

A Resilience-Focused Approach

An Interview with Walter Cotte, Americas Regional Director, International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies

EDITORS' NOTE *Walter Cotte, who joined the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) in January 2013, as Under Secretary General of Program and Operations, has more than 50 years of humanitarian and development experience. Previously, Cotte was the National Executive Director of the Colombian Red Cross Society from 2008 to 2012. His past leadership roles with the organization include Head of Operations and Disaster Management (1994-2008), and Head of Volunteers for Relief and Search and Rescue (1985-1994). His Red Cross and Red Crescent experience includes a six-month assignment to the IFRC as its Head of Operations in Asia Pacific. He has served as a consultant with the United Nations Disaster Assessment and Coordination system and the International Search and Rescue Advisory Group, was a member of the Colombian Government's National Disaster Board and a member of the board of the Colombian National Fire Association. Cotte studied Social Management and Administration at the CUN University of Cundinamarca, and Industrial Safety at the National Council of Safety. He also has a high level of training and specialization in disaster management from Tadeo Lozano University and in "Better Programming for Peace Process" from the National University of Colombia.*



Walter Cotte

Will you provide an overview of the work of the IFRC?

Our main goal is divided into two main lines, to strengthen the humanitarian response worldwide through our network of 192 National Societies and in order to do that, enhancing their organizational capacity, augmenting their capacity of absorption, and strengthening their auxiliary role to the national authorities. As IFRC, we are considered the Secretariat of the National Societies that enables us to have a collective impact and create

operational and influential networks at the local, national, regional and global level.

Our Strategy 2030 envisions three global goals that aim to contribute to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG):

1. People can anticipate, survive, and quickly recover from crises.
2. People lead safe and healthy lives with dignity and have opportunities to thrive.
3. People mobilize for inclusive and peaceful communities.

There are significant threats facing humanity and we must tackle these head on.

1. Climate Change: changes to our climate and environment are already contributing to an increase in the frequency, intensity and unpredictability of severe weather events, as well as the decline of biodiversity. Our focus over the coming decade will be on reducing the current and future humanitarian impacts of climate and environmental crises and supporting people to thrive in the face of it. In the Americas region we are developing a "Climathon" project in which the climate change effects are faced through different lines of action that will help to build resilient communities.

2. Disaster and Crisis: disasters are predicted to become more common, more costly, more complex and, sadly, more concentrated in populations least able to cope. In the region we have faced several disasters such as the earthquake in Haiti, the recent Dorian Hurricane in the Bahamas, Population Movement in the borders and inside of Mexico and the U.S. as well as the Northern Triangle in Central America, civil unrest in more than eight countries in the region, and irregular flows of Venezuelan migrants traveling throughout the continent among many other difficult situations caused by the high-level of inequity and exclusion.

Our main objective is to help communities, local systems and institutions, making sure that they will be able to respond and to mitigate the vulnerabilities and disadvantages resulting from all types of crises and disasters that affect the most vulnerable so that they are able to succeed and to install Early Warning Systems (EWS) at a local level and early actions that can create an environment of prevention, awareness and preparedness to better respond at a very local level.

3. Health: despite significant global health gains and major medical advances, people continue to face a complex mix of interconnected risks to their health and well-being. Infectious diseases and the risk of epidemics and pandemics are a major public global health concern. At the IFRC, we want to make sure that all people have safe and equitable access to water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH). To do so, we will expand our integrated community-based health-care and first aid as well as water, sanitation and hygiene programs to meet the unmet needs of vulnerable or marginalized groups.

With the COVID-19 outbreak we have learnt that we also need to significantly invest in epidemic and pandemic preparedness building trust, ownership and engagement and placing communities at the center of response and in every process. To do so, our Community Engagement and Accountability (CEA) approach lets us better understand the communities and how we can help them in an efficient way. We are able to achieve this through volunteers and campaigns to build community connections, to promote positive mental health and well-being, and reduce loneliness as well as provide psycho-social support particularly in vulnerable communities.

