



Annual report 2023

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RED CROSS
EU OFFICE

Message from the Red Cross EU Office

Guided by the [Red Cross EU Strategy 2022-2027](#), we continue to work with our members – National Red Cross Societies in the EU, the Norwegian Red Cross, the Icelandic Red Cross and the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) – to engage with the EU to safeguard and respond to people’s needs in the face of new and evolving crises.

2023 represented an important milestone for the Red Cross EU Office, as we celebrated our 40th anniversary. It was a chance to look back at key achievements and reflect on how our work with members has evolved over the years. Observing the important impact of decisions taken in Brussels on the operating environment in their home countries, Red Cross societies in Member States came together to set up a joint representation towards the EU in 1983. Four decades later, the EU has acquired many more national competencies which directly affect the work of National Societies as social economy entities – underlining the continued relevance of trying to influence EU frameworks together.

While the ongoing cost-of-living crisis forced many more families into energy poverty, it also posed growing difficulties for Red Cross societies to make ends meet. In 2023, we therefore increased our efforts to better understand and prepare to engage on policies governing the social economy – which regulates the operational capacities of the third sector, and thus greatly impacts our members’ ability to address the needs of people at risk of social exclusion.

The year was also marked by difficult negotiations on the EU Pact on Migration and Asylum and important discussions around revising the Multi-annual Financial Framework to ensure it remains fit for purpose. At the same time, the EU’s expanding role on health provided opportunities for us to share expertise and contribute to discussions around new EU policies and structures. During the year, we also facilitated local voices in EU external action discussions, while supporting the private hosting of people who had fled Ukraine and strengthening our team’s capacities to train members on humanitarian diplomacy.

The examples gathered in this report contribute to reaching our three interlinked and mutually reinforcing goals: to heighten Red Cross influence on EU policy, to increase EU resources for our domestic and international work, and to serve our members on EU-related issues.

We hope you enjoy the read.



Cover photo:

The Indonesian Red Cross, with the support of the IFRC, has been helping communities prepare and prevent the spread of diseases through the epidemic and pandemic preparedness programme.

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In December 2023, we celebrated 40 years of working together with our members, ensuring that EU policies safeguard and respond to the needs of people and communities experiencing vulnerability. © RCEU

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Our engagement on Health at EU level

In context of the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond, health has become an integral part of the EU's internal and external

action, with the EU and Member States stepping up cooperation to tackle health inequalities, and to prevent and respond to health threats. In 2023, we worked with members to push for continued prioritisation of health in the EU agenda.

Heightening influence

Our members have a long-standing role in delivering a wide range of community health services across Europe. Many also support health programming in third countries. In 2023, we enhanced efforts to share this expertise in EU processes and call for universal access to healthcare, including for people who are often left behind, such as people on the move.

In February, we co-hosted the Brussels launch of the latest IFRC [World Disasters Report](#) with the Swedish Red Cross and the Permanent Representation of Sweden to the EU. The report draws on the Red Cross Red Crescent network's experience as a frontline responder to the impacts of COVID-19 and advises on how the world can better prepare for the next pandemic through trust, equity and local action. We also worked to influence the Council Conclusions on the [EU Global Health Strategy](#) and participated in discussions on its implementation at the Global Health Policy Forum.

There is no health without mental health and ensuring access to Mental Health and Psychosocial Support (MHPSS) services for all people in all contexts is a key priority for the Red Cross. We thus contributed to the consultation for the Commission communication on "[A comprehensive approach to mental health](#)" published in June – a positive step towards addressing rising mental health needs in the EU. We also facilitated speakers at high-level events like the World Mental Health Day conference hosted by the Commission in October.

Increasing EU resources

To improve members' access to EU funding, our support largely focussed on the EU4Health programme and Horizon Europe. For example, we enabled discussions around the EU4Health call

on prevention of Non-Communicable Diseases (NCDs). Led by the Portuguese Red Cross, the 2-year "Prevention in Action" project will work on primary prevention to reduce sudden deaths linked to NCDs through training and targeted awareness raising.

In the summer, the EUR 28.4 million EU4Health-funded project led by the IFRC Secretariat to provide MHPSS to people displaced from Ukraine in 25 countries was awarded an additional EUR 2.79 million for extra activities targeting children. For the duration of the project (until June 2025), the Red Cross will offer MHPSS training to teachers, social workers, care givers and healthcare professionals in 12 European countries.

Finally, members explored the potential of Horizon Europe. In February, we held a workshop to map experiences, exchange practices and discuss future opportunities under the Cluster on Health. At the closing conference of the [COVINFORM](#) project – which analysed public health responses to COVID-19 and the disproportionate impacts on people in situations of vulnerability – a Romanian Red Cross practitioner underlined the need for effective risk communication plans, trusted messengers and adapted messaging.

