



Rebeka Ryvola

# Leadership Think Tank COVID-19

## KEY INSIGHTS

On Friday 29<sup>th</sup> May a **Leadership Think tank** was held for Secretaries General, Presidents and other senior leaders of the IFRC network. The think tank was established to help National Society leaders learn from others who are undergoing major COVID responses and to explore how we need to transform as an organisation to navigate this and future crises.

*Presentations were delivered by:*

**Mr. Ren Hao**, Director General of the International Liaison Department of the Red Cross Society of China

**Mr. Flavio Ronzi**, Secretary General Italian Red Cross

**Mr. Antoni Bruel Carreras**, Coordinator General, Spanish Red Cross

**Ms. Gail McGovern**, President and CEO American Red Cross

There were also discussions and questions during the session from leaders participating. 115 people attended from approximately 50 National Societies and IFRC bodies.

Here are 6 key insights that emerged from the think tank:

## Agility and Speed is key

The presenters acknowledged that while we had forecast a global pandemic as a potential threat we would have to manage, we were not prepared for this event. All four NSs who presented reflected on the importance of moving with speed and of the need to be agile in such a response – from operational day to day services, to revamping governance systems.

Services needed to be rapidly adapted to meet both new and emerging needs as well as adapting to the operating environment. The NSs based their approaches on emerging science, but as the science was also rapidly developing and changing this meant that the NSs needed to continually pivot to reflect the new advice emerging from experts.

“American Red Cross for instance began taking convalescent plasma (from patients who had overcome coronavirus) as an experimental approach, to support their Federal authorities and had already shipped 6,000 units of the Plasma. New approaches to collecting blood and plasma had to be rapidly designed and implemented in light of social distancing requirements. They also had to respond to ‘traditional’ crises such as tornadoes in vastly different ways, for instance where usually they would have opened shelters, social distancing concerns meant they had to switch to put families into hotels, as people preferred to sleep in cars rather than go into shelters. American Red Cross needed to rapidly develop new systems and partnerships for this effort.

*“The new situation challenged old ways of thinking and forced us to innovate in order to save lives”*

Flavio Ronzi SG Italian Red Cross

The crisis has presented an opportunity for innovation – it has enabled a rethinking of “business as usual”. All four NSs showed a great deal of innovation during this first part of the pandemic, transforming often well-established practices in a very short period of time, or rapidly scaling up their services, for example;

- › There was a large-scale reorganising of systems by providing social services that complemented health services for those at home. Counselling and PSS services became increasingly important.
- › Many services had to be moved quickly to a virtual delivery format forcing a redesign but also a rapid upskilling in digital tools and management.
- › Scale had to be increased immediately, Spanish Red Cross for instance received 190,000 requests for support in the early days.
- › Understanding the inter-related components of vulnerabilities, the NSs undertook successful integrated fundraising approaches, combining various services beyond COVID19 response, such as health, rescue, education, social and environmental concerns.
- › Italian Red Cross shifted the management of their Governance elections at both regional and national level for the first time to an online process which required a significant and rapid change to systems and processes

The four leaders emphasised the importance of being able to take informed but quick decisions and to move to implementation quickly. They also highlighted the need to be able to immediately change direction given the changes in context.

## Strong local actors are essential, (including our ability to mobilise volunteers), but so is a strong global distributed network

When international borders were closed and movement restricted, much of the response was driven at a local level, underscoring again the importance of strong local actors and the need at the systems level for enhanced focus and investment on this.

All presenters saw a huge surge in local solidarity and to varying extents they were able to capitalise on this and mobilise it to support the community.

Volunteering models were reimagined, redesigned and importantly, significantly scaled up. Large numbers of new volunteers joined, including 25,000 new volunteers in Spain and 40,000 in Italy. Induction and management systems were moved online, offering a combination of videos, virtual trainings and virtual sign up processes. The entire system shifted at a pace that may not have been considered possible only a few months ago.

Mechanisms to ensure the safety and wellbeing of volunteers had to be adapted, including provision of PPE and safety protocols. Red Cross Society of China implemented a fund for the families of those volunteers who had died. There remain many complications in ensuring the safety of volunteers.

Local volunteers also played key roles in identifying innovations and new approaches to addressing community vulnerabilities. Service design and delivery was often rapidly being conceived of or adapted at an ‘on-the-ground’ level.

This 'decentralisation' was significantly enhanced by more horizontal communication among volunteers within NSs and quicker decision making on the ground. In some cases, the NS was able to shift volunteers between regions within their country to provide surge support in areas badly affected.

Spanish Red Cross drove a significant local effort, aligning HR management to local action, supporting local coordination with other actors and implementing support structures that attempted to ensure their 1,400 local offices remained open and functional.

*"This is not a vertical crisis, it is affecting everyone"*

Antonio Bruel, General Coordinator Spanish RC

But while the response was local, the Pandemic was global, also reinforcing the need to function effectively as a global distributed network that can coordinate efficiently to ensure a consistently strong response in all countries. Information sharing between all levels of National Societies has been paramount including;

- › Sharing of expertise and personnel, The Red Cross Society of China sent teams to Iran, Iraq and Italy.
- › Sharing new or innovative ideas between National Society staff and volunteers
- › Global platforms that contain information on NS activities in one easy to access place.

The presenters saw a need for a strong role for the IFRC in these responses to help ensure better coordination and economy of scale in the response and to play a role that is inclusive and focused on its member NSs. Global thinking and convening were seen as essential to be ready to respond as a collaborative operation.

Overall there was a strong recognition of the power of solidarity within our network and, of global support and cooperation.

