Delivering principled local humanitarian action in Ethiopia

The case of the Ethiopian Red Cross Society

A joint collaboration between:

ETHIOPIAN RED CROSS SOCIETY

British RedCross

DANISH RED CROSS

Acknowledgments

This report is the result of a collaboration between the Ethiopian Red Cross Society (ERCS), the British Red Cross (BRC) and the Danish Red Cross (DRC).

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Executive summary

The Ethiopia Red Cross Society's (ERCS) decades-long presence in communities across the country has cemented its role as a strong advocate for the Fundamental Principles of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement.

The Society has demonstrated the added value of being a local humanitarian actor through both its practice and approaches. Examples from ERCS's operations – from helping people in conflict zones with ambulance and first aid services, to consistently being at the frontline of disaster preparedness and response initiatives alongside communities – show the value of the Fundamental Principles when applied in ways that are relevant to local contexts, methods and values. For example, ERCS leverages traditional local methods to enhance communication and preparedness for climate shocks, transforming the Fundamental Principle of Impartiality from a theoretical ideal into a practical and accepted approach that resonates with, and is enabled by, local values of sharing and solidarity with people most in need in communities. Transparency, community engagement, and strict adherence to impartiality underscore ERCS's commitment to principled service design and implementation, building trust with communities and authorities through participatory programming.

ERCS's volunteer network and decentralised structure, with semi-autonomous branches operating at the grassroots level, play a critical role in ERCS's ability to respond to the changing humanitarian landscape flexibly and to effectively fill gaps in government services in critical areas. The adoption of the most recent version of the ERCS Charter in 2018 has bolstered the legal framework supporting ERCS's auxiliary status, resulting in improved coordination and mutual support with public authorities. This has also led to positive developments at the operational level. The provision of increased subsidies for ambulances, facilities and land, as well as a greater recognition of ERCS's unique function, has significantly enhanced its ability to carry out humanitarian operations and expand its reach.

In its auxiliary role, ERCS is mandated to actively engage in disaster preparedness,

management and risk reduction activities aligned with different Government Ministries' plans and priorities. When emergencies hit the country, ERCS works in close coordination with public authorities, reaching affected communities within 24 hours while the government mobilises its more protracted logistical processes. For example, ERCS has engaged in essential shelter construction in conflict-affected areas of Oromia (East Wellega, Kelem Wellega, Buno Bedele and Illuabba Bora), and in the rehabilitation of health facilities and provision of medical equipment in Amhara, Tigray, Oromia and Benishangul-Gumuz in coordination with public authorities. Post-conflict interventions to rehabilitate water and sanitation facilities in Tigray highlight the value of ERCS's longstanding partnership with the Ministry of Water and Energy. Thanks to its auxiliary role, ERCS has been able to utilise government-owned Ethiopian Airlines to deliver vital humanitarian supplies to the Amhara region. At the same time, in situations where government ambulances have been unable to reach remote locations in Oromia, ERCS has stepped in, showing the practical value of complementary action between National Societies and their public authorities in times of conflict.

The Society's success in gaining and retaining access in areas inaccessible to others can largely be attributed to its ability to demonstrate its principled work with all communities across Ethiopia, regardless of their background. This has attracted sector partners and donors, facilitating successful coordination and complementarity of humanitarian responses, both in times of conflict and during health emergencies. ERCS participates in several cluster and inter-cluster coordination platforms, including the disaster risk management (DRM) inter-cluster coordination forum, and clusters on WASH (water, sanitation and hygiene), shelter and NFIs (non-food items), and food, as well as a cash working group.

ERCS-USAID Multi Sectoral Emergency Assistance to IDPs and Host Communities in Benshangul-Gumuz and SNNP Regions.

However, despite the overall trust and acceptance among both communities and authorities across the country, ERCS has faced operational challenges which underscore the inherent difficulties faced by National Societies operating in contexts of highly polarised internal conflict. Factors such as the frequent turnover within military ranks in times of conflict and shifts in governances have led to a reduced understanding of the Society's mandate, particularly among low- and middle-ranking officials and especially regarding its principle of neutrality. During the Tigray conflict, shifts in territorial control from the Tigrayan People's Liberation Front (TPLF) to Ethiopian Federal forces have resulted in sudden restrictions on access for the regional and zonal branches, requiring ERCS to swiftly rebuild trust by demonstrating the impartiality and neutrality of its mandate. This reduced understanding of

ERCS's auxiliary role in times of conflict, particularly at the very local level, has sometimes led to demands not compatible with the Fundamental Principles. These have included requests to use ambulances for non-medical purposes, for instance to transport soldiers and weapons, which ERCS staff and volunteers have had to negotiate and ultimately refuse, often at the risk of their own safety. Variation in resource availability and strength of local government structures from one administrative zone to another also seems to have an impact on the level of acceptance of ERCS branches by the authorities. For example, in north-western Tigray, ERCS branches tend to be better resourced. The better economic environment and stronger private sector mean governmental structures are stronger here too. This contrasts with southern Tigray, where the branches may not be as robust and local government bodies

often lack the financial flexibility to support branch activity, such as ambulance services. This can lead to intense negotiation and create tensions between local and regional authorities and ERCS branches.

The combination of these challenges becomes even more pronounced when conflicts are based on ethnic divisions, as perceptions of regional affiliation can determine whether staff and volunteers of a specific ERCS branch can access a certain area with the necessary protection guarantees in place. This has placed significant pressures on ERCS branches working across different regions, showing that access is ultimately about protection. While high-level authorities may grant permission for ERCS to operate, such assurances do not guarantee safety for humanitarian workers on the ground, unless negotiated and obtained at that level. Furthermore, engaging with different groups of an internal conflict to negotiate safe access can be challenging and potentially raise suspicions among the public authorities to whom National Societies are auxiliary to. So, access negotiation involves ERCS carefully and skilfully managing political nuances through their knowledge and understanding of the local context and culture, while leveraging the trust of local networks established through decades of permanent presence in communities. This has been critical to navigate and address misunderstandings and misinformation that could jeopardise the safety of staff and volunteers and affect relationships with governing bodies and the trust and acceptance of communities.

These challenges are seen by ERCS staff as ultimately resulting from lack of uniform and solid understanding of the ERCS mandate and role, as well as limitations in communication among authorities' own chain of command, particularly in times of conflict. ERCS addresses these challenges through a number of strategies. The existence of strong legal frameworks, and efforts of ERCS leadership and governing board members in engaging with the national government, have been essential in clarifying the scope of the Society's auxiliary role. However,

such interventions do not automatically assure operational advantages or consistent safeguarding of ERCS personnel and volunteers on the ground. Ongoing negotiations are needed at both operational and strategic levels. Continued communication activities are also a cornerstone of ERCS operations, disseminating information to both the government and the public on ERCS mandate, which is vital for maintaining acceptance.

Close complementarity with Movement partners has proved critical too, to address access challenges during the Tigray conflict, and to ensure the sustainability of services of ERCS regional branches, particularly at times when communications blackouts hindered contacts and transfer of resources with headquarters. The combination of ICRC's ability to cross regional boarders and ERCS's established presence within communities, showed tangible benefits. However, in practice, there are ongoing challenges in maintaining complementarity throughout operations, including perceived inadequate information sharing and inconsistent involvement of ERCS by Movement partners. These were seen as areas for improvement to adequately support the sustainability and leadership of ERCS' principled humanitarian services in the country. Perceptions of ERCS, among communities and authorities, can inadvertently be shaped by the actions of other Movement partners in the country, highlighting the need for sensitivity in operations and engagements. At the same time, ERCS staff know that the Society's auxiliary role can be strengthened and better leveraged though targeted humanitarian diplomacy at all levels. ERCS's management and governing board can capitalise on their privileged access to government authorities and the legal frameworks at their disposal to share evidence-based lessons demonstrating the value of local, principled humanitarian action. This emerged as key to continue to effectively advocate for communities in need and preserve humanitarian work in Ethiopia.

2.1. The humanitarian situation in Ethiopia amid conflict and climate-related disasters

Ethiopia faces a range of humanitarian crises, both man-made and climate-induced. Over 31 million people are estimated to be in need as a result of the combined impacts of conflicts, climate shocks such as droughts and floods, and disease outbreaks.[1] The food insecurity and malnutrition levels among the most vulnerable populations continue to worsen.[2] Around 4.4 million displaced people are currently seeking refuge in temporary shelters and host communities across 11 regions nationwide[3], mainly as a result of drought and conflict in northern Ethiopia, and ongoing hostilities and violence in other regions, including Amhara, Oromia, Afar and Benishangul-Gumuz.

The conflict in Tigray, erupting in late 2020, marked a significant escalation in Ethiopia's long-standing ethnic and political tensions. Friction between the Tigray's People Liberation Front (TPLF) and the Ethiopian Federal government quickly spiralled into a full-scale war causing immense suffering and casualties. Despite the declaration of a ceasefire and a peace agreement signed in November 2022 in Pretoria, the impacts of wartime violence continue to cause acute and widespread humanitarian needs in Northern Ethiopia.[4]

Beyond Tigray, the Amhara region has witnessed increasing unrest, fuelled by clashes between the Federal Government and regional Fano militias[5], further challenging Ethiopia's social cohesion. Meanwhile, the Oromia region continues to face periodic violence driven by political instability.[6] The quest for regional autonomy of the Sidama zone in 2018–2019,[7] which led to its separation from the Southern Nations Nationality's People (SNNP) region, eventually leading to the establishment of the Sidama Regional State in July 2020, was

also fraught with conflict. This underscores the complexities of maintaining national unity and respecting ethnic identities and political autonomy within Ethiopia's Federal system. On the international front, in 2018, Ethiopia and Eritrea recommitted to respect the agreed borders established by the Algiers Agreement signed in 2000 with the support of the international community.[8] However, Eritrea's involvement in the wake of the Tigray conflict further highlights the complex dynamics of Ethiopia's regional relations and the ongoing challenges with border disputes and mutual trust.

Compounding these conflicts is Ethiopia's vulnerability to climate shocks, notably droughts and floods, with devastating impacts on the nation's agricultural economy, leading to food insecurity, displacing communities and exacerbating poverty.[9] This creates complications for disaster risk management (DRM), highlighting the importance of robust preparedness and mitigation strategies. In response, the Ethiopian government has embarked on a strategic enhancement of its DRM capabilities, focusing on building resilience, preparedness, and effective mitigation to address the immediate and long-term impacts of both conflicts and climate-related disasters.[10] These efforts are in alignment with global DRM frameworks, such as the Hyogo and Sendai Frameworks, and aim to foster a sustainable and resilient Ethiopia capable of withstanding future crises.

2.2. The Ethiopian Red Cross Society

The Ethiopian Red Cross Society (ERCS) was founded by government edict on 8 July 1935, amid the tumultuous period leading up to the second Italian invasion of Ethiopia. This period was marked by significant humanitarian needs, including care

1 UNICEF Ethiopia Humanitarian Situation Report No. 12: January - December 2023 - Ethiopia | ReliefWeb
2 Ethiopia | OCHA (unocha.org)
3 More than 4.38 Million People Displaced in Ethiopia, More than Half Due to Conflict: New IOM Report – Ethiopia | ReliefWeb
4 Statement attributable to the Spokesperson for the Secretary-General - on the Agreement for Lasting Peace through a Permanent Cessation of Hostilities between the Government of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia and the Tigray People's Liberation | United Nations Secretary-General
5 www.crisisgroup.org/africa/horn-africa/ethiopia/b194-ethiopias-ominous-new-war-amhara
6 www.thenewhumanitarian.org/news-feature/2023/01/12/Ethiopia-Oromia-conflict-OLA
7 www.usip.org/publications/2019/08/southern-ethiopia-trouble-brews-sidama
8 www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/ethiopiaeritrea-statement-spokesperson-anniversary-algiers-agreement_en?s=97
9 IFRC, 'Ethiopia 2024-2026 IFRC Network Country Plan 19 February 2024', 19 February 2024
10 Ibid

for wounded soldiers and civilian victims, which the ERCS promptly addressed. Officially recognised as the 48th member of the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies on 25 September 1935, ERCS became an integral part of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement (the Movement).[11]

ERCS's mandate spans a wide range of activities, including disaster response, health services, WASH activities and promotion of sanitary conditions, and support in social crises, underscored by the Fundamental Principles.[12] ERCS has made significant contributions to humanitarian responses throughout its history, particularly in addressing the needs arising from climate-related disasters, conflict, and public health emergencies. It mobilises a vast network of volunteers and resources to provide immediate relief, such as food, water, shelter, and medical services, to affected populations. Beyond emergency response, ERCS also focuses on recovery and rehabilitation, helping communities to restore their livelihoods and rebuild infrastructure.[13]

Over the years, the ERCS structure and mandate has evolved to meet the changing needs of the communities it serves. The various parliamentary revisions of the ERCS's National Charter, with the latest endorsement in January 2018, reflect the Society's enduring relevance and its adaptive approach to governance and operations in alignment with its Fundamental Principles.

ERCS has grown into a strong organisation with a structure that spans across the nation, including 14 regional branches, 59 zonal branches, and 182 district (woreda) branches, further supported by more than 5,800 kebele (smallest administrative unit in Ethiopia) Red Cross Committees at the grassroots level. With 6.7 million members and more than 258,000 volunteers actively engaged in various initiatives, ERCS exemplifies the power of community and volunteerism in driving humanitarian action.[14]

ERCS operates within a structured yet flexible framework essential for its humanitarian efforts. Its decentralised operational structure caters to the varied needs of communities across Ethiopia. Led by National headquarters, regional branches facilitate coordination and resource distribution, while zonal branches ensure local adaptation of strategies. Woreda branches focus on community-based interventions, and kebele committees drive volunteerism and direct community support. Supported by a vast network of members and volunteers, ERCS maximises community participation and voluntary service to ensure extensive reach, even in remote areas.

The Patron of ERCS is the President of Ethiopia, currently Her Excellency Mrs Sahlework Zewdie. ERCS's leadership is composed of a management structure and a governing board structure. The latter includes the National Governing Board, regional boards, zonal and woreda level boards with upwards accountability. The National General Assembly is the highest decision-making body of the Society. It holds the authority and responsibility to elect members of the National Governing Board. The National Governing Board is composed of nine members,

Food items distribution at Adadle Somali Region.

of which up to three can be high-level government officials or political authorities. Currently, these include the State Minister of Innovation, State Minister of Health and a member of the House of People's Representatives. Regional and zonal branches have seven board members, of which also up to three can be individuals with high-level government or other political positions.

