BRANCH DEVELOPMENT FRAMEWORK

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

FOREWORD

This Framework is published at a time where humanitarian crises are increasingly protracted, unpredictable, and complex. As humanitarian challenges grow, so too does the recognition of the role of the Red Cross Red Crescent National Societies in local actions. Our 191 National Societies have the local reach, thanks to the network of our volunteers, and the coverage and presence of every corner of the globe through the National Societies' organisational structures – their Branches.

Branches serve in the frontline of service delivery, have members and volunteers who come from the very same communities they are helping, speak the same language, understand the unique cultural norms, and are best positioned to collect and respond to people's views, and facilitate community engagement and action, facilitate local support and network to sustain these action.

When we have a network of strong Branches, we build strong National Societies and sustainable local reach and hence our collective humanitarian and development impact.

Thanks to the 121 National Societies and 370 Branches participating in the process, the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) has for the first time, set a Branch Development Framework.

In line with IFRC Strategy 2030, this Branch Development Framework provides guidance for National Societies to define and set a Federation-wide vision and pathway towards building a strong local structure of our network, while at the same time providing the flexibility to define and lead their own branch development trajectories.

The Branch Development Framework is fully aligned with the Strategy 2030 vision, aiming to establish a distributed network. This Framework represents a significant step in the IFRC's commitment to strengthening branches and local action. It acknowledges the complex landscape of Branch Development occurring at multiple levels, led and facilitated by local and national actors.

Xavier Castellanos
Under Secretary General
National Society Development and
Operations Coordination Division

1 INTRODUCTION

Key components of this Framework are accessible from the [Branch Development Portal](#) in various languages, to facilitate easier reference and access to the latest resources.

Background

Today, approximately 180,900 Red Cross Red Crescent Local Units[1] form the basis of International Federation of Red Cross Red Crescent Societies' (IFRC) 191-member National Societies. Within these organizational structures are the Branches, which serve in the frontline of service deliveries, informed by members[2] and volunteers[3] for local decision making and action. Branch members and volunteers come from the very same communities they are helping, speak the same language, understand the unique cultural norms, and are best positioned to collect and respond to people's views, and facilitate community engagement. Thanks to these links to communities, it makes the Red Cross Red Crescent Branches better represented in and connected to communities, as they are present before, during and after a crisis, and are well placed to understand and adapt their activities according to the local context. Branches are the most local structure of any National Society and the source of the extensive grass-roots network of the IFRC.

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1   [Everyone Counts report](#) (2022)

2   Most National Societies are membership-based organizations, embedded within their communities. A key rationale for operating as a membership-based organization is that it gives supporters formal influence on the direction, performance and operations of the organization. National Society membership is voluntary, which implies that it originates in individual, informed consent ([Guidance for National Society Statutes 2018](#))

3   A Red Cross or Red Crescent volunteer is a person who carries out volunteering activities or services, out of their free will and not for a desire for material or financial gain, on behalf of the IFRC Network, occasionally or regularly and always working in accordance with the Fundamental Principles of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement ([IFRC Volunteering Policy 2022](#))

The IFRC Strategy 2030 highlights the importance of National Societies in developing their own capacity, including that of their Branches, to become innovative and agile, emphasize local engagement to drive change, foster partnerships with diverse actors locally, and build a distributed network for collective intelligence. It further highlights the opportunities for National Societies and their Branches to become spaces where Red Cross or Red Crescent members, volunteers and young people[4] can, in addition to being mobilized and involved with core Red Cross services, be supported to design their own local actions, mobilize themselves to take swift action and make an impact on their local communities.

At the same time, the "localization agenda", which refers to the Grand Bargain agreement (2016), calls for more support to local and national responders "*in order to make principled humanitarian action as local as possible and as international as necessary*". Red Cross and Red Crescent Branches, and their volunteers, are best located to provide faster response, having access that international players cannot have. COVID-19, with its impact on international mobility, has also highlighted the urgency of a "localization" agenda, not only inspiring locally led responses, but drawing attention to the fatal consequences of not having appropriate local capacities in place.

Purpose of the Branch Development Framework

The Branch Development Framework aims to define and set a Federation-wide vision and pathway towards building a strong local structure of our Network.

Together with the Branch Development Community of Practice, the Framework aims to provide an oversight on ways to approach Branch Development considering the IFRC Strategy 2030, and in association with the localization agenda.

This framework is developed in coherence and associated with the IFRC National Society Development (NSD) Policy (2022), the IFRC NSD Framework (2013) and the IFRC NSD Compact (2019), and aims to further help put into operation Branch development-related elements of the NSD Policy and NSD Framework. It is further developed in synergy with the IFRC Volunteering Policy (2022), Integrity Policy (2019), PGI Policy (2022), Youth Policy (2018), Principles and Rules for humanitarian assistance (2013), Disaster risk management policy (2020), National Society Preparedness Framework (2022), among others.

Audience for the Framework

This Framework is for:

- National Society **actors responsible for and engaged in Branch Development work within National Headquarters and Branches**.
  - National Societies and their Branches expected to use this Framework and associated guide as a basis to further define their specific approach towards Branch Development.
- It further informs the decisions and actions of **those who support a National Society for its Branch Development work**, including National Societies acting as a Partnering National Society (PNS), the IFRC Secretariat, and other Movement and Non-Movement Actors.
  - External Supporters of a National Society/Branch looking to further align their support towards a National Societies' strategy in developing their Branches and, at the same time, to use this Framework and the Community of Practice to actively reflect on their practice in working with National Societies and Branches and adjusting such practice accordingly.

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4   For the IFRC, the terms "youth" and "young people" cover all people in the age range from five to 30. This includes children (five to 12* years old), adolescents (13* to 17) and young adults (18 to 30). Youth are a heterogeneous group with diverse backgrounds, expertise, skill sets, and needs which requires appropriate human development approaches for meaningful engagement. The IFRC recognizes meaningful youth engagement as a strategic vehicle for transforming institutional cultures that directly and positively impacts the Red Cross Red Crescent operational capacity to deliver on our humanitarian mission (IFRC Youth Policy 2018)

Chad
© Guillaume Binet

2 WHAT IS A RED CROSS RED CRESCENT BRANCH?

Reflective questions

1 What are the organizational structures of a National Society?

2 How are they reflected in the National Society Statutes?

3 What are the roles and responsibilities given to the National Headquarters and different layers of Branches?

4 What are the relationships between these different organizational structures?

Kyrgyyzstan
© Peter Biro

Over the years, the word "Branch"[5] has been used without cohesion, leading to differences of understanding arising from the differences in context and practice within each National Society. This chapter aims to set a common definition, define types of Branch and other organizational structures, and elaborate their differences and similarities.

Defining a Red Cross Red Crescent Branch

Red Cross Red Crescent Branches are an organizational entity, which serve as a neutral space offered to community members to self-organize, facilitate volunteering opportunities to deliver humanitarian assistance, enhance community resilience, and create a platform to mobilize local support.

