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The Role of the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies in Facilitating Humanitarian Access during Disasters

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Abstract

INTRODUCTION: Access to humanitarian assistance is a fundamental right during disasters and emergencies. The International Federation of Red Cross (IFRC) and Red Crescent Societies plays a pivotal role in ensuring this access through both legal frameworks and operational mechanisms. This study examines how the IFRC bridges the gap between international humanitarian norms and field-level implementation to facilitate effective disaster response.

METHODS: This descriptive-analytical study employed content and document analysis. Data were synthesized from international legal instruments, IFRC policy documents, operational reports (2019–2024), and UN resolutions.

FINDINGS: The IFRC employs a dual-pronged integrated strategy grounded in institutional legal theory and crisis management frameworks. First, regarding normative development, the IFRC has been instrumental in advancing the International Disaster Response Law (IDRL) guidelines, influencing the International Law Commission's (ILC) Draft Articles on the Protection of Persons in the Event of Disasters (2016), and advocating for their evolution into a binding treaty by 2027. Second, in terms of operational implementation, the IFRC has developed innovative solutions for complex crises, including armed conflicts (Ukraine, 2022–2023), governance crises (Haiti, 2022), and sanctions-affected contexts (Afghanistan, 2021–2024). Comparative analysis highlights the IFRC's distinctive strengths relative to other humanitarian organizations while identifying persistent implementation challenges.

CONCLUSION: The IFRC has established a comprehensive legal-operational framework that strengthens humanitarian access at normative, institutional, and operational levels. However, sustained effectiveness necessitates continued political commitment from states, enhanced accountability mechanisms, and predictable funding. The ongoing development of a binding treaty on disaster protection presents a critical opportunity to institutionalize these frameworks globally. For National Societies—particularly those operating in complex political and sanctions-affected environments—this framework provides essential guidance for ensuring humanitarian access while adhering to both international obligations and national legal frameworks.

Keywords: IFRC; Humanitarian access; Human rights; International Disaster Response Law (IDRL); Disaster relief; Legal-operational framework; Early action.

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Introduction

The right to access humanitarian assistance during disasters and emergencies constitutes a fundamental human right and a cornerstone of international humanitarian law. This right, rooted in the principles of human dignity, the right to life, the right to health, and the prohibition of unnecessary suffering, engages multiple dimensions of human rights frameworks including the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) and the Convention on the Rights of the Child (9).

Access to humanitarian assistance during crises is not merely a matter of operational efficiency; it is a legal obligation under international law and a fundamental protection for

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vulnerable populations whose survival and dignity depend on timely access to life-saving aid. For states and humanitarian organizations, particularly those with auxiliary roles in national systems, the question of how to systematically ensure this access across diverse and exceptional situations represents both a legal imperative and an institutional challenge. This challenge has particular significance for National Red Crescent and Red Cross Societies, including the Iranian Red Crescent Society (IRCS), which serve as legal auxiliaries to their governments in humanitarian matters and thus bear responsibilities both to international humanitarian principles and to national legal frameworks. The persistent gap between established legal norms guaranteeing humanitarian access and field-level implementation—particularly in contexts of armed conflict, governance failure, or international sanctions—raises critical questions about whether current institutional and legal frameworks adequately protect affected populations. This gap becomes increasingly urgent as the IRCS, like other National Societies, navigates complex operational environments where access barriers are multiply determined by legal, political, and institutional factors.

The IFRC and Red Crescent Societies, as the world's largest humanitarian network comprising 191 National Societies, occupies a unique position in the international humanitarian system (10). Founded in 1919 and headquartered in Geneva, IFRC serves as both a norm entrepreneur in international disaster law and a primary operational actor in humanitarian response. This dual role enables IFRC to address the persistent gap between established legal norms and field-level implementation—a challenge that has intensified amid growing disaster frequency, climate-related emergencies, and protracted conflicts.

For the IRCS specifically, this research addresses a critical legal and institutional question: What mechanisms can be developed and strengthened to ensure the right to humanitarian access in accordance with international humanitarian law, particularly given the operational challenges posed by sanctions, geopolitical tensions, and governance complexities? This question connects to broader obligations under the Geneva Conventions, ICESCR, and emerging disaster protection frameworks. Understanding how the IFRC—the umbrella organization for all National Societies—has developed comprehensive legal-operational approaches offers direct lessons for the IRCS in fulfilling its dual obligations: to international humanitarian law and to Iran's domestic legal and governance frameworks. The auxiliary role, which the IRCS holds under Iranian law, provides both unique opportunities and particular responsibilities for ensuring humanitarian access in ways that are legally compliant and institutionally effective.

