal emergency preparedness, which proved essential in the response to the hostilities in 2008/2009 and 2012.

Since 2013, the main donors to the water sector in Gaza have resumed their investments in larger infrastructure. But the CMWU and municipal water departments still struggle to ensure adequate operation and maintenance (spare parts and consumables), as well as the capital costs of smaller infrastructure works that need to be performed. The difficult operating environment due to the

occupation, entry restrictions for materials, and internal political divisions has made service providers for water, wastewater and electricity financially unsustainable. Today, the ICRC supports the CMWU via the rehabilitation of infrastructure and provision of spare parts and consumables to enable more reliable operations and maintenance. The ICRC has also covered part of its operating costs.

During the 2014 conflict, the ICRC – in its role as neutral intermediary – was the sole reference coordinating water, wastewater and electricity provision between the parties to the conflict, who needed safe access to perform repairs and basic operation and maintenance on critical infrastructure. The ICRC also supported a short-term emergency response that included water-trucking and generators for a back-up power supply, while simultaneously rehabilitating damaged infrastructure. This support helped stabilize essential service provision for the population of Gaza and specialist services like hospitals.

After the 2014 conflict, the ICRC helped rehabilitate infrastructure. As a wider network of donors has re-engaged, the ICRC has refocused its efforts on strengthening the emergency preparedness and response capability of service providers, so playing a complementary role to donor investment.

## MANAGING ETHICAL CHALLENGES

Working in protracted conflict raises many typical ethical problems of humanitarian action, such as: the moral hazard of making things worse; impartiality problems around competing needs; neutrality and independence problems and the risks of cooption or complicity; and dilemmas around the security of affected populations and humanitarian staff.<sup>15</sup>

Balancing immediate and long-term needs in a single programme also creates distinct ethical problems that the ICRC constantly has to face as it makes hard operational choices in chronic conflicts. Box 4 lists five of the main ethical challenges that repeatedly appear in a combined approach.

### BOX 4

#### Five particular ethical challenges in a combined approach:

- how to assess the *differing* value of long-term needs and short-term needs
- how to find the right *balance* between short and long approaches
- how to exit *responsibly* from short and long strategies<sup>16</sup>
- how to justify expensive emergency capacity in periods of stability
- how to minimize the risk of aid *dependency*

ICRC policy recognizes that while there are certain principles to guide decision-making, there is no magic formula to solve these challenges. Each problem needs to be worked out according to the variables of the particular context, and clear reasons given for the choices made.

<sup>15</sup> For a fuller discussion of ethical problems in humanitarian action, see: Hugo Slim, *Humanitarian Ethics: The Morality of Aid in War and Disaster*, Hurst/Oxford University Press, 2015, chapter 11.

<sup>16</sup> Ethically, it can be just as problematic to exit from a hungry community after a few food distributions as it is to leave a war-surgery hospital after 20 years.

## 4. HOW TO RESPOND BETTER IN PROTRACTED CONFLICT?

The ICRC has identified five main ways to improve its response in protracted conflict from the different operational contexts reviewed for this report. The first is about goal-setting and results. The second is about development holds. The third is about effective partnerships. The fourth is about multi-year planning and financing. The fifth is about the importance of listening to the affected population and actively involving them in the design and evaluation of our programmes.

Each one of these improvements requires cultural change and systems adaptation within the ICRC, which are already taking place. All these changes must be made in a way that allows the ICRC to retain its agility and relevance as an essentially operational humanitarian organization.

### FOCUSING ON OUTCOMES

The ICRC's programming cycle has traditionally reflected the annual financing it receives. Its general objectives for a given context already look three to five years ahead, but its specific objectives have been set annually to align with donor financing. Our monitoring and evaluation have also been tailored to report on the numbers of people reached through our services. This quantitative emphasis on *outputs* does not accurately demonstrate the deeper relevance and effectiveness of the ICRC's long-term work to support critical infrastructure and people's means of survival.

The ICRC is increasingly aware of the need to adjust its internal planning, budgeting, monitoring and financing to better reflect and support the reality of its work in protracted conflict. This will mean shifting from its current pragmatic approach of multi-year planning on an annual budget to an investment in proper multi-year *programming*.