The majority of National Societies have two or more organizational levels under their National Headquarters, with the aim of ensuring territorial reach and managing different aspects of National Society operations. The way these structures are set often reflects the territorial organization of the state; some having federated structures, others are based on a centralized organizational model. National Societies often define this structure through their National Society Statutes, providing clarity on roles and responsibilities, and on the legal aspects of their different structures.

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5   Some National Societies use the term "Chapter", "Hubs", "Units" for what is described in this sentence. In this Framework, it shall use "Branch" as a common term.

Red Cross Red Crescent Branch

Definition

Red Cross Red Crescent Branches are an organizational entity, which serve as a neutral space offered to community members to self-organize, facilitate volunteering opportunities to deliver humanitarian assistance, enhance community resilience, and create a platform to mobilize local support.

Branches and their different typologies

Branch

The second layer immediately after the National Headquarters is what we define as a "Branch" in this Framework. A Branch has its roles, responsibilities and relationships with the National Headquarters defined through National Societies' Statutes, including its legal status (if any), the level of autonomy given in the particular area of mobilizing local resources and building local partnerships, and the decisions it makes. It has a local-level decision-making mechanism through its Branch members, board and volunteers, equally defined through the National Societies' Statutes. Instead of the term "Branch", some National Societies use the term "Chapter", "Hubs", "Units" and others[6]. Setting up Branches needs formal approval from the National Board, including clear procedures to open and close them. A Branch may have additional structures affiliated to it, such as hospitals, blood donation centres, health posts, and warehouse and community-based units. Depending on their size and role, there could be different types of Branches: an "Intermediary Branch" and a "Local Branch".

Local Branch

This is a structure that is closest to communities where the majority of services are delivered. Sometimes these Branches are formed in accordance with the administrative boundary of the country. While some Local Branches have paid staff to facilitate activities, a number of these Local Branches rely completely on volunteers to organize activities and deliver services. These are called Sub-Branches or Community Branches, depending on the context.

Intermediary Branch

This is a structure that provides subsidiary services which cannot be delivered by the National Headquarters nor at further local level, for example, specialized emergency response, regional fundraising activities or regional coordination mechanisms. Their primary role is one of support and coordination of Local Branches, and serves as a facilitator of decisions and conversations between the National Headquarters. Such types of Branches are located in countries with large territories or populations. According to the affiliated administrative division, these may be called a Regional Branch, a State Branch, a Town Branch, a District Branch, a Provincial Branch or a Supporting Branch.

Community-based unit

National Societies set further local structures, designed to bring a service closer to needs and strengthen links with communities. These are organized at neighbourhood or village level by the National Society to deliver services as an extension of its Branch network. These units role are not defined in the National Society Statutes. While Branches are considered permanent structures, a Community-based unit can be temporary, linked to a time-bound agreement or activity in a specific area, and have higher flexibility. This is the smallest type of organizational entity, and in most cases organized by a group of volunteers providing basic humanitarian services and resilience-building in their own community. National Societies call these in various ways such as service posts (e.g. First Aid posts), Links, Units and Volunteering groups.

Online Branch: While current Red Cross Red Crescent Branches and Community based-units are physical locations, other membership-based/volunteer-based organizations report the emergence of an Online Branch: An organizational structure that exists virtually and not affiliated with physical locations nor boundaries. This is a new concept for Red Cross Red Crescent National Societies and more is expected to be developed as to how this may coexist with current structures and practices within National Societies.

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6   Some National Societies use the term "Chapter", "Hubs" or "Units" for what is described in this sentence. In this Framework, we shall use "Branch" as a common term.

Poland
© Nora Peter

Figure 1 **Branch typology**

Group of Volunteers	First aid post	Sub-branch	District Branches	Provinical / State / City Branch

COMMUNITY-BASED UNIT   LOCAL BRANCH   INTERMEDIARY BRANCH

Often not defined by NS Statutes →   ← Often defined by NS Statutes —

Local Units as defined by the federation-wide databank and reporting system (FDRS)
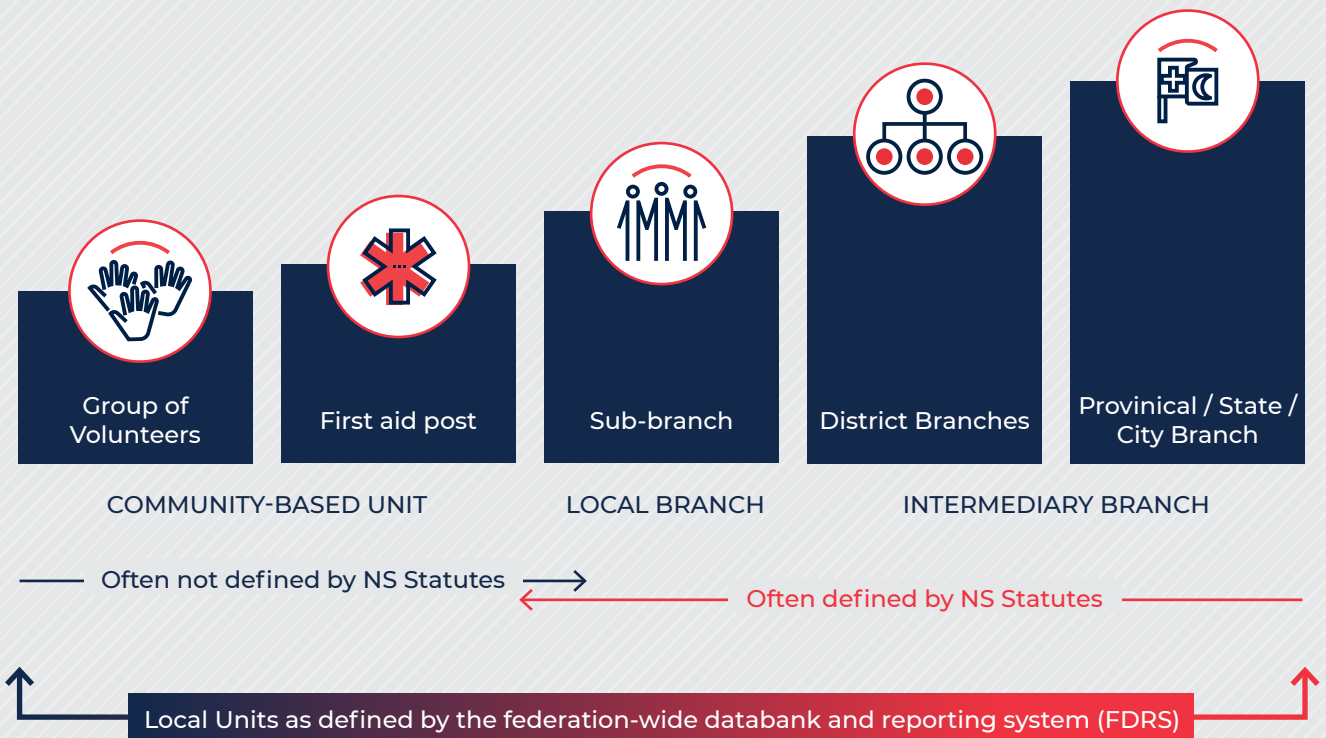
Nepal
© Merit Maharjan / IFRC Nepal

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WHAT IS A STRONG BRANCH AND HOW DO BRANCHES DEVELOP?