The Red Cross services in health range from ambulance services, prevention and pre-hospital care. We believe in a holistic system where prevention and the public health system play a key role along with health in emergency, water and sanitation.

Health is one of our main priorities in our programs and operations, and nowadays we consider it to be very important to focus as well on mental health and how we can create Psychosocial Support networks for our staff, volunteers and communities in need.

4. Migration and Identity: movement of people, whether voluntary or involuntary, is one of the defining features of the 21st century.

ORGANIZATION BRIEF *The International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (ifrc.org) is the world's largest humanitarian organization which provides assistance without discrimination as to nationality, race, religious beliefs, class or political opinions. Founded in 1919, the IFRC comprises 192 member Red Cross and Red Crescent National Societies, a secretariat in Geneva, and more than 60 delegations strategically located to support activities around the world. The Red Crescent is used in place of the Red Cross in many Islamic countries. The IFRC vision is to inspire, encourage, facilitate and promote at all times all forms of humanitarian activities by National Societies, with a view to preventing and alleviating human suffering, and thereby contributing to the maintenance and promotion of human dignity and peace in the world.*

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The risks that people face when they are on the move are growing. These include exploitation and abuse at the hands of traffickers and other criminal groups, as well as deprivations caused by policies that limit access to basic services and care. Migrants are also prone to suffer exclusion and xenophobia acts from local communities. The RCRC Movement delivers services to the migrants' routes, at boarder points and also in the host countries. We promote protection for vulnerable groups – women, children, people with disabilities and asylum seekers. We believe migrants should have a dignified way of living, providing them opportunities and seeking their inclusion. RCRC also focuses its efforts to provide livelihoods to people on the move, advocate through humanitarian diplomacy for their respect, and work for their basic needs, among others.

5. Values, power and inclusion: we seek to eliminate any source of exclusion, marginalization and violence through a cross-cutting approach.

Each of these challenges interact with each other, complicate each other and, in many cases, will worsen each other. Climate change is a prominent risk driver and there is a clear call to make this a major focus of our efforts in the coming decade.

Migration will become more of an issue the world will have to find solutions for. The severity and frequency of disasters will increase and conflicts will continue to be protracted, but new crises will also emerge including those from digital threats.

We not only face unsolved health challenges, but many new or increasing threats as well; loneliness, Non-Communicable Diseases and the threat of pandemics; and finally, we bear witness to increasingly polarized, unequal and xenophobic societies and we must double down on our efforts to promote peace and inclusion. We will increasingly have to do this in dense, overburdened, complex urban environments and in a context where financing, volunteering and resources are harder to attain. To do so, the RCRC Movement will always work through our 7 Fundamental Principles of humanity, impartiality, neutrality, independence, voluntary service, unity and universality which characterize our humanitarian imperative and allow us to have unified values with our National Societies to deliver humanitarian assistance in the best way.

The implementation of this strategy relies on the Red Cross National Societies that reach 160,000 municipalities at a global level with the help of 14 million volunteers worldwide.

We facilitate the work at the community level to create networks and connection systems. We are making our way to create a better system of accountability and community engagement so we can work hand in hand with different sectors and stakeholders. For example, we have alliances with the private sector, especially with companies implementing Corporate Social Responsibility, to drive the changes that will create a better future for all, and we also constantly coordinate with the UN system, multilateral organizations, Governments, the Academy, among other stakeholders that allow us to have strong partnerships and work together for the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) accomplishment.

We are a trusted network since we are neutral, impartial and independent which allows us access in the communities.

How do you describe your leadership style and how do you focus your efforts in your role?

For me, leadership is fundamental not only to generate an impact on others, but to understand that we are surrounded by amazing people. My leadership is based on understanding that people have different capacities and that as long as they are empowered, they are critical, they are persevering, they are good team players, and they are supportive, many things can be achieved together. That is why my leadership style is based on collective leadership, which guides through characteristic values such as being equitable, constantly and strictly focused on results and positive impact for communities and systems. At the same time, “the human touch” in leadership is part of my way of working which is dedicated to show who we are as human beings and how we want to reflect our values in the professional aspect, thinking always about the community and how we can help the most vulnerable.

