INFLUENCING BEHAVIOUR TO PREVENT HUMAN SUFFERING
1. **AN INTRODUCTION TO OUR PREVENTION WORK**

The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) has four main approaches – prevention, protection, assistance and cooperation – that help it achieve its mission to ensure respect for the lives, dignity, and physical and mental well-being of people affected by armed conflict and other situations of violence, as well as for its wider humanitarian work.¹

Prevention literally means “the action of stopping something from happening or arising”.² For the ICRC, however, prevention is not about stopping armed conflicts or other violence, it is about preventing or minimizing the human suffering that they cause. We try to create a conducive environment for this to happen by influencing the behaviour of all relevant parties – both in times of peace and conflict – and by working through the legal, policy, administrative, customary and public opinion systems.

We are committed to our principles of neutral, impartial and independent humanitarian action and know that these principles allow us to address the causes of behaviour that lead to international humanitarian law (IHL)³ and international human rights law (IHRL) violations that cause unnecessary human suffering. We do this in two ways. Firstly, we aim to safeguard the lives and dignity of people affected by armed conflict and other violence by seeking access to them and by meeting their basic needs. Secondly, we aim to protect people from harmful and/or unlawful behaviour by changing this behaviour and preventing its recurrence through our complementary protection and prevention work. We document events and analyse patterns of violations and, by identifying their root causes, we can address law breaking through confidential dialogue and/or systemic long-term responses aimed at ensuring better compliance with and respect for IHL and IHRL, as well as other norms and customs.

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³ International humanitarian law is a set of rules which seek, for humanitarian reasons, to limit the effects of armed conflict. It protects persons who are not or are no longer participating in the hostilities and restricts the means and methods of warfare. International humanitarian law is also known as the law of war or the law of armed conflict. [https://www.icrc.org/en/doc/assets/files/other/what_is_ihl.pdf](https://www.icrc.org/en/doc/assets/files/other/what_is_ihl.pdf) (accessed 21 November 2019)
2. FOSTERING A CONDUCIVE ENVIRONMENT FOR BEHAVIOUR CHANGE

Our prevention approach is based on an understanding of why people behave the way they do and how best to influence them so that they change the behaviours that cause suffering. One important element of the ICRC’s prevention ecosystem is how we are perceived and accepted as an organization. Our image, credibility and relevance in the eyes of others is critical to the success of our prevention work, which is why we carry out a robust analysis of this perception. We also analyse the sources of influence on behaviour by observing the common factors in recurrent violations and the challenges to humanitarian action during armed conflict and other violence, such as the targeting of civilians, torture on arrest and during detention, restricted movement and access to public services, the destruction of civilian property, the targeting of medical staff and facilities, and suspicion of the ICRC and humanitarian workers more generally.

The causes of behaviour that result in adverse humanitarian consequences tend to be found within the environment that an individual or group is a part of. An environment may be influenced by various elements related to laws, policies, rules and procedures, customs and values, and public opinion. By understanding, observing and engaging with these different elements – and how they interact with each other – we can not only identify good practice, but also the gaps in how these existing elements are being interpreted and applied, often resulting in behaviour causing humanitarian consequences. It is also important to listen to people at all levels, to understand the drivers for their behaviours in order to bring about behaviour change. We can then determine related problems, such as limited knowledge or insufficient development of legal frameworks, limited command-and-control capacity, lack of an effective penalty system, deep resentment against specific ethnic groups, or the influence of tribal norms and religious values on the behaviour of belligerents.

Our aim is to build a set of resilient norms that serve as a bulwark to protect people: a set of laws, values and principles that are able to withstand the pressures that lead to harmful behaviour. To build a set of resilient norms, we identify and engage with all the relevant influential parties and decision-makers, and we help them to understand, support, implement, apply and, if necessary,
adapt the laws, policies and basic humanitarian principles that aim to safeguard the lives and dignity of people and support our humanitarian action.

Our prevention and protection approaches not only overlap, they also complement and strengthen each other in aiming to achieve the same goals. Some of the prevention activities mentioned above are highly informed by what our delegates see in the field. This, in turn, informs the confidential, bilateral dialogue that we have with weapon bearers to influence their behaviour, usually near the front line or place of detention and soon after the events in question have taken place. We complement this confidential dialogue by raising awareness more widely among weapon bearers about the norms and values that apply.