Reflective questions

1	How is the Branch performing?

2	Who is responsible for building a strong Branch?

Because of their proximity to communities, Branches and Community-based Units are well positioned to collect and respond to people's views on their needs, priorities, vulnerabilities and capacities, and to facilitate community engagement. Branch members and volunteers come from the communities they support, speak the same language and understand the local cultural norms, and are present before, during and after a crisis, making them best placed to understand patterns of inclusion or exclusion, and to adapt accordingly. The unique role and opportunity Branches have help shape a common vision to strengthen them.

Defining a "Strong Branch"

A "strong Branch" could be defined as below. Depending on context, some aspects of this definition may apply to Community-based units:

- **Deliver relevant services:** The delivery of services is the basis for any Branch to justify its existence. These services must be relevant, meet local needs and practices, and run according to the Fundamental Principles. These services can have a wide range of options, from emergency relief to primary health care, social care, blood services etc, and Red Cross Red Crescent Branches have a unique role in delivering these services while being closely imbedded in communities, and in acting immediately in times of disasters and crises;

- **Understand local and diverse needs of the community:** "Understanding the local and diverse needs of the community" is the foundation for shaping relevant services. To do so, a Branch needs to have mechanisms and connections to the communities it serves (such as through a membership and volunteer base that reflects the diversity of the communities it serves, community engagement and accountability embedded in the services it runs, network- and information-exchange opportunities with local authorities and other organizations);

- **Shape a network of volunteer-based units:** The key role volunteers play in designing actions and reaching communities must be recognized and supported, including necessary knowledge, tools, security and space given to foster volunteer-led actions;

- **Build local relationships:** Local relationships are key to positioning the Branch within its local ecosystem, facilitating local support and networks;

- **Sustain for as long as needed:** The Branch services and networks must be sustained as long as the needs exist, including the processes and the organizational structures that support them;

- **Attract local resources:** As much as possible, local resources must form the basis to sustain the Branch service and its organizational process/structures;

- **Ensure quality:** Services must be delivered to a high standard to meet the expectations of the community. Including the Branch's ability to maintain its integrity while being accountable for what it does;

- **Able to scale based on needs:** Needs will differ and increase in time of crisis and disaster; To perform well during such time, a Branch must scale-up and later scale down its service, systems and resources;

- **Contribute to the overall strength and visibility of the National Society as a whole:** A Branch must perform in unity within its National Society and contribute to strengthening the National Society as a whole.

A Strong Branch

A strong Branch is one that is able to deliver relevant local services, for the local and diverse needs of the community, through a network of volunteer-based units and local relationships.

These services and networks must be sustained for as long as needed, mainly through local resources, delivered with quality, and with the ability to scale up/scale down based on needs.

The collective capacity and impact brought by strong Branches must contribute to the overall strength and visibility of the National Society, and in cohesion with the National Societies' overall vision, mission and strategic priority.

Defining "Branch Development"

As described by the definition of a strong Branch, delivery of services is the basis for any Branch to justify its existence. To continue delivering such services, and to strive to address the underlying causes of crises, and understand the changing nature of vulnerability in the communities it serves, at times a National Society (its National headquarters and Branch) needs to reflect:

- Whether there is sufficient coverage of needs across the territory through its existing Branches and Community-based units?

- Whether existing Branches are meeting the vision of that of a "strong Branch"?

- How to ensure efficiency and sustainability in delivering services?

As a result of these questions, National Headquarters and Branches may:

- Establish a new Community-based unit

- Open a new Branch

- Expand the role of an existing Branch

- Reorganize and/or strengthen the capacity of an existing Branch *[7]

- Amalgamate or combine Branches

- Close a Branch

All of which is integral to "Branch Development" work.

Figure 2 **Why Branch Development**

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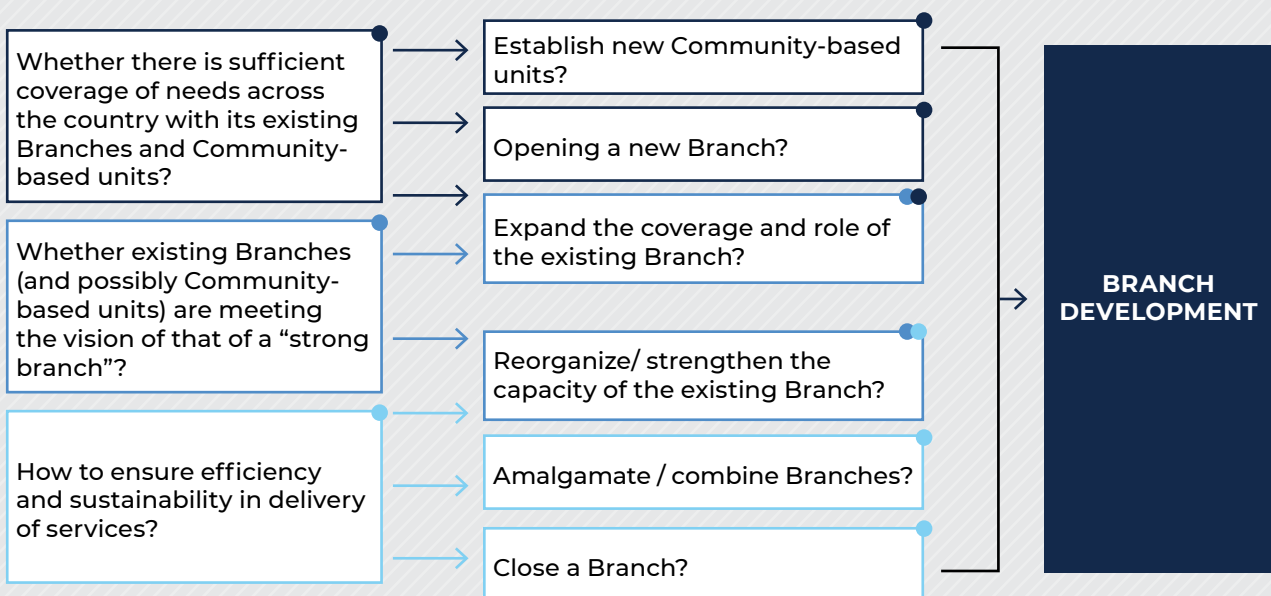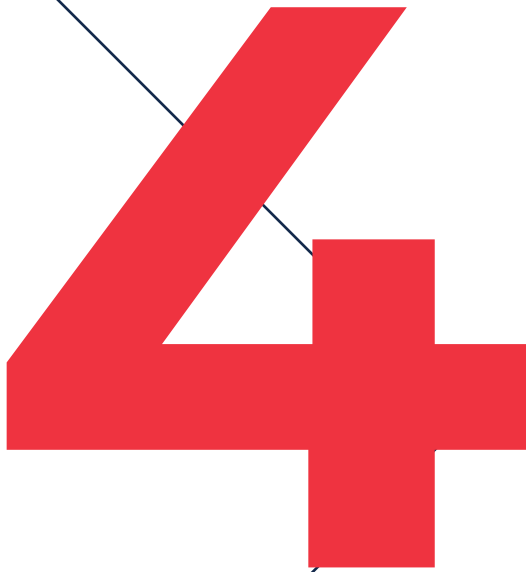
[7]   This work may include actions focusing on the fundamental issues for a Branch to improve, such as its identity, relationships and relevance; along with actions which focus on improving existing services and capacities by making them more impactful, effective, widespread and better related to the National Society mandate and mission.