The ICRC has begun to redesign its programming processes, practices and information management systems to be better adapted to the long-term *outcomes* of its work. We are improving our planning, monitoring and evaluation of the protection, health, nutrition, economic and structural outcomes of our work for people affected by conflict. This emphasis on outcomes programming rightly reflects the importance of humanitarian action that is long-term and engages at different levels to save lives, protect people and support populations in rebuilding their lives with dignity. Just as the ICRC calls on parties to conflict to consider the reverberating effects of their means of warfare, so we must be forward-looking and actively mitigate the cumulative humanitarian consequences of protracted conflict.

## ACHIEVING DEVELOPMENT HOLDS

Since the 1990s, the ICRC, in its operations, has been determined to achieve a more sustainable humanitarian effect – in prevention, protection and assistance – wherever possible. Our experience in protracted conflict convinces us that we can do this directly and personally with particular communities and victim groups, and indirectly with affected populations through large-scale support of infrastructure that is essential to basic services. We will seldom achieve development gains in protracted armed conflicts but we can sometimes help people and authorities secure development holds, which ensure that people's lives do not descend into even worse suffering and undignified poverty.

It is not the purpose of humanitarian action to meet the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). However, as new international consensus emerges around the basic human needs set out in the SDGs, it is clear that the ICRC can play a particular role in preventing greater development reversals in some areas of armed conflict. Our investments in maintaining essential services during conflict may also reduce redevelopment and rebuilding costs when peace returns. In Syria, the World Bank estimates up to \$250 million worth of damage has been done to the health sector and up to \$800 million of damage to the energy sector. In Aleppo, the most damaged area, the ICRC has refurbished more than 80 water sources and supplied hospitals with generators. Such development holds brought about by humanitarian action can prove vital to survival and reconstruction. Humanitarian action can, therefore, make a special and principled contribution to the basic needs prioritized in the SDGs.

The ICRC is not a development agency but a neutral and independent organization with an exclusively humanitarian mission. The ICRC has no ideological vision of development, nor does it favour one political vision of society over another. Our humanitarian mission is based on the principle of humanity's commitment to preventing and alleviating human suffering and "to protect life and health and to ensure respect for the human being". The commitments of several of the SDGs overlap with this basic humanitarian goal to ensure life, health and human dignity.<sup>17</sup> As a result, the ICRC is able to find complementarity with relevant authorities attempting to secure fundamental aspects of the SDGs.

## PARTNERING FOR HUMANITARIAN CONTINUITY

Partnerships are a key aspect of the ICRC's work in protracted conflict and ensure a long-term and sustainable approach. But partnerships can be challenging in situations where the capacity of the State or local communities is eroded by the cumulative impact of conflict, and where insecurity means commercial and development actors are largely absent. In these contexts, choosing, maintaining and developing effective partnerships is a critical skill that the ICRC aims to improve.

The ICRC needs partners who can deliver investment continuity both during conflict and when it ends and the ICRC scales down its operations. In many protracted conflicts, the ICRC and a local Red Cross or Red Crescent National Society will have worked closely with local authorities to maintain fragile services, or establish new ones. These services need long-term support during conflict and when conditions change towards stability and peace.

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<sup>17</sup> Especially SDG numbers 1, 2, 3, 6, 9 and 16.

During conflicts, the ICRC's experience shows that few government and non-government actors have the resources to plan clearly over the medium to long term. Funding visibility is poor, which makes it difficult to strategize effectively with others and complement each other's programming. A sudden reduction in services, or an early exit by a key humanitarian or development actor, has a significant negative impact on the coverage or quality of basic services that are essential to the ICRC's operating environment. This often puts pressure on the ICRC to step up and substitute for this loss in some way.

This lack of investment visibility and forward planning makes it difficult for the ICRC to plan strategically when other actors are not able to provide reliable information about their future operations. Such operational short-termism in the evident long-termism of protracted conflict could be greatly reduced by a general commitment to multi-year planning and budgeting across the humanitarian community.

## INCREASING MULTI-YEAR PROGRAMMING AND FINANCING

The ICRC aims always to prioritize the financial sustainability of its humanitarian programmes. This means that most delegations can plan ahead with some confidence, even though the ICRC itself is still working largely from an annual planning and budgeting system. In the words of one ICRC delegate, this confidence in the ICRC's sustainability means "that I do annual planning with a multi-year mindset".

