The Red Cross movement accounts for a large portion of the system of civilian aid agencies, but has a special status, in part because of its relationship with governments. It derives its international legal mandate from governments from the Geneva Conventions. In addition, the individual Red Cross and Red Crescent societies operating at a country level are established under national law.

The term movement refers to both the 186 national societies and to the two entities, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and the International Federation of the Red Cross and the Red Crescent (IFRC), that span the globe. Most national societies mobilize thousands or tens of thousands of volunteers each year, a characteristic that sets the Red Cross movement apart from the UN and other humanitarian assistance organizations. The many parts of the movement comes together roughly every four years in the International Red Cross Conference.

The ICRC and IFRC both work closely with national societies in emergencies. As shown in table A6.1 below, national societies (one per country) are divided between those in wealthier, donor countries, and those that are in emergency-prone poorer countries.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Organization type</th>
<th>ICRC</th>
<th>IFRC</th>
<th>Donor Societies</th>
<th>Recipient Societies</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Unique legal status</td>
<td>protected</td>
<td>association of national societies</td>
<td>example: American Red Cross, established by U.S. Congress</td>
<td>one per country</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Main focus</td>
<td>protects and offers assistance to civilians in conflict zones, promotes international humanitarian law and Geneva Conventions</td>
<td>works around disasters, refugees, and epidemics</td>
<td>support the ICRC and IFRC and give directly to countries in need</td>
<td>in principle the lead agency for disaster readiness, mitigation, and response in most developing countries</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Headquarters</td>
<td>Geneva</td>
<td>Geneva</td>
<td>capitol cities</td>
<td>capitol cities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009 budget</td>
<td>$1.13 billion</td>
<td>$200 million</td>
<td>example: American Red Cross: $3.7 billion</td>
<td>example: Indian Red Cross: $55 million</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The core humanitarian principles of impartiality, and independence that are today pervasive across a wide range of aid agencies were originally crafted as the fundamental principles of the Red Cross movement. They are seen as critical to the identity and effectiveness of agencies in this movement.
The ICRC, which is based in Geneva, is established by international convention and promotes adherence to the Geneva Conventions in war zones. It is also the lead agency in developing advances to international humanitarian law and principles.

To assist people affected by armed conflict, the ICRC speaks with all parties to a conflict. It supports the efforts of arms carriers to respect international humanitarian law or other fundamental rules protecting persons in situations of violence. The ICRC also visits prisoners of war and security detainees and registers them to prevent disappearances. In addition, the ICRC works with authorities to ensure that people deprived of their liberty are treated humanely and according to recognized international standards, which forbid torture and other forms of abuse. The ICRC has one of the largest budgets (over $1 billion a year) of any agency devoted entirely to helping in humanitarian crises.

In short, its mandate includes the following elements:

- Try to ensure civilians not taking part in hostilities are spared and protected.
- Visit prisoners of war and security detainees.
- Transmit messages to and reunite family members separated by armed conflict.
- Help find missing persons.
- Offer or facilitate access to basic health care services.
- Provide urgently needed food, safe drinking water, sanitation and shelter.
- Promote respect for international humanitarian law.
- Monitor compliance with and contribute to developing international humanitarian law.
- Help reduce the impact of mines and explosive remnants of war on people.
- Support National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies to prepare for and respond to armed conflict and other situations of violence.

As a private Swiss organization, the ICRC, with a mandate given by states in the Geneva Conventions, receives funding directly from governments. The U.S. Department of State, for example, gives the ICRC a sum, earmarked by Congress, for use each year for its worldwide operations. With this funding, the ICRC is more directly engaged in implementing field programs than other international organization funded through state channels are. The ICRC’s relief assistance is perhaps the most comprehensive of any implementing agency, including food aid, nutrition, water supply, medical and surgical care, shelter, and care for livestock. Unlike the World Food Programme (WFP), the ICRC not only procures food but also distributes it directly to populations affected by emergencies.

In the 1980s, the ICRC catalyzed an international movement to view landmines as a violation of the laws of war because the mines kill civilians at least as often as they kill armed combatants. Most ICRC expatriate staff used to be Swiss, but today include many nationalities, including Americans. The American Red Cross sometimes sends U.S. delegates to ICRC operations overseas.
The ICRC does not participate in coordinating forums such as the UN cluster system, in the same ways that other NGOs do. Because it is not an NGO, it is not a member of NGO associations, though it often attends meetings. Because of its strict adherence to its principles of neutrality, impartiality and confidentiality, it must avoid the appearance of signing on to coalition efforts. Thus, although it will meet one-on-one with militaries, including the U.S. military or peacekeeping forces, it avoids those forums that give the appearance of joint efforts where NGOs, militaries, and governments may have struck joint strategies. The ICRC always has maintained both the fact and the appearance of independence of action, in order to gain access to vulnerable populations on each side in a war.