Serving members

In 2023, we enhanced our support to members to showcase their work and develop a collective humanitarian diplomacy approach towards the EU on health. In March, we launched the report "[People centRED approach: Strengthening local-to-global capacities](#)". It provides operational examples of how the Red Cross Red Crescent network contributes to locally led development globally, including activities aimed at ensuring access to health for all – ranging from strengthening health systems with a focus on epidemic preparedness, to addressing the [many impacts of climate change on health](#). Another [paper](#) explained the scope of Red Cross societies' work within the EU in the field of health and care, especially towards people at the margins of society.

In May, we ran an internal meeting between the health focal points of 14 National Societies and the IFRC Secretariat, where colleagues familiarised themselves with each other's work and priorities. We then gathered domestic and international health experts to strategise around our joint EU advocacy plans to improve access to affordable, quality health and social care, including during emergencies.

Heightening influence

Facilitating local voices in EU debates on external action

Localisation means increasing international investment and respect for the role of local actors, with the goal of improving the reach, effectiveness and accountability of humanitarian action. It is also a way of re-thinking the humanitarian sector from the ground up — recognising that most humanitarian assistance is already provided by local actors. Localisation is at the core of our members' approach: European Red Cross societies are part of a global network of National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies that help each other to be as effective as possible and stand together in the face of overwhelming crises — all supported by the IFRC Secretariat.

The EU has made various commitments on localisation, including through the [Grand Bargain](#) and the Commission's [communication](#) on engagement with civil society in external action. Throughout the year, we worked with our members to call on the EU to honour these obligations and facilitated the involvement of local actors in coordination and decision-making processes with the EU institutions. This included supporting colleagues from Red Cross and Red Crescent societies in affected countries to share their perspectives and priorities with EU interlocutors at major events.

At the European Humanitarian Forum in March, the Director General of the Ukrainian Red Cross Society spoke about the protracted crisis in Ukraine and the challenges faced in protecting principled humanitarian action. At the summit between the EU and the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC) in July, Red Cross representatives from Trinidad and Tobago, Panama, Honduras and Colombia shared insights into the difficulties they experience on the ground in helping communities to strengthen their resilience, while tackling compounding humanitarian and development challenges. Finally, at our annual Strategic Dialogue Meeting with the European Commission in November, the Secretary General of the Burkina Faso Red Cross shared how our Community Engagement and Accountability approach helps to ensure local participation and strengthen reliability and trust.

In 2023, we also helped make it easier for colleagues from National Societies in country to contribute to engagement with EU Delegations in the field through stronger and more systematic coordination. In December, staff from the Colombian Red Cross met representatives of the Council working parties on Humanitarian Aid and Food Aid (COHAFA) and on Development Cooperation and International Partnerships (CODEV-PI) during their field visit to Colombia. Finally, we worked with members on case studies to illustrate the European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations (ECHO) [guidance on localisation](#) — explaining our support to local action through National Society development and equitable partnerships.

Supporting families and households experiencing energy poverty

In recent years, the number of people experiencing energy poverty has risen significantly. After more than 3 years of COVID-19, the ongoing Russia-Ukraine international armed conflict has aggravated an already fragile economic context. Increased food and commodity prices, coupled with a prolonged lack of investment in social and health services, are forcing more people into making difficult decisions about their energy spending.

In response, European Red Cross societies have increased and adapted their support to individuals and households experiencing poverty. However, their work is also directly impacted by rising running costs, making it increasingly difficult for

A French Red Cross employee carrying out an advisory home visit.
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them to operate in a sector which has been largely under-resourced and unappreciated. In 2023, we aimed to enhance understanding at EU level of the impacts of the cost-of-living crisis on the people at greatest risk of social exclusion and the organisations working to support them.

In collaboration with Eurodiaconia, we hosted a roundtable at the European Parliament in April to discuss the consequences of rising food prices and a growing demand for food aid on the capacities of not-for-profit social service providers. We also worked with members to define recommendations towards the EU and Member States on responding to the cost-of-living crisis to protect European households from further socio-economic hardship. Social and health services need adequate funding to address emergency needs and ensure that people experiencing vulnerability do not fall into poverty or risk being evicted from their homes. Tackling poverty requires longer-term solutions and the involvement of public and private sectors, while efforts to respond to higher energy prices should also acknowledge the work of not-for-profit organisations.