3. COMPLEMENTARY AND MULTIDISCIPLINARY ACTION

We work in a multidisciplinary way when creating an environment that is conducive to respect for the lives and dignity of people affected by armed conflict and other violence, and respect for the ICRC’s neutral, impartial and independent humanitarian action. We draw on the expertise of our staff members from across the organization, including from the areas of law, policy, protection, the military and police, security, diplomacy and communication. This multidisciplinary way of working is implemented wherever we are present, whether it be in conflict-stricken communities, States’ capitals or the headquarters of influential organizations.

Interconnecting networks at all levels — locally, regionally and globally — to ensure that our humanitarian concerns are heard, and that the laws that apply during armed conflict and other violence are adhered to.

We take into account the interconnecting networks of different influential parties, and we reach out to them at all levels — locally, regionally and globally — to ensure that our humanitarian concerns are heard, and that the laws that apply during armed conflict and other violence are adhered to.

Our prevention approach is characterized by three core and complementary types of prevention work:

1. Structural prevention: influencing to establish systemic measures and frameworks
2. Front-line prevention: directly influencing behaviour in situations of armed conflict and violence
3. Bilateral or multilateral prevention: influencing laws and policies at regional and global forums.
We work with States to support them in integrating and implementing laws, and in setting up domestic structural measures and normative frameworks so they are adhered to. This not only helps States meet their international obligations, but it also helps them to have clearer legal and normative frameworks to guide their actions in difficult situations. To this end, we provide all areas of government – including the legislative, judicial and executive branches (through interministerial IHL committees, for example) – with technical expertise to develop domestic laws, policies, and administrative and practical processes that support the implementation and application of relevant laws. We also encourage and support States to become parties to existing IHL treaties and we work towards developing proposals for new treaties to address emerging humanitarian issues.

We also work with State armed forces and security forces, supporting them to integrate IHL and IHRL into their operations, doctrine, training and procedures to ensure that commanders at all levels take humanitarian factors into account. This, effectively, ensures they apply IHL and other legal frameworks in decision-making processes, during hostilities and when using force.

We take part in the training of military and police officers to help them better understand the practical application of legal standards. Moreover, we organize and contribute to tailor-made, contextualized and targeted training of armed and security forces, such as for contingents being deployed on peace operations. In addition to our confidential, bilateral protection dialogue with the authorities concerned, we also look at existing legal and policy frameworks, and we engage with law and policymakers to bring about changes to improve people’s overall conditions at a systemic level and to reduce adverse humanitarian consequences, such as forced displacement, ill-treatment or overcrowding.

Having observed the disastrous humanitarian consequences resulting from the use of certain weapons, we add our voice and support to the development and application of laws and rules to prohibit or, in some instances, better regulate their use, such as the Ottawa Treaty, the Treaty on Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons and the Arms Trade Treaty.

We also closely follow new developments in the field of weapons and technology, which may have an adverse impact on people’s lives and dignity. Cyber warfare, remotely operated vehicles (such as drones), robots and artificial intelligence are some of the technologies that we are discussing with experts, government officials and industry representatives. We highlight our humanitarian concerns about these new technologies and work to ensure that their impact remains within the limits set out by IHL.

To ensure that IHL is well known and accepted, we work very closely with universities, think-tanks and other academic organizations. By organizing national, regional and global conferences and symposiums with academics and researchers, we can elevate the debate about how IHL can be clarified,
promoted and applied in current situations, as well as new and challenging ones. We need to ensure that a future generation of decision-makers is informed about IHL, which is why we engage with university law faculties and other disciplines to ensure that IHL is integrated in academic curricula. We also organize moot courts and other events for students to stimulate their interest in IHL. In addition, the ICRC regularly publishes position and opinion papers that communicate IHL successes and highlight the consequences of IHL not being complied with.

3.2 FRONT-LINE PREVENTION: DIRECTLY INFLUENCING BEHAVIOUR IN SITUATIONS OF ARMED CONFLICT AND VIOLENCE

Over time, we build and sustain relationships with influential parties in order to respond with structural prevention work. This network of influential parties, combined with our knowledge of the context, is hugely valuable when carrying out front-line prevention work during a crisis. By starting a dialogue to influence behaviour, we can gain and maintain access both to victims and the people involved in order to carry out our neutral, impartial and independent humanitarian activities. In the places where we have ongoing humanitarian operations, this is mainly done through operational communication (information and awareness-raising sessions), meetings and public campaigns using radio and other media. This is complemented and informed by our protection approach; incidents and patterns of existing violations – or potential new ones – are documented and then discussed with weapon bearers in a confidential, bilateral dialogue, usually near the front line or place of detention and soon after the events have taken place. By acting immediately, we can better influence harmful behaviour and stop future law breaking by preventing a recurrence.