The ICRC has dramatically grown its Washington, DC staff in recent years to more than two dozen persons today. Its purpose is largely to liaison with other U.S. organizations, including the federal government and the military. The ICRC also has a delegation at the United Nations in New York.

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IFRC: Federation of Societies

The association of the various Red Cross agencies is the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, also often referred to as the Federation. Based in Geneva, it was previously named the League of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies and depends on its members for most of its resources, staff, and overseas work. In effect, its value is in facilitating the contributions from various members to each country affected by crisis. The Geneva hub conducts assessments and surveillance for all its members, and is increasingly playing a lead role in creating standardized health and food aid responses.

The federation engages in a wide array of activities, mirroring the many needs its members confront in different parts of the globe. These include the following:

- providing technical support, emergency kits, and financial resources to national societies;
- proposing ways for donor societies to contribute within specific technical sectors to the needs of societies in poorer countries prone to emergencies;
- organizing and managing refugee camps;
- promoting humanitarian diplomacy, such as where access to the most vulnerable have been politically restricted, as in Burma and Zimbabwe;
• taking the lead in creating and promoting a new body of international disaster response law (IDRL) and related rules and principles;
• transporting and delivering food aid to mitigate famine;
• providing global leadership in the development of humanitarian aid codes, standards, evaluations, and technical guidelines;
• promoting prevention, preparedness, and mitigation for natural disasters, including local stores for readiness;
• coordinating rebuilding and economic reconstruction after wars and natural disasters;
• promoting primary health care and first aid throughout the developing world, including the operationalization of standards for integrated management of childhood illness;
• planning for and responding to deadly pandemics;
• acting proactively to help national societies tackle threats posed by climate change, including floods, desertification, and disappearing island states;
• offering catalytic support for and at times hosting global initiatives for the whole NGO community, such as SPHERE (minimum standards used by NGOs in crises), the Steering Committee for Humanitarian Response (a consortia of consortia), and the ProVention Consortium (dedicated to disaster risk reduction); and
• facilitating communication among national societies.

The Federation responds to natural disasters and promotes disaster mitigation and risk reduction more than any other network. Within the cluster approach for humanitarian aid responsibilities, and with the family of UN agencies, the IFRC has the lead role for shelter after disasters, manages refugee camp aid, and helps reconstruct health systems after conflicts have ended. The IFRC was originally created by donor governments to address pandemics, and today remains very involved in influenza pandemic preparedness. The ICRC and IFRC cooperate in their response to any given crisis through their Sevilla Agreement. The IFRC has in recent years partnered increasingly with the UN World Food Programme, such as in responding to food shortages in East Africa.

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**National Societies**

The Red Cross movement requires that each nation have no more than one Red Cross or Red Crescent society, and that the determination be made by the government of that country. That national society represents the entire country, just as the American Red Cross is the only national society in the United States. Any country can establish its society to be either a Red Cross or a Red Crescent society. Red Crescent societies differ in the emblem they display, but not in their mission and modes of operation, and are full members of the international Red Cross movement. Many countries with large Muslim populations have chosen to name their society Red Cross given that the original Red Cross emblem was based on the flag of Switzerland rather than any religious symbol. China, Nigeria, and Indonesia each have huge Islamic populations but adopted the Red Cross rather than the Red Crescent.

In most countries, the national Red Cross society has a closer relationship with its government, and its military, than other NGOs do. The Red Cross in many developing countries is not particularly effective. As in the United States, many Red Cross societies also become involved in managing blood supplies. Frequently, therefore, local Red Cross societies play a critical role as the channels for international assistance from donor Red Cross societies.

The Canadian Red Cross, with an annual budget of over $350 million, is active in responding to disasters in Canada, but is also generous in providing aid internationally. Within a few days of the 2010 Haitian earthquake, the Canadian Red Cross had raised almost $50 million for assistance. As well, the Canadian government collaborated with the Canadian and Norwegian societies to set up a medical field hospital in Port au Prince only a few days after the quake.

The Haitian National Red Cross Society also worked closely with many other Red Cross societies as well as the Federation and ICRC in the life-saving responses.

The Red Cross Society of China, founded in 1904, leapt in prominence after the deadly 2008 Sichuan earthquake, for which it raised more than $200 million, an unprecedented sum for a nonprofit in China. In recent years the Red Cross Society of China has become a frequent donor to other crises, including Cambodia, Kenya, and Thailand. Chinese citizens donated hundreds of thousands of dollars through their Red Cross Society in the days after the Haitian earthquake. The first search and rescue team to arrive in Haiti immediately after the quake came from China.

**American Red Cross**

The American Red Cross is the national Red Cross society in the United States, founded by Clara Barton in 1881 and first chartered by Congress in 1900. It is a charitable organization, not a government agency.

