



Annual report 2020



RED CROSS
EU OFFICE

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Message from the Red Cross EU Office

2020 will go down in history as a year like no other; COVID-19 shut down the world, and its spread and resulting impact led to a global crisis of unprecedented reach and proportion. On top of the devastating health consequences, the pandemic significantly disrupted almost all aspects of our lives – leading to new vulnerabilities and heightened loneliness and mental health issues, as well as considerable longer-term socio-economic consequences.

For colleagues from National Societies and the IFRC it was also a demanding year. Many focussed on humanitarian crisis response. All had to adapt to different ways of living; at work, at home and in their volunteering, managing new and competing responsibilities. But the Red Cross Red Crescent has plenty of experience in dealing with adversity and change. Despite all the difficulties, members were at the heart of the response. National Societies stepped up their action to address the changing vulnerabilities, cooperate across borders, and strengthen their auxiliary role.

Things did not stand still on the EU side either. As the virus took hold, the European Commission activated the emergency coordination mechanism and supported Member States in addressing the crisis, providing recommendations on a common course of action. EU countries boosted collaboration in their efforts to slow the virus' spread and manage the fallout of the pandemic. Expertise was pooled, guidelines were developed, including to ensure necessary movements of goods and staff amid restrictions, and efforts were dedicated to increasing the availability of essential medical equipment. In addition, new funding was made available to support EU countries to protect their economies and respond to the health emergency. Indeed, continued collaboration and regular information-exchange created new opportunities for the Red Cross Red Crescent to partner with the EU during the year, such as the EUR 35.5 million Mobile Testing Initiative – which builds on National Societies' reach and auxiliary role to expand COVID-19 activities in seven EU countries.

At the same time, other legislative work of great interest to members carried on. Crucially, negotiations around the next 7-year EU budget and the COVID-19 recovery package continued before they were finally adopted at the end of the year. The European Commission also concluded a consultation on the way it works with NGOs for humanitarian aid actions, as well as releasing the New Pact on Migration and Asylum, which will frame its work on the topic for the next five years. On these and numerous other files, National Societies and the IFRC mobilised throughout the year to leverage their influence at both national and EU levels.

In addition, members spoke out against the increasing use of immigration detention by Member States and boosted the visibility of their disaster risk management work through the “Red Alert” publication. While a lot of EU-related networking typically happens in person at workshops and events, colleagues took many of these discussions online, getting together to exchange on how they had adapted their services in the COVID-19 context, and the ways in which transnational cooperation on social inclusion issues could be strengthened in the future.

This report presents seven examples which illustrate how despite the odds, members maintained their commitment to working together to engage EU support for Red Cross Red Crescent action. We hope you enjoy the read.

Cover photo:

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A Syrian family waiting for their asylum claim to be processed at a pre-removal centre in Fylakio, Evros, Greece. © Stylianos Papardelas / ICRC

Speaking out against immigration detention

At the beginning of 2020, the position paper with members' policy recommendations on reducing the use of immigration detention in the EU were published, launching a year of increased focus on the topic. National Societies have significant operational experience in the field of immigration detention. For example, the Lithuanian Red Cross helps to protect asylum seekers at borders by monitoring reception conditions and the implementation of asylum procedures. Building on this practical expertise, colleagues identified ten ways in which the EU and Member States can reduce the use of detention as a migration management tool and promote the development and implementation of alternatives.

With immigration detention on the rise across Europe despite its long-lasting negative impacts on people's mental health and well-being, National Societies seized available opportunities at EU level to call for liberty to be the norm and for children never to be detained. Their dissemination of the position paper contributed to profiling members on the topic, paving the way for sustained advocacy towards the European Parliament on the return directive throughout the year. In December, representatives from the Swedish Red Cross and the

Bulgarian Red Cross further shared their know-how and views at a webinar on the humanitarian impact of detention, co-organised with the ICRC Brussels delegation. They highlighted the devastating consequences of the measure and deliberated strategies to ensure more effective use of alternatives to detention with participants from the EU institutions, Permanent Representations to the EU, civil society, academia, and the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement.

In addition, on International Migrants Day, the Latvian Red Cross, the Bulgarian Red Cross and the Slovenian Red Cross published a common EU statement, appealing to decision-makers to take decisive action to reduce immigration detention and ensure that migration is managed in a more humane way. In 2021, members will continue to monitor negotiations around legislative instruments under the European Commission's new Pact on Migration and Asylum and to call for the relevant frameworks to make immigration detention truly a last resort measure.

