

The British Red Cross's humanitarian auxiliary role to the UK government and armed forces

The British Red Cross has a special, officially recognised status and role as an auxiliary to the public authorities in the humanitarian field. This guidance sets out the British Red Cross's understanding of the auxiliary role and how it applies across our work.

Introduction

1. The British Red Cross, like other National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, has a special, officially recognised status and role as an auxiliary to the public authorities in the humanitarian field, which applies at all times, both in peace and in war.¹ This means that the British Red Cross has a unique legal status: it is a private organisation with certain recognised public functions; it is neither part of government nor a non-governmental organisation (NGO).
2. The auxiliary status and role are a National Society's standing invitation to participate in public humanitarian services; they provide an automatic relationship between a National Society and its government. In practice, the auxiliary role brings with it mutual benefits and responsibilities.
3. However, a National Society must also be able to act autonomously in accordance with the principles of the Movement. This tension is recognised in the Fundamental Principle of Independence, when it states "National Societies, while auxiliaries in the humanitarian services of their governments and subject to the laws of their respective countries, must always maintain their autonomy so that they may be able at all times to act in accordance with the principles of the Movement."
4. Governments have recognised that the autonomy of National Societies and their commitment to neutrality and impartial assistance, provides the best available means to gain the confidence of all in order to have access to those in need.²
5. The auxiliary status of the British Red Cross exists at all times, regardless of the activity, public or private, and whether it is undertaken on our own initiative or in co-operation with government.

Definitions

Auxiliary status is permanent. The British Red Cross's Royal Charter is the legal document that recognises our organisation as a humanitarian auxiliary to the UK Government.

Auxiliary role is the implementation in practice of our auxiliary status (as opposed to other tasks which the BRC might undertake in a private capacity and outside of its auxiliary relationship).

¹ Article 3, The Royal Charter of the British Red Cross Society

² Resolution 2, 30th International Conference of the Red Cross and Red Crescent (2007)

Our approach

The British Red Cross will uphold its responsibilities as a humanitarian auxiliary to the UK government, and will seek to build and maintain a relationship of trust and co-operation in order to support the public authorities in their humanitarian tasks, according to the needs of the people of the UK.

The above is important in order to ensure that we:

- > Uphold our responsibilities as a National Society under the Statutes of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and our Royal Charter.
- > Manage with care the tension between being a humanitarian auxiliary and being independent. There needs to be an appropriate balance between the need for close relations with the UK government, and the need to maintain our autonomy in order that we are able to act at all times in accordance with the Fundamental Principles.
- > Consolidate a balanced relationship with clear and reciprocal responsibilities, maintaining and enhancing a permanent dialogue at all levels with the UK government, within a humanitarian framework.³ This will help to ensure that we are able to raise with the UK government the most sensitive humanitarian questions in a private, privileged and constructive manner, and that we are similarly consulted.
- > Are able to act, where appropriate and required, as a link between the UK government and the humanitarian sector, for example, in a convenor capacity.
- > Help us to identify those BRC activities that are auxiliary, and to ensure that our people have a clear and common understanding of the auxiliary role, its advantages and restrictions, and how it applies across our work.
- > Enable us to communicate effectively to the UK public and to relevant stakeholders about our unique identity, and how we put our Fundamental Principles into practice.

The auxiliary status of a National Society brings **benefits and responsibilities**:

- > The British Red Cross has a duty to consider seriously any request of the UK government to carry out humanitarian activities within our mandate;
- > The British Red Cross has a responsibility to work co-operatively, with the UK government, establishing a balanced relationship with the authorities based on mutual trust, respect, dialogue and support. Where it is necessary to take up an opposing public position, to do so in a way which enables an effective long term relationship between the two parties to be preserved.

³ Resolution 2, 30th International Conference of the Red Cross and Red Crescent

Putting the Auxiliary Role into Practice

The British Red Cross already provides considerable humanitarian support to the UK government, sometimes without an explicit acknowledgment by the two parties that these activities are a function of our auxiliary role. This is not necessarily problematic, provided we are still able to work together to concentrate on the humanitarian task in hand.