Across Europe, the Red Cross has been working with energy providers and social services to identify suitable solutions for individual households. For example, the Austrian Red Cross advocates for energy providers to temporarily block the accounts of people who are unable to make their energy payments due to low income or unemployment, enabling them to pay retroactively once their

income becomes stable. In November, we joined a meeting organised by the Spanish Red Cross Foundation in context of the Spanish EU Presidency, which brought together a wide range of stakeholders to discuss the impacts of climate change, including energy poverty. We presented the innovative practices of our members to address some of the serious consequences of energy poverty on the most marginalised communities, as well as its link to poor physical and mental health. It was also another opportunity to underline that without increased support, not-for-profit social service providers risk having to cut much-needed programmes and activities.

Increasing EU resources

Promoting an MFF revision that enables humanitarian action

The EU's priorities – legislation, policies and funding decisions – directly impact the work of our members and the needs of the people they aim to support in the EU and in partner countries. National Societies, in their unique position as auxiliaries to public authorities in the humanitarian field, and the IFRC Secretariat, which represents the world's largest humanitarian network, play a key role in the implementation of the EU's long term and annual budgets.

In 2020, the European Commission committed to undertaking a mid-term review of the Multi-Annual Financial Framework (MFF) in 2023, looking at its

After the earthquake that affected Morocco in September 2023, the Moroccan Red Crescent offered psychosocial support to affected people and distributed blankets, mattresses and clothes. © Benoit Carpentier / IFRC



execution and remaining capacity to address other issues. Indeed, since the current MFF was adopted, the EU has faced a series of unprecedented and unexpected challenges with serious social and humanitarian impacts within the EU and externally. Based on the growing needs witnessed by our members on the ground, we have been calling on the EU institutions to develop a budget which is both committed to creating long-term social change, but also responsive to crises as they arise.

Following the proposal from the Commission to revise the MFF in June, we shared our analysis and suggestions with relevant actors in the EU institutions, while providing tools to support our member National Red Cross Societies to reach out to decision makers in EU Member States. With allocations for key EU thematic programmes fully spent and EU funds reduced by the frontloading of resources in 2021 and 2022, we welcomed the proposed reinforcement of the MFF to respond to multiple and overlapping challenges. We highlighted the importance of the Ukraine facility and the suggested increases in the areas of development, migration and social cohesion. However, we also stressed the need to ensure that the budget meets its predetermined priorities, underlining that the mid-term revision was an opportunity to better

reflect increasing needs at the community level and guarantee qualitative, predictable and transparent funding.

In September, we held a meeting with interested colleagues from Red Cross societies to deliberate the best ways to leverage the support of their national decision-makers to ensure our key asks were considered. The meeting was an opportunity to explain the process and what was at stake, as well as to present our key messages and the tools we had developed to support outreach to finance ministers at national level. In Brussels, we engaged with relevant MEPs in the European Parliament Budget Committee and used social media to further promote our recommendations in context of the December EU Council meeting discussions on the MFF.

Developing Red Cross practices in private hosting

Following the escalation of the Russia-Ukraine international armed conflict, European countries encountered exceptional demand for protection. Through the Temporary Protection Directive (TPD), the EU provided people who had fled Ukraine immediate access to protection, rights and essential services in EU Member States, without an individual assessment. However, one of the

In Luxembourg, families who have fled Ukraine and are staying in private homes have regular social follow up meetings with Red Cross social workers.
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main challenges with TPD implementation was finding accommodation for millions of people in a short period of time. Private hosting initiatives mobilised additional housing to provide shelter, with many Red Cross societies contributing to the sourcing, matching, safeguarding and nurturing of relationships between hosts and guests.

The European Commission awarded EUR 5.5 million under the Asylum Migration and Integration Fund (AMIF) to the IFRC Secretariat to lead a programme focused on supporting the private hosting of people displaced from Ukraine, whether in shared or vacant accommodation. ‘[Safe Homes](#)’ was launched in February, in partnership with the National Red Cross Societies in Belgium, France, Hungary, Ireland, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Poland, Romania and Slovakia. It provided additional resources for the Red Cross to support displaced individuals and families to not only secure accommodation, but also to help rebuild their lives within the host community.

Furthermore, the programme offered an opportunity for collective reflection on the use of hosting as a tool to house people who have lost their homes. Acknowledging the need for collaboration between multiple stakeholders, funds were also allocated to strengthening multi-level and cross-sectoral networks at national level. Through a series of workshops, Red Cross societies brought together key actors in private hosting to stimulate conversations between national, regional and local authorities, civil society organisations, hosts and guests. In a context of housing shortages, where accommodation is scarce and rents are ramping up, one of the key challenges encountered has been enabling hosted people to transition towards sustainable longer-term housing alternatives.

We have been actively involved in supporting the programme’s overall implementation by working closely with National Societies, the IFRC Secretariat and the European Commission. We have also led the development of a lessons learned report, which aims to inform the design and implementation of hosting schemes by reflecting on the strengths and fault lines observed firsthand by the partners involved in the Safe Homes programme. The report will be published in 2024, along with a handbook for practitioners sharing step-by-step guidance to plan and execute a hosting scheme, as well as a series of case studies from the different countries.

