



## **‘Being at the front line across the globe’**

**HERE, Now, and in the Future Series**

**Notes from the interview with Cécile Aptel, IFRC, 6 April 2020**

The International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) is a humanitarian network that brings together 192 National Societies and almost 14 million volunteers. The IFRC acts before, during, and after disasters and health emergencies to meet the needs and improve the lives of vulnerable people.

Cécile Aptel presented the IFRC in general, and also what it is doing in response to the COVID-19 crisis, to support its members to carry out their work in the best way possible. This includes providing additional resources and expert knowledge, particularly in the areas of health and pandemics. Established 101 years ago to respond to the Spanish flu, the IFRC has significant experience in this area. Recently, an emphasis has been put on peer-to-peer learning. Present worldwide, the National Societies are at the front line of the COVID-19 pandemic everywhere, and Aptel noted that “right now, a lot of exchange is taking place among them on what to do, as well as on what not to do”.

Beyond knowledge-sharing and learning, Aptel also stressed the importance of innovation. She highlighted that “the best way to answer to something unprecedented is to innovate and to do a lot more real-time learning than we have done in the past”. This is happening at all levels: from exchanges among leaders of National Societies, to technical staff and even volunteers, and on a wide range of issues. The IFRC stimulates such exchanges through various means – from structured virtual think tanks of leaders and specific groups of technical staff within National Societies, to a Facebook-page for volunteers. The aim, Aptel explained, is to maximize the fact that IFRC’s membership spans the globe. While there are significant differences in dealing with this crisis from one context to another, there are also important common elements to build on.

Aptel underlined that an important lesson learnt from responding to the Ebola and HIV/AIDS crises is how crucial community engagement is to best communicate public health messages and also prevent false information and rumours. There are signs in some contexts of foreigners or even health workers being accused of spreading virus. For the IFRC, investing in community engagement is key to ensure misperceptions are addressed. The National Societies bring together close to 14 million volunteers, and these are people who work from within their communities. As Aptel highlighted, “this is what is very often both protecting them but also putting them much more at risk”, increasing the significance of duty of care. To avoid face-to-face interactions where possible, the IFRC is scaling up its online and virtual communication, for example its first-aid trainings online. Aptel clarified: “we try to adjust to minimise risks while continuing, and in fact, even increasing the engagement with communities.”

Aptel noted that the COVID-19 crisis affects a humanitarian response built largely on the international deployment of people and resources across countries. With travel restrictions, this is no longer possible, reinforcing the hugely important role of the local humanitarian actors working in their own communities. What the organisation is seeing now is an increased demand put on local staff and volunteers. Aptel concluded: “So yes, we really need to be supporting our local responders right now because they are the ones on the ground, they are the ones delivering the work. Whether we will as a humanitarian sector learn those lessons, I hope so. And I trust we will, we have no choice.”

Full interview available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GzAab3DfLxg>