The main share of its work is domestic: it shelters, feeds, and provides emotional support to victims of disasters, supplies nearly of the nation’s blood, and supports military members and their families.
The American Red Cross’s annual budget of over $3 billion—which does not include the tens of thousands of work hours contributed by community volunteers—is primarily expended on needs within the United States.

However, its international services branch does respond to disasters and address long-term humanitarian needs overseas, but the resources for this tend to be irregular or clumpy. In other words, more than other NGOs, the American Red Cross receives enormous contributions for the occasional high-visibility crisis (Hurricane Mitch in 1998, Kosovo in 1999, Afghanistan 2002, the tsunami in 2004, and Haiti in 2009). It receives less than many other U.S. NGOs, however, for majority of other crises occurring around the world each year. The American Red Cross received and spent roughly $600 million in assistance for the 2004 Asian—Indian Ocean—tsunami, a sum that greatly exceeded its budget for all other parts of the world and crises combined. Alone among U.S. NGOs because of its size, the American Red Cross has the advantage of counterparts — other Red Cross societies — in each country overseas with which it can work. This gives it more options for how it may respond in any given emergency. Sometimes the American Red Cross responses by seconding staff to another element of the Movement, or goods, or funding. Sometimes it works largely through the Federation and at other times does not. Beyond major disasters, the American Red Cross has also worked with grants from USAID, the Department of State, USDA, PEPFAR, foundations, and other institutional funders to manage local projects in many developing countries.

In its other aid programs, the American Red Cross, like other international NGOs, has delivered valuable programs in the areas of disease prevention (malaria and HIV/AIDS), water supply, livelihoods, and disaster risk reduction. From time to time, it has also acted as a leader in the interagency community organizing open conferences for many NGOs to come together to share technical lessons about improving aid.

One massive effort it led, working with partners such as the Federation, WHO and UNICEF, is the Measles Initiative, which reduced measles deaths in children under five by 78% globally between 2000 and 2008, averting more than 4 million childhood deaths.

### Red Cross Myths

**Red Cross Myth 1. The Red Cross emblem is meant to be a religious symbol**

The Red Cross (a plus + sign against a white background) was chosen by the founders of the movement precisely to be neutral, to imply no race, creed, nationality, or religion. It is based on the national flag and symbol of Switzerland, a country that had demonstrated neutrality over many centuries. It was not meant to be a reference to the Christian cross, though at times uninformed people suspect that it might be. The Red Crescent emblem was offered as an alternative in a diplomatic conference in 1929, after which many countries adopted it. In 2005, the governments involved in the 1949 Geneva Conventions added another emblem (through additional protocol III), the red crystal, following which the Israeli society, the Magen David Adom joined the movement.
Red Cross Myth 2. *International humanitarian law applies only to uniformed combatants.*

International humanitarian law (IHL) specifically addresses wars and combatants, but is intended to be binding on all parties to any major conflicts, including rebel groups and irregular militia. The Geneva Conventions also specify that civilian populations cannot be targeted in wartime, and go on to confer protections on aid agencies working in conflict zones. The ICRC works actively to apprise all military forces to respect the obligations imposed by the Geneva Conventions.

Red Cross Myth 3. *There is only one international Red Cross agency.*

Often news reporters speak about the International Red Cross as if there were an agency with this name, which there is not. There is indeed a Red Cross movement—the alliance of different Red Cross agencies. But there are two international Red Cross bodies, both of which are based in Geneva, but in different offices, under different administrations, and with separate budgets and programs. The Swiss National Red Cross Society, which is also is based in Switzerland, though in Berne, also sometimes provides international aid. The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) is the lead agency spoken about by the press in war zones, whereas the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) is the organization that more often takes the lead in refugee camps, natural disasters, and epidemics.

Red Cross Myth 4. *The Federation helps only in natural disasters.*

Whereas the ICRC works inside war zones, the IFRC frequently works around them, including displaced persons camps and in postconflict reconstruction. The Federation helps national societies address any humanitarian threats.

Red Cross Myth 5. *The Red Cross gets involved only after crises.*

The Federation, perhaps more than any other organization in the world, emphasizes disaster reduction through prevention, preparedness, and mitigation. ICRC works in the worst war zones, but also will step in if serious needs are unmet and offer its services based on the statutes of the movement. Again, the ICRC tries to address the root causes of conflict by bringing scholarly and diplomatic attention to the spread of arms; it publishes journals that act as forums for scholarly analysis of the application of humanitarian principles to emerging problems, such as chemical weapons, biological weapons, the spread of small arms, and landmines.\(^{225}\)


The ICRC policy to not reveal information it finds in its site visits (for example, to prisons) is at times criticized by NGOs. It is argued that ICRC either is cowardly and uncaring or lacks a sense of outrage and stands too fastidiously on its bureaucratic rules.