Branch Development

Definition

Work towards enabling Branches to emerge as entities that deliver necessary action and service across the National Societies' territory, managing to maintain the role of a strong Branch. Such work not only focuses on existing Branches but includes setting up new Branches and reorganizing existing ones to ensure the efficiency and sustainability of these actions, and the role of a Branch.

4 VARIOUS ACTORS FOR BRANCH DEVELOPMENT

While the primary responsibility of Branch Development work sits with the Branch itself, there are various actors who may contribute to its endeavours.

THE BRANCH

The Branch is primarily responsible for its own development, through its Branch leader, along with its members and volunteers. It must define its development priorities, informed by community needs and contextualizing National Society policies and strategies. It must define its own actions to achieve and maintain the role of a strong Branch, implement them, and communicate them actively with its National Headquarters and peer Branches to foster learning, facilitate support, ensure cohesion, and inform a National Society-wide strategy towards Branch Development.

Morocco
© Benoit Carpentier / IFRC

THE NATIONAL HEADQUARTERS

The National Headquarters plays a role in making strategic decisions for Branch Development. These include setting an overall strategy for Branch Development, facilitating cohesion across its Branches, facilitating meaningful external support, making the best use of information gathered by analyzing it, and making informed decisions on a National Society-wide approach to Branch Development and the development of the organization as a whole. It further provides an enabling environment and facilitates opportunities for Branches to work on their development; including support to define its development priorities, providing guidance and support in its development process, coordinating resources and knowledge for Branches.

EXTERNAL SUPPORTERS

External supporters, including both Red Cross Red Crescent Movement partners and non-Red Cross Red Crescent Movement partners (such as governments, public authorities and other International organizations), may contribute to the National Societies' Branch Development endeavours through offering resources, knowledge and tools. Such offers must meet the requirements outlined in the National Society Development Compact (2019), by aligning with the National Society's overall Branch Development strategy and the priorities of the individual Branch, provided with competencies that match its needs, aligned with other support offered to National Societies in this area, and contributing to the National Society and the IFRC networks' learning and quality assurance. Direct engagement with a Branch must be avoided unless agreed with National Headquarters'; when directly supporting an individual Branch, external supporters must ensure to avoid building dependency of an individual Branch and ensure National Society-wide cohesion and coordination in the process of working with Branches.

5 KEY ACTIONS FOR BRANCH DEVELOPMENT

While Branch Development is not a linear process, and could be triggered by various elements (and the process could be complex and involve multiple levels), some key actions could be common in this journey.

Specific actions could be taken and led by a Branch (some aspects may also apply to a Community-based Unit) itself, while some further actions need to be led by the National Headquarters. These steps led by each entity are mutually interrelated.
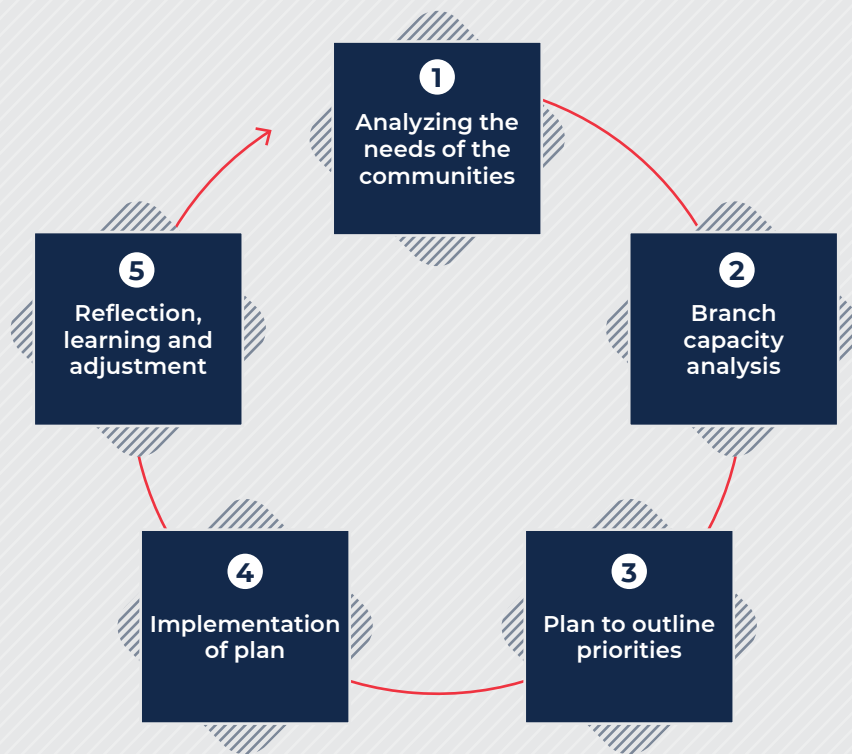
Key actions for a Branch

1. **One of the actions involves analyzing the needs of the communities that the Branch serves within its mandate.**

   This information may already be available to the Branch, or the Branch may have to undertake a needs assessment[8], or enhance its communication with key stakeholders; such as communities and local authorities, partners and networks, strengthening its listening mechanisms through Branch members, volunteers and youth.

2. **Another action involves undertaking an analysis of the Branch's capacities and areas for development.**

   In this step, a Branch may explore and understand how it serves, organizes, resources and networks. The outcomes shall determine where the Branch can have the most impact in addressing local needs and the further capacities it needs strengthening. The Branch Organisational Capacity Assessment (BOCA) can be used for this step in the Branch development process. In some cases, Branches use other specific assessment processes and tools[9] or combine them, but these choices need to be based on strategic decisions of the Branch leadership and in close dialogue and coordination with the National Headquarters as it impacts on ways to capture and analyse National Society-wide Branch capacities, if not selected in coordination (further outlined in section 6). For this reason, external support should be mindful not to impose its own tools and processes on a Branch/National Society, but instead support the National Headquarters to make a strategic choice and adhere to its choice, to avoid fragmentation of data and exhaustion of Branches.

   > **BOCA** is a self-assessment tool developed for National Society Branches to identify and assess their strengths, limitations and challenges in relation to a wide range of organisational capacities.

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8   Tools such as a Vulnerability and Capacity Assessment (VCA) could be useful in such steps. https://www.ifrcvca.org/

9   The Guidance on National Society Assessment and Development Processes provides further information on an overview of the different types of assessment and development processes, and tools available to National Societies, and how it could be best used for organizations to become stronger and more sustainable. https://www.ifrc.org/document/guidance-national-society-assessment-and-development-processes

3. **Once the Branch has undertaken an external and internal assessment it can develop a plan that outlines how it will achieve its priorities.**

   The plan may cover both the activities that the Branch intends to implement in communities, as well as any internal work that is required to develop the capacity of the Branch. Engagement of Branch members, volunteers and youth in shaping these plans and communicating them to local stakeholders and National Headquarters are essential to gain support and alignment. At National Headquarters level, some National Societies consolidate the outcomes from the Branches' capacity assessment, conduct a nationwide analysis and include collective priorities in their national plans, such as Strategic Plans, National Society Development plans or National Headquarters' annual plans.