Representing the Red Cross in the EU budget negotiations

As had been the case the previous year, continued negotiations for the next 7-year EU budget needed close attention in 2020. The economic consequences



Similar to other National Red Cross Societies across Europe throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, a Belgian Red Cross team distributes food aid.
© Belgian Red Cross

of the COVID-19 pandemic led to new financial initiatives being proposed in the first half of the year, with major impacts on the ongoing budget negotiations between the European Commission, the European Parliament, and the Council of the EU.

In May, the Commission presented an adapted proposal for the next Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF), as well as for the Next Generation EU programme (NGEU) – the COVID-19 recovery budget, which in its final form became the biggest financial instrument in the history of the EU. In addition, new regulations were introduced on existing funding programmes, such as for the Fund for European Aid to the Most Deprived (FEAD), to enable projects to quickly responded to the increased need for support due to the pandemic. National Societies also had a stake in new instruments that would directly impact the future European Social Fund plus (ESF+), like the Just Transition Fund (JTF) and the Child Guarantee. To exert influence on these negotiations, members contributed to key messages and stepped up their advocacy activities towards the Commission and the Parliament.

Several National Societies actively engaged with national authorities or Members of European Parliament (MEPs) to discuss these developments and share Red Cross views and priorities. For example, the French Red Cross teamed up with other French Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) active in the social sector to raise awareness of the severe impact of the COVID-19 crisis on the most vulnerable; successfully lobbying for additional support in the FEAD programme. Similarly, in cooperation with the German Welfare Association, the German Red Cross participated in dialogues

Based on their practical experience and the challenges faced in the field, members' joint recommendations on the next 7-year EU budget focused on shaping the new EU programmes to better address the needs of vulnerable people.

with representatives from the Commission and the Parliament to adopt ESF regulations that would allow more flexible support for people affected by the pandemic. Numerous position papers and amendments to the new proposals were produced, with successful outcomes in the allocation of ESF resources for the JTF and future FEAD programmes.

Colleagues also undertook advocacy actions around the future humanitarian aid strand of European Solidarity Corps, which builds on the old EU Aid Volunteers (EUAV) initiative, providing written recommendations to key stakeholders. Based on their experience in training and deploying people to humanitarian projects with the previous programme, National Societies underlined how deployments should strengthen local civil society action and prioritise knowledge transfer, in line with the localisation agenda. At a meeting held between the European Parliament's Committee on Development (DEVE) and humanitarian organisations on the impact of COVID-19 on the EUAV projects in September, representatives from the German Red Cross and the Finnish Red Cross shared lessons learned from the field. Members' priorities were also reiterated in a EUAV ex-post evaluation launched by the European Commission.

Caring for the most vulnerable during the pandemic

With much of the Red Cross' work in the community largely involving contact between people, COVID-19 public health measures forced members to completely re-think their ways of working in the face of rapidly changing and complex circumstances. Not only was service delivery



The EU-funded Mobile Testing Initiative enabled Red Cross teams in seven Member States to enhance their support towards national health authorities.
© Portuguese Red Cross

directly impacted by evolving safety procedures and restrictions, but National Societies had to quickly adapt to protect the health and well-being of their staff and volunteers, especially those from high-risk groups. All the while, striving to address the growing and emerging needs resulting from the crisis – effects which are likely to be felt for many years to come.

In the second half of the year, practitioners got together for a series of “COVID-19 Conversations”: peer-to-peer exchanges to learn from each other’s experiences and innovations in dealing with these new challenges. For example, colleagues from the Hungarian Red Cross and the Slovenian Red Cross discussed their efforts to tackle the stigma surrounding the virus, while Belgian Red Cross and the Latvian Red Cross staff deliberated their changing practices in providing critical food and material aid to people at heightened risk of exclusion. With lockdowns and social distancing measures leaving many in isolation or unable to work, colleagues from the Luxembourg Red Cross and the Portuguese Red Cross stressed how mental health will remain a key challenge in the long run, while Swedish Red Cross and Romanian Red Cross staff emphasised the worrying socio-economic emergency ensuing from the pandemic.

In the meantime, National Societies were also playing a critical role in conducting COVID-19 testing, transporting patients, and providing psychosocial support. During the first wave, volunteers on the front line shared their stories as part of a campaign run by the European Parliament, including Gunnar from the Estonian Red Cross, Veronika from the Slovak Red Cross, and Rasmus from the Danish Red

Cross. In November, the IFRC and the European Commission signed a unique agreement under the Emergency Support Instrument to enhance Red Cross assistance to embattled health systems in seven countries. Recognising National Societies’ capacities to reach the most isolated and vulnerable people, the programme has been helping the Austrian Red Cross, the German Red Cross, the Hellenic Red Cross, the Italian Red Cross, the Malta Red Cross, the Portuguese Red Cross, and the Spanish Red Cross to equip and train staff and volunteers to perform mobile testing.

