

"HEY! HAVE ANY OF YOU GUYS EVER TRIED THIS?"

How has Coronavirus Transformed Us and **Can We Maintain the Momentum?**

"We are used to disasters, we are even used to handling conflicts, but Pandemics, we are not well prepared for a global pandemic"

National Society Scenario Planning Session, Middle East North African Region July 2019

"National Societies are able to anticipate and adapt quickly to changing trends and contexts."

Signal of Success – IFRC Strategy 2030

In many parts of the world COVID-19 has forced National Societies to rapidly adapt and transform their services, ways of working and practices across a range of areas. For some this has been easier than others.

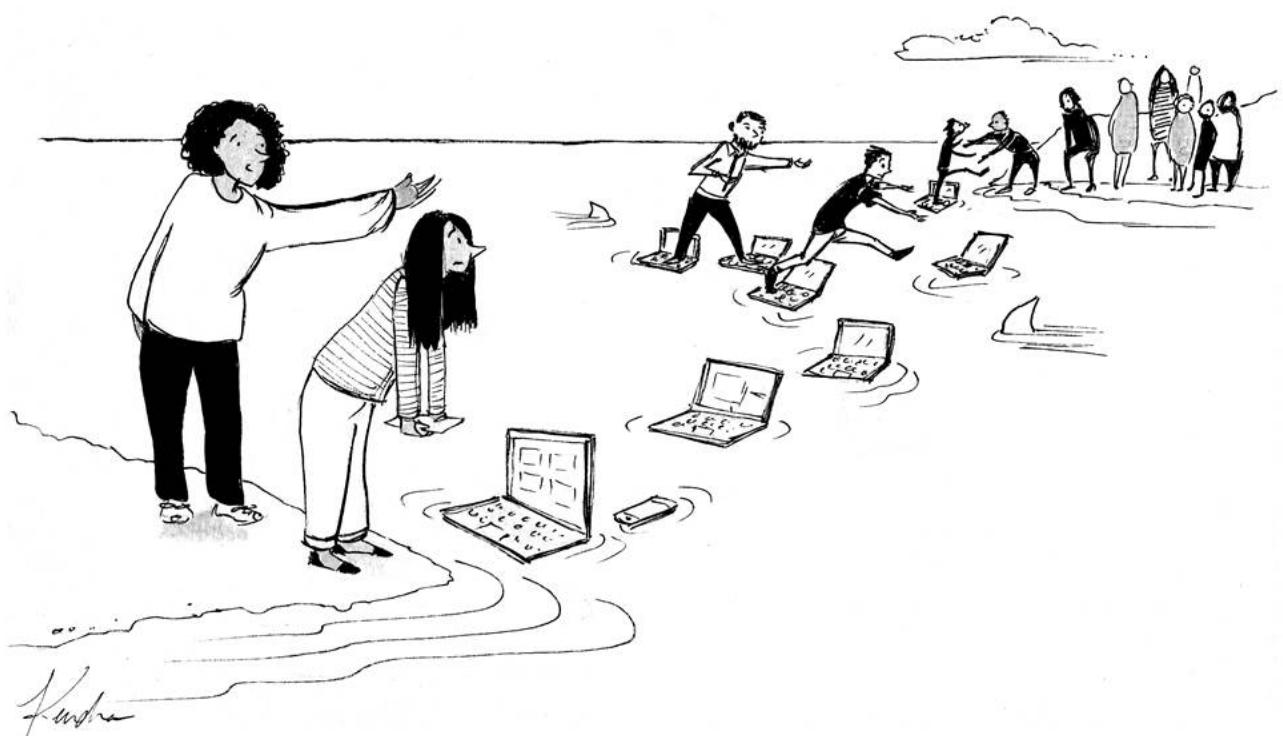
Strategy 2030, which was adopted last year in December at the IFRC General Assembly identified 7 transformations that National Societies insisted would be needed in the coming decade if we were to be able to effectively support the emerging and traditional vulnerabilities being experienced by communities.

Over the last months during the intensity of this outbreak the IFRC has been convening National Societies to come together to share experiences, insights and innovations, we have also collected hundreds of stories from staff and volunteers. Here are a few things we learnt along the way about how the Coronavirus is transforming us and what opportunities lie ahead to further this change.