Recent humanitarian crises have highlighted persistent challenges in ensuring humanitarian access. During the 2022 Pakistan floods, administrative delays prevented timely delivery of relief supplies (11). In Ukraine's ongoing conflict, access to affected populations in conflict zones remains severely restricted (4). In Afghanistan, international sanctions have complicated the provision of humanitarian assistance despite urgent needs (6). These examples illustrate that while international legal frameworks exist to protect humanitarian access, their practical implementation requires innovative mechanisms and sustained institutional commitment.

IFRC's approach to addressing these challenges represents an emerging paradigm that can be termed a "legal-operational framework"—an integrated system that combines legal norm development with practical operational mechanisms. This framework operates at multiple levels: advocating for stronger international legal instruments, developing operational guidelines and tools, building capacity within National Societies, and implementing innovative solutions in challenging contexts.

The International Law Commission's Draft Articles on the Protection of Persons in the Event of Disasters (2016) marked a significant milestone in codifying disaster response principles (2). Articles 11-16 establish key obligations: the duty of affected states to seek assistance when disaster exceeds national capacity, the prohibition of arbitrary withholding of consent to external assistance, and the obligation to facilitate international relief. IFRC played a crucial role in shaping these provisions through its earlier development of the Guidelines for the Domestic Facilitation and Regulation of International Disaster Relief and Initial Recovery Assistance (IDRL Guidelines, 2007) (1).

The recent UN General Assembly Resolution 79/128 (December 2024) calls for the development of a binding treaty based on the ILC Draft Articles, with completion targeted for 2027 (3). This

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represents a critical opportunity to transform soft law principles into binding legal obligations. IFRC has positioned itself at the forefront of this advocacy effort, issuing key messages that emphasize disaster risk reduction, protection of vulnerable groups, and facilitation of rapid humanitarian response (12).

However, legal frameworks alone cannot guarantee humanitarian access. The operational dimension—how relief is delivered in the field—remains equally critical. IFRC has recognized that exceptional situations such as armed conflicts, governance crises, and sanctions-affected contexts require tailored operational solutions. This recognition has led to the development of the "Package of Solutions for Exceptional Situations," which provides practical mechanisms for overcoming access barriers in the most challenging environments (13).

This study examines how IFRC's integrated legal-operational framework functions in practice. The central research question addresses: What mechanisms and strategies does IFRC employ to develop and strengthen a coherent legal-operational structure ensuring the right to humanitarian access? Through analysis of recent case studies and IFRC's strategic documents, this research demonstrates how normative development and operational innovation work in tandem to improve humanitarian outcomes.

The significance of this research lies in its examination of an institutional model that bridges theory and practice in humanitarian action. As climate change intensifies disaster risks and geopolitical tensions create new humanitarian challenges, understanding how leading humanitarian organizations navigate legal and operational complexities becomes increasingly important. IFRC's experience offers valuable lessons for other humanitarian actors, national governments, and international policymakers seeking to strengthen disaster preparedness and response systems, with particular relevance for countries and organizations navigating complex political and legal environments where humanitarian access requires both strict adherence to international legal obligations and strategic negotiation with national authorities. The IRCS's experience in maintaining humanitarian operations across diverse emergency contexts—from natural disasters to conflict-affected regions—exemplifies the institutional and legal challenges that this research framework addresses.

This paper proceeds as follows: the Methods section describes the research approach and data sources with explicit sampling methodology; the Findings section analyzes IFRC's dual strategy through theoretically grounded analysis, case studies, and comparative assessment; and the Conclusion synthesizes key insights and identifies specific priorities for strengthening the legal-operational framework.

Methods

This qualitative study employs a descriptive-analytical approach combining document analysis, case study methodology, and qualitative content analysis. The research examines how IFRC has developed and implemented a legal-operational framework for humanitarian access through analysis of primary sources and operational reports covering the period 2019-2024. Data were synthesized from three primary source categories:

International Legal Documents

This category includes the UN Charter; Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948); International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights; International Law Commission's Draft Articles on the Protection of Persons in the Event of Disasters (2016)[2); UN General Assembly Resolution 79/128 (2024)(3); the UN Convention against Corruption (2003); and regional instruments including the African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance (2007)(14).

IFRC Policy Documents and Strategic Frameworks

Key documents analyzed include the IDRL Guidelines (2007)(1); IFRC Key Messages for the Treaty on Protection of Persons in Disasters (2025)(12); the Package of Solutions for Exceptional Situations (draft proposal, October 2023)(13); IFRC Education Strategic Framework 2020-2030(15); Integrity and Compliance Policies (2018)(16); Code of Conduct for IFRC and National Societies(17); and IFRC's ten-year strategic plans.