4. **When a plan is defined, it must be implemented.**

   The plan may need to be adjusted and adapted to changing conditions as they emerge, with the Branch switching between pre-planned actions and adaptive responses along the way.

5. **Reflecting upon, learning from and adjusting the approach are an important action to ensure continuous improvement on the Branch Development journey.**

   This involves reviewing the status of the Branch's work against its plan, what has been achieved, what has been learned and what needs to be adjusted or adapted for the next cycle of development. Branch development can occur through small incremental changes, for example, improving a Branch's election or volunteer-induction processes, or through more significant changes, such as diversifying the volunteer base or scaling up the team, resources, systems and processes to lead a small/mid-sized and large-scale emergency-response operation. For this reason, continuous reflection, adjustment and scaling the approach is necessary.

Key actions for National Headquarters

In addition to the above actions within a Branch, the following action could be taken within a National Headquarters. These are not linear steps.

1. **Setting a vision and momentum**, for example, by setting a common definition of a strong Branch, setting minimum standards and framing Branch Development approaches. It is important to acknowledge that building momentum to embark on a Branch Development journey may take time, depending on the relationship the National Headquarters has with its Branches. For this reason, the engagement of Branches in the process of setting a vision towards Branch Development is essential.

   This action also serves as an opportunity to better link up service delivery approaches (especially for national programmes) to the vision and work of Branch Development; Potential actions may include: A) uniting different NHQ departments to build a shared understanding of their roles in contributing to Branch Development; B) agreeing on common standards/requirements for Branches in the area of finance management, reporting and volunteer management, as these topics potentially have the risk to establish duplicated/parallel approaches per programme.

2. **Setting systematic approaches to develop Branches and maintain a pool of experts.** For example, by setting Branch assessment approaches and selected tools (such as BOCA) and conducting regular training to maintain a pool of trained facilitators.

3. **Sharing guidance and providing support mechanisms to Branches** are essential roles of a National Headquarters as it supports individual Branches on approaches to follow up on its development plan. In some cases, the National Headquarters support Branches by developing a Branch development guide/handbook, pooling resources, setting seed funding, and providing technical guidance and input to implement its plans.

A circular diagram divided into six segments showing the cycle of branch development:
- Setting a vision and momentum
- Setting up systematic approaches to develop branches and maintain a pool of experts
- Sharing guidance and support
- Facilitating learning
- Monitoring and analysis
- Recognizing and rewarding branches

4. **Facilitating learning and improvement** by fostering shared knowledge and action across Branches. Some National Societies do this by collecting good practice and sharing it with all Branches, documenting good practice, analyzing success to replicate it, facilitating and setting peer-support mechanism/branch twinning or pairing approach, or linking information and knowledge to help enable Branches.

5. **Monitoring the progress of Branches and an analysis of collective strength and gaps** help with developing an overview on collective progress and inform an improved national strategy towards approaching Branch Development. Some National Societies conduct this by mapping all outcomes from Branch assessments, analysing the collective strengths and weaknesses to inform strategic investment on priority development areas to facilitate resources and potential support.

6. **Recognizing and rewarding Branches** keeps them motivated to function better. Some National Societies approach this by setting up an annual process of performance measurement to identify the best-performing Branches and to allow them to offer rewards. This process also helps to take measures so that comparatively weaker Branches grow and perform better.

The BOCA platform allows National Societies and Branches to upload and manage their BOCA results in a secure database, which is accessible only to those stakeholders authorized by the National Society leadership. It provides a quick analysis of individual and aggregated BOCA results, and allows them to monitor progress. It further supports the National Headquarters to access assessment outcomes, have an overview on progress made and analyze collective strengths and gaps to inform National Society-wide strategies.

6 ESSENTIALS FOR BRANCH DEVELOPMENT

To ensure a meaningful Branch Development process and outcome, there is a set of essential points to follow. The following section describes these seven essentials.

Each point indicates whether it is applied solely to a Branch (B) or whether it is also applicable to a Community-based unit (C).

In short, these essentials are:

1 **"Improved service delivery" as a driver for change** **B** **C**

2 **Enabling representation of local community voices** **B** **C**

3 **Finding a balance between professional service and self-organized local action** **B** **C**

4 **Enhancing trust and financial sustainability to maintain local action** **B**

5 **Building agility and readiness to respond to increased needs** **B**

6 **Investing in leadership and good governance** **B**

7 **Ensuring cohesion and coordination across a National Society** **B**

While tools such as the Branch Organisational Capacity Assessment (BOCA) may support Branches to further define their development priorities, these seven essentials should be taken in consideration in all stages of Branch Development work, by all actors engaged.

Essential 1
"Improved service delivery" as a driver for change

Applies to
**Branches,
Community-
based Units**

Service delivery should be seen as the core driver for developing a branch. Considering the relevance, quality, reach and sustainability of services should be a guiding point in determining what the Branch needs to do differently and what it needs to invest in improving.

- Primarily, it is the **Branch's** role to resource the improvement of its service, define the need to restructure itself and build relevant capacities.

- At the same time, **National Headquarters** and **external supporters** need to be mindful not to perceive Branch Development as a stand-alone thematic area but integrate it well within the work of technical and programme engagement. This is challenged when services are designed and managed top-down, and do not engage Branches in the equation of designing and decision making. This could be improved by ensuring that Branches become part of the designing and decision making of national/central programmes/services, jointly reflecting points that are outlined in the right box.

KEY POINTS TO NOTE

- The relevance of the service depends on the Branch's ability to listen to and resource needs, and on its agility to restructure its approaches.

- The outreach of the service depends on the Branch's ability to mobilize resources (human resources including staff and volunteers, financial resources, and its assets), and on the relationships it builds with local authorities and its key stakeholders, informed by the legal base of the National Societies.

- The quality of the service is impacted by how the human resources (both staff and volunteers) are equipped with the right knowledge and skills, and the availability of the right materials and supplies.

- The sustainability of the service depends on how the service is designed, its relationship with the local authority and communities, the motivation of the people (especially volunteers) engaged in the service, the resources the Branch manages to generate and the way it manages it.

- To maintain such ability, the Branch needs the right resources (financial, human and assets), the right management abilities, systems and mechanisms in place, and the ability to restructure itself to make necessary changes, all guided by a strong leadership. In a stable and sustainable Branch, these relationships are in balance.

Essential 2
Enabling representation of local community voices

Applies to **Branches, Community-based Units**

The actions of a Branch and Community-based Unit are firmly rooted in the agency of people to drive change for themselves and for their communities. For this reason, the right representation of local community voices is essential to make a Branch/Community-based Unit relevant and better connected. Several elements could help in practising this principle.

