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Decolonization in international health cooperation: Are we ready for it?

Localisation of Aid at the Swiss Red Cross

Shifting roles in a changing world

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Localisation is a key aspect towards sustainable cooperation programme implementation. To succeed, it is crucial to listen to the voice of the local partners and acknowledge and respect that they are in the lead. Partners and donors alike need to have an appropriate institutional framework – vision, strategy, guidelines – to live such an approach and truly embark on localisation. Localisation requires a changed approach, attitude, and value system on an institutional level to whole-heartedly support locally-led action and strengthen local partners and shift the role from an implementer to a facilitator, enabler, knowledge broker or mere observer and ultimately retire as a Northern NGO in international cooperation.



Photo: © Croix Rouge Béninoise

The Swiss Red Cross (SRC) was founded in 1866 in Bern and is a member of the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent (IFRC) and part of the global Red Cross/Red Crescent (RC/RC) Movement. SRC started its work in the international cooperation in the 1970ies with a “classical” development approach. Interventions were project based and centred around professionals seconded from Switzerland aiming to “help” beneficiaries in poor countries to lead a better life. These professionals supported RC/RC Sister National Societies (SNS) or local NGOs/institutions in those countries. In some instances, the SRC even founded local NGOs in order to have a reliable implementing partner, as an “extended arm” of the SRC abroad. However, in all instances the SRC emphasised its human rights-based approach and realised a high level of beneficiary participation and empowerment in its operations.

Shifting towards strong and local actors

Over the decades, the SRC gradually shifted its approach. While the human rights-based approach, participation and empowerment remained in the centre, the capacity building and empowerment of the local counterparts gained in importance. Ignited by global policies and the

strive as a member of the IFRC to align closer to Movement strategies, a shift towards partner strengthening and localisation of aid started.

In the context of the Grand Bargain, the IFRC strategy 2030 and the SRC strategy 2030, the SRC International Cooperation (IC) embarked on a transformation process (see figure 1) to redefine its role and value proposition for the stakeholders. A key element for SRC in this transformation process is to achieve “strong and local actors”. This means that SNS need to have a stronger role in setting its own priorities and in being involved in the decision-making about operations in its territory.

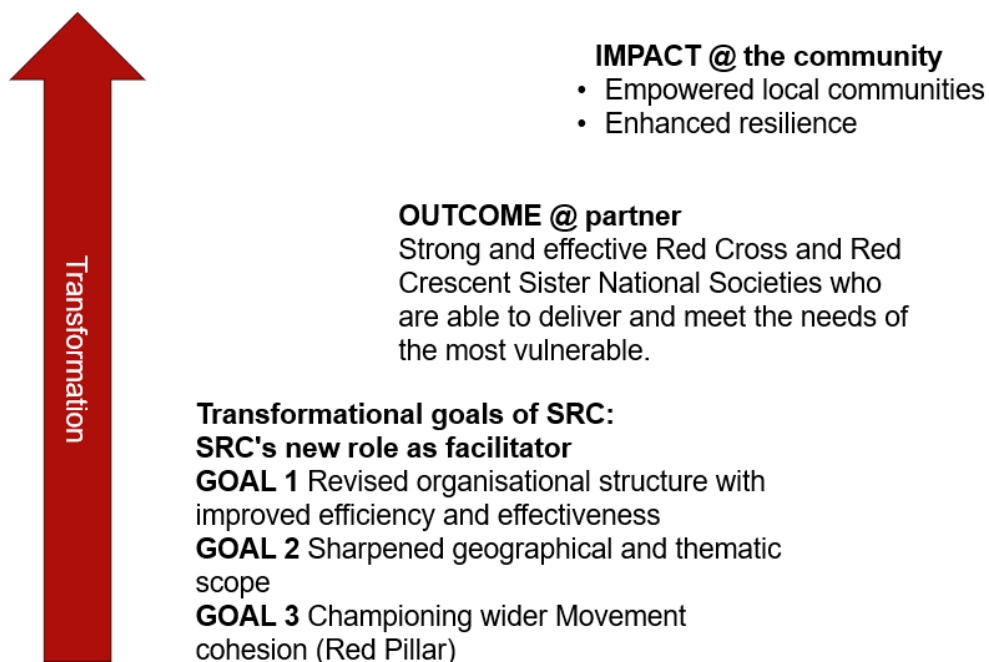


Figure 1: SRC transformation process aspirations

Keeping National Society Development at the centre of action

The transformation process – a manifestation of SRC’s commitment to localisation in the sense of locally-led action -started in a participatory process with a thorough context and trend analyses and several needs assessments and analyses together with the SNS to identify where the competence of the SRC is and if and where they match demands of SNS. The transformation process brought about a sharpened geographical and thematic scope, emphasising the use of regional synergies, and flagging out three thematic domains and 10 core competencies (see figure 2). National Society Development (NSD) is the central objective of SRC support in and through all thematic domains, ensuring that a SNS can sustainably carry out services according to its mandate and auxiliary role to the Government to serve their most vulnerable communities and enhance their resilience.

