



## Calling for change in a time of crisis

**Zoë Abrams, Executive director of communications, advocacy and strategy at British Red Cross**

The ideas explored in this collection of essays remind us that, among the devastation caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, positive change can happen. In the last year, we have seen the best of humanity. From Red Cross volunteers eager to help people get home safely from hospital despite the threat of Covid-19, to those offering to help their shielding neighbour with food shopping, people across our communities have shown, more than ever, the power of kindness.

During this time, we've all been struck by people's willingness to learn, reflect and improve. Like so many of our partners, my colleagues and I at the Red Cross have challenged ourselves to answer what can sometimes feel like difficult questions.

Was the disproportionate impact of the pandemic on certain communities inevitable? Could we have done more to help? Are we set up in a way that effectively meets the needs of the most vulnerable? What do we need to do to recover and protect our communities against future shocks?

No single organisation can solve the issues exposed and exacerbated by Covid-19.

**The British Red Cross will continue to try to fill the gaps, support people to recover and prevent them falling into future crisis. But where we can't fully meet people's humanitarian needs ourselves or with our partners, we will advocate for change.**

We know change doesn't happen overnight – however we also know seismic events like Covid-19 have the unique ability to galvanise attempts to shift the status quo.

The path to recovery will no doubt be long but to get there we need to take smart, decisive steps. In the coming months, the British Red Cross will be calling on UK governments to drive real change for people in, or at risk of, crisis across a range of priority areas:

- **Eliminate the gaps in health and social care**

Our health and social care system must better meet people's holistic needs, focusing on person-centred support which is better at preventing people from falling through the gaps between services. To start this process, the Health and Care Bill for England must do more to address inequalities in health and social care, including by looking at services in a joined-up way and investing in care and support in the community (particularly where it is lacking the most). Social prescribing link workers should also continue to be rolled out – not just across primary care but within acute settings too.

- **Ensure humanitarian needs are met in emergencies**

We'd like the upcoming review of the Civil Contingencies Act to introduce a clear statutory responsibility for national government and category one responders to fully meet the humanitarian needs of their communities. This should include a duty to provide assistance so nobody goes hungry, without shelter or without psychosocial support during and after a crisis. The planned National Resilience Strategy will also be key in ensuring UK communities have the connections they need to withstand future crises. Our emergency response systems also need to adapt to the increased global

risk of climate and extreme-weather emergencies by ensuring disaster risk reduction is climate smart and by investing in adaptation as well as mitigation. Relatively simple changes, such as improving effective early warning systems and using seasonal forecast data, can prevent emergencies from becoming disasters.

- **Move towards cash-based assistance in emergencies**

With a strong presence both across the UK and internationally, the British Red Cross sees the potential to learn from best practice around the world. This year in the UK we have seen the benefit of supporting people through cash and vouchers assistance, rather than goods in kind. We know from our work overseas this is a more cost-effective approach that not only ensures a more dignified response, but also allows people to get hold of what they personally need as quickly as possible in an emergency. We



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continue to call for a greater, long-term investment in local welfare assistance schemes and for these schemes to use a cash-first approach to help ensure people facing serious financial hardship can afford essentials, such as food, toiletries, and warm clothes.

- **Provide safe and legal routes for people seeking asylum**

It is the government's responsibility to ensure that people experiencing displacement feel safe, are able to live with dignity and have choices on their journey. This should include looking first at domestic policy, ensuring there are safe and legal routes to seeking asylum in the UK, and that the end-to-end experience of a person in the asylum system is efficient, fair and humane. The Sovereign Borders Bill offers an opportunity to look again at making improvements to the whole system, rather than looking at specific challenges in silo. We will be advocating for a number of core principles, including people's right to claim asylum and the inappropriateness of a two-tiered system based on mode of arrival; and the right for all to a safe home and freedom from destitution.

- **Uphold international law and principled humanitarian action**

As the government outlines its vision for the UK's global role as part of the Integrated Review, it must commit to upholding and promoting international law and principled humanitarian action. The UK should ensure that those most in need are put first, and that the focus of humanitarian action is on the world's most vulnerable communities.

The steps outlined above are the first of many that will take us into our next 150 years.

**We are determined to look back on this pandemic and know we truly did our best to work towards a more resilient, compassionate future. We look forward to working with decision makers across the UK in the weeks, months and years ahead to make this a reality.**