

HUMANITARIAN LAW & POLICY



Dialogue, dignity, and the humanitarian contribution to peace

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The number of conflicts continues to rise – with the ICRC currently classifying some 130 armed conflicts worldwide^[1] – while at the same time, they are rarely brought to an end. The human suffering they cause is devastating and hard to comprehend. But wars are not inevitable – and the best way to end the suffering they cause is to end conflicts or prevent them from breaking out in the first place. In the absence of effective efforts to find sustainable political solutions, humanitarian organizations like the ICRC are often left to manage the suffering caused by these conflicts, which affect civilians most of all. Political will to reinvest in international cooperation, conflict prevention, and resolution is urgently needed. While humanitarian action cannot substitute for political action, humanitarian actors can contribute to the prospects for peace.

In this post, ICRC Policy Advisers Ariana Lopes Morey and Avigail Shai outline key reflections on the ICRC’s direct and indirect contributions to an environment conducive to peace. Drawing on case studies and other research, they identify three primary areas of the ICRC’s humanitarian action – its work with communities, in dialogue with parties to conflict and other influential actors, and in building respect for human dignity through laws, norms and institutions – which can strengthen prospects for peace. While focused on the ICRC’s own work, many of these reflections can apply more broadly to other organizations who strive to address the humanitarian impacts of conflict on people.

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As we carried out this research, some colleagues we spoke to were surprised to hear we were investigating the connections between the work of the ICRC and peace. As an organization famously ‘born on the battlefield’ and mandated to respond to the humanitarian needs caused by war, it seemed to them an unlikely subject. Yet it is one that has long been close to the ICRC’s heart, for a simple reason: the ICRC, as part of the International Red Cross Red Crescent Movement (‘the Movement’) undertakes all of its work with the ultimate aim of protecting and promoting respect for human dignity. This essential goal of humanitarian action is also the foundation of sustainable peace.

We were not surprised, therefore, to find that some 95 resolutions relating to peace have been passed by the Movement’s governing mechanisms since 1921, including most recently in 2024. In addition, we discovered that the ICRC itself has been referenced in some 150 peace agreements and related documents between 1934–2023.

As the number of active armed conflicts, and the severity and scope of their impacts on people, increase steadily with devastating effect, the ICRC cannot continue to respond to the growing needs through ever-growing humanitarian programs alone; not only is the entire humanitarian sector facing an unprecedented budgetary crisis as states reduce humanitarian funding, but no amount of emergency response programming can ever truly respond to the breadth of human suffering caused by war. As an organization which witnesses this suffering daily around the world, the ICRC feels a humanitarian imperative to use its voice to call for peace.

Adherence to the humanitarian principles, and especially neutrality, necessarily puts limits on the extent to which the ICRC can engage with the political aspects of work to build peace. It will never opine on the requirements for peace in any specific conflict. But the ICRC is often present for decades in places affected by conflict, as are other international humanitarian actors.^[2] It means that organizations like ours inevitably impact the sociopolitical environment in which we work, including impacts on efforts to make or build peace; we have a duty to ‘do no harm’ that extends to ensuring we do not inadvertently exacerbate or prolong conflict and, where possible, that we contribute to the likelihood that peace can take hold. For the ICRC, ‘peace’ is understood not only as the absence of armed conflict, but as a dynamic state of cooperation and the respect of all peoples’ rights and dignity.^[3]

Based on case studies and other research, we have identified three main ways in which the ICRC's work can contribute to prospects for peace, and hope the analysis may enable an awareness and intentionality that can strengthen these connections. We believe that, while based on ICRC practice, these reflections may also be relevant for other humanitarian actors whose work intersects with that of peace actors, and for peace actors interested in strengthening peace-making and -building efforts by addressing the humanitarian issues which arise from conflict.

Working closely with communities

Making and building peace is not just about parties to conflict agreeing to a peace deal. To be sustainable, peace must be felt by communities at their level, addressing their needs and realities. Humanitarian actors with long-term presence in communities see firsthand the impacts of conflict on people, and how larger conflict dynamics are replicated – or are perhaps distinct – at community level. This is why it is so important for humanitarian action to be informed by an analysis of local conflict dynamics (often referred to as being 'conflict sensitive'). When programs are designed and carried out together with communities and intentionally take account of conflict dynamics and drivers, humanitarians mitigate the risk that they will exacerbate grievances – and they may be able to contribute to restoring trust between groups and finding alternatives to violence. The ICRC, while maintaining its humanitarian objectives, integrates conflict sensitivity analysis into its programming to improve the quality of its humanitarian work, and it has seen that it can also at times go further to contribute to strengthening social cohesion at community-level.

For example, community-based work has been and continues to be key to building a lasting peace in Northern Ireland. Until drawing its operational presence there to a close in 2024, the ICRC worked with community organizations to support them with conceptual tools, training, and financial resources to amplify their work for violence prevention. This addressed the humanitarian impacts of the legacy of conflict, and supported efforts to embed peace at the community level. Over time, the ICRC built rapport with mediation-focused organizations from historically rival communities, hosting a neutral space in which they could come together to address specific incidents or risks of inter-community violence using an agreed humanitarian framework for dialogue. Our research highlights that the ICRC, as an international actor, was able to provide an alternative, purely humanitarian framing for conversations that enabled community groups to bypass entrenched positioning and find mediated solutions to intra- or inter-communal tensions and violence, with positive impacts still being felt.

Influencing and facilitating dialogue

Maintaining the possibility, and a mechanism, to engage in a dialogue with the other side is critical to negotiating formal or informal agreements to end and resolve conflict. As a neutral intermediary, the ICRC can support or facilitate dialogue and contribute to trust-building between conflict parties if requested, and with their agreement. This can include providing support to formal peace processes and implementing humanitarian aspects of formal agreements. Even when not formally acting as a neutral intermediary, humanitarian actors can raise humanitarian concerns with all political actors, including parties to conflict, third states, and others with influence, to ensure that humanitarian issues are addressed and the needs of affected people are considered in political processes. In addition to the humanitarian imperative to bring attention to these issues, if left unattended they may also obstruct progress towards lasting peace.