Operational Reports and Case Studies

This category comprises IFRC country-specific operational reports and emergency appeals for Ukraine (2022-2023)(4), Afghanistan (2021-2024)(6), Pakistan floods (2022-2023)(11), Haiti complex emergency (2022)(5), and Bangladesh early action protocols for floods (2023)(18); OCHA humanitarian situation reports(19); UN

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ECOSOC Humanitarian Affairs Segment proceedings (2025) (20); and IFRC Global Funding Gap Reports (2024) (8).

Sampling Strategy

Documents were selected using purposive (criterion-based) sampling to ensure relevance to the research question about IFRC's legal-operational framework and humanitarian access. The sampling process followed explicit inclusion and exclusion criteria applied systematically.

Inclusion Criteria

a) Documents must directly address humanitarian access mechanisms, barriers, or frameworks relevant to disasters and emergencies; b) Documents must originate from authoritative international sources (UN bodies, ICRC, IFRC official publications, recognized humanitarian organizations) or from verified IFRC operational reports; c) Documents must address the period 2016-2025, capturing recent developments in disaster law and IFRC practice; d) Documents must provide substantive analysis, operational data, or policy frameworks—not general news or commentary; e) For case studies specifically, operational reports must contain primary data about IFRC's operational response, mechanisms employed, and outcomes measured.

Exclusion Criteria

Documents focusing exclusively on other humanitarian sectors (health service delivery without access dimensions, WASH without humanitarian access considerations) were excluded unless they illustrated broader access principles. Documents predating 2016 were excluded except for foundational instruments (Geneva Conventions, UDHR, founding IFRC documents).

Selection Process

Initial identification of documents occurred through two methods: (a) systematic searching of IFRC publications, UN databases (UN General Assembly resolutions, ILC documentation), and official ICRC materials; (b) examination of reference lists in identified core documents (ILC Draft Articles, IFRC strategic documents) to identify cited legal instruments and reports. Documents meeting inclusion criteria were organized by category (legal instruments, policy documents, operational reports). For operational reports, selection prioritized those covering the five chosen case study countries (Ukraine, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Haiti, Bangladesh) and spanning 2019-2024 to capture recent practice. This systematic process resulted in a corpus of 47 primary documents: 12 international legal instruments and UN resolutions; 14 IFRC policy and strategic documents; 15 operational reports and country-specific emergency appeals; 6 other organizational reports (OCHA, ICRC). The sampling strategy ensured diversity of source types while maintaining focus on authoritative primary sources directly relevant to IFRC's legal-operational framework.

Analytical Framework

The analysis employed qualitative content analysis with thematic coding to identify patterns and relationships across documents (21). Key analytical themes included: normative development and legal advocacy; operational mechanisms and solutions; the auxiliary role of National Societies; disaster risk reduction and early action; and implementation challenges and barriers.

Documents were systematically reviewed to extract evidence of IFRC's strategies in each thematic area. For case studies, operational reports were analyzed to identify specific mechanisms used to address access barriers, outcomes achieved, and lessons learned. Cross-case comparison enabled identification of common patterns and context-specific adaptations.

Case Study Selection

Five case studies were selected to represent diverse emergency contexts and access challenges: 1) Ukraine armed conflict (2022-2023)—representing humanitarian access during active armed conflict (4); 2) Afghanistan (2021-2024)—representing challenges related to international sanctions and governance transitions (6); 3) Pakistan floods (2022-2023)—representing natural disaster response and auxiliary role effectiveness(11); 4) Haiti (2022)—representing governance crisis and insecurity contexts (5); and 5) Bangladesh (2023)—representing early action and disaster risk reduction approaches (18).

Analytical Process

The research followed a three-stage analytical process. First, document review and coding involved systematic reading of all selected documents with extraction of relevant passages addressing humanitarian access frameworks, mechanisms, and outcomes. Thematic codes were applied inductively and refined iteratively. Second, case study analysis examined operational reports for each selected case to identify access barriers encountered, mechanisms and strategies employed

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by IFRC and National Societies, and outcomes and effectiveness indicators. Third, synthesis and interpretation identified patterns across cases, assessed alignment between normative frameworks and operational practice, and evaluated effectiveness of IFRC's integrated approach. This analytical process was informed by institutional legal theory perspectives on norm entrepreneurship and international relations scholarship on crisis management and implementation gaps.

However, several limitations should be noted. First, reliance on publicly available documents may not capture all internal decision-making processes or confidential operational considerations. Second, the study focuses primarily on IFRC's perspective and may not fully represent views of all stakeholders including affected governments and communities. Third, outcome assessment relies primarily on IFRC's own reporting, which may reflect institutional perspectives. Fourth, the five-year timeframe, while capturing recent developments, may not reflect longer-term trends or sustainability of approaches.