1. Attracting and empowering members, volunteers and youth as lead actors for local action

Members, volunteers and youth come from the very same community and serve as knowledge brokers, sensors, activators, promoters and advocates of change within the community.

However, the connection between the Branch/Community-based unit and communities may be weakened when the opportunities to engage members, volunteers and youth are not well designed.

- **Branches** that are able to offer more flexibility, and a variety of approaches to engage members and volunteers and youth, attract a more diverse group of contributors and continue to refresh/enlarge their engagement. Branches that are unable to offer this flexibility and diverse approach are less likely to attract this group and eventually diminish their connection with communities.

- Motivation also plays an important role in attracting and maintaining members, volunteers and youth. **A Branch** should be able to listen carefully and understand the motivational factors of this audience, testing different approaches to support these motivations, to eliminate the negative factors to motivate success in attracting and retaining its talent.

> For instance, more young people are leaving their communities to seek education and employment in cities, decreasing the potential pool of volunteers in their home communities if the Branch/Community-based Units solely offer volunteering opportunities in a traditional manner which requires long-term commitment.

2. Ensuring diversity and inclusion

Branches and Community-based Units that strive for diversity and promote the inclusion of all those who recognize themselves in the values of the organization, continue to re-imagine their work and attract new resources with and through their volunteers and members, in particular young people.

- Adapting **Branch/Community-based Unit** systems and cultures to be more effective in engaging young people, diverse genders, people living with disability and different ethnicities, enables a Branch/Community-based Unit to stay relevant to a vast range of community compositions, and builds agility. This includes supporting diversity in staff and volunteer recruitment, diversity within its leadership composition and in its decision-making process.

- Communities have also become more diverse through migration and mobility; hence a **Branch/Community-based Unit** needs to adapt its working practices and broaden its connections to attract and reach these diverse groups.

3. Fostering local relationships

The ability to connect and combine the Branch/Community-based units' own competencies with those of others (local authorities, local businesses, other humanitarian and development agencies, neighbouring Branches) helps enhance the outreach and build a shared vision across local actors.

- For a **Branch/Community-based unit**, the key to a successful collaboration is the quality of the relationship; this is characterized by the way difference is explored, recognized and acknowledged.

- **National Headquarters** may enable Branches to benefit from agreements signed at national level (such as Memorandums of Understanding and partnership agreements) and establish similar connections at local level. The sensitization of the National Societies' auxiliary role and existing agreements, providing guidance on how to conduct advocacy and build relationships, should be helpful in this regard.

Essential 3
Finding a balance between "professional service" and "self-organized local action"

As National Societies have grown and made their operations and services more professional, the demands on National Societies to show value for money and accountability have increased. This has led to pressure on centralized decision making, design programmes and services centrally, building complex management processes in order to follow and monitor progress in strict fashion.

These reforms have been important for the delivery of essential national services, but should be balanced with efforts to empower Branches and Community-based Units to implement self-organized actions, by identifying local needs and generating local responses through its volunteers and youth. These two approaches to service delivery entail different ways of working and different competencies.

- **A Branch/Community-based unit** must reflect a balanced approach in offering both opportunities; one being "professional services", the other "self-organized local action". For the former, trained human resource (staff and/or volunteers), a strong volunteer management approach (recruitment, training, management and mobilization), and reporting and accountability mechanisms, may be required. For the latter, volunteer and youth empowerment (given space to express their interest, identify community needs and design local volunteer/youth self-led action) may be required.

  If the Branch/Community-based unit is solely focusing on professional services, it entails a sustainability risk in the long run, especially if these services are relying on national/external resources, when volunteers have not been offered the means to perform beyond the service or when they do not have the means to resource and understand general community needs. In such situations, Branches/Community-based units need to actively explore "self-organized local action" as a means to stay relevant and sustainable.

- Equally, **National Headquarters and external supporters** need to acknowledge and support Branches to bring a balanced approach in how services, programmes and projects are designed and delivered. This includes refraining from insisting on a purely professionalised approach and, wherever relevant, enabling Branches to resource setting up "self-organized local actions" – and, if required, allocating initial resources to do so.

Maldives
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Maldivian Red Crescent

Essential 4
Enhancing trust and financial sustainability to maintain local action

Applies to
Branches

The ability to deliver services is based on the trust of the organization, and the continuation of services relies on the financial sustainability of the organization. For this reason, enhancing trust and financial sustainability should be considered as a key aspect at every stage of Branch development.

1. Building integrity and accountability

Strong Branches are trusted by people and communities, staff and volunteers, and their partners and donors. Maintaining its "integrity" by doing the right thing in the right way, adhering to strongly held values and practising "accountability" by being responsible or answerable for any action it takes, enables to build "trust" in a Branch among these stakeholders.

- The **Branch** presence and representation in a community, the way it engages the community in its service, its principled action and overall transparency in its decision making, supports building trust within communities. This is strengthened when the Branch sees communities not only as a recipient of its service, but rather a key stakeholder and owner of Branch actions and decisions.

- The **Branch** setting up a safe workplace and creating an enabling environment, supports the generation of trust from staff, volunteers and youth[10].

- A **Branch** needs to be responsible and answerable for the actions it takes, the resources it uses and the impact it brings to those who provide the means and support to sustain the Branch actions.

- A **Branch** needs to adhere to its Statutes to maintain its expected role outlined within it. Furthermore, it is expected to practise transparency in its Branch plan, budget and priorities, and in its results to its National Headquarters and other Branches in order to contribute to shaping National Society-wide strategy and collective accountability.

- The **National Headquarters** has a role in setting clear checks and balances between Branch leadership and management, for instance through its Statutes, and checks and balances between National Headquarters and Branches, for instance through its internal audit scheme. This is followed by setting policy environments and mechanisms that Branches can utilize, such as a formal Integrity line, a complaint resolution mechanism and a volunteer insurance mechanism.

- **National Headquarters'** support to Branches when capacity building in the areas of financial management and reporting should prove helpful. When doing so, it is necessary to determine National Society-wide requirements/standards, ensure that Branches build sustainable capacities to meet them, and further analyze international requirements that may be different/additional. This will help the National Society to determine which additional capacities are needed when engaging in international programmes or preparing for potential international operations, to support Branches in building additional capacities in a scalable manner.

KEY POINTS TO NOTE

- Branches can reach communities because communities trust and accept the Branch to act in their best interests.

- Branches can deliver services, because the people engaged with them – such as staff, volunteers and youth – believe in the cause and share those values.

- Partners, donors and local authorities provide the means and support to sustain Branch actions.

- Under the principle of unity, Branches work as one National Society, so it has to have integrity and accountability to other peer Branches, and towards the National Headquarters.

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10 Potential actions include: A) Ensuring fair volunteering and youth engagement pathways; B) Setting safety nets, including adequate training, and mechanisms to prevent and address issues such as harassment and exploitation; C) Providing personal protective equipment and insurance depending on the nature of the work; D) Setting a culture of risk management; E) Providing security and safety training, and F) Setting up psychosocial support mechanisms.

