Supplementary Guidance on the Policy on Migration

Advisory Note

ACTION TO REDUCE THE RISKS OF MIGRATION

National Societies have identified awareness raising about the risks of migration and the reduction of these risks as a challenge of special complexity. The present note spells out the essential rules and recommendations for strategic programming in this area, based on the IFRC Policy on Migration (2009) as well as on relevant programme expertise within the Movement. It focuses on guidance that is indispensable and valid for all Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies at the global level.

1. Background

Many migrants succeed in establishing themselves in their new communities, but their journey can also expose them to risks. While National Societies provide assistance and protection to potential and actual migrants all along the migratory trails – in countries of origin, transit and destination – the present note focuses on basic risk reduction in the form of action in countries of origin.

The Policy on Migration recognizes that people who decide to migrate need to know about the risks of migration. It underlines that, although the Red Cross and Red Crescent must remain neutral, National Societies may raise the awareness of potential migrants about such risks, and thus contribute to the prevention of human suffering.

Further, the Policy also highlights the importance of National Society action to alleviate the pressures on communities, which compel people to migrate against their will and desire and take high risks in doing so.

The term “risks of migration” relates to the full range of threats to the physical integrity, well-being, and fundamental rights of migrants. Migrants may be exposed to direct harm to their physical and mental health, as well as to exploitation, abuse, and trafficking in persons. They also may suffer economic hardship, discrimination and the denial of access to humanitarian assistance (e.g. health care)¹. Other migratory risks are related to social and psychological isolation and the disruption of family

¹ See Advisory note on Action to Ensure Humanitarian Access for and to Migrants.
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links. Finally, migrants’ well-being is also under threat if they come into conflict with the law, which may result in prosecution and detention.

National Societies can contribute to raising awareness as well as alleviating migratory pressures\(^2\) by taking action within communities. As migrants by their own choices can reduce risks, National Societies can also help individuals and their families in making informed individual decisions about whether to migrate or not, and under which conditions.

The humanitarian imperative means that at the basis of Red Cross and Red Crescent action must be the will to aid people in need, and in an impartial manner. Hence, programmes to reduce the risks of migration should not be isolated, but rather integrated within an overall framework of humanitarian assistance.

National Societies do not take part in government schemes to encourage, prevent or dissuade migration. Whether to migrate or not is a personal choice made within a local cultural, social and economic context. The goal of National Societies is to empower migrants to explore all available options and their consequences, i.e. to help them establish realistic and positive prospects for themselves.

If National Societies were part of governmental policies to hinder migration or enforce measures against certain forms of it, they would lose credibility and trust with potential migrants and jeopardize the neutrality of the Movement. Populations who perceive the Red Cross or Red Crescent as acting in governmental interests, rather than as an impartial, neutral, and independent humanitarian actor, may refrain from seeking help and advice.

If National Societies choose to raise awareness and provide information on migration, this will be with a view to informing comprehensively about conditions in countries of transit and destination, about migrants’ rights and obligations, and about how to access humanitarian services.

\(^2\) Pressures that can induce people to migrate against their will and desire; see Policy on Migration, Principle 10.

“People deciding to migrate in search of safety and new places to live and work need to know about the risks of migration, which for irregular migrants can be life threatening. Migrants’ hopes for opportunities abroad may also be inflated and unrealistic. Raising the awareness of potential migrants about the risks of migration, and of conditions in countries of destination, can prevent human suffering. However, many migrants may have no choice but to travel by irregular means. As a matter of principle, National Societies must not seek to prevent migration: Whether to migrate or not is a personal decision. It is also important that National Societies avoid the perception that they are acting under governmental policies to encourage, prevent or dissuade migration.

- National Societies may raise the awareness of potential migrants concerning the risks of migration, particularly irregular migration. However, they must avoid becoming instruments of governmental policies, aimed at preventing migration as a whole.”

(Policy on Migration, Guidance 7.5.)
National Societies that provide individual counselling also may refer potential migrants to relevant and legitimate immigration services. However, this is part of community level action, and not a back-up service to embassies and consulates of countries of destination or other agencies, which provide immigration advice or consular information. Moreover, National Societies shall ensure that any information obtained about and from potential migrants remains in the humanitarian domain.

For National Societies to be in a position to contribute to the reduction of migratory risks, the conditions in countries along the migratory trails need to be properly understood, and information provided to potential migrants must be up-to-date. Hence, it is essential for Red Cross and Red Crescent work with and for potential migrants to be based on close cooperation and exchange between National Societies of countries of origin, transit and destination. Where appropriate, external sources may also be called upon, including returning migrants and diaspora associations in countries of destination.

2. Programming principles

When working with and for potential migrants, National Societies must ensure that the following general programming principles are respected:

1. National Societies maintain at all times their impartiality, neutrality, and independence. They do not encourage, prevent or dissuade migration, nor do they participate in the enforcement of government schemes to hinder migration or certain forms of it;

2. Action to reduce risks of migration is part of an integrated and impartial approach to address needs and vulnerabilities linked to migration, in line with the Policy on Migration;

3. National Societies engage with communities from which migrants originate; they have a thorough understanding of migratory pressures on them, and make efforts to alleviate conditions that induce people to migrate against their will and desire;

4. Information provided to potential migrants is comprehensive and includes possible risks of migration as well as relevant conditions in countries of transit and destination, their rights and obligations, and how to access humanitarian services;

5. National Societies in countries of origin, transit and destination work together to ensure that the needs of migrants, and the risks they are exposed to, are properly identified and taken into account, and that potential migrants receive correct and up-to-date information.
3. **Types of action**

3.1. **Creating community level awareness and alleviating migratory pressures**

National Societies in countries of origin can contribute to alleviating migratory pressures that induce people to migrate against their will and desire, and take action to create an environment conducive to reducing the risks of migration:

- as migratory pressures are usually multiple and diverse, raise the general awareness of communities about the need for up-to-date and comprehensive information and realistic decision making on migration choices; disseminate information about the experiences of migrants; support community level exchange and discussion on migration choices and alternatives;

- when social and economic distress, and lack of services and prospects for development, are major causes of migration, strengthen the resilience of people through action at community level, such as programmes for food security and income generation, programmes for health and education, or humanitarian relief;

- when environmental degradation makes living conditions increasingly precarious, support disaster risk reduction and disaster preparedness;

- when migratory pressures are caused by the spread of violence or by armed conflict, engage with the community on ways and means to reduce tensions and cooperate with the ICRC in support of its mandate under international humanitarian law.

3.2 **Providing individual counselling and support to potential migrants**

National Societies in countries of origin can take action to reduce the risks of migration by enabling potential migrants and their families to make informed decisions about whether to migrate or not, and under which conditions, based on comprehensive and up-to-date information. They may provide counselling, among others, about:

- the rights of migrants in accordance with international human rights and refugee law;

- migration options and referral to relevant and legitimate immigration services;

- conditions in countries of transit and destination – such as security, access to asylum procedures and residence permits, employment, housing, health care and education;
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- risks related to migration such as threats to migrants’ health, exposure to exploitation, abuse and trafficking in persons, problems of lack of access to humanitarian services, and legal risks, in particular for irregular migrants;

- essential assistance from National Societies or other institutions, which migrants may need to call upon, before as well as once embarked on migration, such as medical and psychosocial support, material assistance, legal advice, and services to restore family links.

- additional services from National Societies or other institutions to people who decide to migrate, with a view to preparing and supporting them to protect themselves against risks. These services may include training – for example in language and computer skills – in order to facilitate migrants’ access to host communities, assistance and information, and help them maintain links with families and communities at home.