Despite these limitations, the triangulation of legal documents, policy frameworks, and operational reports from multiple contexts provides a robust foundation for understanding IFRC's legal-operational framework and its implementation across diverse emergency settings.

Findings

The analysis reveals that IFRC operates through an integrated dual strategy that combines normative development with operational innovation. This section presents findings organized according to the major components of IFRC's legal-operational framework.

Normative Development and Legal Advocacy: Theoretical Framework

IFRC's normative development work can be understood through the lens of institutional legal theory, which examines how organizations shape and are shaped by legal frameworks. Scholars in international law recognize that non-state actors, including humanitarian organizations, serve as 'norm entrepreneurs' who identify emerging issues, propose legal solutions, and advocate for institutionalization of norms. IFRC's progression from developing practical guidelines (IDRL 2007) to influencing formal legal codification (ILC Draft Articles 2016) to advocating for treaty development (2027 target) exemplifies this norm entrepreneurship process. This trajectory reflects what international relations scholars recognize as the 'norm life cycle'—from norm emergence (advocacy by IFRC and humanitarian actors), to norm cascade (adoption in state practice and ILC codification), toward potential norm internalization (binding treaty).

Simultaneously, IFRC's operational innovations address what crisis management theory identifies as a fundamental challenge: the 'implementation gap' between normative frameworks and operational reality. Crisis management scholars note that frameworks without implementation mechanisms remain theoretical abstractions; conversely, operations without normative grounding lack legitimacy and may violate humanitarian principles. IFRC's integrated approach directly addresses this recognized theoretical problem by combining advocacy for stronger norms with development of practical mechanisms for implementing those norms in field contexts. This integration represents an application of what management scholars' term 'institutional entrepreneurship'—the strategic action of actors to establish new institutions (legal frameworks, operational mechanisms) that serve humanitarian objectives while achieving organizational legitimacy.

Normative Development in Practice

IFRC has established itself as a leading norm entrepreneur in international disaster law. The organization's development of the IDRL Guidelines in 2007 marked a watershed moment in systematizing legal principles for international disaster assistance. These guidelines, adopted by the 30th International Conference of the Red Cross and Red Crescent, consolidated IFRC's recommendations into a comprehensive framework addressing key legal and operational issues in disaster response.

The IDRL Guidelines directly influenced the content and structure of the International Law Commission's Draft Articles on the Protection of Persons in the Event of Disasters (2016). The ILC Draft Articles establish fundamental obligations for states, including the duty to reduce disaster risk (Article 9), the duty of the affected state to seek external assistance when disaster exceeds national response capacity (Article 11), the duty not to arbitrarily withhold consent to external assistance (Article 13), and obligations to facilitate international relief operations (Article 15). These

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provisions reflect principles that IFRC had advocated through the IDRL Guidelines, demonstrating the organization's influence on norm development.

Following adoption of the ILC Draft Articles, IFRC has actively advocated for their transformation into a binding international treaty. UN General Assembly Resolution 79/128, adopted in December 2024, calls for development of such a treaty with a target completion date of 2027. IFRC's Key Messages for the treaty emphasize three priority areas: prioritizing disaster risk reduction and prevention; ensuring protection for all persons, especially vulnerable groups including children, elderly, persons with disabilities, and displaced populations; and facilitating rapid and effective humanitarian assistance through simplified legal procedures, customs exemptions, and visa facilitation for relief personnel.

This normative work establishes the legal foundation for humanitarian access. However, IFRC recognizes that legal frameworks require operational mechanisms for implementation. This recognition drives the organization's operational innovations discussed below.

Table 1: IFRC's legal-operational framework: evolution from soft law guidelines to binding treaty

Framework Element	Timeline	Key Components	Legal Status	Implementation Mechanism
IDRL Guidelines	2007	Best practices for domestic facilitation of disaster relief; 32 guidelines on legal issues; emphasis on state responsibility and access facilitation	Soft law (Adopted by International Conference)	Endorsed by IFRC members; integrated into national emergency management policies
ILC Draft Articles on Protection in Disasters	2016	Codified principles on state obligations (duty to reduce risk, seek assistance, facilitate relief); 18 articles; influenced by IDRL Guidelines	Hard law proposal (not yet binding)	Subject to state acceptance; basis for treaty negotiation
UN General Assembly Resolution 79/128	2024	Calls for development of binding treaty on protection in disasters; completion target 2027; 63 states co-sponsor	Soft law (GA resolution); catalyzes binding treaty	Initiates intergovernmental negotiations for treaty development
Binding Treaty on Disaster Protection (Projected)	2025-2027 (negotiation)	Will include binding obligations on humanitarian access; compliance mechanisms; provisions on vulnerable groups; facilitation procedures	Hard law (binding on ratifying states)	Treaty compliance; state reporting mechanisms; potential dispute resolution mechanisms

Operational Implementation: the Package of Solutions for Exceptional Situations

At the operational level, IFRC has developed innovative mechanisms to address concrete access challenges. The "Package of Solutions for Exceptional Situations" represents a systematic approach to overcoming barriers in three critical contexts: armed conflicts and protracted crises, governance crises and insecurity, and sanctions-affected environments.

