

IFRC*

Choreographer of Disaster Management

Preparing for tomorrow's disasters

* International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent

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“It is easy to find resources to respond, it is hard to find resources to be more ready to respond”
- Bernard Chomilier, Head, Logistics and Resource Mobilization Department

Introduction

Between 22 October and 1 November 1998, Hurricane Mitch, a 180-mph Category 5 storm, the worst to hit the Gulf of Mexico in 200 years, swept through a number of Central American countries¹ devastating the economies of Honduras, Nicaragua and Guatemala. The hurricane, dumping as much as six feet of rain, washed out roads, destroyed some 400 bridges in the region, changed the course of rivers and left a three feet layer of mud on flooded airport airfields. 10,000 people were estimated dead while some two million were left homeless. In January 1999, Carlos Flores, president of Honduras stated, “We lost in 72 hours what had taken us more than 50 years to build, bit by bit.”

The International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) was under fire (Exhibit 1). The donor National Societies (NSs) and the NSs of Central America were dissatisfied with the way it had handled the Hurricane Mitch disaster. Nothing had gone right. It took weeks before IFRC took a lead in coordinating the relief contributions of the donating NSs. IFRC’s technical staff and relief delegates arrived late in the region. Emergency Response Units (ERU)² were deployed at the eleventh hour (See Exhibit 2). Basic supplies such as food, water and shelter took weeks to mobilize and distribute to the population. This, while bilateral assistance, in particular from the US and Mexican governments as well as the American and Spanish NSs, had visibly delivered.

Although the Federation was engrossed in a reorganization exercise, a group of experienced staff, led by Iain Logan, Operations Manager, was appointed to ensure that IFRC was never again caught unprepared. Their work resulted in the creation of a Pan-American Disaster Response Unit (PADRU) - a pilot initiative to be eventually replicated in other regions of the world. PADRU’s central responsibility was to respond to disasters in the region by providing technical expertise and creating capacity in disaster preparedness and response (See Exhibit 3).

Restructuring of IFRC

The endorsement of IFRC’s new Secretary General, Didier Cherpitel, in October 1999 marked the beginning of the major restructuring exercise. In 2000, McKinsey, at Cherpitel’s request, carried out a *pro bono* study of the role, activities and structure of IFRC. The recommendations of the study triggered debates that led to significant organizational changes. The reorganization consisted of the transformation of the four vertical divisions - continuously switching from developmental to disaster and emergency management activities - into six divisions with a clear separation between on-going development (Programme Coordination) and disaster management and coordination (See Exhibits 4 & 5). The major novelties in the new organizational structure were the creation of a Knowledge Sharing division and a Disaster Management and Coordination division, the latter with

¹ Belize, Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Jamaica, Mexico, Nicaragua, and Panama.

² Specialized equipment and people on standby addressing logistics, health (basic health care and referral hospitals), telecommunication and water and sanitation issues sponsored by 10 donating NSs.

two distinct departments, namely Emergency Response Preparedness and Logistics and Resource Mobilization, as well as three Operations Managers responsible for coordinating emergencies on global scale.

Stakeholders on the humanitarian scene

To deliver better assistance to disaster stricken populations, IFRC worked through the NSs and collaborated with international bodies, non-governmental and inter-governmental organizations. Between 20 and 25 of the 178 NSs were considered as participating NSs as they channeled substantial funds, goods and personnel mobilized in their countries to IFRC. Among the inter-governmental organizations, the European Union, through ECHO (European Community Humanitarian Office) was IFRC's largest single donor. IFRC collaborated with relevant United Nations (UN) agencies such as the UN office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the World Health Organization (WHO), the World Food Programme (WFP), and the UN Children's Fund (UNICEF) in the field as well as establishing humanitarian standards and procedures. IFRC competed for the same resources as other humanitarian NGOs such as Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF), Oxfam³ and Cooperative for Assistance and Relief Everywhere (CARE).

Although IFRC's ultimate "customers" were the disaster stricken populations, as the saying among the IFRC staff went, "A happy donor today is a good donor tomorrow". What made a donor happy was IFRC's efficiency, transparency and effectiveness and the donor's visibility and accountability with the public at large. In this context, the role of the press in covering a disaster became crucial. As Bernard Chomilier, head of Logistics and Resource Mobilization department, said, "The fund-raising capabilities of our NSs depend very much on the press coverage and reviews we manage to obtain in the immediate aftermath of a disaster. For example, IFRC was the first humanitarian organization to arrive on the Gujarat site. That gave us a lead role among the humanitarian agencies and determined our resources and reach."

Given its exclusively humanitarian mission and its presence at the national and regional level, IFRC generally enjoyed easier access to some countries than the UN organizations. As another operations manager explained, "We are smaller, often more discreet, easier to handle and less bureaucratic than the UN. Plus UN is not only a humanitarian organization but also a political one."