The ICRC's experience in protracted conflicts indicates that multi-year planning and financing could bring about major improvements in humanitarian operations. Multi-year financing comes with some risks. It may not be appropriate in every programme, but it can often have significant benefits. Box 5 sets out a number of advantages in such an approach that are being recognized at operational level.

### BOX 5

#### Some advantages of multi-year programming

- *Better strategic planning* – multi-year financing enables a clear project-management approach to be developed for programmes that are currently vulnerable to short-term funding.
- *Cost-efficiency* – streamlined costs can be planned into a project if investment continuity is assured, and unused funds can be wisely carried forward, not rapidly spent.
- *Increased learning* – clearer future commitments give more time and space in which to learn and apply lessons from the operational context and collaborative partnerships.
- *Greater trust and credibility* – secure finance increases operational trust and commitment between affected communities, local authorities and humanitarian organizations.
- *Better planned entry and exits* – multi-year strategies make it possible for humanitarian actors to plan ahead, especially for responsible exit.
- *Greater retention of skilled staff and volunteers* – from assurances that future work plans can be carried out from one year to the next.

One main risk identified with multi-year financing is that it could tie the ICRC down to a given project or location, which may not remain relevant as the situation changes on the ground. If violence displaces the majority of people the ICRC is supporting through a hospital, the multi-year investment in that particular hospital may lose its relevance even though the health of those people remains a priority.

This risk is rightly mitigated by a primary focus in multi-year strategies on outcomes rather than projects. Outcomes-based financing enables both the ICRC and the funder to retain flexibility and relevance in changing conditions. Even if certain medical sites become untenable in new episodes of violence, the ICRC can still deliver the desired humanitarian impact by changing plans and following displaced people to new locations to continue providing essential health services for them. When multi-year outcomes are not tied to project location, the ICRC is able to retain its operational agility. Strategically, outcomes-based programming enables the ICRC's operations to focus on the health of a vulnerable population and not the outputs of a particular project site.

Box 6 presents an example of a specific project that has been considered by ICRC delegations but which requires multi-year financing to implement.

## BOX 6

### How multi-year financing could improve seed quality

The ICRC often distributes seeds and tools as part of its economic security (ECOSEC) programmes in protracted conflicts like those in the DRC, CAR and South Sudan. The aim is to provide people with the material they need to plant and harvest. This increases livelihood capacity, enables independence and helps manage food shocks and general food insecurity, so decreasing the role of food aid.

But the poor quality of some seed has heightened the risk of lower yields for some people, and the ICRC has decided that programme

performance could be raised by improving seed quality and, simultaneously, by developing local seed- production capacity and expertise. Working upstream with local seed producers is a long game but one that may achieve several goals: better seed, capacity-building and cost reductions. Results from one study in DRC showed that investing in high-quality seed production may increase the yield of a harvest by up to 300 per cent. To do so successfully, however, requires an investment of at least three years to harvest and breed the seeds with a reliable local partner.

Multi-year planning and financing is not the right approach for every humanitarian programme. Some ICRC activities do not need multi-year planning because their programme cycle will always be less than a year. These programmes are best kept on short-term implementation models to ensure they are carried out where and when it is most relevant to the target population. For example, food distributions and cash-for-work programmes are usually carried out from assessment phase to delivery in a matter of months. The same applies to protection activities that respond to immediate threats to physical and mental integrity. For example, the ICRC has transported war-wounded people for surgery, or evacuated recovering patients who are unable to flee imminent violence with the rest of their community.

## DEEPENING COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

The ICRC works with communities and individuals who are capable, proactive and resourceful at meeting their needs. They are the main agents of their future. It is important that the ICRC learns new ways to listen to their views and involve them in the design and evaluation of the ICRC's work. Without such communication, it is unlikely that ICRC operations will remain relevant and respected.

Integrating a diversity of voices and concerns in emergency situations can be difficult but the longer the ICRC works in a protracted conflict, the more it can rightly be expected to incorporate the proposals, views and criticisms of people with whom it works. The ICRC is committed to increasing its efforts to ensure accountability to conflict-affected people, recognizing the role they should play in shaping the short and long-term humanitarian response that affects many areas of their lives. An exciting part of this deeper interaction is the potential to use new technology and new media to optimize engagement between affected people and the ICRC.