That is why, for me, leading by example and action is what represents a leadership style that stems from the base of the organization, where the spirit of volunteerism and solidarity are my core and where examples of good leaders maintain our humanitarian imperative clearly and sincerely, closer and silently effective in the medium and long-term.

I truly believe in a democratic and coaching leadership style. This engenders trust and promotes team spirit and cooperation from staff. It allows creativity and helps people to grow and develop. I actively include people in the decision-making process before making a final decision. I see people who work with me as offering a reservoir of talent that can change today's world and be further developed in anticipation of a challenging future. I seek opportunities to harvest leadership processes from a multilayer and multisectoral network to unlock and develop one's potential.

This leadership approach has led us to be innovative and create solutions for communities, systems and entities in our day-to-day work at the IFRC. It also keeps us focused on the long-term results by generating a positive chain of good actions that together fulfill our humanitarian objectives.

This leadership seeks to go beyond the IFRC and the Red Cross Movement and includes work with the public, private and academic sectors. This type of leadership is based on generating alliances and replicating good practices in the world to create an expansive and resilient network to help solve the problems of exclusion and inequity.

How do you define resilience and how critical is resilience to the culture of the Red Cross?

Resilience is the ability to adapt and cope with disasters, shocks, stresses and crises. But beyond that, to create and sustain enabling environments for resilience, we must nurture localization approaches and view our communities as resilience champions in order to most effectively identify and address underlying vulnerabilities.

The Red Cross Red Crescent Movement has a systematic resilience-focused approach to all programs and services so I can attest that it is not only part of the culture, but informs each level of our planning and implementation processes. Our resilience approach has evolved over the years, and continues to do so, recognizing that risks are ever-evolving and require agility and bridging the humanitarian-development divide in order to adequately respond to the immediate needs and imminent threats as well as those that we may not always be able to fully anticipate and prevent.

What role do you feel the IFRC can play in building a more resilient world?

Our volunteers are an ever-present network serving as a neutral and independent bridge between communities and different national systems and give a global voice to vulnerable people. The Red Cross is characterized as a system of agglutination of local to global systems where we can represent the interests of all. The Red Cross and Red Crescent network serves as an independent auxiliary to its government, including having permanent observer status with the United Nations. This privileged role allows the Red Cross and Red Crescent the ability to advocate for and shape policies that ensure a more resilient ecosystem. For example, we know that good legislation is critical to reducing disaster and climate risks. Law can set the stage for early warning, financing, community empowerment and accountability, or it can obscure and obstruct the necessary steps. Since 2012, the IFRC and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) have been working on a joint project to research, compare and consult on the efforts of various countries to strengthen how their laws support the reduction of disaster risks, particularly at the community level. In June 2014, they launched a major new study examining 31 countries and in December 2015, they launched a new tool, The Checklist on Law and Disaster Risk Reduction and its accompanying guide, The Handbook on Law and Disaster Risk Reduction, to provide practical guidance on this area of law. These macro-level changes help to ensure systems changes are in place which ultimately impact the local communities in which we live and serve.

We can create a way to build residual integrated and comprehensive resilience in the future by further serving as a convener and localization-enabler to facilitate inclusive approaches to fostering resilience regardless of an individual's age, gender, race, creed, health, economic status or education.

What is the contribution the IFRC Americas team is making to build a more resilient Latin American region?

Our region, ranging from the North to the South, is comprised of 35 countries representing diverse realities and risk exposure. Disasters in the Americas are very common, with an increased frequency of 3.6 percent in the last 50 years, costing billions in economic losses and human lives every year. Nevertheless, it is not only major disasters which contribute to developmental delays and the rising cost of living in the region. Adopting what we refer to as the 'Road Map to Resilience', Red Cross National Societies in the Americas have expressed their unified efforts to:

1. Make every effort to ensure that our disaster and crisis management system, from the local to the global levels, provides communities and individuals affected by disasters and crises with relevant, effective, high-quality and coordinated response and recovery, in accordance with their functions within national systems, as a key contribution to community resilience.