Disaster Preparedness

Logan recalled the heated debriefings held at IFRC in the immediate aftermath of Hurricane Mitch. "Criticism abounded. Can you imagine, we had 22 separate assessment reports on the hurricane carried out by various NSs and donors on our desk! IFRC had failed to play a coordinating role in managing the disaster. We were not prepared to respond to the crisis in terms of technical support

³ The Oxford Committee for Famine Relief was established in 1942. It adopted its abbreviated telegraph address Oxfam in 1965.

and provision of goods as not enough technical expertise was readily deployable and no supplies were pre-positioned.”

With such evidence, IFRC acknowledged the need to improve while NSs realized the need for professional coordination. IFRC became aware that if it did not have a system in place to guarantee transparent and quick responses to disasters, donors would reinforce their own capabilities and provide assistance on a bilateral basis.

In order to take a lead role as disaster management choreographer and become a benchmark for the humanitarian sector, IFRC had to act quickly. It had to meet the expectations of the beneficiaries, the NSs, donors, public opinion and the media. Beneficiaries expected a speedy response to their needs. Donors and governments, obsessed with speed-of-relief delivery, were keen to enhance their profile in the international arena. The media exerted pressure - competing with their peers to reach the scene before the event, they never fell short of asking humanitarian organizations: “Do you think you are quick enough?” IFRC’s stance, as Logan explained, was, “Speed without quality can come back and bite you. There is a need to build capability in preparedness. Our strategy in the Americas is to work hard during disasters but to work even harder between disasters.”

For IFRC staff in Geneva two elements of disaster management had to be mastered for the right goods to arrive at the right place at the right time: disaster preparedness and disaster response. Preparedness was required in Geneva but also at IFRC’s regional and national offices across the continents. The culture of preparedness was to be spread to the 178 National Societies with different capacity and capabilities. Through PADRU, IFRC also aimed to go beyond itself and its members by including other humanitarian organizations, active in relief operations, in the preparedness process.

Leveraging and building resources

IFRC’s new strategy consisted of the creation of tools and resources and their utilization at the global level. Depending on the size of the disaster, it envisaged different levels of intervention: NSs were to cope with small disasters, medium-sized disasters were to be dealt with at the regional level, and for big disasters IFRC would call upon its own global network of people and resources (See Exhibit 6).

Until Hurricane Mitch, IFRC, at best, tended to observe and learn from its actions during disasters. After that, the focus shifted to actions that needed to be undertaken between disasters. “We plan to build preparedness and response capabilities at regional and NS level,” said Logan. “If everything goes to plan, we will be working ourselves out of this job in a number of years with implications for the structure and function of emergency operations at IFRC in the future.” This vision was shared among IFRC staff who believed “The less we do, the better. The more our members do, the better.” To effectively manage disasters, IFRC’s preparedness activities were to be built on five pillars: human resources, knowledge management, operations and process management, financial resources, and the community (See Exhibit 7).

HR preparedness

The humanitarian sector is a people-intensive and people-driven industry that leverages on the motivation and devotion of those who chose to work for it. Over the decades the sector had evolved. Despite the fact that it suffered from high employee turnover and relied heavily on the participation of volunteers, it had managed to attract as well as develop a small army of professional humanitarian operators and managers.

To be able to respond to major disasters quickly, IFRC had a rapidly deployable tool, the Field Assessment Coordination Team (FACT). The mandate of FACT was to carry out rapid field assessment immediately after a disaster, ensure coordination with dozens of actors and make quick decisions. FACT members were on standby and deployable within 12-24 hours for up to six weeks anywhere in the world. They were experienced Red Cross/Red Crescent disaster managers, hence generalists, trained in specific areas such as relief, logistics, health, nutrition, public health and epidemiology, water and sanitation, finance, and administration. To build and maintain such a core pool of about 200 experts from which to draw, training sessions were organized by IFRC. The Disaster Management and Coordination Division of IFRC was the authority that decided on the composition of the team of six to seven members to be deployed in any given disaster.

“Under the PADRU framework, the capacity building process is conceived in steps,” said Logan. To build capability at the NS level, IFRC ran a number of standard training programmes and provided on-the-job training. These programmes enabled NSs to be self-sufficient in their response to small national disasters. “In the Americas, it has become common practice to impart training during a disaster,” pointed out Logan. “For example as the trucks pull in, NS staff receives training in warehousing techniques and systems.”

The next phase consisted in the creation of Regional Intervention Teams (RITs). RITs were composed of the most talented and knowledgeable people within a NS, trained on the FACT syllabus. As first line relief operators, their brief was to support the FACT team entrusted with disaster assessment. Logan observed, “It is always more powerful for a Nicaraguan NS staff to tell a Peruvian NS staff that this is how they did it during their disaster and that it worked than - let’s say - a European saying the same thing in broken Spanish. A common language, experience-based advice and peer pressure works very effectively.”