- **External supporters** must acknowledge the difference between the local accountability culture and international requirements. Therefore, when engaging with the National Society and Branches, it is important to acknowledge and explore these differences, to introduce international standards/requirements in relation to the context, and to support the National Society and its Branches in dealing with additional international standards/requirements in a scalable manner.

2. Building financial sustainability

Lessons on sustainability from Branches around the world highlight the importance of designing services that are relevant and visible, and which attract community participation and resources. Continuum of these services are recognized as key factors in creating a good and trustworthy image of the Branch, generate understanding of its value, and help in attracting local resources and volunteers.

- A **Branch** should invest in designing its actions and services with local community and volunteer engagement. These approaches are seen to be more sustainable as opposed to heavy investment in mobilizing staff and volunteers outside the community. Such practice is undermined when a Branch accesses and relies too heavily on short-term international resourcing, as it steers the Branch's focus away from its local constituencies and Branch development towards short-term projects/programmes that diminish its sustainability and relevance.

- When a **Branch** critically reflects and defines "what it should maintain as core-services and core-structures", it helps to define Branch priorities in moments of scarce resources. It further enables a Branch to estimate the cost to sustain itself and helps it plan to manage resources with long-term reliability and avoid dependency solely to short-term external support and programmes.

- A **Branch** should, as much as possible, mobilize and utilize diverse, locally secured resources to run its core service and core structure, and to mitigate the risk of being dependent on few and unsustainable income streams.

- Resources collected by a **Branch** must be managed with accountability, to continue build trust and relationships. Financial oversight should be used as the basis to inform short-term/long-term risks and opportunities, and it is the responsibility of the Branch leader to maintain this strategic oversight.

- Wherever appropriate, the **National Headquarters'** oversight on Branch Financial Management may help the branch to detect risk early on and maintain its sustainability. When resource mobilization is carried out in an orderly manner, providing guidance and opportunities for Branches to establish local partnerships and local resource mobilization is essential.

Essential 5
Building agility and readiness to respond to increased needs

Applies to **Branches**

For most Branches, the moment of responding to disaster and crisis is the ultimate test of its ability. It is a moment of truth, when it needs to perform and to be seen to perform. If it does, its image and its support grow with it; if not, both may be negatively affected. For this reason, openness towards innovation, and the ability to scale up and down without causing damage become important.

1. Openness towards innovation

The COVID-19 pandemic has clearly shown that a Branch's ability to foresee new and rising situations, and adapt to them with agility, is central to its relevance and effectiveness. Branches that were able to rapidly adapt to a changing operational reality during the COVID-19 crisis played a significant role in mitigating the crisis in their communities. Openness towards innovation amplifies this effort; trying out new things, being open to trial and error, quickly learning from it, and seeking how success could be brought to scale.

- A **Branch** can build openness and practice towards innovation by facilitating dialogue with its members, volunteers, youth and staff to generate new ideas on how to build the Branch stronger, giving space to test ideas, reflecting on how this worked and seeking how to improve.

- The **National Headquarters** may support building this culture by accepting imperfection, putting emphasis on learning and adjusting from experience. It may provide space and support to pilot ideas, facilitate reflection and dialogue across Branches, and gather what it has learned to bring success to scale.

2. Scaling up and scaling down without causing damage

Most of the time, Branches are the first-line responders, especially to small to mid-sized disasters/crises, and occasionally to large-scale operations. Depending on the size of the disaster and crisis, it may require a Branch to quickly scale up its service and its capacity, with possible support mobilized nationally or, in some cases, internationally. The Branch strategy and ability to quickly scale up and scale down its service has implications on its long-term sustainability.

- **External supporters**, especially in international operations, have a strong impact in this regard. National Societies and their Branches are often perceived by external supporters as a local platform through which external supporters can reach affected or vulnerable people. Whereas this is appropriate in some cases, particularly in situations of humanitarian crisis, it should not be the primary function of a National Society or its Branches. In this process, external supporters should take into account the overall coordination role the National Headquarters plays[11] and the long-term development needs of its Branches. This may determine whether any newly built operational capacity is necessary for the longer term; if so, it should avoid leaving Branches with a financial burden, if not, they should be able to scale down without damaging the Branches' positioning and its practice in managing human resources.

- The **National Headquarters** plays a role in enabling Branches to foresee potential risks for disasters and crisis, strategically navigating the setting up of new structures and capacities within a Branch to avoid financial and sustainability burden in the long term, facilitating external support and requirements accordingly. If necessary, some National Societies might set up a national response mechanism, giving clarity on the scale of disaster/crisis a Branch needs to act upon on its own, and when and how regional/national support comes in.

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11 Principles and Rules for humanitarian assistance https://www.ifrc.org/document/principles-rules-humanitarian-assistance

- The ability of a **Branch** to perform well in these situations is the result of the preparation to be aware and sensitive to potential hazards, clarifying Branch roles and their relationship with National Headquarters and other local actors, pre-defining their overall development priorities and adhering to them when preparing or building capacities through response. They should also have an idea on how to deal with newly required capacities and requests and define how to scale down and manage expectations as early as possible.

KEY POINTS TO NOTE

Past experience shows negative impacts such as:

- Newly built capacities being difficult to scale down and becoming a financial burden;

- High dependency on external support diminishing branch capacity to build local relationships and sustainability;

- Practice of paying volunteers as cheap labour diminishing volunteering among the community;

- Capacity-strengthening opportunities given to selected Branches causing tension between other branches;

- Centralized decision-making process during response phase causing disconnection between NHQs and Branches.

Eswatini
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Finnish Red Cross

Essential 6
Investing in leadership and good governance

Two decades of National Society development support has demonstrated that successful Branch development involves the Branch senior leader's ownership of the process. Moreover, the ability of Branch senior leadership to navigate changing environments, its agility to adapt and its strategic oversight, builds a culture of trust and safety, and has demonstrated it can accelerate Branch Development efforts and better position the Branch.

Applies to **Branches**

- The roles and responsibilities of a Branch Leader, its composition and selection process outlined in the National Societies' Statutes, must be the basis for the **Branch** to follow.

- For National Societies that are formulated as a membership-based organization,[12] and in which the members take part in the decision making and election of a Branch, it is necessary for a **Branch** to invest in the continuous recruitment of members, ensuring these members reflect the diversity of the community, and regularly informing them of their rights and responsibilities; this builds a healthy foundation for the organization's decision-making body.

- Building a culture that invests in succession planning keeps the **Branch** active and ensures the continuity of its brand and services.

- As opposed to roles and titles, leadership may be demonstrated by various actors within a Branch, including volunteers and youth. For this reason, a **Branch** must invest in building leadership across its organization, by empowering people to learn, practise and demonstrate their leadership ability, and by creating an enabling environment for individuals themselves to find a way to speak up and act.

- The **National Headquarters** can provide a strategic approach to developing leadership across the organization. A well-articulated leadership development strategy/programme and a leadership succession plan are central to ensuring that Branch senior leaders perform the basic demands of leadership, facilitating a healthy turnover. Putting in place a clear conflict mediation/resolution mechanism also supports constructive and focused dialogue among Branch leaders, reinforcing their relationship to each other, and between the Branch and its National Headquarters.