Armed Conflicts: The Ukraine Case (2022-2023)

The armed conflict in Ukraine created severe humanitarian access challenges, particularly for populations in conflict-affected areas. IFRC developed a logistics corridor strategy utilizing neighboring countries' National Societies. The Polish Red Cross and Romanian Red Cross established logistics hubs that received international relief supplies and coordinated onward transportation to the Ukrainian Red Cross for distribution within Ukraine (4).

This approach demonstrated several advantages. First, it circumvented access restrictions in conflict zones by utilizing established humanitarian channels through National Societies. Second, it leveraged the auxiliary role of National Societies, which possess legal status and government relationships facilitating cross-border operations. Third, it maintained the humanitarian principles of neutrality and impartiality by operating through the Red Cross network rather than governmental military logistics. By March 2023, this mechanism had enabled delivery of assistance to over 12 million people across Ukraine (4).

Sanctions-Affected Contexts: Afghanistan (2021-2024)

Afghanistan presents a complex challenge where international sanctions, banking restrictions, and concerns about the de facto authorities have severely limited humanitarian operations. Many international organizations reduced or suspended

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operations following the 2021 government transition. IFRC maintained continuous operations throughout this period, becoming one of few organizations providing assistance across all 34 provinces (6).

IFRC's approach in Afghanistan involved several key mechanisms. First, the organization negotiated exemptions and clarifications on humanitarian exceptions to sanctions with relevant governments and financial institutions. Second, IFRC utilized the Afghan Red Crescent Society's domestic banking relationships and local procurement capacity to bypass international financial restrictions. Third, cash assistance programs provided direct support to vulnerable families while minimizing corruption risks through mobile money transfers and biometric verification (22).

IFRC's 2024 Afghanistan report indicates that these mechanisms enabled the organization to reach over 8 million people with health services, cash assistance, and emergency relief despite the challenging operating environment (6). This case demonstrates how the auxiliary role of National Societies—possessing domestic legal recognition and operational infrastructure—enables sustained humanitarian operations where international actors face severe constraints. This finding has particular relevance for National Societies operating in sanctions-affected or politically complex contexts.

Governance Crises: Haiti (2022)

Haiti's complex emergency, characterized by gang violence, political instability, and weak government capacity, created severe access constraints for humanitarian organizations. Traditional supply chain approaches involving physical distribution points became dangerous and inefficient. IFRC and the Haitian Red Cross implemented a cash assistance program using mobile money transfers to reach 45,000 vulnerable families (5).

This mechanism offered multiple advantages in the insecure environment. Cash transfers reduced the need for physical distribution points that could become targets for violence or theft. Mobile money transfers minimized corruption risks through electronic tracking and reduced handling of physical cash. Beneficiaries could purchase needed items from local markets, supporting local economy while meeting diverse needs. The program achieved a 92% satisfaction rate among beneficiaries according to IFRC's monitoring data, while significantly reducing security risks to humanitarian workers (5).

Natural Disasters: Pakistan Floods (2022-2023)

The 2022 Pakistan floods affected over 33 million people across vast geographical areas, creating massive coordination challenges. The Pakistan Red Crescent Society, as auxiliary to public authorities, served as the primary operational partner to the government's National Disaster Management Authority. With IFRC technical and financial support, Pakistan Red Crescent deployed over 15,000 volunteers and reached 1.4 million people with emergency assistance (11).

This case exemplifies the auxiliary role in practice. Pakistan Red Crescent possessed pre-existing government agreements establishing its role in disaster response, had trained volunteer networks pre-positioned across affected areas, could access government coordination structures and information systems, and mobilize international IFRC network support while maintaining national leadership. The auxiliary role enabled rapid scale-up and coordination that would have been difficult for international organizations operating independently (11).

Early Action and Disaster Risk Reduction

IFRC's legal-operational framework extends beyond response to include anticipatory action and risk reduction. The Early Action Fund enables National Societies to implement protective measures before disasters strike, based on forecasting and early warning systems (23).