2.3. Fundamental Principles and the auxiliary role

The seven Fundamental Principles of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement –humanity, impartiality, neutrality, independence, voluntary service, unity and universality – provide an ethical, operational and institutional framework for the work of the Movement in support of people in need during armed conflict, natural disasters and other emergencies. Their value has been repeatedly reaffirmed as key enablers of locally led action, promoting trust, influence, access and clarity in decision-making.[15]

While the Fundamental Principles gave rise to the fewer, but more broadly interpreted set of humanitarian principles adopted throughout the humanitarian sector, they uniquely incorporate the auxiliary role within the principle of independence. This means that National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies have a special, officially recognised status and role as an auxiliary to the public authorities in the humanitarian field, which applies in times of peace and war. In practice, this provides an automatic relationship between a National Society and its government. Unlike other humanitarian organisations, National Societies have a standing invitation from their governments to provide humanitarian services.

The auxiliary status is a permanent, legal feature, embedded in domestic legislation. It is conferred when a National Society is recognised by its government as a voluntary

aid society, supporting the public authorities in their humanitarian tasks according to the needs of the people, on the basis of the 1949 Geneva Conventions and national legislation. The auxiliary role is the practical manifestation of the auxiliary status. It is flexible and refers to mutually agreed responsibilities and activities defined by the government and the National Society, bringing mutual benefits and responsibilities to both. The uniqueness of the auxiliary status means that National Societies are private organisations with recognised public functions, and they are neither part of government, nor non-governmental organisations (NGOs). Effectively, National Societies are 'autonomous' but not fully independent like NGOs – a tension that is recognised in the principle of independence, and that is explored in this research. Governments have recognised that the autonomy of National Societies and their neutrality and impartiality are the most effective means to gain the confidence of all parties.[16] The auxiliary role of National Societies has faced increasing pressure in fragile and conflict-affected contexts in recent years. There are varying degrees of understanding of its parameters, and its dynamism, flexibility and nuance are often underappreciated. It is crucial to promote a better understanding of the auxiliary role by documenting a spectrum of auxiliary practices that highlight the opportunities and privileges the auxiliary role brings to a National Society, but also the challenges and dilemmas it may be required to navigate. This is one of the aims of this research. The availability of such evidence can foster trust between the Movement, governments and donors, facilitating stronger partnerships and supporting strong locally led action in contexts affected by crisis and conflict.

2.4. The red cross emblem

The red cross emblem – a red cross with arms of equal length on a white background – is a visible sign of neutrality and protection under the Geneva Conventions of 1949. It is used

11 Rainer Baudendistel, Between Bombs and Good Intentions: The Red Cross and the Italo-Ethiopian War, 1935-1936, Human Rights in Context, Volume 1 (New York (N.Y.): Berghahn Books, 2006)
12 Proclamation to Reestablish the Ethiopian Red Cross Society Charter
13 Ibid
14 Ibid

15 This emerged in the findings of research commissioned by the British Red Cross in 2020: www.redcross.org.uk/-/media/documents/humanitarian/reportis-aid-really-changing-what-the-covid19-response-tells-us-about--localisation-decolonisation-a.pdf
16 www.ifrc.org/document/statutes-international-red-cross-and-red-crescent-movement

to safeguard wounded and sick people and those who care for them, in a totally neutral and impartial way. It also indicates a person or object's connection to the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement. Therefore, the emblem is also perceived as representing the Movement's Fundamental Principles.

The red cross emblem does not carry an intentional religious meaning, however, due to historical reasons (and the fact that there is more than one emblem) this is a common misconception. During the nineteenth century, the symbol evoked associations with the medieval crusaders for soldiers from the Ottoman Empire (modern-day Türkiye). Consequently, starting from 1876, certain countries adopted a red crescent emblem to serve a similar purpose as the red cross emblem in other countries. The red cross and red crescent emblems have exactly the same meaning and status under international law. The Movement continuously educates and informs the public and other stakeholders on the correct meaning and purpose of the emblems.[17]

Unauthorised use of the emblem is forbidden in International and National Law, including in Ethiopia. Many National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, such as ERCS, monitor unauthorised use or misuse (deliberate or accidental) of the emblem in support of their public authorities.

Coalition for Humanity distributes Food and NF Items to IDPs in Debere Berehan.

Purpose of the study and methodology

3.1. Study purpose

This case study is a joint initiative of the Ethiopian Red Cross Society (ERCS), the British Red Cross (BRC) and the Danish Red Cross (DRC). It is a collection of practical examples and insights on how ERCS leverages its legal mandate and operationalises the Fundamental Principles to deliver effective assistance as a humanitarian auxiliary to its public authorities.

The purpose of the case study is to understand whether and how the practical implementation of the Fundamental Principles of neutrality, impartiality, and independence, as well as use of its auxiliary role, have helped ERCS gain trust and acceptance in communities, engage with authorities at different levels, participate in coordination mechanisms with the sector and ensure humanitarian access. The aim is to deepen understanding of the nuances of auxiliary practices in conflict settings, by also exploring challenges and dilemmas in the implementation of the Fundamental Principles and auxiliary role and looking at lessons on how ERCS has been able to navigate those challenges. It is hoped that this case study can contribute to internal reflection around how the Movement might collectively support ERCS's mandate and strategic direction within a fast-changing humanitarian environment, while highlighting the unique value of ERCS as principled, local actor in Ethiopia.

This case study forms part of the British Red Cross' project, *'Delivering principled, local humanitarian action in fragile and conflict settings'*, which aims to promote understanding among governments, donors and Movement actors of the ways in which National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies operate in highly complex contexts to deliver principled and effective humanitarian action. In particular, the project examines how National Societies navigate operational and political sensitivities while exercising their role as a humanitarian auxiliary to their public authorities.[18]

ERCS USAID food security program to IDPs and Host Communities in Konso Zones.

17 www.redcross.org.uk/about-us/what-we-do/protecting-people-in-armed-conflict/the-emblem#:~:text=In%20times%20of%20war%2C%20the,must%20 have%20trust%20in%20them

18 The purpose of the case study is to improve the understanding and practices of ERCS 'special features' and is not intended to be critical of any individual or organisation. Rather, it is intended as a helpful and constructive analysis, to improve understanding of the Fundamental Principles and the auxiliary role, for the benefit of the population and the public authorities.

3.2. Methodology and limitations

This case study used a new approach to co-design and co-develop the methodology and data collection jointly by the Ethiopia Red Cross Society and British Red Cross, with support from the Danish Red Cross. This enabled a strong and productive peer-to-peer relationship to ensure ownership of the outcomes and findings between ERCS, BRC and DRC. A research team composed of three ERCS staff members, two BRC staff members and one DRC staff member was set up to lead on the project, develop a Terms of Reference (ToR) tailored to the Ethiopian context and carry out the data collection.

The key steps in the co-design process included:

- **A two-day methodology workshop** in May 2022 in Addis Ababa to tailor the global Terms of Reference (ToR) to the Ethiopian context;

- **A three-week data collection period** in October 2023 with the research team. This entailed 34 interviews with ERCS staff, volunteers, leadership and board members in five regions, selected by ERCS staff. These included five interviews with volunteers, conducted in the form of focus group discussions. Branches covered in the study included the following: ERCS Headquarters and Addis Ababa Regional Branch, Afar Regional Branch in Semera, Tigray Regional and Zonal Branches in Mekelle and Shire, Amhara Regional Branch, Sidama Regional Branch in Hawassa, Oromia Regional Branch and Sheger City Branch in Oromia. 33 out of 34 interviews were conducted in person by travelling to the regions, and one was conducted online. Due to ongoing conflict in Amhara and the difficulty in travelling to the region, interviews concerning this regional branch were conducted in Addis Ababa. All interviews were recorded after obtaining full consent from key informants. Inputs were anonymised to preserve the privacy of participants, before the coding, analysis and write-up of the findings;

- **A validation workshop** with ERCS regional and headquarters leadership and governing board members and Red Cross Red Crescent Movement partners to present the findings and develop recommendations.

In line with the purpose and scope of the overall research, this study is intended to be a qualitative piece focused primarily on highlighting and examining the experiences, examples and perspectives of ERCS staff, volunteers, leadership and board members. It is not intended to provide a generalised picture of humanitarian work in Ethiopia. Perspectives from communities, authorities, sector partners and other Movement components are purposefully not prioritised; while external perspectives of National Societies are more readily available, the study focuses on the often hidden voices and experiences of the Society itself.

The data collection was conducted in October 2023. As a result, this research captures perceptions and experiences from that time, while acknowledging that some of the issues might have evolved since. Interviews were conducted in English, as well as Amharic and Tigrinya and translated to and from English on the spot with the help of ERCS staff members present in the research team. Language limitations from some research team members may have impeded their ability to capture some of the nuances expressed by key informants in Amharic and Tigrinya. The majority of key informants were male. This limits the representation of perspectives included in the case study, which as a result, does not capture any potential gender specific issues or dynamics.

ERCS-IFRC Cholera Outbreak DREF Operation in Bale Zone Ormia Region.

Principled local humanitarian action

The Ethiopia Red Cross Society (ERCS) consistently puts the Fundamental Principles of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement (the Fundamental Principles) into action in ways that are relevant to local contexts and meaningful to the communities they assist. Through this approach, ERCS has fostered the trust and acceptance of communities over decades of principled humanitarian service, often at the frontline of crises, in a part of the continent besieged by conflict, drought and other crises.

4.1. Best practice of principled local humanitarian action

4.1.1. Ambulance services

ERCS is known across the country primarily for its ambulance services – a cornerstone of its impartial humanitarian efforts through which it provides reliable emergency assistance, free of charge. Most of the time, ambulances are procured by ERCS with financial support from regional or Federal government, with operational costs being covered by the municipality and regional governments where the ambulances operate. This shows the trust the Society has earned in its role as humanitarian auxiliary to public authorities.

ERCS volunteers and staff provide ambulance services to communities regardless of their ethnic background, political beliefs, or religion, including in conflict settings. The contribution of volunteers is particularly relevant in showcasing ERCS's commitment to neutrality and impartiality. For example, during the conflict in Tigray, volunteers from the Afar Regional Branch assisted wounded individuals from Tigray and took them to the hospital, as explained by ERCS volunteers: *"We are neutral. We are not an actor of the government; we are providing humanitarian support. Just like we are supporting the Afar community, we need to do the same for the Tigrayan civilians as well. We have the responsibility to address the needs of those communities."*

Similar examples were highlighted by branches in the South of the country. The Sidama Regional Branch supported casualties from both Sidama and Wolayita populations during a conflict that occurred in Hawassa in 2018. Sidama Branch ambulances reached areas where the Wolayta were located to support people wounded, showing their acceptance from both sides as a testament to their neutral approach.

4.1.2. Health emergencies and support for internally displaced people

ERCS's principled approach goes beyond ambulance support. ERCS volunteers engage in mass social mobilisation campaigns for epidemics (and pandemics), such as measles and Covid-19 across the country and in collaboration with the Ministry of Health, to facilitate vaccination uptake.

ERCS provides assistance to internally displaced people in conflict areas, supporting with shelter, food and non-food items (NFIs) and Restoring Family Links (RFL) services. In Afar, during the conflict with Tigray forces, the Afar Branch provided essential support for displaced Tigrayan people in the Afar region, a service that received positive recognition from both the regional government and the community. The branch made it clear to all, including regional and local authorities and the broader community, that their aid was based on humanitarian needs, not regional affiliations. They communicated that the displaced individuals were human beings in need of assistance. Their support met little resistance, suggesting a good understanding of the ERCS mandate.

In Tigray, during the conflict, the Shire Zonal Branch prepared shelters for 8,000 people in public schools and universities. At that time, around 1,500 volunteers were mobilised to assist displaced people. At their rehabilitation centre in Shire, ERCS hosted and supported wounded individuals from both sides of the conflict, providing them with food and medical assistance.

4.2. Enablers of principled local humanitarian action

4.2.1. ERCS at the frontline of responses

> *Everybody comes full of hope. When individuals or victims see the red cross emblem, they have hope.* – ERCS staff member[19]

ERCS enjoys deep-rooted trust from the communities that stems from its legacy of sustained presence across the country and emergency support in times of need. ERCS has been on the frontline of varied humanitarian responses over the years. From spearheading the coordination of relief efforts amid the devastating famine in 1984, to rescuing and treating wounded people and providing relief during different national and international armed conflicts, as well as life-saving support during droughts, floods and other emergencies. This has cemented community trust in ERCS's commitment to help people of all ethnic, religious or political backgrounds without taking sides. As a result, ERCS has become a symbol of hope and reliability for many.

ERCS is often among the first responding on the ground when emergencies hit. Its branches responded quickly to the Borena drought in the Oromia region. During the first week of the conflict in Tigray in 2020, the regional and zonal branches were the only organisations supporting the communities in coordination with the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC). In Wellega and Metekel, ERCS was the first and only actor on the ground to support people affected by the conflict. Similarly, during violent tensions in Hawassa in the Sidama region, the local branch provided immediate support to those wounded, distributing food and providing shelter.

After a landslide in the Koshe area of Addis Ababa caused at least 72 casualties in March 2017, staff and volunteers from the Addis Ababa

Food items distribution at Adadle Somali Region.

branch were first on the ground to save lives and protect livelihoods, deploying a team of 20 volunteers and five ambulances to provide pre-hospital care, psychosocial support and support in the search for missing people.[20] Following the tragic crash of Boeing 737 near Bishoftu, in Oromia region, in March 2019, ERCS was able to dispatch 15 ambulances and volunteers to provide vital assistance and support in debris-clearing activities.[21] When a bridge collapsed at Hawassa University in October 2022, killing a student and injuring another 70, in the absence of other emergency services or organisations, ERCS was the first to arrive on the scene to provide the necessary medical treatment and transportation for all those injured in the incident.