2. Build alliances that lead us to achieve the One Billion Coalition for Community. Through

the Coalition, the IFRC and its partners will help individuals, households and communities around the world to improve their understanding of risk and take action to strengthen their safety, health, and well-being.

The IFRC in the Americas 'runs 3 humanitarian marathons' that seek to have a replicated positive effect in communities, systems and networks:

1. Climate change and resilience (Climathon)
2. Migration, Protection Gender and Inclusion (Migrathon)

3. Health, water and sanitation (Healthathon)

Our contribution as the IFRC is to ensure investment in institutional strengthening of all of our National Societies so that they may develop their capacities to support communities in taking active steps to strengthen their resilience and to ensure risk-based analysis, planning and decision-making in Red Cross programs and actions.

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Has the role of humanitarian organizations changed due to COVID-19 and its far-reaching effects?

From June 1 to 30, 2020, the Americas region doubled the number of COVID-19 cases reported, becoming the geographical epicenter of the pandemic, notwithstanding the significant sub-regional differences, especially regarding the Caribbean, where the English and Dutch speaking countries (islands) have managed to contain the transmission. The number of deaths in these 30 days represented an increase of 60 percent and 6 out of the top 10 countries with more cases of affectation are in the Americas region according to WorldMeters.

The situation, apart from numbers of cases and deaths, continues to impose an increasing overload on healthcare systems, especially those that are already structurally weak. The potential collapse of healthcare systems is of particular concern in Central America and some areas of the Andean region. This continues to force the adoption of extraordinary measures of auxiliary support to the health authorities through human and material resources.

As IFRC, we have acquired extensive knowledge managing disasters and Disaster Risk Reduction initiatives using a Preparedness for Effective Response (PER) approach. However, it is clear that having the experience supporting contexts with natural and human disasters, a pandemic like COVID-19 is a challenge that our or any organization was not prepared to deal with alone. That is why we believe that “we are in this together” and our National Societies continue their tremendous work in community engagement and advocacy, healthcare, health promotion, hygiene access and promotion, and in mental health and psychosocial support. However, as the pandemic continues, efforts must continue to be made to control transmission, avoid the impact of discontinuation of essential health services, and strengthen psychosocial support for individuals and communities. At the same time, special attention must be paid to the fatigue and stress of the front line aiders with increased vulnerability, reinforcing biosafety protocols and having a very strong approach on “protecting the ones that protect.”

We are also working on the study and analysis of the negative effects of the pandemic, in particular on mental health, livelihoods and the development of healthy and sustainable local markets through joint initiatives with other organizations such as the UN.

Do you feel it is critical to have collaboration and strong global alliances in order to build a more resilient world?

No one entity can handle the pandemic and the problems that afflict our society alone. We must increase our capacity to integrate resources, leadership, methodologies, personnel and vision to create optimal solutions that are replicable and expandable at a cost that can be assumed by the local communities and the supportive systems.

Our global IFRC Strategy 2030 articulates that, as a movement, we will and must “go beyond resilience, to ensure that individuals and communities can thrive” and “work as a distributed network” by deepening our collaboration with various organizations, the public and private sector, academia, communities and others to learn, collaborate and act to improve scale and scope when developing longer-term interventions that address humanitarian needs.

Establishing and nurturing alliances with communities and public authorities in accordance with our auxiliary status is at the core of our humanitarian mandate. The rapid expansion of the network of alliances with environmental organizations, research institutions, disaster management agencies, the private sector and beyond has contributed to the creation and implementation of pioneering initiatives that are relevant and appropriate to the targeted context whether they aim to bridge the digital divide, invest in early warning and early action, public awareness and education, or assessments and training. The range is, in fact, limitless. We embrace the opportunities to collaborate with partners, especially now when the complexities of risks necessitate alliances in order to curtail the magnitude of exposure. Without it, none of us will scratch the surface. ●