Digital Transformation

Perhaps the most obvious area, National Societies have long had their eye on the need for a digital transformation throughout the organisation. COVID forced a pace of change that in many countries saw us make the kind of gains in a few months that may normally have taken years to implement.

Suddenly all meetings were held virtually. Many in the network previously perplexed about why the humanitarian and social sector continued to insist that the bulk of its meetings be held in person, (with both climate and financial consequences), watched with glee as staff and volunteers alike scrambled to test to new digital tools and design approaches to be able to hold virtual meetings. Suddenly new things were possible. In the early days of the outbreak thousands of volunteers and staff from more than 100 National Societies joined think tanks hosted by the Solferino Academy where they could listen to the experiences of others and collaborate with others from around the world in multiple languages at virtually zero cost. Learning in real time,



Believe it or not, this is now our best path forward.

Kendra Allenby/Cartooncollections.com

building innovation and joint initiatives. Virtual design enabled a pace and scale for a more diverse audience not typically possible otherwise.

Young people from Norway, Kenya and Colombia started connecting to share ideas and learn languages from each other. Others aspired to design virtual meetings that went beyond replicating a face to face meeting and instead leveraged the unique benefits of online approaches, experimenting with a range of digital tools in the process.

Volunteer recruitment and induction processes which for most National Societies have stubbornly persisted as face to face processes rapidly went virtual aided by you tube videos, webinar briefings and online registrations.

Services likewise went virtual, most notably psycho-social support activities, which wholesale went toward virtual calls. Even as the volume of need for these kinds of services instantaneously skyrocketed, skilled volunteers were able to reach out to thousands who needed a simple human connection during isolation or a friendly ear, or more sophisticated PSS support for more vulnerable groups. The Los Angeles Branch of American Red Cross had volunteers calling other volunteers to check they were ok. Italian Red Cross used a mobile and whatsapp mass messaging service to reach thousands of people with reliable health messages and to provide a channel to alleviate their swamped call centres. New partnerships were formed or expanded to enhance digital skills, competencies and tools. All over the world National Societies leveraged a range of technologies to shift their existing services virtually and to also create new virtual services to serve emergent needs.

This was not without challenges, people in low bandwidth environments continually dropped out or struggled to hear, the highly marginalised couldn't be reached digitally at all and alternative approaches had to be made. The vulnerability of digital isolation was brought to the fore as a complexity that we needed to address. But as one volunteer put it;

"What to do with those who cannot take the step into the digital world, how to close the digital divide, but also recognizing that it wasn't that everybody was included in the old ways of working either"

Some of this may return to 'normal' once it is able to, but it is likely the momentum gained in digital approaches will change the organisation forever. We are in the middle of a massive work from home experiment, where most of the some 430,000 staff who work for the Red Cross and Red Crescent around the world and their 14 million volunteers have been remote working, and it appears largely to be a successful experiment. It remains to be seen if the success of this experiment will survive the push to return to the traditional management once situations begin to return to 'normal'!

Perhaps most importantly for the elusive goal of digital transformation is that leaders the world over have seen how effective an investment in digital can be and can play their part in driving the policies, culture

and allocation of resources needed to drive true transformation. As one volunteer said "In the climate space, can we go back to flying around and having so many in person conferences now that we have seen how we can work this way"

Trust

The convergence of a critical need for reliable health messaging combined with public decline in trust in institutions has created a complexity and crisis of its own when it comes to ensuring public health safety. In a so-called post-truth era, the need to be able to convince people to adopt safe public practices and distancing has underscored again the need for trust in public institutions such as National Societies. Trust, identified as one of the 7 priorities of Strategy 2030 was again thrust to the fore as an essential condition for any National Society to be effective.



“ We cross-check every new question we receive from people in awareness sessions with the World Health Organization to ensure we have the correct and approved answer for our Frequently Asked Question documents and other resources.

Salam Salloum
LEBANESE RED CROSS

#OurCovidStory

In some countries there was a certain amount of solidarity that emerged as perhaps it can only do during a crisis that affects all;

"... I think that for the first time I saw a whole town looking in the same direction and that moved me."

Volunteer Spanish Red Cross

Many National Societies went to great lengths to ensure this trust was deserved.