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19 Quotes in the case study are either attributed to 'volunteer', 'staff', 'leadership' or 'board member', without regional affiliation, to protect the privacy of key informants. They may be from individuals from any of the regional or zonal branches or headquarters.
20 https://redcrosseth.org/blog/2017/03/15/ethiopian-red-cross-society-supports-koshe-landslide-victims
21 Recognizing Humanitarian Volunteers – Ethiopian Red Cross Society (redcrosseth.org)

4.2.2. Leveraging local methods and local values

ERCS's embedded presence in and strong ties with local communities are major factors in the trust and acceptance it enjoys nationwide. Not only does this acceptance enable the Society to respond quickly when emergencies hit, it also allows it to incorporate local methods of support that facilitate communication in times of crises. An example from the Afar region is the use of Dagu, a local information sharing mechanism that has proved key during floods or other emergencies, where timely information-sharing between communities has led to effective disaster preparedness and response. This method consists in a rapid relay of information – strangers meeting at crossroads share news from their respective areas, ensuring that vital information is disseminated, potentially saving lives. This culturally ingrained practice of information exchange is also used by staff and volunteers of ERCS branches in the region and demonstrates the effectiveness of integrating local communication methods into their operations.

As a community-based organisation, ERCS can implement tailored strategies to reinforce the Fundamental Principles' acceptance across different and diverse communities, by tapping into local values. While the Movement strives to apply the Fundamental Principles globally, their practical implementation and operationalisation by National Societies is dynamic, context-appropriate and can adapt over time, so they can enable effective humanitarian action at the local level. In Ethiopia, local values can reinforce and enable the implementation of the Fundamental Principles. Weaving the Fundamental Principles with existing local values can channel impartiality, neutrality, and humanity from theoretical ideals into concrete, practiced realities that are meaningful to the communities where humanitarian services are delivered. This integration ensures that a principled approach is not only understood but also actively embraced by local communities and the ERCS staff and volunteers who are part of them.

For example, values of 'solidarity' and 'sharing', integral to many Ethiopian communities and particularly strong in rural settings, emerge as conduits for the practical implementation of some of the Fundamental Principles that are more complex to accept when different and often competing needs exist, such as the principle of impartiality. This was particularly evident in the Afar region, a region predominantly of pastoralist communities. One of ERCS staff members reflected on how during food distributions people would approach him to say – "I'm better off, if there is any surplus we can get it, otherwise, give it to them," capturing the principle of impartiality, that is, prioritising aid based on need.

Community mass sensitisation, prevention and response to cholera outbreak in Moyale Oromia and Sumali.

4.2.3. Transparency and community engagement

Transparency and community engagement are central to ERCS's approach to building trust. By adopting a participatory method to programming, ERCS involves the community and local authorities right from the start and organises workshops to reflect each community's inputs into the services that will be provided. One such example, is ERCS's Skybird programme, supported by the Austrian Red Cross and focusing on WASH interventions. The programme idea emanated from zonal branches in consultation with government and community representatives at ground level. A workshop was conducted to encourage feedback and questions from both community and government representatives, which were then incorporated in the programme design. This dialogue and responsiveness foster a trusted and respected presence in the community.

After consulting communities in the conceptual phase of a service or programme, ERCS autonomously identifies and supports beneficiaries by establishing criteria based on need only. Robust and independent beneficiary selection mechanisms are significant enablers of transparency and trust, both from communities and authorities. These criteria are discussed with government and community representatives, ensuring a participatory approach that is informed by local perspectives and allows for community and government consensus. Maintaining independence from authorities is key to this approach – ERCS directly manages the distribution process to avoid potential political biases. It is by upholding its independence and impartiality that ERCS reinforces trust. Even when government officials are present to ensure security during distribution, their role is communicated as providing safety and order, without interference in beneficiaries' selection.

ERCS Volunteers home to home Post Distribution Monitoring in Adigrat-Tigray.

4.3. Barriers to principled local humanitarian action

4.3.1. Conflict dynamics and impacts on humanitarian workers

> *Since the war, things have changed, especially within the military – they don't have knowledge about the Red Cross. They don't know what our mandate is, or what the principles are.* – ERCS staff member

While ERCS staff and volunteers agree that, generally, both the government and communities possess a good understanding of the ERCS mandate and Fundamental Principles, difficulties can arise on a practical level. These are greatly exacerbated in times of conflict, when dynamics within the authorities and the military can shift significantly as a result of political tensions, high turnover and uneven understanding of ERCS mandate.

The conflict in Tigray shed light on some of these challenges, particularly how the acceptance and access of ERCS often depends on the willingness of individual authorities. While efforts to educate senior military personnel about ERCS's values have proved successful, challenges exist with lower-level, new recruits. Military personnel, particularly low-ranking and middle-ranking officials, often unfamiliar with ERCS's role, have posed challenges to the provision of ambulance services, and the difficulty in engaging consistently with authorities due to the urgency of conflict and competing priorities is a challenge.

Frequent turnovers and shifting roles within the military and government authorities mean that continued efforts are required to disseminate and reaffirm ERCS's neutral and independent role as well as their humanitarian mandate. Despite established dissemination programmes across the whole country outlining the Fundamental Principles and special features of ERCS, often done jointly with the ICRC, ERCS has often found itself in a cycle of having to engage with and re-educate new appointees who may otherwise

hinder access, expecting ERCS to act in violation of the Fundamental Principles due to lack of awareness. This issue appears to be particularly significant at the local level, where turnover rates among officials are high, disrupting the continuity of collaboration and requiring repeated awareness sessions for new officials. Members of the ERCS Governing Board, who often are representatives of government, play an important role to address these issues. This is perceived by ERCS staff as a role that can be leveraged further.

While issues are resolved through dissemination and leadership engagement most of the time, misunderstandings of the ERCS mandate and principled approach have also led to instances of ambulances being stopped at checkpoints for long periods of time, even when transporting patients in urgent conditions. In the worst cases ambulances have been attacked or looted. Tragically, this lack of understanding has at times extended to violence and killings of staff and volunteers, despite the clear visibility of the red cross emblem, resulting in the loss of 11 volunteers in the Tigray region alone.

> *There could be some who misunderstand us. Particularly as we go down the echelon, we might be misunderstood as if we were taking sides with one or the other [...] That's how we lost 11 people in the Tigray conflict. That's how we lost a number of our ambulances in the Tigray conflict. So, I honestly cannot say that there is full and complete understanding of how neutral and impartial we are.* – ERCS staff member

The killing of an ERCS ambulance driver in Tigray in January 2024, who was shot at night while in a vehicle marked with the red cross emblem, is the most recent of such tragic events, and the latest example showing how targeting of aid workers is a very current challenge in conflict settings, with local, frontline responders bearing the brunt of these attacks.[22] In previous years, another ambulance driver, from North Gondar, Amhara, was sadly shot dead in Tigray while on duty. The injured patients who were on the

ambulance were killed along with the driver and the ambulance was burned. In 2021, at the peak of the conflict, another ambulance driver providing life-saving humanitarian service was shot as he was transporting a woman in labour in the town of Adwa in Tigray[23] – an ERCS board member recounted the tragic event:

> *You know the story from Adwa. An ambulance driver was taking a woman to deliver with two nurses. Military officials ordered them to get out of the car. The driver told them that he was taking a woman for delivery, she was just at the brink of giving birth, so he had to move quickly. But they shot them – one of the nurses was dead. The ambulance driver was injured, but he took a local scarf, he tightened it around the wound, and he continued to drive and took the woman in labour to the hospital. When he reached the clinic, the woman gave birth safely, but the driver died. At least he saved her.* – ERCS board member

As a result of a limited understanding of ERCS's mandate to impartially support victims from all sides during conflict, volunteers on the frontline may be the ones facing the most challenges. One volunteer recounted an instance of arrest:

> *I was once arrested for two days. There was an ethnic conflict in the region. We rescued some of the injured victims and put them in the ambulance. Sadly, one of them passed away while we were transporting them. The group this person belonged to jailed us for two days. During that time, we explained how the Red Cross works and its mission. After understanding, they apologised and acknowledged their mistake. They let us go but said not to tell anybody.* – ERCS volunteer

ERCS distributes food items to drought affected peoples in Borena Zone.

22 Statement: IFRC condemns killing of Ethiopian Red Cross ambulance driver - Ethiopia | ReliefWeb

23 A groom, a lawyer, an ambulance driver among Ethiopia's dead | AP News

4.3.2. Variation in resource availability and strength of government structures

> *Though our Principles are fixed, the implementation of the principles may not be equal.* – ERCS board member

The challenges faced by ERCS colleagues in implementing the Fundamental Principles are seen to also be impacted by the variation in resource availability from one administrative zone to another and the consequent strength of government structures. For example, this has been the case in Tigray. In northwestern Tigray, ERCS branches tend to be better resourced due to a better economic environment and a stronger private sector, which contribute to stronger governmental structures. This contrasts with southern Tigray, where the branches may not be as robust and local government bodies often lack the budgetary flexibility to support the activities of the National Society, such as ambulance services. This can lead to intense negotiation and create tensions with local and regional authorities, which can put ERCS operations to the test. For example, while authorities have a duty to support ERCS members to carry out their mandates, during the Tigray conflict this support was not consistently provided and posed significant challenges to the branch. Owing to communication blackouts, when they were unable liaise with headquarters for guidance and financial support, the regional and zonal branches had to navigate issues independently, relying heavily on persuading local and regional authorities to provide support.

Practice shows how the application of the Fundamental Principles is a dynamic process requiring ongoing engagement and tailored, contextualised approaches and interaction with authorities. Lessons from ERCS show how this may involve educating new appointees, some of whom may transfer from resource-rich zones and carry with them expectations or practices that are not feasible in more constrained environments. Offering clarity about the broader mission of ERCS in the country as a whole, and the global

presence of the Movement, has helped ERCS smooth interactions and reinforce understanding of neutrality and impartiality.

4.4. Navigating operational challenges: lessons and solutions

4.4.1. Responding to the challenges of ambulance service

ERCS's ambulance service embodies the co-existence of both opportunity and challenge in local, principled humanitarian action. As a result of ERCS's decades-long ambulance service, public sentiment reached a point where any ambulance in Ethiopia, irrespective of ownership, is viewed as a Red Cross ambulance. This shows the trust and reliance placed in the organisation, but it also places a significant amount of pressure on ERCS, as actions committed by other ambulances can potentially reflect on ERCS's reputation. For example, ERCS has received complaints from concerned citizens who have witnessed non-ERCS ambulances, without the ERCS logo, transporting weapons or armed individuals. In such situations, ERCS has had to address the misconceptions and manage public perception to ensure similar incidents do not have an impact on its operations and safety of its staff and volunteers.

In times of conflict, the uneven understanding of ERCS's role and mandate by authorities and military personnel has at times resulted in requests that contradict the Fundamental Principles. This includes, for example, demands for non-medical use of the ambulances, including transportation of weapons and armed soldiers, which ERCS has had to refuse and skilfully negotiate.

These issues have often been exacerbated by cases where ERCS ambulances were operating with both a government plate number and the ERCS logo, which happened in Tigray. Before the conflict, the Federal Ministry of Health procured ambulances which were distributed to the Regional Health Bureau in Tigray. Recognising the value of ERCS's effective and impartial work, the Regional Health Bureau agreed to transfer full ownership of these ambulances to the ERCS

Tigray Regional Branch, including, replacing regional government plates on ambulances with ERCS plates. However, this process was slowed down with the start of hostilities in late 2020 and replacing plates (which could only take place after formally transferring ownership papers) was delayed. As a result, during the war, ambulances were operating with both the regional government plate and the ERCS logo, despite them being fully and effectively managed by the regional branch and the ownership transfer being a formality. This exposed the ERCS ambulances to misunderstandings with authorities.

For example, after the Ethiopian National Defence Force (ENDF) occupied Mekelle, a commander showed up at the regional branch office with their patrol, having seen the ambulances parked outside the office, and asked to take one of the ambulances with the regional government plate numbers. The ERCS branch showed them the ERCS logo and explained how the ownership of the ambulances was in fact transferred to ERCS and that was under the branch's management. The commander asked about the branch readiness to provide support to all parties involved in the conflict, to which the branch Head clarified

that, should they require ambulance services to transport patients to hospitals, the branch would be prepared to assist. It was emphasised that ambulance use would be strictly for medical purposes and that transporting weapons would be not allowed.

Government subsidies towards ambulance purchases may also create misconceptions among some authorities around their ownership, as explained by a member of ERCS staff: *"Because the authorities subsidise the ambulance service, they think they are a little bit theirs."* This is more common in local areas where, at times of conflict, modes of transport were scarce, prompting authorities to claim usage rights over the ambulances because they contributed to their acquisition or maintenance. Navigating this tension and maintaining the humanitarian purpose of these vehicles in time of conflict has been a persistent matter for ERCS to grapple with.

Illustrating the tension between the risks faced by staff and volunteers when confronted with such demands, particularly by armed individuals, and maintaining a principled approach, one ERCS staff member recounted an incident where military

ERCS Ambulance Handover In Tigray Regional Branch office.

forces attempted to force an ambulance driver to transport machine guns in North Shewa, Amhara. The driver steadfastly refused. *"This is impossible from my role and responsibility point of view. […] I won't give you the key"*, said the driver *"I'm here to serve the Red Cross. If you want, you can call my boss."* Thanks to the intervention of the branch leadership, the situation was defused when the official received orders from higher command.

Communities are important allies in protecting the smooth operations of ERCS' ambulance service, particularly in times of conflict. Because ambulances are often purchased with the support of contributions from local communities, they see ERCS ambulances as their own, deeply valuing the services they provide, along with ERCS's affordable pharmacies and blood donation services. This sense of ownership has protective implications in times of conflict, where communities have at times hidden ambulances to safeguard them from attacks, making sure they would be returned to ERCS if taken. In other circumstances, community members directly engaged with different groups to ask that ambulances be returned where they belonged, displaying remarkable acts of trust and support for ERCS.

> " *Even if the authorities try to take the ambulances, the local people will not allow it, because they consider them as their own property. I saw this in the time of conflict, in two areas – Shire and Adigrat. The Eritrean forces took our ambulances and a group of elders went to approach the Eritrean authorities to ask for them to be returned […] because they are of the community. […] It was a difficult decision for them but that tells you about the ownership they feel. And one time an ambulance was swept away by a flood […] and a group of people rescued the ambulance. They call it 'our ambulance'.*
> – ERCS staff member

Other strategies were implemented in other regions to address misuse or theft of ambulances. In Afar, this includes escalating the issue to higher authorities and leveraging an established agreement as legal backing. The existence of an agreement at the regional level with senior officials that understood ERCS's mandate ensured that if someone at the woreda level breached that understanding, the matter could be taken up to the regional authorities for resolution, who would provide guidance back down to the woredas.