For instance, in Yemen in 2018, the ICRC participated in the implementation of the prisoner release file of the Stockholm Agreement. While progress has been mixed, two large detainee release operations have taken place under the agreement, in October 2020 and April 2023, resulting in the release of some 2,000 people. The ICRC's participation helped to secure the parties' confidence in the process and its successful implementation, because it had widespread presence and acceptance; the logistics capacity to carry out large release operations; a recognized mandate and longstanding professional expertise working with conflict-related detainees. The releases had a tremendous humanitarian impact – on the individuals

released, their families, and their communities. And while no peace deal has yet been reached, these releases helped to demonstrate that a negotiated agreement between the parties can lead to tangible outcomes.

Strengthening respect for human dignity through laws, norms, and institutions

A final and important element is the creation of an environment in which both the law and the fundamental norms of respect for human rights and dignity are upheld. The ICRC draws on its role as the reference institution on international humanitarian law (IHL) and its experience of responding to the impacts of conflict around the world to ensure lawmakers are prepared to address real-world consequences of means and methods of warfare, ensuring existing obligations are respected and that new ones reflect the original purpose of IHL – to mitigate suffering and ensure respect for human dignity. Its work to disseminate the law and integrate and reflect the humanitarian principles in national, regional, and multilateral institutions and processes contributes, we hope, to an environment in which peace is more likely to take hold.

Its work in Colombia provides one example of this. The ICRC supported the negotiation of the humanitarian aspects of the 2016 peace accord between the government and the FARC, and it provided technical, legal, and financial assistance to the Special Jurisdiction for Peace (JEP), the Search Unit for Persons Reported Missing (UBPD), and the Truth Commission, which were established as a result. It has also supported the organization created by demobilized ex-FARC fighters to search for missing persons as part of their reparations toward civil society and to recover their own disappeared members. The ICRC's support to these and other Colombian institutions helps to ensure that they reflect international standards on key humanitarian questions, and that they reach the communities most affected by violence in rural areas to provide a tangible peace dividend. At the same time, in light of the eight non-international armed conflicts that impact millions of lives across the country^[4], the ICRC continues to engage with armed groups and government forces to promote respect for IHL, including on elements that experience has shown can support future peace talks – such as questions on the application of amnesties, and the obligations to prevent recruitment of children, and prevention and clarification of cases of missing persons.

At the international level, the ICRC has also contributed a humanitarian perspective to inform the development of laws and of multilateral consensus on key issues related to peace. For example, it has promoted multilateral disarmament on humanitarian grounds since the first World War, when it [called for a ban on chemical weapons](#) after witnessing their horrific effects in its field hospitals. It has since been instrumental in the adoption of almost all humanitarian disarmament treaties, such as the Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons and its Protocols, the Anti-Personnel Mine Ban Convention, the Cluster Munitions Convention and the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW), as well as the Arms Trade Treaty. The ICRC's call for a treaty on autonomous weapons systems is made in the same spirit of mitigating indiscriminate and widespread human suffering and keeping the respect for human dignity at the center of the international system of cooperation.

Conclusion

While the ICRC's longstanding reflections on peace may not be widely known, former ICRC Director General and Vice President Jean Pictet observed that there are few causes that are closer to its heart.^[5] As a neutral and independent institution, the ICRC cannot and does not seek to define what peace should look like in any given conflict, but it will always work for a future in which all peoples' human dignity is respected and protected. As we saw in our research, the contribution of humanitarian action to the prospects for peace is necessarily limited in scope, yet valuable.

At the same time, ending and preventing conflicts requires real political will. This is why the ICRC and a group of eight states recently launched a [Global IHL Initiative](#) which aims to renew investment in IHL as a political priority, and which includes a workstream dedicated to the links between IHL and peace.

We face a critical moment when the recourse to armed conflict appears too common, and the commitment to conflict resolution and prevention appears to waver. We must remember that a consensus was built on the desire ‘to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war’.[6] Armed conflicts are not inevitable; sustained political effort must be dedicated to their prevention and resolution. Renewed political investment in peace is the only way to prevent the unspeakable suffering of war.

References

[1] The number of conflicts has been increasing more rapidly than the number of conflict-affected countries over the past decade, indicating a rise in countries hosting multiple conflicts at the same time (Rustad, S.A., *Conflict Trends: A Global Overview, 1946–2024*, PRIO, Oslo, June 2025). To understand how the ICRC classifies the existence of an armed conflict, see International Committee of the Red Cross, *How is the Term “Armed Conflict” Defined in International Humanitarian Law?*, ICRC, Geneva, 2024.

[2] The focus on international humanitarian organizations is intentional: local humanitarian actors, such as National Societies of the Red Cross Red Crescent Movement, are present before, during, and after conflict. They are often engaged with peacebuilding efforts in the long-term.

[3] For its research, the ICRC adopted the Movement’s definition of peace as articulated in its Statutes: “not simply the absence of war, but is a dynamic process of cooperation among all States and peoples, cooperation founded on respect for freedom, independence, national sovereignty, equality, human rights, as well as on a fair and equitable distribution of resources to meet the needs of peoples.” *Statutes of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement*

[4] According to the ICRC’s latest public classification, found here: <https://www.icrc.org/es/articulo/colombia-retos-humanitarios-2025>

[5] See Pictet’s “*The Fundamental Principles of the Red Cross: Commentary*” at page 20.

[6] UN Charter, Preamble

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