*"Now I feel it in my heart: the RCRC is very powerful, when we work together, we are very powerful"*

Gail McGovern, CEO/President American RC



## Trust and Community engagement emerges once again as central

In a crisis marked by the need for reliable and trustworthy public health advice complicated by a large amount of misinformation in social media messaging, the need to trust public health institutions has possibly never been more important. This reinforces the criticality of trust being built and maintained by National Societies during 'normal' times as well as during crises.

Presenters reported high levels of trust emerging for their National Societies during this Pandemic. This manifested in multiple ways;

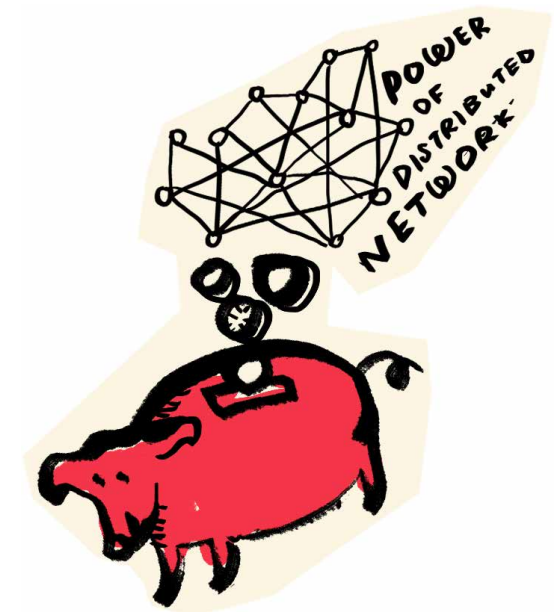
- › Substantial financial support for NS activities – appeals were often oversubscribed, National Societies raised beyond their targets.
- › A significant increase in support from the Private Sector, both in terms of resources and in-kind contributions
- › A significant increase in volunteer applications
- › Generally strong public profiling of the role of the RCRC and volunteers

Spanish Red Cross went to lengths to provide a transparent public platform that provided real time information on their operations, finances and other efforts. They found that ensuring transparency of operations to the population in real time, built confidence and demonstrated their leadership, as well improving public engagement.

Likewise, the Red Cross Society of China saw very high support from the population boosted by an increase of

accountability mechanisms using social media and mainstream media and by the standardisation of fundraising approaches and the increased speed in the use of public donations.

The NS presenters also reflected on a high level of trust in one another, with leaders of all 4 NSs highlighting how the power of our global distributed network was evident in this response and a much stronger sense of belonging, of collective impact and the pride that this instilled.



## The Auxiliary role has become even more important

The presenters noted an enhanced partnership with government and greater information sharing which they saw as critical for an effective response.

In all cases, the auxiliary role to national and local authorities had to be reinvented and adapted, in the face of growing requests: NSs have taken on new responsibilities, for example Italian Red Cross has extended their support to prehospital triage and other areas new to them, to recruiting and making available health personnel for hospital and home based care and, sourcing and providing additional ambulances.

The NS auxiliary role appears to have been significantly strengthened through the response and there is real potential to leverage this for a sustained and improved role going forward.



## Digital transformation has rapidly accelerated and is here to stay

The presenters saw that the crisis hastened the investment and adoption of a digitally transformative approach. Some highlights included;

- › The e-Governance and e-Elections of the Italian RC
- › E-learning courses for American, Italian and Spanish RC.
- › Digital volunteerism and, recruitment and induction of large numbers of new volunteers
- › Team and management meetings, and coordination of work went almost entirely digital
- › The skills and capacities of staff and volunteers to work digital rapidly increased

Less presence in offices and more flexible smartworking was identified as cost effective, increasing vicinity to communities if mixed properly with traditional forms of community engagement, and able to contribute to a reduced carbon footprint.

The presenters felt that these were transformations that would now likely continue beyond the crisis and are now part of the 'new normal'

## We need to be forward looking and to learn from this

While the future is evolving, NSs are using foresight to work with different scenarios, risks and contingencies. There is an acknowledgement of the need to transform this knowledge into a body of action that can determine how we influence our future

The crisis has equally provided the opportunity for NSs to break new ground and to adapt (in some cases to make quite radical changes). There continues to be risks, such as channelling all the energy from old and new volunteers, while at the same time there is a clear opportunity in the improved positioning of the RCRC.

*“The new situation is unknown, but we have learned to read better the trends and anticipate some of them”*

Flavio Ronzi, SG Italian RC

As the second phase of this Pandemic emerges for these National Societies some key considerations were being raised;

- › Strategically rethinking our model of financing beyond traditional sources, building on the momentum generated with a diversified set of private sector partners gained throughout the COVID19 emergency
- › Maintaining data privacy while significantly increasing virtual management and service delivery.
- › leveraging the positive local expressions of community solidarity and trust in the organisation to extend our community engagement

- › Challenges emerging in a range of social issues, including social cohesion, employment and livelihoods and addressing the inequality in society exacerbated by the Pandemic
- › A change in the culture of society, (reflected also in the NS) that will have to be navigated in the coming months
- › The need to ensure attention to the mental health needs of our volunteers and staff, particularly those on the front line who have worked tirelessly for months under extremely stressful conditions.
- › The need to scale up our capacities to face a possible new wave

The IFRC SG mentioned in his opening speech that the COVID-19 pandemic has indeed accelerated Strategy 2030, putting all of us at the centre of its transformations. The presenters recognised that some of these transformations will change our business model forever, others presented opportunities to re-imagine our engagement with communities, volunteers, partners, the government and each other.

In general, the pandemic appears to have boosted our capacities to embrace transformation and there is a need to continue growing the culture that will enable further growth and transformation, together with the flexible systems in our organisation to thrive in complex, unpredictable, dynamic times.

## Recordings of the sessions in four languages (click to download)

- › [English](#)
- › [French](#)
- › [Spanish](#)
- › [Arabic](#)



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