Leadership and governing boards at branch and headquarters levels play a critical role in situations where firm stances against the misuse of ambulances, particularly by low-ranking military officials, are necessary. They can communicate directly with relevant government officials, such as the Ministry of Defence and the Police, leveraging existing memoranda of understanding (MoUs). For example, when the military asked an ERCS driver to carry militias in the South of Ethiopia, the branch leadership informed headquarters, who called the Minister of Defence, quickly resolving the issue.

4.4.2 Addressing external influences

Engaging with authorities on distribution and targeting of beneficiaries is necessary to ensure ERCS is able to fill gaps in government services effectively. However, it can also present some complications when new officials, unfamiliar with ERCS's mission, come to power. Lower-level officials in particular may request that ERCS distribute aid through their own channels and prioritise their own people or specific groups as beneficiaries over those identified by ERCS's need assessments. Such challenges are not frequent, nor are they unique to any one region, and they are typically resolved with support from local volunteers and branch leadership.

One such example is from the response to the 2016 flood in the Arusi and West Hararghe zones of Oromia region, as well as Southern Nations, Nationalities, and Peoples' (SNNP) region and Somali regions. Many people were displaced and needed immediate assistance. Based on a rapid assessment by ERCS that identified the need for blankets and sanitation supplies, beneficiaries were jointly selected with the local government. ERCS collected and transported the necessary supplies to its warehouse to prepare for distribution to those affected. However, during this process, a change in government officials meant that the incoming woreda leader was not familiar with ERCS operations and opposed their direct distribution of supplies, insisting that the government took over this role. This impasse caused a delay of several days while numerous discussions and negotiations were held to resolve it. These meetings included conversations with government and higher-level zonal officials to reaffirm ERCS operational procedures and commitment to impartial and direct aid distribution.

ERCS Inaugurates WASH Project in Sululta Oromia Region.

4.4.3. Learning from emblem challenges

Like many National Societies, ERCS has had to address various issues related to emblem misuse over the years, which can have significant impact on perceptions of ERCS' principled operations. Such issues emphasise the importance of emblem disseminations including discussions around its rightful use and protection.

Misuse of the emblem is often observed on ambulances. In instances where private companies or other organisations improperly use the emblem, before reporting incidents to relevant authorities, ERCS takes proactive measures to provide orientation and guidance, for example suggesting the organisation or individuals involved change the colour of their emblem. However, if issues are not resolved, branches coordinate with the legal team at headquarters, which will communicate with government authorities. Recently, for example, the Addis Ababa zonal branch contacted headquarters, reporting their joint efforts with the police commissioner to search and take custody of privately owned

ERCS distributes food items to drought affected peoples in Borena Zone.

ambulances displaying the red cross emblem. Up to three ambulances were taken into custody, including two with plates from Oromia, raising the question of jurisdiction. In such cases, coordination between branches, with facilitation from headquarters, was crucial to address the issue.

In the past, emblem challenges have prompted ERCS headquarters to communicate with the National Ministry of Health, which sent a circular to all Regional Government Health Bureaus and other relevant entities regarding the unauthorised use of the emblem by both government and private ambulances. The letter stated that the use of the emblem, except by the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and military medical units, is prohibited and punishable under Article 282 of the Criminal Law. It also demanded the removal of the emblems from 93 ambulances.

However, ERCS has also highlighted situations where military ambulances marked with the emblem were seen as providing transportation services for military and other individuals in the

city, rather than for military or other wounded and sick and medical personnel, which is acceptable for protective purposes. In response to this, ERCS has attempted to engage with military leadership to collaborate on promoting proper usage of the emblem and combatting its misuse.

Emblem misuse has, at times, gone beyond ambulances. For example, during the conflict in Hawassa, where officials were restricted from moving due to being targeted, some individuals sought to use the emblem vests of the ERCS as a means of personal safety. This presented a challenge for ERCS, going against the Fundamental Principles. Through discussions with the individuals concerned, despite the difficulties, ERCS was able to address and manage the situation.

The National Society Charter clearly states that, in cooperation with the appropriate public authorities, ERCS will ensure the proper use of the emblem at the national level, providing legal backing for engaging with the government and ensuring follow-up actions are taken. ERCS has been advocating with the government for a national emblem law to facilitate better control and regulation of emblem use and protection, and for the authority responsible to supervise and regulate its misuse, outside the provisions in the Geneva Convention, the 1991 Emblem Regulations, and the National Society Charter. Dialogue with the government has taken place, with the aim of establishing an MoU to protect the emblem. At the time of writing, ERCS has completed the final draft of the MoU with the Ministry of Defence, which should be finalised in 2024. However, the process of enacting legislation is more complex and would require involvement and initiation from Ministries or Parliament.

In Muslim-dominated areas of the country, ERCS faces challenges related to the perception of the red cross emblem as a Christian symbol, which poses challenges to the operationalisation of the Fundamental Principles of impartiality and neutrality. Concerns have been raised in the

Eastern parts of Oromia, where Muslims make up a large portion of the population, about the use of the red cross instead of the red crescent, which is more commonly used by National Societies in Muslim-majority countries. Similarly, in the Somali and Afar regions, where almost the entire population is Muslim, convincing people about the red cross emblem's significance can be challenging.

In response to this, the regional and zonal branches in both regions conduct dissemination activities targeted at the regional or local authorities, religious leaders, and clan leaders, where staff and volunteers emphasise ERCS's Fundamental Principles and impartial approach as a humanitarian organisation without any religious affiliation. Efforts are made to educate around the relevance of the emblem, the meaning of the Fundamental Principles, and the importance of the principle of unity for National Societies, which cannot have different symbols as protective emblem for their branches. The process of convincing community members takes time, however, and requires ongoing engagement. While such efforts contribute to a better understanding of ERCS special features, questions and doubts about the emblem remain.

4.5. Dissemination strategies and practices

Dissemination of information about the Movement and Fundamental Principles plays a critical role in preventing and tackling operational challenges faced by ERCS, as well as in building the foundational trust and acceptance ERCS enjoys with authorities and communities. Schools play a vital role in communicating the functions and mandate of the National Society and inspiring respect for the Fundamental Principles, often nurturing the next generation of volunteers. Through Red Cross clubs established in schools, students receive first aid training and are instilled with a spirit of service to their community.

ERCS places significant emphasis on disseminating information to both higher officials and lower-level authorities. Through extensive

dissemination programmes, often done jointly with ICRC, ERCS ensures that the Society's history and development, Fundamental Principles and proper use of the emblem are well understood. These programmes are not solely limited to Federal government officials but also extend to regional, zonal, and woreda levels, and are carried out by relevant branches.

ERCS uses different dissemination means and channels to engage with the community. For example, it works closely with community religious leaders, seeking their participation in dissemination sessions and in sharing messages. Social media, radio and local tv channels play an important part. When providing humanitarian support in a specific area, the local media is critical to help the wider community learn about the Society's work. Through this coverage, people are able to see the impact of ERCS actions, and local authorities are also kept informed about their activities. Megaphones are used to deliver messages and reach communities effectively during epidemics or other public health crises. To foster transparency and trust, ERCS informs the community about how membership fees are used, sharing examples of its work.

ERCS leadership, staff and volunteers are also educated on the Fundamental Principles. One valuable lesson for ERCS has been strengthening awareness around the importance of responsible use of social media among its employees and volunteers, always ensuring neutrality while identifying as ERCS representatives. Before engaging in emergencies or development activities, volunteers undergo orientation that highlights the Fundamental Principles and their practical implementation.

ERCS's efforts to ensure the continuation of the Fundamental Principles in future generations are best described by a new initiative – the establishment of the School of Humanity. The School of Humanity will aim to initiate a cultural shift towards embracing humanity at a time of significant humanitarian challenges in the country. The school is in its inception phase – in January 2024, ERCS organised a workshop to review and provide input on the modules developed by a consulting team, which will include humanitarian diplomacy, ethics, morals and accountability, education in emergencies, disaster risk management, gender equality, and leadership in the humanitarian sphere, among others, with the aim of fostering a deep understanding of humanity and promoting peace and coexistence.

First aid training for ERCS volunteers in Moyale Oromia and Sumali.

Auxiliary role

> " *Assisting the government in what they cannot do, reaching the areas where the government cannot reach. That's what auxiliary means to me.* – ERCS staff member

The concept of the auxiliary role within ERCS is consistently understood as 'filling the gaps' of government provision. This means that ERCS functions as a critical bridge between the government's capacities and the community's needs, particularly for communities that are either out of reach or disconnected from official support channels. While there is a recognition that the primary onus to cater to the needs of the population lies with the government, authorities often lack the resources to address every challenge. ERCS steps in to fill these gaps, providing essential humanitarian or development assistance, easing the government's burden, and amplifying and complementing its efforts while maintaining the autonomy of its operations and decision-making.

> " *Auxiliary role means that there are areas where we share and collaborate, because the government cannot fully address them alone. So, there are areas that we share. But there are also areas that are special to ERCS – which the government could address, but we can address them in a better way because of the government's nature [which is inherently political]. People have economic, social and political lives, but those lives are not defined by clear-cut boundaries, rather the boundaries have shared areas where they overlap. […] The government has a duty to take care of the overlapping social and humanitarian aspects of its people, but because of its very nature, it cannot do everything in those areas – or even if it did, it may not be able to do it in a better way than ERCS.* – ERCS board member

Locust Swarm Cash Transfer Beneficiary at Romso Kebele-Borena Zone.

5.1. Auxiliary role in practice

5.1.1. Disaster risk management (DRM)

In its auxiliary role, ERCS is mandated to actively engage in disaster preparedness, management and risk reduction activities aligned with government development plans and national priorities. As a vital element of this auxiliary function, ERCS is a member of the Disaster Risk Management Technical Working Group, led by the government-led Ethiopian Disaster Risk Management Commission (EDRMC). This partnership allows ERCS to collaborate closely with government bodies during needs assessments and implementation.

For example, ERCS contributes to EDRMC-OCHA (UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs) developed Humanitarian Response Plans (HRP) that each year outline the humanitarian aid needed and identifies any gaps in the government's ability to provide it. The HRPs, which are created after carrying out bi-annual assessments, state the nation's humanitarian requirements for the year. Within this framework, ERCS's National Board pledged to cover 10 to 15% of the need outlined in the HRP for 2023. This percentage has increased compared to 10% in 2021, due to increasing conflict, health emergencies and disasters, as well as ERCS's ability to mobilise resources. By doing so, the organisation contributes significantly to the government's efforts to fulfil its responsibilities to those in need.

The collaborative process between the government and ERCS in disaster risk management begins when an emergency hits. ERCS, jointly with EDRMC and other non-Movement partners conducts a rapid on-site assessment in the affected area. Then the EDRMC will jointly evaluate the situation and determine the roles each partner will play in the response and how resources can be best allocated. Understanding each other's capacities is crucial for an effective DRM strategy. For instance, when multiple woredas are impacted, ERCS and the government negotiate how and where to distribute resources. The independence and autonomy of ERCS's mandate allows it to quickly respond with emergency assistance, often reaching affected communities within 24 hours, while the government mobilises its slower logistical processes. When ERCS lacks the capacity, its contribution will be complementary to government efforts, for example offering NFIs when the government provides food support.

Membership of the Disaster Risk Management Technical Working Group gives ERCS an influential presence and ensures that their actions are visible and integral to government-led efforts. In the 2022 Midterm Review of the EDRMC's Implementation of the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015-2030, a voluntary national report, ERCS's work on DRM and disaster risk reduction was recognised as key to building resilient communities and households, in line with government priorities and Sendai Framework commitments.[24]

5.1.2. Health

ERCS maintains strong cooperative ties with the Ministry of Health to ensure communities receive quality emergency support though ambulance services and pharmacies, and social mobilisation campaigns around vaccinations through strong community engagement.

ERCS Pharmacy at Horogudru – Oromia Region.

24 See *The Midterm Review of the Implementation of the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015-2030 - Ethiopian Voluntary National Report, September 2022 – Ethiopia | ReliefWeb*. Such efforts include but are not limited to:
1. strengthening the capacity of local governments through training for early warning and the provision of necessary materials and equipment;
2. developing mobile application software that enables communities to report disasters, losses, and early warning signs, which is currently operational in the Ebinat district of the Amhara region;
3. establishing community-based disaster risk management committees (CBDRMCs) contributing to risk management at the community level; and
4. implementing an innovative forecast-based financing system that uses early warning information to help communities affected by drought and flood, in collaboration with the Netherlands Red Cross.

Ambulance service and essential drug programme

ERCS's ambulance support can supplement government actions when access is limited. In the western region of Dembi Dolo, where Ministry of Health ambulances are unable to reach people because of the presence of armed groups, ERCS is present within the community and able to provide these essential services. Similarly, when a malaria outbreak occurred in those regions, ERCS supplied the ambulance services necessary to address the emergency, with the costs being covered by the government. This presence has garnered recognition and respect from both military personnel and officials on the ground. Ambulance support also extends to international conferences, events and festivities. For example, as a member of the organising committee for the African Summit, ERCS is usually asked by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to coordinate the provision of ambulance services and the deployment of volunteers. At the 2024 African Summit in February, the Addis Ababa branch allocated six ambulances and 29 volunteers to provide support. ERCS's auxiliary health services also include the distribution of essential medications, particularly under the Essential Drug Programme, which provides quality and affordable pharmaceutical services nationwide. As the government has recently started a health insurance scheme, people can obtain medications on credit from ERCS pharmacies, with the government then settling the costs.

Social mobilisation and vaccination campaigns

ERCS works in close cooperation with the Ministry of Health to implement social mobilisation campaigns within Addis Ababa and beyond, including around measles and Covid-19. During the pandemic, as community awareness and vaccine uptake remained low, ERCS volunteers conducted house-to-house education and awareness sessions. Working alongside youth associations and health extension workers from the Ministry of Health at the kebele level, ERCS has been instrumental in ensuring effective and inclusive social mobilisation campaigns, and has leveraged these relationships to spread health messages more effectively. Such efforts exemplify the complementarity and auxiliary support ERCS offers during public health emergencies.

ERCS effectiveness in engaging communities is widely recognised by the government, which requested that ERCS handle the risk communication and community engagement (RCCE) aspects of a grant from MasterCard for its Covid-19 response. The government's allotment of the entire budget for this component to ERCS showed significant trust.

Community mass sensitisation, prevention and response to cholera outbreak in Moyale Oromia and Sumali.