To hone our front-line engagement with weapon bearers, we carry out research in specific areas to deepen and improve our understanding of any local values and traditions that could influence behaviour and, ultimately, lead to better respect for the law, our mission and vulnerable people. This work allows us to have meaningful discussions with communities and non-State armed groups, during which we encourage them to develop codes of conduct that show respect for civilians, other protected people, such as humanitarian workers, and civilian objects.

Our front-line prevention also includes engaging with civilian authorities, National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, the media, community members, and tribal and religious leaders. We endeavour to secure their support in raising awareness about humanitarian issues and principles. These relationships – developed within the ambit of the principles of neutrality and impartiality – allow us to gain access to people affected by violence. Crucially, by gaining the trust of weapon bearers, political authorities and other influential parties, we are often able to reach people and places that are out of bounds to others.

3.3 BILATERAL OR MULTILATERAL PREVENTION: INFLUENCING LAWS AND POLICIES AT REGIONAL AND GLOBAL FORUMS

The ICRC benefits from a presence in numerous locations around the world and a diverse network of relationships, which allow the organization to engage with diplomatic and political circles at regional and global levels. Having the opportunity to engage means we can draw attention to the need for humanitarian space so that neutral, impartial and independent humanitarian action can be carried out, and the need to respect the rights of people affected by conflict and other violence. Through our humanitarian diplomacy work, we share, sometimes publicly, our observations, experience and expertise in order to influence policies so that the humanitarian imperative remains at the heart of decision-making. Two examples of this are the UNSC Resolution 2286 (2016), strongly condemning attacks against medical personnel and facilities in time of conflict and violence, and UNSC Resolution 2474 (2019), calling upon parties to armed conflict to take all appropriate measures to actively search for missing people, to enable the return of their remains and to account for people reported missing without adverse distinction.

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4. MEASURING OUR IMPACT

Measuring the impact of our prevention activities is a challenging task. It is particularly difficult to measure if something did not occur because it was prevented by our actions or if it was the result of some other, possibly multiple, external factors. However, not only is the regular monitoring of prevention activities necessary, it is also possible and valuable. Our progress can be measured in a number of ways. We can assess the effectiveness of our dialogue and engagement with groups at different levels, we can measure the progress in our work being accepted and we can measure the behaviour of decision-makers and weapon bearers in complying with the law. Measuring impact and progress allows us to adjust and adapt our future actions, which is particularly important given the complex and changing nature of the environments and parties involved.

5. CHALLENGES AND WAYS FORWARD

Our prevention work is, at times, hindered by the unwillingness of certain parties to comply with the law and legal frameworks. However, our prevention work is a continuous task and a moral responsibility, and any prevention activities, whether they be direct or indirect, take place before, during and after an armed conflict or other violence as we take an approach with a medium- to long-term perspective.

We share our task and responsibility with other organizations, within and outside the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, and both governmental and non-governmental, and this prevention response is spread across and interlinked at national, regional and global levels. In an ever-changing world, this cooperation will continue to require sustained efforts to match the realities and challenges of current and future environments where the universality of IHL and its underlining norms could be questioned by certain influential parties. With a diverse and inclusive workforce representing a multitude of cultures, the ICRC is well placed to listen and analyse opinions from across the globe, and we will continue to engage with all parties in order to win their support in respecting people’s lives and dignity.

Other areas we are investing in are the research, study and assimilation of behaviour change theories and the socialization of norms, which will help to strengthen our prevention response. Similarly, we are making use of new tools to analyse and better engage with influential parties, building networks and reaching out to like-minded people and organizations. We must build a positive narrative about the continued relevance of IHL and its application, so we can promote its effectiveness in and around battlefields and violent settings, both for those engaging directly in violence, as well as for those who should be safeguarded from suffering.

Our prevention approach will continue to serve as an enabler for our operational activities, and it is through this relentless, purposeful and systematic work that the ICRC hopes to build an environment where creating a humanitarian space and respecting people’s lives and dignity, however adverse the situation, becomes a common goal for all.
MISSION

The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) is an impartial, neutral and independent organization whose exclusively humanitarian mission is to protect the lives and dignity of victims of armed conflict and other situations of violence and to provide them with assistance. The ICRC also endeavours to prevent suffering by promoting and strengthening humanitarian law and universal humanitarian principles. Established in 1863, the ICRC is at the origin of the Geneva Conventions and the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement. It directs and coordinates the international activities conducted by the Movement in armed conflicts and other situations of violence.