But trust is not earned overnight and this crisis has again underscored the importance of the work done during 'peacetime' to maintain and build trust in our institutions, this has implications for everything we do, from the integrity with which we handle money, to the values, behaviours and culture that permeate our organisation, through to transparent and inclusive decision making in our management and governance and, our capacity to engage with and communicate with communities, including sophisticated mastery of social media. The crisis has showed us once again that trust must be prioritised in our strategies and everything we do.

Localisation and the power of a distributed network

While the Red Cross and Red Crescent is possibly the best example of a globally connected but almost entirely localised network, not all National Societies are equal and this crisis has again reinforced the centrality of strong local actors. Support to National Societies who work in resource low environments has shifted almost entirely to transfer of funds and technical guidance from afar.

When cyclone Harold hit the pacific during the COVID outbreak, Vanuatu a country with no confirmed cases of COVID decreed that they wouldn't allow foreign aid organisations to fly in staff, the local network was compelled to respond to the devastation without the (likely double-edged) surge of international aid workers.

This has been experienced elsewhere, the COVID response has largely been a domestic one, with some exceptions. People largely cannot fly nor cross borders to physically help their sister National Societies. Perhaps never before has the importance of a fully independent and fully capacitated local National Society and set of local branches been so critical.

This of course reaffirms the importance of investment in National Society and Branch development, a priority that has long been recognised by the Red Cross and Red Crescent but has perhaps not

been met with genuine resource and methodological integrity that it deserves. This crisis presents an opportunity for the organisation to accelerate this priority, to come together to design more effective and better resourced approaches that are measured solely on their ability to strengthen a National Society, rather than the often eclipsing operational or donor imperatives.

But while strong local actors are key, in perhaps equal measure is the ability of the network to function effectively as a distributed source of support, expertise and resources.

During COVID one could witness a large-scale collaboration across the network, some of it through the IFRC but much of it between NSs who connected with each other at all levels to share guidance, resources and insights with each other. Leaders connected with each other, volunteers, branches and youth groups reached out to others across the world and technical staff came together to share insights. This is the power of a distributed network, able to rapidly connect, communicate and learn from each other without an over reliance on a central hub.

The IFRC Secretariat must play a role though, but one that seeks to convene quickly and in innovative ways, that is focussed on connecting expertise rather than possessing the expertise. Investment needs to be made into systems, tools and approaches that will help this continue; that will help people from all NSs to connect with each other rapidly and in a flat and open structure. Through this we can more effectively maximise the collective intelligence of the entirety of the network.

Volunteering

During the Strategy 2030 process National Societies identified that volunteering was rapidly changing throughout society and that the RCRC volunteer definitions, conceptions and mechanisms would likewise have to rapidly change to accommodate these shifts.

Much progress has been made during COVID response. Joining as a volunteer became much easier in many NSs, people could move to a 'first level' volunteer very quickly, registering and doing their training courses online and then very quickly moving into service delivery, very often online also. This is in line with an observed desire from potential volunteers in non-covid times as well, the ability to easily join and move to action quickly, rather than go through long, convoluted and bureaucratic processes.