Organizations like NGOs are free to criticize governments for human rights and IHL violations; the system works effectively because these groups can complement the ICRC. Meanwhile, if the ICRC

did not strictly adhere to its confidentiality policy, it would not be invited into countries and into prisons, and there would be no observation to protect prisoners. Moreover, ICRC discretion has its limits, and the ICRC reserves the right to speak out, publish findings, or stop its work in exceptional cases. For example, if a detaining authority issues excerpts from a confidential report without the ICRC’s consent, the ICRC reserves the right to publish the entire report to prevent any inaccurate or incomplete interpretations of observations and recommendations. Likewise, if it’s clear that a confidential approach isn’t working, for example, because a government or rebel group simply refuses to take concerns seriously, the ICRC can and will take action by expressing concerns publicly. The decision to speak out is never taken lightly but it is important to remember that confidentiality is not unconditional.

Red Cross Myth 7. The American Red Cross is like other any other U.S. Nonprofits.
The American Red Cross is distinct from other U.S. aid agencies in various regards. For one, it was chartered by Congress. Most other NGOs working internationally—CARE, Catholic Relief Services, World Vision, and hundreds of others (see annex 1)—are registered with the U.S. government but have no assigned mission. Because it was established by Congress, the American Red Cross is meant to be national, representing all the American people, in a politically nonpartisan way.

Second, the American Red Cross is itself a system: a system of chapters across the United States, each with its own board, governance, fundraising, and authorities. The national headquarters, based in Washington, DC, which leads on international aid issues, works closely with its various chapters, which are largely organized around metropolitan areas.

Third, more than other nonprofits, the American Red Cross builds volunteerism throughout its structure. Not only are part-time aid workers and their board of governors volunteers, but volunteers are also matched to decision-making managers across the organization.

Fourth, the American Red Cross shares sole rights with the U.S. military for use of the emblem in its advertising, as established by Congress.

Fifth, the American Red Cross has a privileged relationship with the U.S. government which frequently looks to it as a lead agency, recommending the public to donate to it, whereas otherwise silent about advocating donations to other specific NGOs. Last, because of its automatic network with other Red Cross entities, the American Red Cross is in a special position for fundraising and mounting programs. For example, after the fall of the Soviet Union, the U.S. government turned to the American Red Cross to help mount brand new aid efforts to the breakaway states in the Caucasus and central Asia, because although no U.S. NGOs had much experience in working in any of them, the American Red Cross at least had counterpart Red Cross and Red Crescent societies that it could immediately work through. As another example, whatever the crisis in the world, the press gives top coverage to the ICRC or some Red Cross entity, and Americans accordingly donate more to the American Red Cross.
**Red Cross Myth 8. The ICRC picks and chooses which wars to work in.**

In many of the very worse conflicts, even when other NGOs have to flee for security concerns, the ICRC typically comes in. Every NGO, including the American Red Cross, has latitude to decide on its own which crises it wants to become involved with. The statutes of the ICRC do not allow an option. The ICRC is mandated to work in any and all war zones where it is needed for as long as it is needed. The ICRC stays in the worst crises even when other agencies have pulled out, including Somalia in 1991 and Rwanda in early 1994. The ICRC pulls out only when conditions do not permit the organization to reach the populations in need, for example, when three unarmed staff members were executed in Burundi in 1995 and six in Chechnya in 1996. Similarly, after an ICRC relief plane was shot down en route to Biafra, Nigeria, in 1968, the ICRC also temporarily withdrew its staff.

**Red Cross Myth 9. The ICRC is the author of the Geneva Conventions**

The Geneva Conventions were written and are amended collectively by governments (states). Thus, the U.S. Department of State has a direct say in what has been added, or will be added or edited in them. The ICRC, which derives its mandate from the Geneva Conventions, and has a lead role in interpreting and promoting knowledge about them, is not a signatory. However, it is very involved in thinking, researching, and writing about the conventions and what might be added. Thus it does influence evolving debates about them.

**Red Cross Myth 10. The Red Cross defends war criminals in Guantanamo.**

Worldwide, ICRC visits 500,000 prisoners of war and civilian internees every year to assess detention conditions and procedural safeguards, and to help restore contacts among separated family members. The ICRC has, since 2002, made many regular trips to visit persons held at the Guantanamo Bay Naval Station on the island of Cuba. The ICRC maintains a confidential dialogue with U.S. authorities on the treatment and conditions there as well as on legal frameworks, and it facilitates contacts between detainees and their families. The ICRC does not act as a legal representative of detainees nor engage in court cases. ICRC findings from Guantanamo referred to in the press were not given to the press by the ICRC but by U.S. government or other sources.