In Bangladesh, flood forecasting indicated high probability of severe flooding in July 2023. The Early Action Protocol enabled the Bangladesh Red Crescent to provide cash assistance to 5,000 at-risk families before flood onset. Families used funds to secure property, purchase food stocks, and relocate livestock to higher ground. Post-event evaluation indicated that early action reduced losses by an estimated 30% compared to areas without early support, and reduced subsequent emergency needs through protective actions (18).

This anticipatory approach represents a shift from reactive response to proactive protection, aligning with the disaster risk reduction emphasis in IFRC's advocacy for the protection treaty (12). Early action demonstrates operational innovation that complements legal frameworks by reducing humanitarian needs rather than merely responding to them.

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The Auxiliary Role: Foundation of the Operational Framework

A critical element across all cases is the auxiliary role of National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies. This unique legal status, recognized in the Geneva Conventions and national legislation, establishes National Societies as support organizations to public authorities in the humanitarian field (24). The auxiliary role provides several operational advantages for humanitarian access.

National Societies possess domestic legal recognition and government relationships that facilitate operational permissions and coordination. They have pre-positioned infrastructure, trained volunteers, and community relationships enabling rapid response. National Societies can access government coordination mechanisms and receive operational support from authorities. The Red Cross Red Crescent network enables international support while maintaining national leadership and cultural appropriateness.

The COVID-19 pandemic illustrated this role globally. National Societies worldwide supported government vaccination campaigns, health education, and community support services. In Indonesia, the Indonesian Red Cross deployed over 200,000 volunteers supporting vaccination of 50 million people. In Italy, the Italian Red Cross operated mobile vaccination units and contact tracing systems in partnership with regional health authorities (25). These examples demonstrate how the auxiliary role enables National Societies to serve as implementing partners for government health responses while maintaining humanitarian principles and accessing international support through the IFRC network.

Comparative Analysis: IFRC's Framework in International Perspective

To assess the strength of IFRC's legal-operational framework, it is instructive to compare IFRC's approach with those of other major humanitarian organizations. The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), while serving complementary roles, operates primarily as a neutral intermediary in armed conflicts rather than as a network coordinator; the ICRC's strength lies in specialized protection work in conflict zones, but it lacks the network structure and government auxiliary relationships that characterize IFRC's National Societies. The United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) serves a coordination function across humanitarian actors but does not have direct operational capacity comparable to IFRC's 191 National Societies. Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) such as Médecins Sans Frontières operate with greater political independence but lack the legal status and government relationships that enable IFRC's auxiliary role.

This comparative analysis reveals IFRC's distinctive strength: the combination of legal status (auxiliary role recognized in national laws and Geneva Conventions), operational capacity (191 National Societies with trained personnel and infrastructure), network reach (global presence enabling context-specific adaptation), and advocacy platform (credible voice in international law development). Conversely, this comparative perspective also identifies a relative weakness: IFRC's auxiliary role creates dependencies on governmental cooperation and political will, which can constrain advocacy during periods of government-humanitarian organization tension. The auxiliary role provides access advantages during stable periods but creates vulnerabilities during periods of political polarization or sanctions.

This analysis suggests that IFRC's strength lies precisely in its integrated approach: when legal-operational mechanisms function in coordination, IFRC can overcome barriers that purely legal or purely operational approaches cannot address alone. In sanctions-affected contexts or situations of political tension, however, this dependency can become a constraint, highlighting why the development of binding legal obligations—which would require state compliance—is essential for strengthening this framework globally.

Integrity and Accountability Mechanisms

IFRC's legal-operational framework includes robust integrity and accountability systems essential for maintaining trust and effectiveness. The Integrity and Compliance Policy (2018) establishes standards for organizational conduct and mechanisms for addressing violations (16). The policy defines integrity violations including breach of fundamental principles, government interference in National Society affairs, financial mismanagement and corruption, sexual exploitation and abuse, and misuse of the Red Cross Red Crescent emblem.

IFRC maintains multiple reporting channels enabling anyone to report misconduct: online reporting through the IFRC website, email reporting to dedicated integrity addresses, and toll-

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free telephone hotlines. The Office of Internal Audit and Investigations (OIAI) conduct independent audits and investigations, reporting directly to IFRC governance bodies (26).

These accountability mechanisms serve multiple functions in the legal-operational framework. They maintain donor confidence essential for funding humanitarian operations. They protect beneficiaries from exploitation and abuse. They preserve the reputation and access of the Red Cross Red Crescent Movement. They ensure compliance with humanitarian principles that underpin the Movement's neutrality and acceptance.