Central Equatoria State, Juba, Physical Rehabilitation Reference Centre supported by the ICRC. A physiotherapist looks after a young girl.



ICRC

# Longevity of ICRC Presence in selected Protracted Conflicts

(2015)

## Israel and the occupied territories

**2015 budget: 50.5M CHF**

The ICRC has been present in Israel and the occupied territories since 1967, and throughout the subsequent phases of conflict, which have varied in intensity since then. It strives to ensure respect for IHL, with special emphasis on the laws applicable to occupation.

## Sudan

**2015 budget: 5.0M CHF**

The ICRC opened an office in Khartoum in 1978. In 1984, it began operations in the context of armed conflict between government forces and the opposition, later adapting its programmes to the transition to peace. Since 2004, it has responded to needs arising from hostilities in Darfur, although the ability of the organization to do its work has been restricted in recent years.

## Colombia

**(1969)**

## Colombia

**2015 budget: 33.3M CHF**

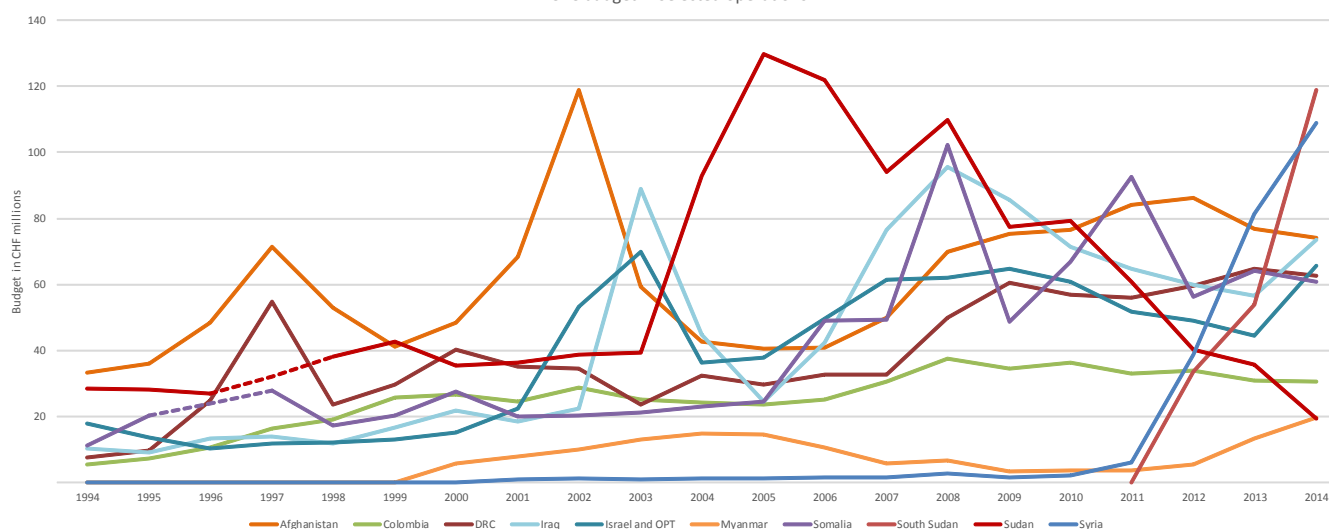
The ICRC has been in Colombia for more than 40 years, responding to the consequences of the armed conflict, which is one of the longest-running in the world, and other violence. A number of humanitarian issues will remain after a peace agreement, currently being negotiated, is signed.