Showcasing the Red Cross’ disaster risk management work

Currently, European countries are hit by more frequent, intense, and deadly heatwaves and forest fires, floods, and other complex risks. Some of these dangers are predictable, while others strike unexpectedly. Regardless, National Societies are at the forefront of reducing the risks, helping people to prepare, and supporting public authorities in



Annual International Disaster Management Exercise of the Hungarian Red Cross in Pécsvárad. © Márton Neményi

responding to these challenges as part of their auxiliary role, and within the framework of the European Union Civil Protection Mechanism. To increase visibility of the breadth and depth of this work, the “Red Alert” booklet was developed – a first publication of its kind, with contributions from National Societies across Europe, the IFRC, and the Red Cross Red Crescent Climate Centre. Through twenty-five cases, it highlights the importance of understanding risks, establishing early warning mechanisms, and taking early action at the local level; combining lifesaving and awareness-raising activities to increase people’s resilience.

Despite being in the midst of responding to the COVID-19 pandemic, many members contributed their long-standing experience in reducing and managing disaster risks all over Europe. In Croatia for example, extreme winter conditions can severely affect the population, especially remote and isolated households. In these difficult circumstances, the Croatian Red Cross’ preparedness activities with older people have transformed into early action when needed. The Spanish Red Cross on the other hand, has conducted an early warning pilot project aimed at informing people of upcoming hazards and advising them on the most suitable measures to take to reduce their risks. While in Portugal, growing numbers of deadly fires in recent years have prompted the Portuguese Red Cross to adapt its response tools and capacities, and to rethink its emergency mechanisms. And in

Norway, the Norwegian Red Cross has collaborated with research institutions and public emergency authorities to enhance understanding of the local effects of the climate crisis and how to anticipate changes in targeted preparedness measures.

Through these and other examples, Red Alert shows how National Societies continuously adapt, innovate, and test their capacities in the face of changing hazards. They are ready to step up collaboration and partnerships to optimise operational reach, scale, and impact on preparedness and emergency response. The booklet hopes to inspire and inform both National Societies and their partners, as well as to serve as an advocacy tool to support members in increasing their efforts to reduce the impacts of extreme weather and other risks.

Pooling knowledge and capacities to fight social exclusion

Throughout 2020, National Societies continued to build on the collective wealth of Red Cross experience and expertise in the area of social inclusion. Daily, staff and volunteers across Europe carry out a wide range of activities for vulnerable groups, from long-term and well-established services, to more temporary or innovative initiatives – there is ample of knowhow to draw from when exploring ways to improve programmes or develop new projects.



Service user Paul takes his first steps outside in three months after being discharged from hospital, with the help of support worker Scott, and emergency response volunteer Bridget. © Betty Zapata / British Red Cross

With this in mind, during the year a total of eighteen National Societies contributed good practices to “Snapshots” – a series of two-page documents showcasing Red Cross action in relation to EU social policies. For example, the Bulgarian Red Cross’ e-homecare service which uses Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) to support distant chronic disease management, the Cyprus Red Cross Society’s “Stella Soulioti” centre that has been assisting children with severe physical disabilities since 1957, the Hungarian Red Cross’ person-based service to prevent families experiencing homelessness from sleeping rough, the Irish Red Cross Youth’s work to stand up for the rights of LGBTQI+ people, and the Danish Red Cross’ efforts to ensure proper reception conditions for unaccompanied minors. This sharing of best practices also supported EU advocacy on social inclusion issues, particularly attempts to make policy initiatives like the European Pillar of Social Rights and the Child Guarantee, which aims to prevent child poverty, more tangible.

Colleagues also contributed to mapping social inclusion activities; helping to identify common priority groups like older people and children, as well as themes like material deprivation and homelessness. Discussions about good practices and areas of shared interest continued during a workshop organised by the French Red Cross among domestic focal points in October, where representatives of eighteen National Societies reflected on increasing collaboration in activities such as care, ageing, employability and integration. To inform discussions about EU opportunities for service development and future possibilities for transnational cooperation, members shared past experiences with EU-funded projects. For example, a colleague from the British Red Cross talked about their work to strengthen community resilience in urban areas, while an Austrian Red Cross delegate explained a project to fight violence against older women, and a Finnish Red Cross representative revealed some of the lessons learned from activities to enhance capacities to deal with oil spills in the Baltic region.