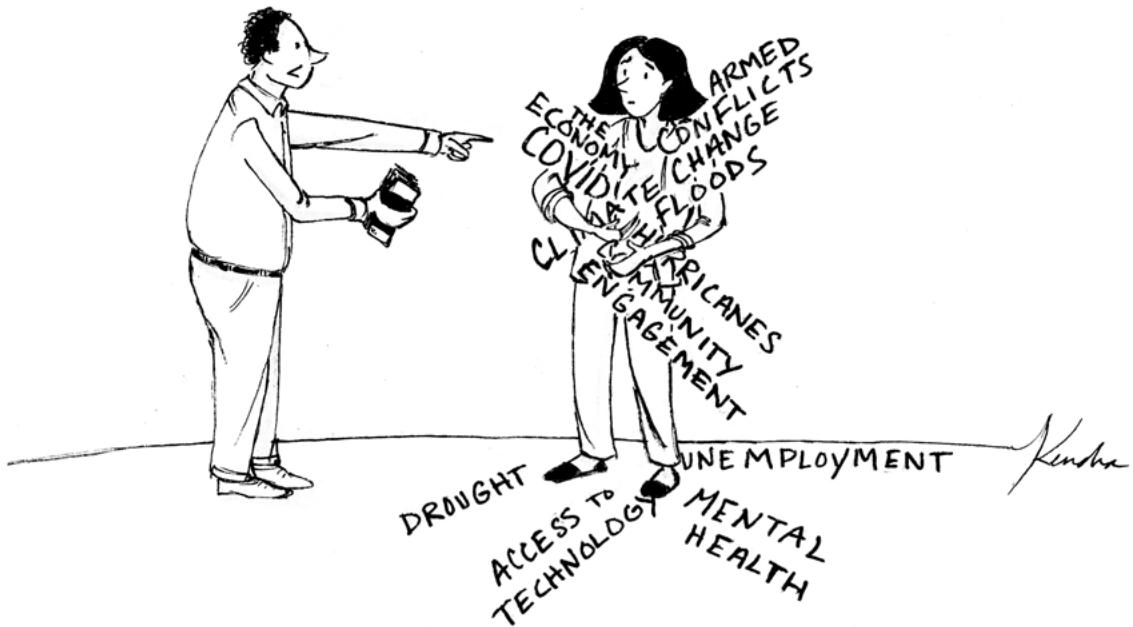
This meant NSs who could effectively make these changes were able to capitalise on the huge momentum of support being offered to help with the COVID response. Spanish and Italian RC's for instance increased their volunteers by 25,000 and 40,000, the Chinese Red Cross too saw a significant surge. While these new systems won't replace the traditional ones they should stay as a useful complement that allows NSs to engage with a broader range of volunteers and the community and to extend their impact.

In some instances we also saw volunteers taking active role in developing new services to meet new needs, and taking on new roles for many NSs including supporting communications strategies, data information management, technology support including sophisticated web development and other digital tools, online counselling and other initiatives.

New partnerships also rapidly formed including with the private sector that brought more potent joint initiatives and alliances to meet new needs. Volunteering strategies in the RCRC need to rapidly diversify as do the partners we join forces with and COVID-19 has provided an opportunity to get a glimpse into what that may look like.

Finance

COVID has shone a light on how ill-suited the current financial system is for responding to and preparing for these crises. While the RCRC fared reasonably well in securing traditional financing, in part due to strong auxiliary roles, possessing a mandate and local infrastructure, and in part because this unprecedented crisis triggered a more active engagement from the private sector.



No no, this money is only for that one problem, right there.

Kendra Allenby/Cartooncollections.com

Concerns remain; Many Donors shifted priorities to COVID, often funding for COVID19 was repurposed from other priorities as opposed to being new funding being made available; Single focus funding streams continue to ignore the reality of a world where challenges are complex, interrelated and incapable of being addressed as a vertical, siloed challenge and; funding has often been reactionary and humanitarian focused, which while necessary, doesn't involve the foresight needed for ensuring long term development funding to address future risks and build resilience.

Many INGOs, charities and social organisations have been forced to close or reduce scale; OXFAM International is reducing staffing by one third, while this is due to circumstances beyond the pandemic, it presents a cautionary tale of what may lie ahead. We can also expect a decline in ODA as traditional donor governments face pressures from taxpayers to repurpose financing towards domestic needs and reduce engagement in international and multilateral financing.

COVID19 is not simply a humanitarian or health crisis, it is also a socio economic and financial crisis that demands a rethink of SDGs financing and provides the opportunity for a broader and more reformed engagement with multiple stakeholders, traditional and unusual partners. The opportunity is to leverage the excellent progress made in partnerships (particularly with governments and the private sector) during the COVID response, as well as the many new financing models emerging to explore new frontiers and approaches that can mobilise alternate forms of capital.

Conclusion

Strategy 2030 has called for transformative change to the organisation. This is a complex endeavour that will require dramatic shifts to leadership approaches, cultures, organisational systems, risk appetite and innovation capacity. Many of these transformations will take years to materialise. COVID 19 however has presented numerous opportunities to accelerate our path of transition if we can capitalise on the momentum gained across multiple domains, some of which are listed above. Crisis presents an opportunity for change unlike no other, Leadership will be able to drive a new future for the organisation rather than just returning to business as usual once the dust settles.

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