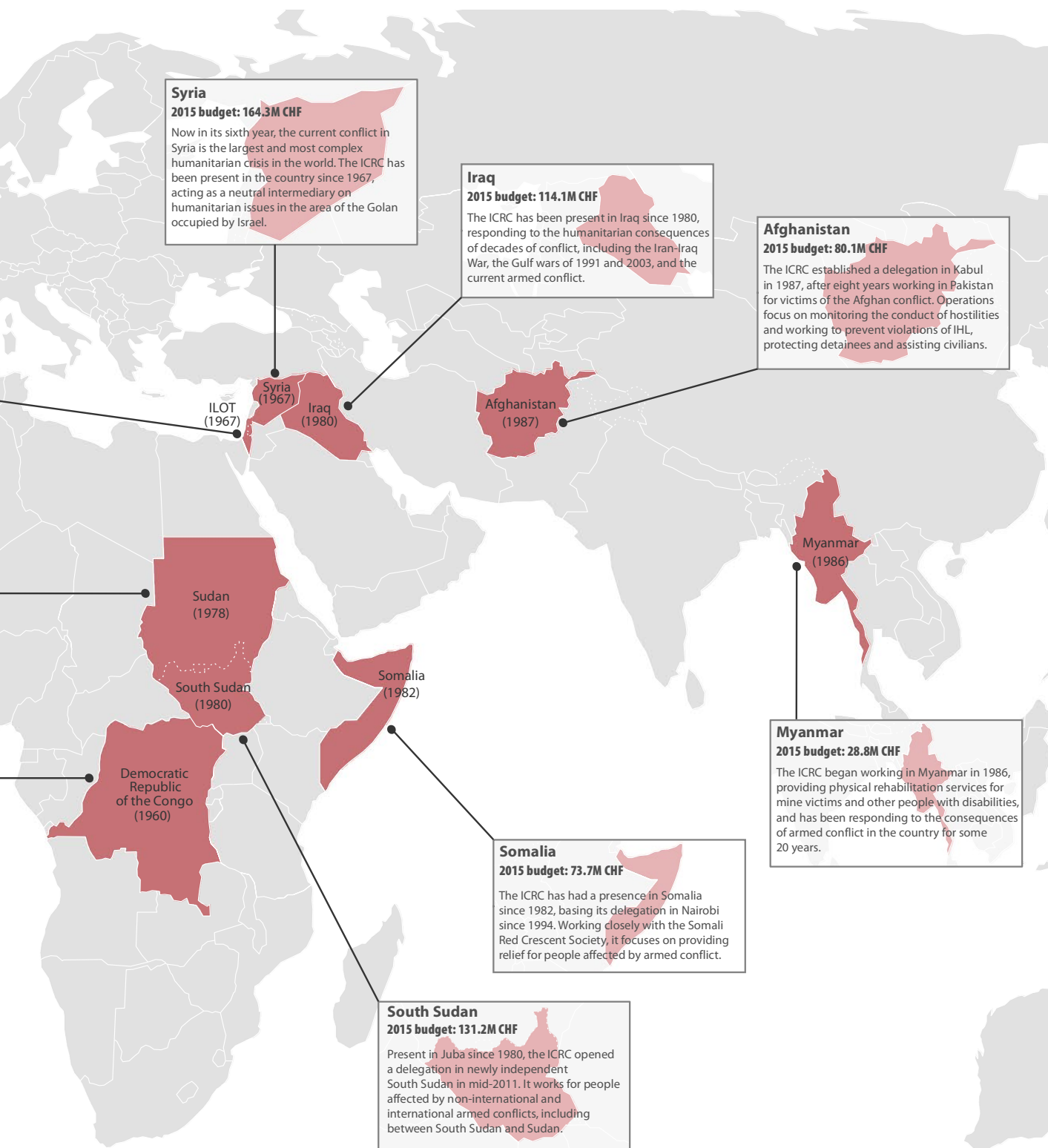
## Democratic Republic of the Congo

**2015 budget: 63.4M CHF**

Having worked in the country since 1960, the ICRC opened a permanent delegation in Zaire, now the Democratic Republic of the Congo, in 1978. It meets the humanitarian needs of IDPs and residents affected by conflict.

ICRC budget in selected operations







#### **MISSION**

The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) is an impartial, neutral and independent organization whose exclusively humanitarian mission is to protect the lives and dignity of victims of armed conflict and other situations of violence and to provide them with assistance. The ICRC also endeavours to prevent suffering by promoting and strengthening humanitarian law and universal humanitarian principles. Established in 1863, the ICRC is at the origin of the Geneva Conventions and the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement. It directs and coordinates the international activities conducted by the Movement in armed conflicts and other situations of violence.