Implementation Challenges and Constraints

Despite successes, the findings reveal significant challenges constraining the legal-operational framework. IFRC's 2024 Global Funding Gap Report indicates only 65% of requested funding was received, forcing difficult prioritization decisions and limiting operational scale (8). Politicization of humanitarian assistance remains pervasive, with access often dependent on political considerations rather than humanitarian principles. Systematic violations of international humanitarian law in many conflicts directly obstruct humanitarian access regardless of legal frameworks. Increasing complexity of crises, including climate-conflict interactions and protracted emergencies, strains operational capacity (27).

Table 2: Comparative analysis of IFRC's operational mechanisms across context types

Context Type & Year	Primary Access Barriers	IFRC Solution Mechanism	Outcomes Achieved	Key Constraints
Armed Conflict (Ukraine 2022-2023)	Active combat; restricted border access; security threats; logistics disruption	Logistics corridors via neighboring NS (Polish & Romanian Red Cross hubs); cross-border coordination	12 million people reached; sustained supply chains; 500-800 tons monthly transfers maintained	Combat intensity; border security; dependency on neighboring state cooperation
Sanctions-Affected (Afghanistan 2021-2024)	International banking restrictions; sanctions compliance concerns; government transition; financing barriers	Sanctions exemptions negotiation; domestic banking relationships; cash assistance via mobile money; local procurement	8 million people served (health, cash, relief); 34-province coverage; domestic financial mechanisms operational	Limited to humanitarian carve-outs; slow exemption negotiations; vulnerability to political shifts
Governance Crisis (Haiti 2022)	Gang violence; weak government; insecurity; physical distribution danger; corruption risks	Cash assistance via mobile money; biometric beneficiary verification; decentralized collection points	45,000 families assisted; 92% beneficiary satisfaction; reduced security incidents	Digital divide; platform dependency; limited to immediate needs; sustainability challenges
Natural Disaster (Pakistan Floods 2022-2023)	Scale (33 million affected); geographic dispersion; logistics challenges; coordination complexity	NS operational leadership; government partnership; volunteer mobilization (15,000+); auxiliary role activation	1.4 million people reached; rapid scale-up; government coordination; 30-district coverage	Government capacity limits; political prioritization; volunteer sustainability; funding constraints
Disaster Risk Reduction (Bangladesh Early Action 2023)	Anticipated flood risk; timing of intervention; loss reduction prioritization	Forecast-based financing; anticipatory cash transfers; community protection action; pre-positioned resources	5,000 families protected; 30% loss reduction vs. unprotected areas; 25% shelter damage reduction	Forecasting accuracy limits; funding pre-positioning; scalability questions; community trust building

The gap between normative frameworks and compliance represents a persistent challenge. While the ILC Draft Articles and IDRL Guidelines establish clear obligations, state compliance remains inconsistent. Some states arbitrarily withhold consent to assistance for political reasons. Customs and administrative procedures create delays even where legal frameworks exist. Insecurity and active combat restrict access despite legal obligations to facilitate relief.

These challenges underscore that legal frameworks, while necessary, are insufficient without political will, adequate resources, and operational mechanisms. IFRC's integrated approach addresses this reality by combining advocacy for stronger legal obligations with practical operational solutions adapted to challenging contexts. For National Societies operating in particularly difficult political environments, this integrated approach becomes essential for translating international legal commitments into operational capacity to serve affected populations.

Discussion and Conclusion

This study demonstrates that the IFRC and Red Crescent Societies has developed a comprehensive legal-operational framework that effectively

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bridges the gap between international humanitarian norms and field-level implementation. Through an integrated dual strategy combining normative development with operational innovation, IFRC strengthens humanitarian access at multiple levels.

At the normative level, IFRC has played a crucial role in developing international disaster law through the IDRL Guidelines and influence on the ILC Draft Articles. The organization's active advocacy for transformation of these articles into a binding treaty represents an important opportunity to strengthen legal obligations for humanitarian access. IFRC's Key Messages for the treaty appropriately emphasize disaster risk reduction, protection of vulnerable populations, and facilitation mechanisms—priorities that reflect lessons from operational experience.

At the operational level, the case studies examined demonstrate that IFRC's Package of Solutions for Exceptional Situations provides effective mechanisms for overcoming access barriers in diverse challenging contexts. The Ukraine case illustrates how logistics corridors through neighboring National Societies can maintain humanitarian supply chains during armed conflict. The Afghanistan case shows how National Societies' domestic legal status and operational infrastructure enable sustained humanitarian operations where international actors face severe constraints. The Haiti case demonstrates how cash assistance programs can maintain effectiveness and security in contexts of insecurity and weak governance. The Pakistan case exemplifies how the auxiliary role enables National Societies to serve as primary operational partners to governments during large-scale disasters. The Bangladesh case shows how early action protocols can reduce humanitarian needs and losses through anticipatory assistance.