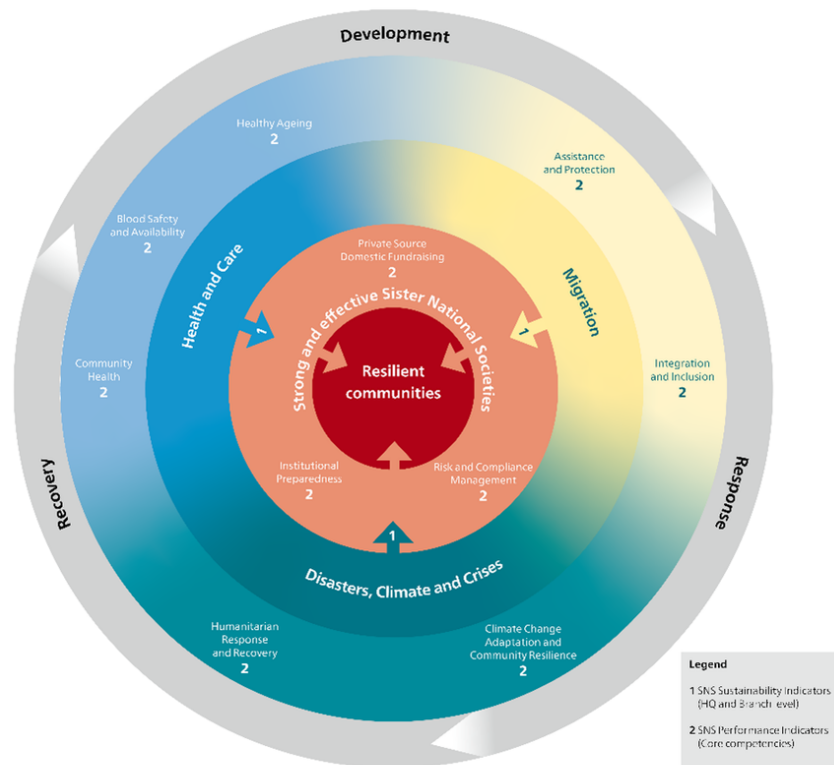


Figure 2: The three thematic domains “health and care”, “disasters climate” and “crises and migration” and 10 core competencies in these domains and NSD (inner orange ring).

The new value proposition of the SRC IC confirms the shift of the SRC from an “implementer” to a “facilitator” role, where the local SNS is determining if and what kind of support they need from the SRC and where the partner is clearly in the forefront of delivering services to their population:

The SRC IC defines its role and responsibility to provide on-demand-support to Sister National Societies so they can deliver effective localized services to those in need aligned with their auxiliary role and mandate. Main partners and stakeholders of the SRC are their Sister National Societies, Red Cross and Red Crescent societies worldwide. These are the organisations supporting people in need and fostering resilient communities. SRC sees itself in a supporting role to these organisations so they can be strong and effective.

During the transformation process, the SRC IC staff has already changed gears and piloted the new ways of working with new skillsets. What is central in this transformation process is the shift of decision-making power. Specifically, the SNS are to assume a still stronger role and SRC will support them to implement their own development strategies and jointly define the added value to be created by the SRC together with the SNSs.

This approach requires good listening skills, looking and negotiating for good matches in terms of strategies and needs and what SRC can actually contribute. It requires new collaborations, and it requires the ability to be able to say “no” and for SRC to accept a “no” by a SNS, if a SNS does not deem SRC to be the best partner. It also means to develop new partnerships more holistically, always keeping NSD in the centre to help develop strong and effective SNS.

Putting localisation into practice: establishing a partnership with the Benin Red Cross

The following case of the establishment of a partnership between the Swiss Red Cross and the Benin Red Cross shows a sub-regional approach of SRC to localisation that demonstrates the importance to listen to “the voices of the South”.

The SRC has been working in Togo with the Togolese Red Cross and the Ministry of Health (MoH) in the areas of health, WASH, NSD and climate change adaptation since many years. Benin being a neighbouring country to Togo, the Beninese Red Cross (BRC) heard about the interventions and SRC’s partnership in Togo and expressed the wish to enter into a partnership with the SRC. The BRC's initiative offered the SRC a good opportunity to apply some of the emerging approaches from its transformation process, even more so since a strategic expansion in the Western Africa region was indeed desirable.



Volunteers of the Benin Red Cross in Cotonou. Photo: © Croix Rouge Béninoise

With the vision to potentially create a new partnership of equals, the SRC, in coordination with the IFRC Cluster Office in Abuja, thus started a partnership development process (see figure 3 below) with the Benin Red Cross. The process started with a short introductory visit that served as a platform to meet and greet and exchange on each other's vision, strategies, approaches, organisational structure, as well as each other's needs and capacities.