Nevertheless, the auxiliary status can enable the relationship by helping to demonstrate our unique status, our neutrality, and our co-operative approach to working with partners in government. This can help in cementing and growing existing relationships, and in developing new ones.

Examples of UK services which fulfil the auxiliary role

Emergency response in the UK	Delivery of direct support to the statutory emergency services; involvement in national and local resilience fora.
Ambulance support	Delivery of direct support to the National Health Service.
Administering and managing funds for victims of disasters	Serving as a bridge between the government and the population; providing a channel for the humanitarian instinct of the people of the UK.
Psycho-social support to FCO Rapid Deployment Teams	Delivery of a humanitarian support function to UK government rapid deployment teams responding to emergencies overseas.
International humanitarian law	Directly supporting the UK government to meet their obligations under IHL.

These activities are not static; our implementation of the auxiliary role must continually adapt to meet new requirements. Similarly, our humanitarian function also goes far wider than this; we remain a private organisation with the ability to respond in many areas that are not linked to our auxiliary role.

Indeed, in cases where independence is critical for access and effective assistance to vulnerable groups such as asylum seekers, it may be necessary to act more in our private than our public role. However, even in such cases, there may be instances where our auxiliary status will help us to gain access to key decision-makers.

Examples of UK services where a more nuanced approach might be required

First aid training	Some life-saving skills are offered free as a public service, whereas specific first aid at work courses and public first aid courses are provided for a fee.
Refugee services	Requires a close working relationship with the public authorities; however the BRC may not always agree with current government policy or practice.
Health and social care	Requires a close working relationship with the authorities; however the BRC must ensure that we are not perceived as providing a way for the government to avoid responsibility for service delivery, and that our involvement in the provision of such services is not politicised.

It is the primary responsibility of States to provide humanitarian assistance to vulnerable people on their territories. The purpose of National Societies as humanitarian auxiliaries is to 'supplement' them in fulfilling this responsibility. The specific role to be played will depend on need, and the relationship between the National Society and its government. It would be unusual for the BRC to replace statutory services provided by the UK government. On the other hand, there are National Societies in countries where the government has limited capacity who do indeed find it necessary to 'substitute' public humanitarian services. Similarly, on occasion, a National Society may fill a gap in service provision until the State or another service provider can assure it.

How we make the most of this special feature of our organisation depends on the objectives we are trying to achieve. We may choose to communicate and apply the auxiliary role in different ways, depending on the audience and our desired outcome.

It is, however, always important that everyone understands the basics. This will help to increase people's understanding (both inside and outside of the government) of the British Red Cross and of the Movement generally, and what makes us unique. It may also assist BRC volunteers and staff to have a clearer sense of the organisation to which they belong.

Supporting documents

The following rules and Movement policies are relevant to the auxiliary role:

- i. The Royal Charter of the British Red Cross Society.
- ii. The Fundamental Principles.
- iii. Articles 3 and 4 (3), Statutes of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement.
- iv. Characteristics of a balanced relationship between States and National Societies as auxiliaries to the public authorities in the humanitarian field.⁴
- v. The Specific Nature of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement in Action and Partnerships and the Role of National Societies as Auxiliaries to the Public Authorities in the Humanitarian Field.⁵
- vi. Furthering the auxiliary role: Partnership for stronger National Societies and volunteering development.⁶

⁴ Report to the 2003 Council of Delegates, Conclusions of the IFRC Study on the Auxiliary Role

⁵ Resolution 2, 30th International Conference of the Red Cross and Red Crescent (2007)

⁶ Resolution 4, 31st International Conference of the Red Cross and Red Crescent (2011)

Appendix 1: The British Red Cross and our auxiliary status – a user's guide

Communicating and developing our auxiliary role

Not only is the auxiliary role a defining characteristic of National Societies, but it also requires dialogue about responsibilities and roles. As such, the public authorities and the National Society should seek to ensure that the auxiliary role reflects and is adapted to the needs and priorities of each side. Regular dialogue around humanitarian issues is essential to ensure that the auxiliary role is serving its purpose and the needs of both the public authorities and the National Society in the best way.