5.1.3. Water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH)

The close collaboration between ERCS and the Ministry of Water and Energy has a long history given the significant gaps in the country in terms of WASH needs, as well as the consistent support provided by ERCS over time. For example, ERCS and the Ministry of Water and Energy have completed joint assessments of the damaged water supply systems, as well as planning, implementation and monitoring of WASH interventions, during the post-conflict period in Tigray. In collaboration with the Tigray Regional Water and Energy Bureau, ERCS conducted assessments of the water facilities (boreholes, hand-dug wells, water points, springs, reservoirs, and pumping stations) while also supporting displaced people with a water trucking service until the damaged water sources were rehabilitated. Based on the assessment findings, and in consultation with the Ministry of Water and Energy, ERCS launched an emergency appeal

and supported the response, with resources from Movement partners.

ERCS has implemented WASH and shelter projects in conflict- and drought-affected woredas in different parts of the country where the government has limited access to reach and support. For example, East and West Wollega, Illuababor, East Guji and Borena zones in Oromia Region, and North Gondar, South Gondar, North Shoa, North Wollo and South Wollo in Amhara and Benishangul regions are all inaccessible areas that have been supported by ERCS in recent years. Rehabilitation of water schemes, construction and maintenance of latrines (community and institutional), distribution of WASH, NFIs and hygiene promotion through media, house-to-house, and community conversation were also major areas of support from ERCS, which received recognition from the government.

ERCS Inaugurates WASH Project in Sululta Oromia Region.

5.1.4. Restoring Family Links (RFL)

ERCS plays a pivotal role in restoring family links (RFL) activities, specifically in cases of returnees from Saudi Arabia. While the Saudi government is responsible for transporting these individuals to the airport, once they arrive, the responsibility for reunification is supported by ERCS, as outlined in the National Society Charter. This responsibility is also recognised within national coordination platforms, where the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) acknowledges the essential role of the ERCS. At the Addis Ababa airport, the ERCS serves as a primary agent, actively collaborating with the IOM and various other organisations to carry out those RFL activities, ensuring that people returning from abroad are supported during their reintegration and reunification with their families.

5.1.5. Other emergencies

ERCS works in complementarity with public authorities during other types of emergencies, including fires. In a recent example from the Addis Ababa, a fire broke out in a part of the sub-city, leaving residents in urgent need of assistance. ERCS resources were limited, particularly with regards to mattresses, which the community desperately needed. However, ERCS still held a stock of a few bed sheets and cooking materials, including cooking sets. To solve the issue, ERCS engaged in discussions with local officials, which resulted in the Addis Ababa Fire and Emergency Prevention and Rescue Agency (FEPRA) supplying the required mattresses. By combining and coordinating their contributions with ERCS, the FEPRA managed to deliver a complete package of assistance to those affected by the fire.

Restoring Family Link Phone call service IDPs inter point in Metema North Gondar.

5.2. Privileges of the auxiliary role

> " *The government assists us because we assist the government.*
> – ERCS staff member

This auxiliary role entails not only responsibilities but also a range of privileges that help ERCS carry out its duties effectively. These privileges range from financial benefits such as subsidies and tax exemptions, to the provision of facilities and assets by the government designed to bolster the Society's capacity. The responsibility of the government to provide necessary support to the Society in order for it to achieve its purposes is enshrined in the National Society Charter, and ERCS can utilise this framework to solicit a variety of support from government authorities.

Financial support: One crucial financial privilege ERCS has is tax exemptions granted for the importation of humanitarian and medical supplies, which is critical to refurbish their nearly 80 pharmacies and drug stores across the nation. Additional waivers from custom duties and certain income taxes contribute further to the sustainability of ERCS operations. The government provides subsidies at both Federal and, in most cases, regional levels. Members of the ERCS governing board often play a pivotal role in leveraging these statutory provisions by using their influence to secure government backing. While the subsidies received are perceived as not being able to cover the increasing humanitarian needs of the country, ERCS's duty-free status is particularly vital for importing necessities such as ambulances and medicines without fiscal burden.

Privileged access to authorities: ERCS enjoys a privileged position that allows for open channels of communication with government entities at local, regional and Federal levels. As such, ERCS does not require prior approval to engage with the country's President, who is the Patron of ERCS, as well as mayors, or regional authorities. This right of direct access means that the Society

is deeply integrated with, and supported by, governmental frameworks. Furthermore, ERCS is granted the status of an observer in Parliament. This unique position permits ERCS to directly address issues raised by parliamentarians, reflecting the significant advantages conferred by its special status. Moreover, having a select number of government officials on its governing board enhances ERCS's ability to engage with public authorities and secure continuous support. At the same time, the general rule that prevents government representatives from holding a majority on the board helps prevent conflicts of interest and ensures ERCS's independence in decision-making. This arrangement has proven especially pertinent during periods of changing territorial authority in Tigray:

> " *When ENDF got control of Mekelle, and the interim government was established, we had to continue our activities. In order to do so, ERCS had to go to the politicians to ask them to give them access and fuel. Fuel was centralised, so we had to get fuel access through the authorities […] and we had the space to go to the new authorities. If all of the board members were politicians, direct politicians, in times of change it would have been a problem. Even in normal times.* – ERCS staff member

Ambulances, land and other facilities: ERCS ambulances and the operational costs of running them are typically subsidised or entirely funded by the government. Also, the government's donation of land and office facilities provides ERCS with significant infrastructure to carry out its mission. In regions like Sidama, ERCS's presence on government-granted land is notable, with government donating offices which are now operating in 11 woredas and zones. Such substantial support also comes with expectations of development and utilisation, which ERCS is not always able to fulfil due to limited financial resources.

Resource mobilisation: The government provides considerable support to ERCS's social and resource mobilisation efforts. For example, the Revenue Authority agreed with traders and other business entities to charge, alongside taxes paid by these individuals or businesses, a small amount towards the support of ERCS. The ERCS has been able to collect significant income from the Revenue Authority to support its services.

5.3. Challenges of the auxiliary role

5.3.1. Ensuring permanence amid financial constraints

The high trust placed on ERCS comes with equally high expectations from government authorities and communities around its capacity to intervene in times of need. While this level of expectation is a sign of ERCS trust and reputation, the organisation is constrained by limited resources, particularly in areas affected by conflict and other crises, and as a result, they are often unable to fulfil all the demands placed upon them. Such challenges point to the limitations and pressures on ERCS to fulfil its mandate and auxiliary function while it is not always adequately resourced to do so, as explained by one of ERCS regional board members:

> " *Sometimes I feel that we don't act as per the trust the community has on us. We have gaps in our capacity. I sometimes feel guilty. We don't do enough to fulfil these expectations. The expectations are much higher than our capacity allows.*

One of the main challenges in this regard concerns ambulances. Most ambulances across different regions and branches were described by staff and volunteers as ill-equipped to provide emergency support, lacking essential supplies such as oxygen, sufficient personal protective equipment (PPE), and other first aid materials needed to care for patients. Volunteers also feel they can lack access to advanced training to improve their skills, and express a wish for increased support from the National Society when faced with operational

challenges. These shortages make it difficult to carry out their duty effectively, and in line with communities' and authorities' expectations.

Being an auxiliary to the public authorities in the humanitarian field, as well as an integral part of communities affected by crises, also means that ERCS remains present even when resources are limited. The permanence of the auxiliary status and ERCS community-based nature means for ERCS that exiting a community, service or region when funds dry up, or when security deteriorates is not an option. In the Tigray region specifically, the impact of the war on branches has been huge. Prior to the war, the Tigray region had a far-reaching presence in the form of 676 paid staff members and a fleet of up to 254 ambulances across 136 ambulance stations. This allowed the branch to fulfil its responsibilities and serve all areas of the region impartially, offering both emergency assistance and development initiatives to enhance community resilience. However, during the war, the branch's capacity was severely depleted. Currently, there are 87 functioning ambulances which require significant maintenance, as well as 40 non-functioning ones. More recently, after the conflict, the Ethiopian Regional Health Bureau in Tigray received 400million Ethiopian Birr (ETB) from an international philanthropist and requested that the Tigray Regional Branch facilitates the procurement of 200 ambulances. With support from ICRC to facilitate the importation of the ambulances, procurement is expected to be delivered in 2024.

However, with extremely limited resources available, the resilience demonstrated by the regional branch staff in Tigray, most of whom have not received salaries for two years, and yet continue to serve communities, is remarkable. They find themselves in a challenging situation where it is nearly impossible to meet the community's and authorities' expectations with the current resources at hand. A staff member shared the difficulties faced when lacking resources to fulfil their mandate during the peak of the conflict:

> *Sometimes you cry with them when you see people cry. And sometimes you just decide to hide here in the office so that you don't have to witness such levels of suffering without being able to provide adequate support.*

As the needs and requests from communities increased rapidly during the war, the role of volunteers became critical in maintaining support for vulnerable individuals. In Mekelle, volunteers leveraged the trust they had built within the community to ask for and collect food from homes. They would then prepare and distribute the food to children in the courtyard of the regional branch, often walking long distances with significant risks to their safety.

ERCS and ICRC Distribute Food and NF Items to IDPs in Ebinat, Amhara Region.

5.3.2. Navigating perceptions and building trust

The auxiliary role of the ERCS, while pivotal in carrying out its core mandate and supporting the resilience of communities, does not eliminate challenges and the need for sustained negotiations and relationship-building with authorities to maintain trust, especially in conflict zones. While strong collaboration with authorities is key to the successful delivery of its humanitarian mandate, in times of conflict, the National Society's endeavours can be challenged by ethnic divides and polarisation. Auxiliary relationships can be mistakenly conflated with affiliation to either side of the conflict and a lack of neutrality. In situations of internal conflict, particularly when ethnic divisions play a major part, delivering humanitarian assistance becomes as much about assisting wounded people or distributing food or NFIs as it is about navigating political sensitivities and addressing perception issues. Supporting authorities while maintaining autonomy and demonstrating impartiality, neutrality and independence is a delicate balancing act that ERCS navigates, not without challenge, to ultimately reach and assist the communities in need, as explained by a member of ERCS leadership:

> *There should be some level of trust between the ERCS and the government, the trust that we are doing our jobs, not reflecting our political views. This is the hardest part […]. The only option you have is just to show them by action. […] So, this is why we have to be trained. Knowing that we will have to be able to demonstrate our impartiality to all parties.*

Such perceptions can impact ERCS's operations and access, limiting movement or causing delays. During the Tigray conflict, for example, ERCS was delayed in providing timely assistance to wounded people as they waited for permissions from relevant authorities. These challenges are explained by the variety of powers controlling different territories and the varying degrees of awareness about the role of ERCS, underscoring the importance of disseminating ERCS's core mandate. These insights paint a picture of the nuances of the auxiliary role, a role that necessitates an ongoing adaptation to the evolving political and security landscapes, with ERCS often manoeuvring through logistical and perceptual hurdles.

5.3.3. Managing relations with the media

Public advocacy for humanitarian needs in conflict times requires careful communication and diplomacy to ensure relations with authorities are protected and preserved at the same time as maintaining autonomy and independence. Such fine balance is something National Societies have to constantly navigate to make sure talking openly about needs is not politicised and does not undermine their auxiliary relationship.

For example, soon after the ERCS President delivered a press conference jointly with IFRC following its visit to Tigray during the conflict, he was misquoted by international outlets as he was describing the humanitarian needs he saw in the region. ERCS promptly published a statement to rectify the misreading of the President's quote, as it risked becoming detrimental to the Society's relations with the Government.[25] A member of ERCS leadership explained the importance of finding that balance:

> *That's the balance between being an auxiliary but also being able to talk about the humanitarian needs without jeopardising that relationship with the authorities, which is always a fine balance.*

Effectively managing the dual responsibilities of fulfilling the auxiliary role while drawing attention to humanitarian needs is a constant and intentional balancing act for National Societies operating both within and outside conflict settings. It requires nuanced and strategic approaches and it can often be more productive to approach sensitive matters through private humanitarian diplomacy.

5.3.4. Fighting misinformation

ERCS has had to address misinformation about its role, mandate and principled approach being spread in the media, highlighting one of the challenges that many National Societies face, particularly those operating in highly polarised conflicts. Examples of international media outlets misquoting ERCS regarding humanitarian needs or responses, as well as false accusations and defamation have been circulated over time, alleging that ERCS lacks neutrality, which the Society has had to promptly counter.

A critical example occurred during the conflict in Tigray, when ERCS accompanied the ICRC convoy transferring 2 million ETB to the region to pay for staff salaries, at a time when banks in

25 This statement was posted on Facebook

Tigray were not operative. Despite the fact that permission to transfer funds for humanitarian purposes had been sought and obtained by the Federal government, misunderstandings arose at the Afar checkpoint, when security officers noticed the funds being transported by the convoy. This resulted in false allegations that ICRC and ERCS were funding the Tigray war, particularly the TPLF, against the Ethiopian government. Despite providing explanations and presenting documented evidence of the funds' purpose, the misinformation had already spread on social media, creating additional challenges for both ERCS and ICRC to maintain their credibility and clarify their mandate.

The complexities of conflicts make it challenging to convince all segments of society and fight misinformation effectively. ERCS has to endlessly reaffirm its scope, mandate, and commitment to impartial humanitarian action. Recently, the National Governing Board developed a communication and media strategy, which is now under implementation. The strategy outlines the key messages ERCS should deliver and clarifies the roles of different individuals within the organisation, such as the President and the Secretary General, regarding who should communicate specific messages. This approach extends to ERCS staff and volunteers, ensuring they are aware of what they should and should not say when representing ERCS.

One approach ERCS uses to respond to misinformation is to use television, radio and social media platforms, particularly Facebook. These are used both to manage misinformation and to address attacks on staff or ambulances. This helps create awareness among the community about how these acts hinder ERCS's ability to deliver humanitarian assistance. The Communications department plays a crucial role in addressing misinformation. Depending on the incident, legal procedures may also be followed by notifying the police, who are then responsible for investigating matters further.

5.4. Evolution and changes in the auxiliary role

ERCS's efforts to disseminate its role and mandate has resulted in positive improvements in their auxiliary relationships over time. Over the past five to six years in particular, ERCS staff have observed a significant increase in government support, in terms of subsidies and resource mobilisation but also recognition of ERCS's role in addressing humanitarian issues. The evolution of ERCS's auxiliary role since its formation has mirrored both government policies and changes within society. The National Society Charter has been revised and updated over the decades. The iterative process of adapting the Charter reflects a commitment to staying relevant and responsive to changing humanitarian needs and the demands of both the society and the government.

