

## **Armenia Red Cross Society – self-led volunteering as an approach to re-activating branches**

This is a recap from the “Branch Coffee Lounge session” organised by IFRC on September 22nd, 2022, with Nazeli Kirakosyan as a speaker from Armenia Red Cross Society (ARCS). The session was recorded and can be seen on <https://www.dropbox.com/s/z7uab7tqiyzwdp9/video1939309639.mp4?dl=0>

### **Intro**

*The work of branches is based on the powerful spirit of volunteerism. Volunteers, Members and Youth are the sensors, activators, promoters and advocates of a branch. At the same time, they are the knowledge brokers between the branches and the communities.*

*However, the ever-increasing demands on National Societies to show value for money, to be accountable, to comply and manage risks, have created pressures to centralise decision making, management processes and service delivery. Such requirement needs to be balanced with efforts to empower volunteers and youth to self-organise, identify local needs, and generate local responses. These two approaches to service delivery entail different ways of working and competencies. For example, viewing this through a volunteering lens, a national service, will benefit from strong volunteer management, whilst supporting self-organisation in branches will require processes that engender volunteer empowerment.*

During the Branch Coffee Lounge session, Armenia Red Cross Society shared how it approached this question.

### **Context**

There are 11 Regional branches in Armenia Red Cross Society (ARCS) which follows the government structure of the 11 regions. In addition, there are a large number of Community branches which are small local offices, that are entirely run by volunteers. In addition, ARCS has one Territorial branch, which has a special status and is mainly an emergency management centre, hence having a specialised role covering the entire territory, though having a similar structure.

ARCS is 102 years old, and it is assumed that it has been active all the time with various pace. In a setting of poverty and at times scarce funding, ARCS has for decades relied heavily on volunteerism. While volunteerism is the backbone of ARCS’s action, over time, a large number of community branches became inactive, so-called ‘sleeping’ branches, due to decreasing funds and hence decreasing programmes to implement.

### **Why did volunteering become a solution for activating branches?**

With volunteers being the backbone of ARCS and having a key importance in providing community service at branch level, it was deemed highly necessary to (re)activate the sleeping branches. In the endeavour to regenerate branch service delivery, volunteer-led initiatives became a component of the Branch model in 2016. This approach is now active in 9 out of 12 regions, and in some communities, it is the only approach.

Having very scarce resources and hence very few or no funds for proper support to volunteers and branch activities, let alone having paid staff in the branches on community level, a self-led volunteering approach was taken. Self-led volunteering is low cost and the support to branch activities and volunteers is covered through local fundraising---raising funds from local authorities, as well as the local corporate sector.

### **How did it happen?**

With this shift, volunteers were empowered to take the leading role in planning and implementing activities, undertake local fundraising. As a result, trained and experienced volunteer leaders were given the authority and the leading role to manage its volunteer groups. Volunteers at regional branches select their board and president themselves. Each regional branch also has community branches (representations) in nearby communities. While the community branches usually provide services outlined by the regional branches, in some case volunteer led initiatives are the only activities.

As one source of inspiration for volunteer leaders as to which activities are appropriate, as well as ensuring a certain level of commonality between activities, an activity catalogue, with a number of activities to choose from, has been developed. Peer to peer support between regions and branches for sharing of best practices, cross learning and mutual inspiration, has proven highly beneficial. These approaches have a highly motivational effect for volunteers, and as well eases volunteer recruitment.

This has over time turned into a vast success as all formerly sleeping branches are now re-activated, with an approach that ensures long-term sustainability.

However, ARCS has a centralised branch and volunteer management set-up, as it is the role of the HQ to overall coordinate initiatives, as well as continuously monitor, control and evaluate the branch services, and execute overall volunteer management. In this sense, with a wide network of self-leading community branches and volunteers, ARCS HQ still has the role of ensuring that the NS works and acts as one organization, respecting its principles and mandate. The branches are not legal entities as such and are not autonomous but actively participate in decision making.

### **Are there any risks for this approach?**

The volunteers of ARCS are young people who are very ambitious and have their own dreams of how to make a difference. This great commitment of youth is a positive factor, however, they must adapt their ideas to the actual needs of the community, and accept and respect the limitations given in the mandate of the ARCS and adapt to the principles of the RC, code of conduct, etc.

The volunteers learn this by joining the ARCS, and in most cases, volunteers do understand and adapt. As mentioned, they will plan and implement their own activities, but in ways that the RC mandate and principles allow.

There are other youth organisations which are freer to act than the RC, free of laws and principles of the kind that are inherent in the RC. Therefore, volunteer retention was earlier recognised by ARCS as potential challenge, as youth may leave when faced with the RC limitations. However, this has proven not to be the case. Part of the explanation to this may be that, apart from the motivation inherent in the self-leading approach, ARCS has a good image and a status of delivering good quality and important work..

Regarding the potential issue of mismanagement of funds by volunteer groups, branches are not autonomous, and do not handle funds themselves. Instead, each branch will provide a list of expenses using a simple budget format. The branch operates in a context of low-cost services, and the proposed costs are analysed and approved by the HQ. Should certain expenses be found not eligible, e.g. not being cost-effective or not applicable (e.g. purchase of items not related to the activity designed by the volunteer), the budget will be revised together with the branch.

### **Do branches only provide volunteer-initiated services?**

The regional branches receive external funding, depending on the vulnerability in their context (e.g. border tensions, poverty) and have various activities and staff. Funding cannot always be guaranteed as it depends on donor focus and commitment, but the volunteers at regional level is a core group ensuring that the regional branches are always running.

### **What would be some examples of the services the volunteers do?**

Community branches provide services e.g. support to elderly and lonely people, and support to vulnerable children (e.g. displaced children, refugee children, poor children) including MHPSS activities (e.g. play-groups), learning activities. Other activities include collecting firewood during autumn and provide this to vulnerable families, run educational centres for vulnerable women for them to obtain vocational skills like sewing, and in turn are enabled to take up a job or income activity to provide for their families.

### **Caring for volunteers**

Stress, burnout and frustrations from helping people who may be traumatised and have experienced painful situations through their volunteering, are supported by ARCS, including health insurance and psychological support. Peer support is also recognised as importance, by forming peer support groups of volunteers, which are led by experienced volunteer leaders. Experience shows, that is important that volunteers are

well prepared and well trained and is led by a strong volunteer leader. Specific focus is given to ensure volunteers are not being overworked.

Other support to volunteers includes a mandatory dissemination and orientation course, which is conducted by the volunteer leader.

Furthermore, volunteers are offered simple project proposal training, set up as a scenario and a simple form to fill in: Define the problem, suggest the solution(s), and specify the financial means necessary presented in a simple budget form.

Furthermore, recognition is seen as important element to acknowledge volunteers. It is often in the form of small gifts, and the most active volunteers are especially praised. Volunteers are offered to be part of RC conferences, and some are sent abroad for training. It is important that volunteers are recognised by their communities, as well as authorities such as the mayor and the head of the municipality, through regular recognition ceremonies and events to signal the importance of volunteers towards the community, as well as promoting a virtuous and important image of the volunteers.