DO

- ✓ Take the auxiliary role into consideration when thinking about new activities, and when developing existing services. Consider how the auxiliary role might facilitate our objectives, or the risks it might pose.
- ✓ Communicate to partners, both in government and outside government, about our unique status and why it is important. Use the language of the Fundamental Principles, and the structure and mandate of the Movement, to help to explain.
- ✓ Work with partners in government in a spirit of co-operation, in order to achieve common humanitarian objectives. Consider the value of private and confidential constructive dialogue with officials, versus an adversarial or publicity-seeking approach. What will best meet our real-world humanitarian objectives?
- ✓ Incorporate the auxiliary role into agreements and MOUs, where appropriate.
- ✓ Have a conversation within the BRC about the auxiliary role and why it makes us unique.

DON'T

- ✗ Pretend that we don't have a relationship with the government, in order to suit a particular situation. Rather, seek to explain and clarify the auxiliary role, in a way that is appropriate to the circumstances.
- ✗ Overtly criticise or condemn current government policy and practice. Our tone should be helpful and should focus on humanitarian need.

Appendix 2: Q&A

> How can the auxiliary role be **compatible with the Fundamental Principles**⁷, especially Neutrality and Independence?

- In the definition of Independence the tension with the auxiliary role is recognised. This Fundamental Principle states that National Societies must always maintain their autonomy so that they may act at all times in accordance with the principles of the Movement.
- Governments have formally acknowledged that our commitment to neutrality and impartial assistance provide the best available means to have access to those in need.
- The Principle of Neutrality is concerned primarily with avoiding controversies of a political, racial, religious or ideological nature. This does not necessarily mean that we are unable to engage with government, but that involving ourselves in controversies of a political nature may diminish the confidence in the BRC by some part of the population. We may not become engaged publicly in issues that might alienate others and therefore limit our ability to respond impartially to the most urgent cases of distress.

The key then is to retain our freedom of action, whilst maintaining a co-operative relationship with the public authorities and seeking to avoid becoming engaged in issues that compromise our ability to uphold the Principle of Neutrality.

> Is it just about us helping the UK government? What are the **responsibilities of the government**?

- An important part of the auxiliary relationship is the role of the public authorities to promote and support the capacity building of their National Societies to be effective and strong humanitarian organisations.
- The government also has a responsibility to respect our compliance with the Fundamental Principles; the government should not ask us to do anything that is not in accordance with our principles.

> What are the **benefits** of the auxiliary role for the BRC?

- A distinct identity, clearly separate from non-governmental organisations.
- Access to decision-makers in government and the armed forces⁸.

⁷ For more information on the Fundamental Principles and, in particular, the application of the Principles of Neutrality and Independence, please see [The Fundamental Principles of the Red Cross: Commentary](#).

⁸ NB in addition to the long-established trust and co-operation we have with officials and senior military officers, we chair or have a place on a number of bodies by virtue of our auxiliary role. Bodies that we believe we chair due to this special status include the Voluntary Sector Civil Protection Forum (Cabinet Office), and the NGO-Military Contact Group (MoD). Bodies that we attribute our membership of because of our special status, include the Foreign Secretary's Advisory Group on Human Rights (FCO) and the Inter-departmental Committee on International Humanitarian Law (the UK National IHL Committee).

- A recognised part in national plans and policies in the health and social welfare sectors and in disaster preparedness and response.
- Involvement in the UK's implementation of international humanitarian law.
- The ability to use the red cross emblem and name.
- Participation in the quadrennial International Conference of the Red Cross and Red Crescent; enabling us to influence humanitarian issues at the global level, on an equal footing with States.
- The ability to serve as a link between government and civil society e.g. as a convenor.

> What are the **risks** associated with the auxiliary role?

- The auxiliary role is not an automatic guarantee of acceptance of and trust in the BRC by the public authorities. We still need to be able to deliver our humanitarian purpose.
- Misperceptions about who we are; we are not part of government, but nor are we a non-governmental organisation.
- Impact on how we position ourselves publicly, in particular, there may be an expectation that we will not take a public position on certain issues.

Ends.

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