Notably, the most recent version of the ERCS Charter adopted in 2018,[26] incorporated a few elements which laid the legal grounds for better coordination and relationships with public authorities. The new Charter mandates ERCS to work with relevant public authorities in the protection of the emblem; it clearly recognises the auxiliary role of ERCS and guarantees in clear terms the institutional autonomy of ERCS to work based on the Fundamental Principles. While previous versions of the Charter already included government financial support,[27] the 2018 version also expresses for the first time the government's responsibility to provide the necessary support for ERCS to achieve its mission in more general terms. This development signified an increased trust between ERCS and public authorities.

Food items distribution at Adadle Somali Region.

26 1067.pdf (lawethiopia.com)
27 Proc No. 153-1999 Revised Charter of The Ethiopian Red Cros | PDF | International Relations | Public Sphere (scribd.com)

Access

Securing access for the delivery of humanitarian services in situations of internal conflict is a balancing act of diplomacy, strategic engagement, and adherence to the Fundamental Principles. It is a complex and dynamic process that requires ERCS's constant negotiation to navigate operational challenges and security risks for staff and volunteers. Within an extremely challenging operational reality, ERCS has consistently upheld its principled approach towards obtaining and maintaining the channels necessary for the delivery of humanitarian aid, particularly at times where access for other organisations was curtailed.

IFRC Governing Board Oversitting Committee and ERCS Higher officials field visit in Tigray.

> " *When Federal Defence forces took control of Mekelle, it was just after two weeks when things were still not safe when our Board Chair and Headquarters Secretary General (SG), along with others, came to Mekelle to visit us. We were so grateful at the time. And by the way, the Red Cross convoy was the first humanitarian convoy to cross to Shire through Adigrat. It was just after the Ethiopian Forces took control of Mekelle, when much of the territory was controlled by Eritrean forces and no cars were allowed, not a single private car, be it government or civilian, no one was allowed to cross, no NGO, including the UN. But the Red Cross convoy, with medicines, could cross. They had to stay the night in Adigrat and the Ethiopian military forces were not sure whether they would be safe or not, because Eritrean forces were there. The Ethiopian military forces wanted to protect the convoys, because they feared that Eritrean forces would loot those medicines. But the SG said – 'No, we don't need any military, we are Red Cross'. He rejected them. They got angry, saying – 'We are here to protect you!' But he refused. So, they negotiated so that the military stood about 100 meters away. The SG had boasted about being Red Cross, but deep down he knew they could be in danger. But he wanted to maintain the Red Cross independence – make it clear. And it worked. The commanders there, they are called 'higher authorities'. They said – 'they are telling us they don't want protection, but the Eritrean forces are around, so what should we do?' They had to call at higher level and when Red Cross convoy crossed, Eritrean forces stayed back. So, maintaining your principles even in difficult times, it works, it opens opportunities, though it also carries a risk. It was a high risk, but maintaining that was very important. And people always remember that convoy. And after that episode, also, the Federation sent medicine and then it became normal, and the UN became dominant in crossing the borders. Yeah, but the first to cross was the Ethiopian Red Cross.'*
> *– ERCS leadership member*

6.1.1.Decentralised structure

ERCS's decentralised structure is a key factor in its ability to access and serve communities effectively and respond promptly to disasters across the country. This organisational model not only underscores ERCS's commitment to decentralised operations and community involvement but also enhances its responsiveness to Ethiopia's diverse humanitarian needs. The Society's footprint closely mirrors the government's administrative structures, facilitating a widespread presence – from the kebele (grassroots) level, to the woreda (district), zonal, regional and national levels. At the same time, the adaptability of the Society has allowed it to adjust to changes in government structures over time in order to continue to provide impartial humanitarian services to communities while performing their auxiliary role. For example, the case of the recent disintegration of the SNNP region into three regions with three regional governments initiated the establishment of three regional branches, a process that is currently underway.

Across Oromia, the largest region of the country, where 40% of the ERCS branches are concentrated, the Society is strategically positioned to swiftly access all communities in times of need. This decentralised structure with semi-autonomous branches, each with their budget and resources, empowers individual zonal branches to promptly respond to crises and engage with affected communities during disasters without waiting for external support. During the drought in Oromia's Borena zone, the zonal branch staff and volunteers was first on the ground. "We didn't need to wait for support […] because we can go to the community with what we have. So even if there is any problem, if the government can't enter there, the Red Cross local branch can reach the community.' (ERCS leadership member).

6.1.2. Building trust in peace-time

ERCS's decentralised structure ensures access to populations even in remote areas that other organisations or government services might struggle to reach, particularly in times of conflict. ERCS's permanent presence within communities is a decisive factor that influences access and operations during periods of conflict by virtue of the trust built over time. Such was the case in western Oromia's Wollega region, where the long-established relationship with communities and authorities prior to the increase in tensions meant access was secured for ambulances to affected areas in conflict times, as explained by a ERCS staff member – *"It is all about perception. It is about what the branch does in normal times."*

In 2021, during hostilities in Metekel zone bordering the Amhara region, ERCS was the only organisation that had access and was able to deliver humanitarian services, including construction of essential shelters. In some cases, ERCS access negotiations have supported other Movement partners, showing the value of complementarity. Volunteers from the Afar Regional Branch played a critical role in accompanying an ICRC convoy to the Tigray border and engaging with Tigrayan forces during the conflict, speaking the local language, Tigrinya, to negotiate access.

6.1.3. Leveraging local networks and influential community elders

The roles of community and grassroots networks are important in access negotiations, highlighting the added value of local organisations such as ERCS, which inherently understand local dynamics and can harness community networks effectively to deliver humanitarian assistance. Engaging with community and religious leaders was critical for access negotiations in times of conflict, as they hold significant power and influence as mediators, negotiators and peace-makers, with their influence being well-recognised by local authorities. This was observed across multiple regions included as part of this research.

The unique value of this approach was clearly demonstrated when the Shire branch in Tigray sought to maintain its operational activities amid the escalating conflict in 2020. At that time, the frequent turnover within the military had led to a deterioration of their institutional awareness about the ERCS mandate, mission and Principles. To overcome this challenge, the Shire branch established elder community committees, educating influential elders in the community about ERCS's work and principled approach. The committees' efforts, alongside those of branch leadership, staff and volunteers, proved to be a decisive factor in improving access and secured the continuation of the branch's night-time ambulance service, in addition to day-time operations.

6.1.4. The auxiliary role as an access enabler

ERCS staff and volunteers shared examples where leveraging the auxiliary role enabled ERCS to access areas others had no access to, and use government resources, such as Ethiopian Airlines, to transport humanitarian essentials. During the current Amhara conflict, road closures imposed by different armed groups continue to pose significant challenges for accessing populations in need amid significant hospital and medical shortages. Despite there not being a formal agreement in place, after establishing contact with government officials, ERCS employed the assistance of government-owned Ethiopian Airlines aircrafts to transport medications and medical equipment to Gondar.

Leveraging the auxiliary role has also enabled ERCS to secure access for other Movement partners, including ICRC. For example, in western Oromia, ERCS communicated with local authorities to ensure ICRC was able to access the area.

> " *Once the ICRC was in an area in western Oromia but they were not allowed to access that area. They called me and I called the zonal administrator and told him – 'ICRC is there to support the community but are being denied access.' He (the zonal administrator) replied – 'who is doing this (denying access)? send them to me.' And then I talked to the ICRC partners who went and discussed with the administrator. They got access for the emergency response. You see, if you work strongly with the government, you can get access.* – ERCS leadership member

ERCSs' access and track record of reaching communities across various conflict-affected regions, such as West Wellega or Tigray, has also enabled them to collaborate with various partners outside the Movement, for example in situations where government officials would grant access to ERCS vehicles only. This has led to international organisations such as the UN often relying on ERCS to distribute medications and other essential items in areas they cannot reach, laying the foundation for several partnerships. For example, the World Health Organization (WHO) has partnered with ERCS to distribute 14.5 metric tons of emergency medical supplies and other essential items in Amhara, to benefit a total of 44,000 individuals, providing treatment for 1,500 trauma cases and 600 children with severe acute malnutrition.[28]

6.2. Barriers to access

6.2.1. Communication infrastructure

Communications and resources are critical elements of access and significantly impact the resilience of services in conflict times. The communication blackout in Tigray during the conflict, marked by disruptions in phone lines and internet services, caused enormous challenges in terms of access and coordination. The complete lack of communications infrastructure not only isolated individual branches in the region, preventing them from communicating with each other, but it also made it nearly

impossible, with the resources available to the branch, to communicate and coordinate with headquarters. This blackout exacerbated the already challenging logistical issues ERCS faced, such as fuel shortages and threats from drones and air attacks. Within such a constrained environment, support from organisations with broader available resources, like the ICRC, equipped with alternative communication methods, helped to partially mitigate the severe impact of the communications shutdown. By using ICRC satellite phones, ERCS was able to provide communication services to members of the communities who were desperately trying to reach their loved ones, benefiting approximately 300,000 individuals.

6.2.2. Uneven understanding of ERCS's mandate

With different areas of the region being under the control of either Tigrayan, Ethiopian or Eritrean forces during the Tigray conflict, securing access involved complex negotiations with all parties. Negotiations, however, can cause severe delays to humanitarian operations, as different parties may have different understandings of ERCS's mandate. This was also observed even across factions fighting on the same side, often resulting from lack of communication with one another. For example, a team composed of ICRC and ERCS staff members received approval from Ethiopian authorities in Mekelle to travel to Gijet, only to be blocked by Eritrean forces there, leading to a two-day negotiation standoff. A similar lack of alignment was also seen between high-ranking and lower-ranking military personnel within the same faction. For example, despite securing approval from high-level commanders in Mekelle, ERCS encountered harassment from lower-level military forces on the ground who were not properly informed about ERCS's mandate.

6.2.3. Changes in governance

Changes in governance due to rapid shifts in territorial controls can have significant impact on access. Perceptions of affiliation to either party, with divides often being along ethnic lines, can

hinder the Society's engagement and negotiations and result in access restrictions.

Examples from Tigray show this. After Federal Government forces took over Mekelle, trust needed to be rebuilt at a time of great polarisation, volatility and ethnic division. Staff and volunteers of regional and zonal branches in Tigray highlighted how these challenges were mainly due to lack of dissemination of the mandate of the regional branch. When the Tigray Defense Force (TDF) was in control, there appeared to be fewer issues of access, suggesting greater trust and familiarity and acceptance of the branches' humanitarian mandate at regional level. However, after the Ethiopian National Defense Force (ENDF) took control, the staff believe there had not been adequate dissemination of the Fundamental Principles, which led to soldiers and officials often being unaware of the branch's neutral and impartial stance. This lack of understanding is seen as the cause of initial blockages to access and service delivery, but this improved after thorough discussions with the incoming officials. Experiences like this were not unique to Tigray; similar restrictions have been observed in Gondar, in the Amhara region, after territorial control shifted, which led to a *"Red Cross vehicle being refused to move anywhere",* as explained by a member of staff.

6.2.4. Perceptions of neutrality

Despite ERCS's strong commitment to supporting all sides unequivocally, the reality of an internal conflict can prove challenging. There is a fear that, by supporting people in need on both sides, ERCS might be seen as taking one side or another. This perception can significantly hinder a National Society's ability to reach and treat those in need, including wounded soldiers, irrespective of their affiliation. For example, in Tigray during the conflict, troops from conflicting parties were typically treated in separate hospital facilities in different areas, which made it difficult for ERCS volunteers to provide support to wounded individuals from both sides and take them to their respective hospitals, due to fear of association with either party.

> *…We fear we can't go to those places [hospitals], because the people may take photos and assume that the Red Cross is with one side or the other. So, this is a big challenge. This is because of the lack of awareness of the parties to the conflict. […] We have many volunteers, but because of the directions given to us from the higher authorities and so on, we cannot go to that place.* – ERCS volunteer

6.2.5. Protection and the politics of ethnicity

The auxiliary status and principled approach by a National Society such as the ERCS, does not guarantee unfettered access by default. Ethnicity-based conflicts can have additional implications and severe consequences for the protection of staff and volunteers, who have often become the target of searches, violence, arrests and crossfire, with incidents of ambulance drivers being killed while providing life-saving assistance in different regions. This has placed a heavy toll on the human and operational capacity of the branches:

> *During internal conflicts, the problem in Ethiopia, […] our political system is with tribes – Oromo, Amhara, and politics like that. It's ethnic politics. […] like during the Ethiopia-Tigray conflict – the Amhara ambulance could not enter Tigray, because of the ethnic divides. Even one time they killed the driver and they burned the ambulance in Tigray. […] They perceive that you are supporting the government […]. And because of that, we have also changed the name of the ambulances. Previously the name was 'ambulance from a specific district' […] but now we understand the risk, and simply say the 'Red Cross Society ambulance'. But they will still request you to speak Oromifa or Amharic. So it's politics. That is the problem.* – ERCS staff member

The auxiliary role can also add another layer of pressure and risk. This can be the case, for example, when engaging in negotiations for permissions at military checkpoints. While uneven dissemination efforts – for example only

ERCS and UNFPA Sexual Reproductive Health and Gender Based Violence Activities in Amhara Region.

to specific areas under the control of a specific group – can lead to operational and access barriers, it is also true that engaging in such dialogues is precarious, and often dangerous. When a National Society seeks to engage with different groups for better dissemination of its mandate, or for receiving guarantees for safe passage, such engagements may lead to suspicion from their own authorities with a risk of compromising its future operations – or worse:

> *The ICRC can engage with different actors, but we sometimes fail to access them. For example, ICRC can access different groups. But our branches cannot contact them, and if they did, they could face consequences. That is a fear. We couldn't overcome that fear. So, the ICRC distributed in these places. We couldn't go to Gondar, but ICRC could go to Gondar by air. ICRC could go to Bahir Dhar and reach some western Gojjam areas with medication. There, they work in collaboration with our Branches.* – ERCS staff member

This shows the paradox that National Societies operating in an internal conflict as an auxiliary to public authorities may often face: the need and expectation to communicate their impartiality and neutrality to all parties and negotiate access, but in doing so, potentially becoming a suspect in the eyes of any one of those parties, particularly their own authorities. Consequently, access may be denied not as a result of a formal or explicit prohibition, but rather due to difficulties in negotiating with different groups.