Serving members

Providing guidance for negotiations on the Migration and Asylum Pact

2023 was a critical year in the negotiations around the EU Pact on Migration and Asylum – the set of rules aiming to reform the asylum system across Europe – which culminated in the [political agreement](#) reached by co-legislators in December. Our members have broad and established experience working with and for migrants. Many have long been engaged in humanitarian diplomacy with their authorities around the Pact legislation. As negotiations intensified during the year, we kept members abreast of the discussions and offered support in approaching their respective decision makers to share Red Cross concerns and recommendations.

A series of “Pact update” calls every 6 weeks allowed us to unpack developments in the negotiations and discuss the possible implications at national level with colleagues from European Red Cross societies, the IFRC Secretariat and the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) Brussels delegation. To inform these exchanges, we produced summaries and analysis of the positions taken by the European Parliament and the Council of the EU on the Pact’s legislative proposals. Considering the rapid pace of the negotiations, our outreach focused on the provisions for which we felt there was still potential to influence outcomes, and the EU Member States that might be more receptive to our views. With our support, Red Cross societies in several countries engaged in advocacy actions at national level: publishing position papers, addressing letters to their ministries and holding meetings with their government representatives in Brussels and in their capitals.

In addition to facilitating internal coordination, we provided tools to help our members to speak out in favour of a more human-centred reform. We shared public statements at different milestones in the negotiations, as well as key messages and reactive lines in the context of Justice and Home Affairs Council meetings. From the Netherlands Red Cross and the Slovenian Red Cross posting on social media about the impacts of the changes on the lives of migrants, to the [Swedish Red Cross](#) and the [German Red Cross](#) publishing opinion pieces advocating for the right to seek and access asylum – collectively, we voiced concerns regarding the protection and identification of unaccompanied children and people with acute vulnerabilities. We also called for improved reception standards at border facilities, as



The Belgian Red Cross provides support to migrants and asylum seeker children.
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well as unconditional humanitarian access at border and screening locations.

The Pact is expected to be adopted before the European elections in June 2024. We will continue to work with our members to influence the implementation of the Pact in their respective countries and assist them to better comprehend the new framework and its implications for their operations and the people they aim to support.

Strengthening capacities in Humanitarian Diplomacy towards the EU

We have complementary roles in EU affairs with our members and together, we can make a substantial contribution to discussions about current and future EU policies and practices. As auxiliaries to public authorities, National Societies can play a crucial part in shaping EU policies at the national level by sharing consistent messaging across the Union. We help to ensure an EU-wide perspective and engage with EU stakeholders in Brussels, drawing on our members' activities and evidence, while the IFRC Secretariat brings a global outlook and long-term experience in coordinating and supporting humanitarian action around the world.

In line with the [Red Cross EU Strategy 2022-2027](#), we have been working on strengthening our capacities to better collaborate and increase our influence on EU action. In doing so, we identified the need to improve knowledge about the EU among members and to develop a common understanding of our approach and respective roles in carrying out EU advocacy. In 2023, we collaborated with an external consultant to develop a training module and supporting materials covering the EU institutions and their decision-making processes. After identifying why it is important to influence the EU and available opportunities for engagement, the training guides participants through the steps involved in developing a humanitarian diplomacy strategy: from defining objectives and priorities, to analysing relevant stakeholders, developing and delivering key messages, and monitoring and evaluating outcomes.

To ensure the sustainability of this training, a group of staff participated in a training of trainers in September, allowing the team to offer training in different formats and configurations in the years to come. A first pilot was organised with members in October, with 14 participants from the IFRC Secretariat and 10 different Red Cross societies. Feedback from the participants was gathered to improve the training in the future. One of the participants shared: *"The training was extremely relevant, and I put everything I learned into practice on the first day I returned to the office. For the first time, our National Society will organise a humanitarian diplomacy meeting at the Parliament, with the participation of 50 people from several committees. The training has helped me to understand the role and objective of this very important meeting."*

Building on the lessons learned from the pilot, a second training was carried out with staff in December. It provided an opportunity for colleagues to learn from each other by sharing experiences and different approaches to humanitarian diplomacy towards the EU. Going forward, the training modules developed will be adapted to cater for different profiles, thematic expertise and durations – in line with the needs identified with our members.



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The International Red Cross Red Crescent Movement is committed to, and bound by its seven fundamental principles
HUMANITY | IMPARTIALITY | NEUTRALITY | INDEPENDENCE | VOLUNTARY SERVICE | UNITY | UNIVERSALITY