Promoting a humane approach in EU asylum and migration policies

In September, the European Commission published the long-awaited new Pact on Migration and Asylum (the Pact). Setting the frame for the Commission’s work on migration and borders for the next five years, the Pact consists of a policy communication and a series of legislative and non-legislative



Undocumented migrants like Claudia have struggled to find unofficial work during the COVID-19 pandemic and have received support in the form of food vouchers from the Netherlands Red Cross.
© Victor Lacken / Red Cross Red Crescent magazine

initiatives. Given that the Pact was an attempt to relaunch internal discussions around EU cooperation on migration and asylum, members came together to develop joint assessments and key messages to influence the debate. The IFRC, as well as the Swedish Red Cross, the Finnish Red Cross, and the Norwegian Red Cross, immediately engaged in dialogue with national decision makers and stakeholders to emphasise the need to draw lessons from recent experiences, including on the Greek islands, and to ensure a fair Common European Asylum System based on humanity and solidarity. After a first discussion among members in October, a preliminary evaluation and a set of recommendations on the Pact were developed to support coordinated advocacy at the national level.

National Societies also exchanged on the Pact’s implications for their work with and for migrants in their own countries, including during a meeting held between migration experts from the Austrian Red Cross headquarters and regional branches in October. An internal webinar in December, provided another occasion to discuss ways forward for National Societies in context of the Pact. Colleagues from the German Red Cross and the Spanish Red Cross shared their concerns and analyses from their national perspectives, helping to further collective reflections on the role that the Red Cross can and should play in this new policy environment.

In 2021, these conversations are set to continue, with members contributing their expertise to

identifying and exposing the Pact's consequences on vulnerabilities along migratory routes and the associated humanitarian responses. Advocacy efforts will focus on how new practices, such as the new screening regulation which foresees accelerated border procedures, will affect vulnerable people and their access to assistance and protection. Specific attention will be given to highlighting the less visible vulnerabilities, such as medical needs and trauma, as well as on the plight of survivors of human trafficking. Safeguarding the ability of humanitarian actors to access and provide services to vulnerable groups will also remain a key priority.

Influencing how the Commission works on humanitarian action with NGOs

For the last three years, thirteen National Societies have been working together to influence the European Commission Directorate-General for European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations' (DG ECHO) revision of its Framework Partnership Agreement (FPA) with NGOs – a consultation process which culminated in 2020. This consultation was important because it served to



Following Super Typhoon Goni, the Philippine Red Cross works to support children to cope with the traumatic events and engage in fun activities in the island of Catanduanes. © IFRC

pre-identify partners and define eligibility criteria, as well as laying down the rules governing Union-funded humanitarian aid actions.

In line with the overarching objective of the Grand Bargain commitments to increase the efficiency and effectiveness of humanitarian action, the FPA revision provided a unique opportunity to improve contractual relations between National Societies and the European Commission. Throughout the three-year process, colleagues repeatedly shared their concerns and practice-based recommendations with DG ECHO, helping to ensure that Red Cross expertise and experiences from different contexts, sectors, and ECHO-funded actions were adequately reflected.

In 2020, DG ECHO announced changes in the rules and procedures for EU-funded humanitarian aid actions implemented by NGOs; the 2014 FPA was to be replaced by an EU Humanitarian Partnership Certificate, and a new Model Grant Agreement (MGA) would enter into force on 1 January 2021. During the year, thirteen National Societies successfully underwent the ex-ante assessment requested by DG ECHO as a prerequisite for the Partnership Certificate. Once again, colleagues joined forces to explain how Red Cross Red Crescent international humanitarian assistance is always provided with the consent of the Host National Society and responds to the humanitarian needs and priorities that they define. In the second half of the year, members also analysed the new MGA and addressed an official letter to DG ECHO, emphasizing the limited evidence of simplification, while highlighting that in fact, more questions are now posed at the proposals stage. The letter also supported collective efforts to ensure that the MGA did not introduce additional impediments linked to the EU's restrictive measures. The final relevant MGA article recognises the need to comply with humanitarian principles and International Humanitarian Law (IHL), while making it clear that beneficiaries do not need to be screened against the EU sanctions list – a very positive outcome of the consultation.

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Representing National Societies in the EU, the UK, Norway and Iceland, and the IFRC

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The International Red Cross Red Crescent Movement is committed to, and bound by its seven fundamental principles

HUMANITY | IMPARTIALITY | NEUTRALITY | INDEPENDENCE | VOLUNTARY SERVICE | UNITY | UNIVERSALITY