The auxiliary role of National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies emerges as a critical foundation of the legal-operational framework. This unique legal status, recognized in international and national law, provides National Societies with government relationships, operational infrastructure, and community acceptance that facilitate humanitarian access. The auxiliary role enables National Societies to serve as bridges between international humanitarian resources and domestic needs, while maintaining the humanitarian principles of neutrality, impartiality, and independence. For National Societies in complex political environments or sanction-affected contexts, this role provides unique opportunities but also requires strategic engagement with national authorities to ensure both legal compliance and humanitarian principles.

Early action mechanisms represent an important evolution from reactive response to proactive protection. The Bangladesh case demonstrates that anticipatory assistance based on forecasting can reduce humanitarian needs and losses. This approach aligns with disaster risk reduction priorities and offers a cost-effective complement to emergency response.

However, the findings also reveal significant constraints on the legal-operational framework. Funding gaps limit operational scale and sustainability. Political considerations continue to obstruct humanitarian access despite legal obligations. Violations of international humanitarian law directly prevent assistance to affected populations. These challenges indicate that legal frameworks and operational innovations, while necessary, remain insufficient without political will and adequate resources.

Specific Priorities for Framework Strengthening:

The transformation of the ILC Draft Articles into a binding treaty requires acceleration and strategic attention to three essential elements: 1) inclusion of explicit compliance mechanisms and regular state reporting on disaster law implementation to create accountability; 2) establishment of a technical expert group to provide guidance on applying treaty provisions to National Society operations in diverse contexts, including those affected by sanctions or political tension; 3) development of a dedicated funding mechanism within the treaty framework to ensure that financial constraints do not prevent treaty compliance or humanitarian operations.

The Package of Solutions for Exceptional Situations requires concrete operationalization through specific steps: a) translation of the draft proposal into detailed operational guidelines for each context type (armed conflict logistics, sanctions adaptation, governance crisis cash programming), with clear decision trees for National Societies; b) systematic training programs for National Society leadership on implementing these solutions while maintaining humanitarian principles and legal compliance; c) development of legal analysis templates that National Societies can use to assess their own operating environment and identify applicable solutions tailored to their specific legal and political context.

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Governments must be engaged in systematic capacity building to integrate disaster law principles into domestic legislation and practice: (a) technical assistance to draft or revise disaster management laws incorporating IDRL Guidelines principles of access facilitation; (b) establishment of memoranda of understanding between governments and National Societies clarifying the auxiliary role in different emergency contexts and delineating authorities and responsibilities; (c) inclusion of disaster law principles in government emergency management training and protocols to ensure consistent application.

Core funding for IFRC and National Societies must be increased and made more predictable through sustainable mechanisms: (a) establishment of a minimum baseline funding level indexed to disaster risk exposure and climate vulnerability; (b) expansion of unrestricted funding that allows IFRC flexibility for emerging crises and exceptional situations; (c) linking donor contributions to long-term preparedness and capacity building rather than only reactive emergency response.

Accountability mechanisms must be maintained and strengthened to preserve trust and effectiveness: implementation of regular monitoring of compliance with humanitarian principles, transparent reporting on operational outcomes and challenges, and systematic evaluation of how institutional frameworks support or constrain humanitarian access in different contexts.

As climate change intensifies disaster risks and geopolitical tensions create new humanitarian challenges, this integrated legal-operational approach becomes increasingly important for the international humanitarian system and for individual National Societies. The legal-operational framework that IFRC has developed offers a valuable model for humanitarian action that simultaneously honors legal obligations, maintains humanitarian principles, and achieves operational effectiveness in complex environments. The ultimate effectiveness of this framework depends not only on strong legal instruments and innovative operational mechanisms, but on the collective political will of the international community—and of individual governments—to uphold humanitarian principles and prioritize protection of affected populations.

The transformation of the ILC Draft Articles into a binding treaty represents a critical opportunity to institutionalize and strengthen this framework globally. Success will require sustained commitment from IFRC, National Societies, governments, and the broader humanitarian community. For National Societies, including those operating in politically complex or sanctions-affected contexts, this framework offers essential guidance for fulfilling humanitarian responsibilities while maintaining adherence to both international legal obligations and national legal frameworks. The combination of strong legal foundations with practical operational mechanisms, grounded in the unique institutional capacity of National Societies, provides a pathway for humanitarian organizations to fulfill their core mission of serving affected populations even amid extraordinary challenges.

Compliance with Ethical Guidelines

There were no ethical considerations in this research.

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Author's Contributions

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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