- **External supporters** must recognize and respect the local leadership, and not bypass its decisions nor contradict its strategic vision at all times.

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12 A key rationale for operating as a membership-based organization is that it gives supporters formal influence on the direction, performance and operations of the organization (Guidance for National Societies Statutes 2018)

Essential 7
Ensuring cohesion and coordination across a National Society

Applies to **Branches**

While the development of a Branch is primarily the responsibility of the Branch itself, this cannot be done in isolation from the National Society-wide vision and strategic direction.

- Therefore, work by an individual **Branch** needs to contribute to increasing the coherence and effectiveness of the National Society as a whole.

- Equally, **National Headquarters** should strive to bring continuous development across all its Branches.

At the same time, like any organization, National Societies may prioritize their actions to maximize limited resources, and it is likely that the National Headquarters might select priority Branches for development and/or allocate resources to support specific Branches.

- Prioritization of Branches does not necessarily entail that other Branches cannot benefit, such as learning and participating in training opportunities, to name but two. When the **National Headquarters** does not facilitate opportunities in an open and coordinated manner across a National Society, it leads to imbalanced capacity and creates tension across Branches, and between Branches and the National Headquarters.

- The way **external support** engages with a National Society and its Branches also impacts cohesion and coordination. External supporters should adhere to and respect the role of the National Headquarters in having an overview, the strategic decision making and the oversight of its Branches; including decisions on ways development should be carried out, the tools to be selected and used, and the ways information is shared and collected.

Whatever the structure of the National Society and its Branches, coordination and communication between National Headquarters and a Branch is seen as important and a common challenge.

- Aspects to enable this include regular training/awareness raising of roles and responsibilities between **National Headquarters and Branches**, and the establishment of information sharing/capturing mechanisms where the National Headquarters may have an oversight of actions taken by Branches. Equally, Branches should be informed of other activities within its territory (especially when there is direct engagement from National Headquarters or other service-delivery forms that do not go through Branches). An annual coordination meeting among Branch leaders and National Headquarters senior management can also explore areas of improvement for communication and coordination.

Bringing cohesion and coordination does not mean making everything centralized. Valuing, encouraging and nurturing formal and informal connections are equally important. Connecting a Branch within and between National Societies, and with other actors, extends the value of our Branch network. The *IFRC Strategy 2030* articulates this as one of its transformations to "work effectively as a distributed network".

- **National Headquarters** may contribute by reducing bureaucracy where possible or appropriate, defining the balance between formal communication protocols/partnership procedures and informal collaboration, exploring new models of collaboration, such as twinning of Branches within its National Society and with other National Society Branches, and encouraging Branch self-organization and direct peer-to-peer engagement.

- **Branches** should actively learn from one another, building network across its peer Branches within the National Society and, whenever appropriate, with Branches from other National Societies. This is a way to learn good practice, share lessons learnt and common challenges, and co-create solutions.

- **External supporters** may equally contribute to this endeavour but need to be mindful not to undermine the coordination role of the National Headquarters and ensure to liaise through them.

KEY POINTS TO NOTE

Opening up to more connections among Branches and across National Societies, and transformative partnerships that prioritize collective action and joint problem-solving, proves to be more effective than traditional training approaches and formal meetings.

The rapid transition to digital work across many National Societies, especially during COVID-19, has also demonstrated the potential to establish a highly connected Branch network, with amplified member-to-member, volunteer-to-volunteer, youth-to-youth, employee-to-employee collaboration enabled through new technology. Furthermore, the collaboration and partnerships established between cross-border Branches have shown their impact on emergency response time, as they facilitate better readiness and response to managing crises and disasters which affect both sides of the border.

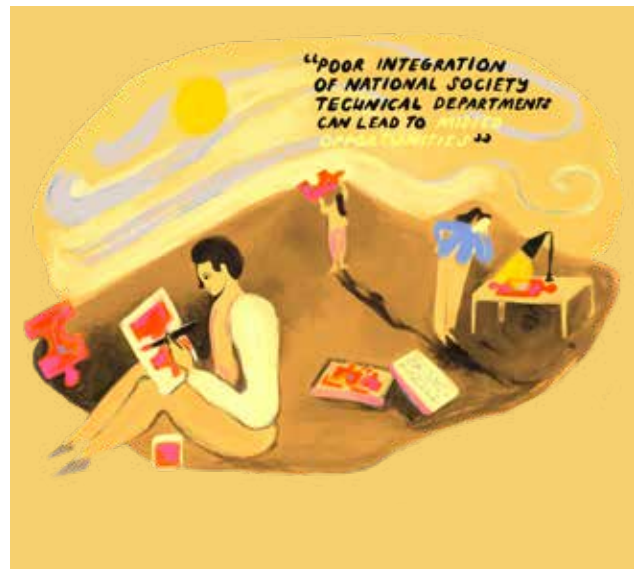# An illustrated guide to the Essentials

Essential 1

Essential 2

Essential 3

Essential 4

Essential 5

Essential 6

Essential 7

CONCLUSION AND WAY FORWARD

While this Framework is being referenced, informing the thinking and providing inspiration to all those who are working in and with a Branch, the IFRC will continue to collect and analyse learning. This should facilitate communication among practitioners and improve coordinated support for National Societies and their Branches to enhance the IFRC network-wide effort in strengthening our 188,000 local Units and Branches to play a crucial role for a more sustainable and resilient world.

THE FUNDAMENTAL PRINCIPLES
OF THE INTERNATIONAL RED CROSS AND RED CRESCENT MOVEMENT

Humanity

The International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, born of a desire to bring assistance without discrimination to the wounded on the battlefield, endeavours, in its international and national capacity, to prevent and alleviate human suffering wherever it may be found. Its purpose is to protect life and health and to ensure respect for the human being. It promotes mutual understanding, friendship, cooperation and lasting peace amongst all peoples.

Impartiality

It makes no discrimination as to nationality, race, religious beliefs, class or political opinions. It endeavours to relieve the suffering of individuals, being guided solely by their needs, and to give priority to the most urgent cases of distress.

Neutrality

In order to enjoy the confidence of all, the Movement may not take sides in hostilities or engage at any time in controversies of a political, racial, religious or ideological nature.

Independence

The Movement is independent. The National Societies, while auxiliaries in the humanitarian services of their governments and subject to the laws of their respective countries, must always maintain their autonomy so that they may be able at all times to act in accordance with the principles of the Movement.

Voluntary service

It is a voluntary relief movement not prompted in any manner by desire for gain.

Unity

There can be only one Red Cross or Red Crescent Society in any one country. It must be open to all. It must carry on its humanitarian work throughout its territory.

Universality

The International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, in which all societies have equal status and share equal responsibilities and duties in helping each other, is worldwide.

The International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) is the world's largest humanitarian network, with 191 National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies and around 15 million volunteers. Our volunteers are present in communities before, during and after a crisis or disaster. We work in the most hard to reach and complex settings in the world, saving lives and promoting human dignity. We support communities to become stronger and more resilient places where people can live safe and healthy lives, and have opportunities to thrive.