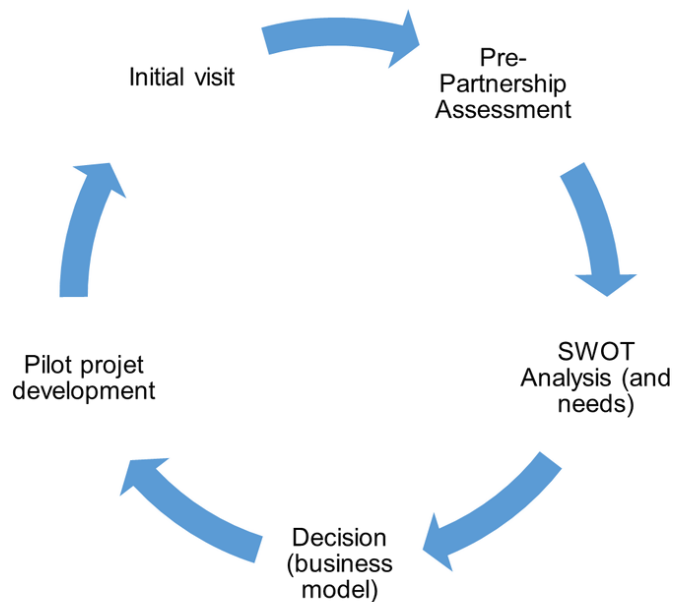


Figure 3: Different steps in SRC's partnership engagement process with the Benin Red Cross

During this **initial visit**, the Benin Red Cross presented its organisation, long-term strategy (Strategic Development Plan 2022-26) thematic priorities and policies, its current and prospective partnerships within and outside the Movement and its relations with the Benin Government in its auxiliary role. The SRC in turn shared its old and new thematic frameworks and the main features of its transformation process and what it meant for future partnerships with any SNS, especially with a view to localisation aspects, different business models and SRC's future thematic core competencies.

Based on this exchange, the two institutions were able to decide whether there were in fact common topics of interest or whether there were areas where the BRC expressed needs that did not match with any of the SRC's thematic competencies but where the SRC could advocate towards other donors or partners to support the BRC in a specific thematic domain with funding or technical expertise. For the SRC, it became clear that there were indeed several common points of interest touching all three of the SRC's future programmatic areas (cf. Figure 2 above) and the BRC concluded that a partnership with the SRC would be very interesting.



Visite bureau comité local Djidja. Photo: © Croix Rouge Béninoise

Striving for a partnership of equals

The two institutions thus decided to engage in a pre-partnership assessment that comprised many different aspects. Foremost, it helped to deepen each other's' understanding of partnership and allowed to create a joint vision of a future cooperation. While, from a SRC perspective, the process meant getting to know better the BRC from its headquarters to its decentralised structures and grassroots level entities, for the BRC, the thorough assessment process not merely allowed getting to know the SRC better but was furthermore an interesting reflection process, e.g., with regard to its own strategic coherence across organisational levels. The BRC also appreciated the gradual approach of the partnership development process where the SRC assumed rather a role of critical observer than tough assessor.

The BRC concluded that the added value of working with the SRC would be threefold:

- SRC could contribute to the achievement of the objectives of its long-term Strategic Development Plan in the areas of National Society Development and community health.
- SRC could support the Benin Red Cross to reposition itself with the Government through the Ministry of Health and to play its auxiliary role still better as well as to attract additional external partners by enhancing its reputation as a National Society.
- SRC could offer the opportunity to explore virgin sectors or sectors with little activity.

The final BRC team discussion and SWOT analysis – with the SRC in the role of facilitator and observer – highlighted a number of opportunities, particularly with a view to the SRC 2025-28 thematic positioning, and allowed to define priority areas of intervention, agree on a specific approach / business model, and eventually laid the foundation for the development of a joint pilot project.

With a view to the sub-regional approach aspect of the partnership development process, the discussions with the BRC indeed went beyond bilateral partnership aspects, considering potential future South-South exchange opportunities between the National Societies of Togo and Benin. Since the jointly identified areas of actions with the Benin Red Cross overlap with current thematic foci between the SRC and the Togolese Red Cross, additional opportunities for regional exchanges or a more comprehensive regional approach, arose. Such an approach will help to utilize synergies, foster peer learning and exchange, and to give still more weight to “voices of the South”.



Fortunat Büsch is a public health professional and social anthropologist. Following longer-term missions in Tanzania, he joined the Swiss Red Cross in 2015 and coordinated the implementation and strategic development of several country programs including Mali, Sudan, Ethiopia, Togo, and Ghana. Since 2024 he is responsible for the Western Africa portfolio of the Swiss Red Cross. [Email](#)



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