For example, when the regional branch was working with WHO to transport 11m ETB worth of medicines, allocated to four ERCS branches in the Amhara region. While they successfully transported medicines to Debre Birhan by vehicle and to North Gondar via Ethiopian Airlines, ERCS was unable to safely access East Gojjam and West Gojjam due to safety concerns. The government had assured ERCS there would be no obstacles from their side, but ERCS was still

concerned for the security of its staff, given the presence of armed groups in these areas, with whom they felt unable to try and contact in order to receive those assurances, as explained by an ERCS staff member:

> *[In terms of] communicating with a non-State armed group, we are not sure enough to bring our phones and call someone who we know has a partner or is a leader of a non-State armed group, because we are not sure the government will accept us to communicate with these groups. […] The problem is how can we go there? And if we can go there, what will the response of the government be?* – ERCS staff member

ERCS and UNFPA Sexual Reproductive Health and Gender Based Violence Activities in Amhara Region.

If the act of accessing a certain area to conduct humanitarian operations or engaging in negotiations with different parties might lead to suspicion from the authorities of information sharing with opposing sides, then this highlights how access remains fundamentally about ensuring protection of staff, a task inherently political and fraught with complexity when there are different actors at play. As a staff member of ERCS said, it raises the question of *"protect from what?"*.

> ❝ *Nobody can protect you, that's the challenge. Do you get me? Nobody will protect the driver who goes and talks to TPLF or others. When he comes back, he will be suspected that he might be sharing information with the other side and might be put in jail. Who will protect him? Internal conflict is challenging. We had conflict with Eritrea, Somalia. But the last four years, there has been an internal conflict. This is difficult. The military may suspect me because of my work, they may suspect that I share information and put me in prison. Who is going to protect me? Who is going to give guarantees for me?* – ERCS staff member

The ICRC becomes an important ally in these circumstances and has often moved in the same convoy as ERCS. ERCS colleagues emphasised how, within war dynamics, ICRC's international nature allowed it to safely engage and establish relationships with various actors and traverse regional borders that the ERCS branches could not always cross alone. ICRC's access privilege was often described as resulting from most ICRC staff engaged in negotiations being mostly foreigners and having higher resources and means of communication that provide increased safety and coordination for their staff. In other circumstances, within Tigray for example, ICRC hired Tigrayan staff when trust issues increased towards non-Tigrayans in the region.

> ❝ *ICRC got talking with TPLF military, and later with Federal forces. But we need to work a lot to do that, as a National Society. We want to position ourselves, we are transparent. You know, sometimes we are afraid to speak to our leaders. Yes, we are independent, we are impartial, we are neutral. But we are not used to talking to the government about these issues – otherwise, if I go and talk to both parties, when I get back, the government might send me to prison.* – ERCS staff member

ERCS and UNFPA Sexual Reproductive Health and Gender Based Violence Activities in Amhara Region.

7 RESERCH FINDINGS
Coordination and partnerships

7.1. Best practices of working with the humanitarian sector

Humanitarian coordination in Ethiopia is led by the government and co-led by relevant UN agencies. ERCS actively participates in several coordination platforms, including the Disaster Risk Management (DRM) inter-cluster coordination forum, which is led by the Disaster Risk Management Commission (DRMC) and co-chaired by OCHA. ERCS also participates in the WASH, shelter and NFI, and food clusters. Notably, ERCS is one of the two local civil society organisation members of the Strategic Advisory Group (SAG) for the WASH and health clusters, a testament to its principled approach, auxiliary role and well-recognised reach to communities. Being a member of the SAG allows ERCS to provide technical support, including developing joint assessments, strategic papers and guidelines, and exchanging information.

ERCS's level of engagement varies across different clusters and stakeholders. In the WASH cluster, ERCS is a member at the national level, with lower engagement at regional levels. However, in areas like climate change adaptation or early warning systems, ERCS takes on the role of technical lead. For example, in a recent workshop focused on using digital technology to enhance hydrometeorological services for early warnings in Africa, ERCS collaborated closely with various sectors including government entities such as DRMC, the World Meteorological Organization, the Ethiopian National Meteorology Agency, and the Ministry for Water and Energy. ERCS has taken a lead in preparing a proposal for the next inception period, outlining a detailed plan of action.

ERCS's effective coordination with the sector seems to be enabled by its long-standing presence within communities, a dedicated volunteer base, the trust and access it has established, and its commitment to the Fundamental Principles. These elements have made ERCS a favoured local partner for INGOs, UN agencies, and donors. For example, during the Covid-19 pandemic,

organisations reached out to ERCS to lead on the delivery of humanitarian support due to its volunteers' presence at the grassroots level. ERCS in Addis Ababa collaborates closely with various local civil society organisations, including the Women's Association, youth associations, and the People with Disability Association. These associations provide support in different locations and are also members of ERCS. This collaboration between ERCS and local civil society organisations helps improve services and demonstrates a concerted effort to strengthen the impact of their work in the community.

Collaboration with the sector, including international NGOs and UN agencies, has been particularly relevant in times of conflict. For example, soon after the conflict in Tigray broke out in late 2020, ERCS swiftly deployed an assessment team, which identified, as one of the immediate challenges, the severe lack of water caused by the destruction of the water supply system. To address this critical need, ERCS collaborated with UNICEF to provide assistance during the conflict, showing ERCS's unique added value as a crucial first responder. Such collaboration has also been critical at a time when access to and within the Tigray region was disrupted, as was support from ERCS Headquarters. Collaboration with UN agencies, NGOs and other Movement components, such as ICRC, became critical for the support of ERCS operations in the region.

ERCS's earned trust and access to communities is also attracting increasing interest from donors. ERCS has recently launched a 117 million ETB project in partnership with USAID to rehabilitate displaced populations in conflict-affected areas in the Oromia region, including East Wellega, Ilu Aba Bora, Buno Bedele, Horo Guduru and East Guji zones. The project aims to reach 101,000 people.[29] In the past three years, ERCS has partnered with USAID in shelter construction, livelihood restoration, water facility maintenance, and water, sanitation and hygiene, supporting 88,000 displaced people in Tigray, Amhara, Benshangul-Gumuz, and southern Ethiopia regions. The

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29 ERCS, USAID launch a 117mln Birr project to benefit 101,000 conflict-affected people in Oromia region – Welcome to Fana Broadcasting Corporate S.C (fanabc.com)

UK Foreign Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) recently funded the Ethiopia Crises to Resilience programme, where ERCS is one of the partners alongside UNICEF, WFP, Save the Children and REACH. The consortium will implement a multi-sector humanitarian assistance programme to meet the needs of Ethiopia's most vulnerable populations, support poor households and invest in the humanitarian system so that it is able to identify risks and respond early and cost-effectively to crises.[30]

7.2. Challenges of working with the humanitarian sector

Generally, coordination with the sector is approached with caution, recognising the different mandates and objectives of ERCS compared to NGOs, INGOs, and multilateral agencies. The society values engagements that involve information sharing, but remains cautious as some NGOs may not align with their principles and could potentially impact their privileged auxiliary relations.

For example, during the Tigray conflict, ERCS collaborated with Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) for a short period of time, providing them with ambulances to support their operations in the Abiy Addi area. ERCS and MSF signed a Memorandum of Understanding which agreed to remove all ERCS logos and red cross emblems, replacing them with MSF logos. The decision to lend the ambulances to MSF was partly due to ERCS facing difficulties in accessing certain areas where MSF was operating and lacking resources such as fuel and radio communication to operate the ambulances safely. Despite not lasting long, this partnership resulted in many lives being saved. However, ERCS soon realised that MSF adopted a more vocal approach to advocacy, which conflicted with ERCS's neutrality and auxiliary role and could potentially pose challenges in the long term.

7.3. Movement coordination and the value of complementarity

ERCS coordinates with Movement actors, including ICRC, IFRC and other National Society partners through different platforms, focusing on strategic level, operational level and technical level coordination. The strategic level coordination platform is the highest-level forum chaired by the Secretary General of ERCS, with the heads of ICRC and IFRC delegations as members. The technical level coordination platform includes several committees such as the Emergency Coordination Committee, Communication Committee, Security Coordination Committee, National Society Development (NSD) Taskforce, and Cash Working Group. Overall, the coordination platforms facilitate collaboration and coordination among ERCS and Movement partners at different levels to effectively address strategic, operational, and technical matters.

Close coordination with Movement components has been instrumental for the continuation of ERCS's humanitarian efforts across different regions in times of conflict or disasters. This has allowed ERCS and Movement actors to work in complementarity, leveraging the comparative advantages of all.

For example, during the recent drought in Borena, ERCS worked closely with the Finnish Red Cross, which supported cash transfer programmes, distributing 101,380,500 ETB to nearly 5,200 households. Areas supported include Borena, East Guji and East Bale zones in Oromia region. This close coordination between ERCS regional branches, headquarters and National Society partners helped save lives and alleviate the impact of the drought. ERCS engaged in people-centred and participatory development activities, working with the Swedish Red Cross, Danish Red Cross and in close cooperation with both the government and local communities in north-western Tigray and in eastern Tigray. These projects ranged from WASH programmes to health initiatives.

Cooperation with ICRC was most critical in times of conflict, and complementarity was recognised by ERCS staff as critical to cooperation and to the resilience of ERCS services in challenging times. This includes ICRC help with health facilities, transporting medical supplies via airplanes due to blocked roads, financial support and budget allocations for ambulance operations, as well as support with some ERCS staff salaries and the establishment of the Emergency Operations Centre (EOC) in the south. Joint dissemination activities to authorities and support in communications also proved critical. For example, in Tigray, when the interim government nominated by the Federal government came into power, resulting in access challenges for the Tigray Regional Branch, it was important for ERCS to conduct dissemination sessions, alongside ICRC, to the newly assigned President of the region. Such dissemination focused on the role of the different Movement components and emphasised the need to get free access within and outside Mekelle, as well

as fuel. Although not without difficulties, the regional branch was able to obtain a permission to move across checkpoints up to Shire to continue the delivery of humanitarian services.

The comparative advantages of ERCS and ICRC are most evident in issues related to access and protection. ICRC and ERCS regularly provide safer access training, to ensure staff, volunteers and governing board members at both headquarters and regional levels have a comprehensive understanding of the Safer Access Framework[31] including issues related to access, safety, security and emblem use. Once they have received the training, regional branches have been cascading the learning to zonal and district-level staff and volunteers.

Cooperation between ERCS and ICRC was also critical in situations involving the looting of ambulances or detention of ERCS volunteers and staff, where ICRC proactively engaged with local authorities or different non-state armed groups to

ERCS and ICRC Distribute Food and NF Items to IDPs in Ebinat, Amhara Region.

30 DevTracker Programme GB-GOV-1-301474 (fcdo.gov.uk)

negotiate their release, often going directly to the affected area. At the same time, ERCS was able to leverage their auxiliary role and the trust built within communities to support ICRC in crossing some checkpoints, as seen in Oromia. In Tigray, while cross-regional access was nearly impossible for ERCS headquarters, ICRC functioned as a critical lifeline for the local and regional branches in Tigray. Once in the region, it was the ERCS regional branch who would distribute humanitarian aid, leveraging their more local access and acceptance within communities.

Such experiences were not unique to Tigray, but included coordinated efforts in Amhara region, another critical example of complementarity in action. Recent events saw the ICRC delivering medication to Bahir Dhar airport, from where the ERCS Amhara Regional Branch took on the task of distributing it to West Gojjam, were ERCS branches were actively engaging with the community and healthcare facilities, particularly hospitals in urgent need of medication. This synergistic relationship leverages local access and reach held by ERCS branches, such as those in Tigray and Amhara, and the ability of the ICRC to cross regional borders.

IFRC-ERCS Cholera response activities in Moyale Oromia and Somali Woredas.

7.4. Challenges of Movement coordination and complementarity

Despite the evident benefits of collaborating with the Movement, these partnerships are not without challenges. Suboptimal coordination both among Movement partners and within individual organisations was highlighted as a lesson from the Tigray conflict. To improve future outcomes, suggestions were made for all actors to align under a unified plan with shared priorities identified by ERCS, to ensure clear communication, information-sharing and collaboration between different Movement actors, and to support preparedness for future disasters and conflict.

While increasing efforts have been made to reach a consensus on working together, there is still room for improvement in terms of coordination and information-sharing, engagement with authorities, programme implementation, and community perceptions. Working towards overcoming challenges in these areas has the potential to promote ERCS's leadership role in humanitarian responses.

A step in that direction would be to increase efforts by Movement partners to support the positioning of ERCS as the leading, principled humanitarian actor of the Movement, both with authorities and other groups, particularly in times of conflict. This could contribute to a more sustainable and resilient National Society and help address or minimise the operational and movement obstacles it faces. Such issues were highlighted as particularly challenging in Tigray.

Perceptions and behaviours have also posed challenges, as communities do not differentiate between ERCS, ICRC, IFRC, or other National Society partners. Any actions by any Movement partners that do not meet communities' expectations can reflect on or undermine ERCS's reputation, given its embedded presence within the community. Therefore, it is crucial to consider cultural sensitivities and perception issues and their potential impact on operations.

While ERCS's limited capacity is often presented to justify not involving them in relevant engagements with authorities, it should be the responsibility of Movement partners, including IFRC, ICRC and other National Societies to support and strengthen precisely that capacity and support ERCS's positioning. While the value of complementarity is undeniable, challenges arise when it comes to translating complementarity into practical action. As expressed by ERCS, this may lead to international Movement components dominating and marginalising ERCS as the leading local Movement actor in the country.

At the same time, ERCS is equally aware of its own responsibility to strengthen its positioning as humanitarian auxiliary with the authorities, questioning whether their role is fully understood by the government. ERCS staff, leadership and board members expressed the importance of focusing on humanitarian diplomacy efforts to strengthen ERCS positioning, including by increasing Movement support in this area.

8

Conclusions

The debate around principled humanitarian action often puts the relevance of humanitarian principles in local contexts into question, especially if they are not communicated effectively. At the same time, assumptions suggesting that local humanitarian actors lack neutrality and independence may be used to perpetuate existing inequalities and power imbalances within the humanitarian system.[32] The experience of the Ethiopian Red Cross Society (ERCS) shows both the centrality and relevance of the Fundamental Principles for their operations, access, partnerships and coordination. ERCS deliberately and consistently applies the Fundamental Principles in ways that are aligned with local contexts and supported by local values, and has done so for decades. As a result, theoretical ideals around impartiality or neutrality are transformed into practiced and culturally-relevant realities that resonate with communities.

