

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)