ERCS's recognised credibility, established over years of effective, neutral, impartial, and independent delivery of humanitarian services, underpinned by its robust, country-wide volunteer network, has granted the organisation access to areas that are largely inaccessible to other humanitarian or government actors. This allows humanitarian aid to reach the most vulnerable individuals, ensuring that those who cannot be reached by traditional support systems are not left behind. Through its principled approach, ERCS is able to effectively support the delivery of government services, complementing its efforts in critical areas of health, disaster preparedness and response, and serving as a model of the unique value that National Societies bring in building the foundational resilience of societies.

At the same time, ERCS's experience shows how conflict amplifies both the opportunities and challenges of its auxiliary role, and the related tensions with the Fundamental Principles. While the auxiliary role and the principle of independence can be perceived as inherently conflicting, lessons learned from ERCS emphasise the importance of these reinforcing one other to better enable the delivery of humanitarian services by a National

Society. In practice, ERCS has effectively used government-owned assets, subsidised resources or donors' support to deliver essential humanitarian aid to areas that would otherwise be inaccessible, and has successfully reached regions where the presence of various armed groups hinders government aid efforts. This practice underscores the significance of ERCS's independence in effectively fulfilling its auxiliary mandate and supporting the government in meeting its humanitarian obligations. It also is a reminder that its independence needs be effectively communicated to, and well understood by, all parties in order to create the appropriate space for ERCS to operate.

However, in highly polarised environments, particularly when there are regional divisions, the auxiliary role can also put pressure on a National Society, as it may be wrongly perceived as affiliated with the government. These challenges are exacerbated by the urgency of war, frequent turnovers within military forces, and changes in governance and power structures, which can erode the overall understanding of the Fundamental Principles and of the mandate of the ERCS. When internal conflict intensifies and perceived regional affiliations impact access and protection, the trust of communities and a principled approach are not a guarantee of access on the ground, and staff and volunteers have to negotiate with different, often opposing forces with significant risks to their safety. This shows the dilemma that National Societies operating in internal conflicts as auxiliaries to public authorities may have to navigate: there is an expectation that they will communicate their impartiality and neutrality to all parties in order to secure access and fulfil their mandate, but doing this potentially affects the trust placed in them by others, including possibly their own authorities.

The complexities associated with operationalising the auxiliary role are often not fully understood and appreciated by donors and international actors. Providing humanitarian assistance in times of conflict entails more than just distributing aid; it also

involves navigating political sensitivities, addressing perception issues, and countering misinformation that can endanger staff and volunteers and affect community trust and relationships with authorities. Sharing lessons and examples that can explain the nuances of the auxiliary role in practice is crucial, as these relationships do not develop or play out in a vacuum but are deeply intertwined with contextual and political dynamics. National Societies possess an understanding of these dynamics and play a unique role in reconciling the complexities involved in implementing the auxiliary role and upholding the Fundamental Principles to effectively serve those in need.

ERCS has effectively addressed some of the challenges faced by its branches by implementing strategies at both the operational and strategic levels. They have achieved this by leveraging their special features, complementarity with Movement partners (particularly ICRC), and trust and acceptance of communities. However, while ERCS's experience shows how legal frameworks are important in defining the parameters and mutual responsibilities of the auxiliary role, their mere existence does not automatically translate into guarantees at the operational level. Instead, continuous negotiations, humanitarian diplomacy efforts and dissemination are necessary with authorities at all levels, given the dynamic nature of the auxiliary role – a space that needs ongoing nurturing, negotiation, and flexibility to adapt to evolving political and security environments. ERCS's governing board and management have a key role to play in humanitarian diplomacy efforts on behalf of the most vulnerable communities. This can continue to be leveraged with government officials at both Federal and regional state levels for better access and safety of its staff and volunteers.

ERCS benefits from its longstanding legacy, strong reputation, and trust established with the government and communities over many years of local, principled humanitarian action. These factors serve as valuable assets in strengthening the auxiliary role through targeted and evidence-based influencing. Documenting best practices that

demonstrate the unique value of local, principled humanitarian action, and sharing insights on key challenges, can contribute to effective advocacy for communities in need, helping protect the integrity of the humanitarian space in times of conflict, and facilitating the exchange of expertise and learning with partners within and beyond the Movement. At the same time, Movement partners bear the responsibility of supporting and empowering National Societies like ERCS to enhance their capacity and reinforce their positioning with authorities as the primary and permanent local humanitarian actor in the country. Understanding how dynamics within the Movement can either facilitate or undermine local leadership is crucial to these endeavours.

32 https://library.alnap.org/help-library/is-aid-really-changing-what-the-covid-19-response-tells-us-about-localisation-0

9

Recommendations

The below recommendations were co-developed by ERCS and BRC with inputs from DRC, other National Society partners and the ICRC, at a workshop held in Addis Ababa in May 2024 to present and discuss the findings of this report.

RECOMMENDATION 1: Establish a structured and regular dialogue with the authorities at both national and regional levels to strengthen ERCS' auxiliary role, as well as with Non-State Armed Groups to improve safe access and protection.

To strengthen ERCS' auxiliary role and positioning as a partner of choice to the public authorities, it is critical to establish a structured and regular dialogue with authorities at both national and regional levels. This approach should replace ad-hoc interactions that only occur during crises or when resources are needed. Through these systematic dialogues, ERCS can communicate its humanitarian mandate, and its strategic role and offer as an auxiliary to the public authorities, highlighting its expertise in IHL, DRM, WASH and health. As part of these efforts, ERCS should also establish dialogue with Non-State Armed Groups in different regions, to promote safe access and protection. Regular engagement will create the space to discuss operational challenges and build trust and understanding with different actors, allowing ERCS to better advocate for populations in need while improving the safety of its staff and volunteers in times of conflict.

ACTIVITIES

1. **Offer regular, high-level, evidence-based engagement to public authorities at both national and regional levels** to strengthen understanding of ERCS' auxiliary role and strategic offer, improve awareness of the Fundamental Principles and the rightful use of the emblem, and position ERCS as a principled local humanitarian actor of choice. These interactions should be used to discuss ERCS's role, capabilities and initiatives, and to sensitise government officials on principled humanitarian action, mutual expectations, challenges and opportunities in conflict- or disaster-affected areas.

2. **Define and develop ERCS' strategic offer as an auxiliary to the public authorities to strengthen the partnership.** This should highlight ERCS' added value based on existing capacities and skillsets at both headquarters and regional levels, including on IHL, DRM, WASH and health. ERCS should communicate its strategic offer to the authorities as part of its regular engagement, supported by adequate -evidence of ERCS work at local, regional and national levels.

3. **Develop an ERCS training offer for government officials, military and police on IHL, emblem use, the Fundamental Principles and the auxiliary role, with support from Movement partners.** The aim should be to promote awareness of ERCS' special features and visibility of ERCS' expertise in IHL among public authorities and the military, leveraging ERCS' well-established relationships with the Ministry of Defence. This training can complement ICRC trainings, offering the unique perspective of ERCS as a local actor.

4. **Establish regular dialogue between ERCS branches and Non-State Armed Groups (NSAG) across different regions to promote awareness of ERCS's role and principled approach and encourage respect of IHL and the red cross emblem.** The aim of this dialogue is to improve protection outcomes and safe access for ERCS staff and volunteers and should be developed in complementarity with ICRC and with support from peer National Societies who have experience of engaging with NSAG.

5. **Leverage diplomatic engagement through international missions in Ethiopia, and Ethiopian embassies throughout Africa and in other key strategic contexts, with the support of National Society partners.**

This could include arranging briefings with diplomatic missions in Ethiopia to garner their support and diplomatic leverage to further ERCS operations, access and initiatives. This could be complemented by engaging with Ethiopian embassies in other African countries, and beyond, to improve ERCS' visibility and positioning with missions in relevant and strategic contexts.

RECOMMENDATION 2: Develop a comprehensive induction programme to strengthen ERCS' internal cohesion, capacity and expertise on humanitarian diplomacy and the National Society's special features, as well as strategic external dissemination.

Implementing a robust induction strategy with tailored levels for ERCS board members, management, staff and volunteers would enhance the National Society's humanitarian diplomacy skills and boost its confidence to negotiate with public authorities, during both peace time and conflict. This approach would improve organisational cohesion and maximise the auxiliary role's potential, thereby increasing ERCS' visibility, positioning with and acceptance by public authorities. A targeted external dissemination strategy should complement this induction to foster trust and help stakeholders better understand ERCS' principled role.

ACTIVITIES

1. **Develop comprehensive induction and training programmes for ERCS board and management at both headquarters and branch levels.** ERCS management and board members, who are often representatives of government or local authorities, have huge influencing power that can be leveraged to support ERCS' services and activities, negotiate safer access, and resolve operational challenges. The induction should focus on ERCS' mandate, humanitarian diplomacy capabilities, media training, effective communication, and negotiation skills, with support from Movement partners in country. Periodic refresher courses should be ensured.

2. **Strengthen induction and training programmes with periodic refreshers, for staff and volunteers covering the Fundamental Principles, auxiliary role, social media use, negotiation skills, and safety and security.** Follow the induction with regular updates and mentorship from experienced staff, focusing on working in conflict and emergency situations. This will ensure staff and volunteers understand the practical aspects of the auxiliary role and Fundamental Principles, preparing them to handle operational challenges and negotiate confidently with military, police, or the authorities in a principled manner.

3. **Strengthen mass dissemination activities to promote ERCS's mandate, principles and emblem among communities at the grass root level to enhance trust and acceptance.** This can be done through schools and other community structures on the ground.

4. **Build on the current ERCS communication strategy to strengthen two-way communications and dissemination channels with the public and media.** Utilise existing community networks and, if needed, implement platforms such as online feedback systems to strengthen two-way communication with communities to ensure their concerns and feedback are listened to and addressed. Establish key relationships with the media.

RECOMMENDATION 3: Strengthen the capacity and resilience of ERCS branches and services to respond efficiently and autonomously when conflicts or other emergencies occur.

Enhancing the preparedness, capacity and resilience of ERCS branches is vital for efficient conflict response, especially when disconnected from headquarters. This includes pre-positioning essential supplies and cash at strategic locations for rapid deployment to ensure that branches can respond autonomously. Conflict

preparedness includes developing contingency plans, regular training and simulations, and establishing alternative communication systems for continuity during blackouts. Empowering branches to mobilise local resources and build strong community relationships can help to ensure the resilience of services. This approach could be supported by Movement partners as part of ERCS branch development plans, to prepare branches to meet the needs of affected populations in times of conflict or other disasters.

ACTIVITIES

1. **Invest in and deploy alternative communication infrastructure at branch level.** These should include satellite phones and VHF radios, ensuring they are operational before crises occur.

2. **Develop creative resource mobilisation and fundraising initiatives.** These should involve community members and diverse businesses to generate resources for branch-level preparedness.

3. **Ensure strategic pre-positioning of resources.** Identify strategic locations across the country for pre-positioning of emergency supplies, including food, water, cash and non-food items (NFIs), and ensure these locations are stocked and maintained.

4. **Enhance contingency safety and security plans.** Develop detailed contingency plans and Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) for each branch, tailored to local risks and possible scenarios, and conduct annual simulations to test these plans.

5. **Invest in community resilience building.** Engage local communities in yearly resilience-building activities, such as disaster preparedness and community emergency response workshops.

6. **Strengthen strategic partnerships with the sector in line with the Fundamental Principles.** Systematise engagement in coordination fora at regional and national levels and invest in strengthening relationships with the sector to ensure better coordination, complementarity and mutual support in times of conflict.

RECOMMENDATION 4: **Establish a systematic approach to documenting and analysing humanitarian responses and activities, and gather evidence of good practices and challenges faced in conflict responses, to inform future actions, strategies and humanitarian diplomacy efforts.**

Systematically documenting and analysing past operations is crucial for continuous improvement and learning. By capturing records of challenges, successes and lessons learned, ERCS can build a valuable repository of knowledge to inform future actions and strategies. This can involve conducting after-action reviews, compiling response summaries and facilitating knowledge-sharing sessions between branches, Movement partners, and the broader sector. A systematic approach to documenting and learning could enable ERCS to adapt its practices based on its own evidence and experience, while also using this evidence to inform humanitarian diplomacy and influencing.

ACTIVITIES

1. **Invest in documentation and evidence building.** Document lessons learned from different conflict responses, including challenges faced, strategies used to address them and areas for improvement.

2. **Develop evidence-based briefings and presentations to support strategic engagement.** Use data and case studies from past operations to create compelling briefs that highlight ERCS' impact and effectiveness; share these with authorities, donors and other stakeholders to support ERCS' influencing efforts.

3. **Systematise learning exchanges between branches to learn from past responses.** These should be aimed at identifying gaps and challenges, and building on good practices, using existing channels and/or developing new ones for sharing documented experiences and lessons learned.

4. **Integrate learning into induction and training programmes for ERCS board and management, staff and volunteers** to ensure they have up-to-date information and are equipped to apply best practices in future operations.

RECOMMENDATION 5: **Strengthen coordination with Movement partners – including ICRC, IFRC and National Society partners – and ensure complementarity between influencing efforts, with ERCS positioned as the permanent, principled, local actor.**

Effective coordination and complementary influencing efforts within the Movement are essential for maximising collective impact. Strengthening coordination can involve utilising existing platforms to share challenges, lessons and best practices with Movement partners. These discussions should also include branch management, to enhance internal coordination within ERCS. This approach avoids duplication and aligns efforts toward common goals, which can help to boost ERCS' visibility and positioning as the Movement's permanent, principled, local actor in Ethiopia, with support from partners. Presenting a united front enhances the Movement's influence and credibility with stakeholders, policymakers and the public, advancing humanitarian principles and achieving better outcomes for affected populations, in line with localisation approaches.

ACTIVITIES

1. **Enhance information sharing, unified messaging and coordination of influencing and humanitarian diplomacy efforts with Movement partners, and utilise existing coordination meetings and shared online platforms to improve collaboration.** Humanitarian diplomacy efforts should be aligned and complementary, with ERCS taking the lead to strengthen its capacity on key issues such as humanitarian access and civilian protection.

2. **Enhance frank bilateral dialogue with ICRC to strengthen partnership quality** at both headquarters and branch levels, addressing challenges and concerns around partnership dynamics and their impact on both operations and influencing efforts with authorities.

3. **Make intentional efforts to strengthen internal coordination between headquarters and branches.** Ensure ERCS branch leadership teams are involved in Movement partnerships meetings, as well as ERCS internal decision-making processes.

ERCS Volunteer activity of drought affected peoples in Borena Zone.