PADRU’s trust was to leverage on resources available on a global scale. Against this background, the most operational, skilled, and knowledgeable (language, technical, culture, regulations, etc.) members of the RITs were selected and invited to participate in FACT teams outside their region. Once part of the FACT team, these delegates were entrusted with the responsibility to run and coordinate operations within the country as well as with the Federation. Logan emphasized the relationship between reinforcing response and capacity building: “A strong and experienced FACT team enhances the Federation’s capability and capacity to respond better and simultaneously to more disasters. This impacts the FACT and ERU mechanisms as the range of expertise is widened through the cross-fertilization of knowledge and experience.”

Knowledge management

Besides assessment reports prepared by FACT delegates to guide field operations during the first weeks after the disaster, other reports were mainly generated to satisfy the accountability and administrative requirements of the Federation. In theory, debriefing sessions were to be held with delegates after completion of their field missions. However, this was not always feasible. There was awareness of the reinforcement role of an effective knowledge management system in building experience. Nevertheless no system was in place to capture the experience, knowledge and information shared in reports and during debriefing meetings for future reference. As Bernard Chomilier, head of the Logistics and Resource Mobilization Department, admitted, “We always reinvent the wheel. All humanitarian organizations are poor in lessons learnt.”

At the Federation, efforts were underway to create a Disaster Management Information System (DMIS) with the objective of ensuring that the existing knowledge within the IFRC network of NSs was captured, codified and accessible to staff at large. One of the features of DMIS was identification and creation of links with relevant websites that held key information regarding the geography, climate, population, food habits, living conditions and customs, infrastructure, duty customs and regulations of a country and its regions.

One of the main lessons drawn from Hurricane Mitch and incorporated during the conceptualization of PADRU was that NSs and IFRC need not wait for disasters to occur before acting. On the contrary, they should carry out risk assessments and get prepared for them. “It is common knowledge that some parts of the world suffer from cyclical disasters,” said Logan. “For example, in January we know how many hurricanes will hit the Americas between June and November of each year. Roughly speaking, we expect 14 storms. What we don’t know is the line they will take and how strong they will be. We also know that there are about 10 vulnerable countries in Central America and the Caribbean.”

Logistics: Operational and process preparedness

Over the years, to respond effectively to disasters, IFRC had developed a number of readily deployable mechanisms and tools involving people and equipment such as FACT and the ERUs. In recent years, it had devoted considerable effort to the improvement of the logistics systems and procedures. These consisted of improved procurement procedures, the establishment of a code of conduct and special guidelines for acceptance of in-kind donations, standardization of relief items, and frame agreements with international and local suppliers for key relief items. These agreements specified the good’s price, quality and delivery requirements, and obliged suppliers to stock (at their own premises) a certain level of inventory. IFRC had also a number of warehouses and logistics units at the regional level to stock goods.

One of the major issues faced by IFRC during the relief operations was the arrival of unsolicited goods from “over-enthusiastic” NSs. Logan recalled the arrival of planeload after planeload of unsolicited goods during the Balkan crisis. “The Balkan crisis, perceived as a ‘European’ crisis, unleashed an overwhelming response from the donor community to the point that IFRC had to take a firm position by making a public statement that it would not unload any planes that carried unsolicited goods. Donors if not controlled and somehow reprimanded, give into the temptation of sending unsolicited goods. Generally they want to contribute with what they have and not necessarily with what is needed.” To prevent repetition of such situations in the future, IFRC made sure it involved the donor NSs in the needs assessment phase. “We now try to involve the staff of

select NSs in the FACT missions. Basically once a NS staff assesses the situation and determines that, for example, 1,000 tonnes of rice are required, it is unlikely the NS will push its reserve of honey down the system.”

PADRU’s aim was to go a step further by ensuring access to and faster distribution of more goods purchased at competitive prices. Logan explained, “Before a hurricane arrives, there are a number of things we can do. First of all we can sit around a table with the concerned NSs to obtain their agreement on the content of basic relief kits (shelter, sanitation, and kitchen sets). Bearing in mind that we don’t need the perfect kit, but a kit that provides clean water, basic and balanced diets and shelter for those initial days after a disaster, we can sign pre-agreements/MoUs based either on a disaster response plan or individual/specific kits. The next step consists of the identification and capability assessment of potential suppliers. This leads to the preparation of a mock relief action plan with a corresponding budget. With this packaged information we can approach the donor NSs. Once we obtain their agreement, we pre-contract the kits to the identified suppliers at predetermined and advantageous prices. With this paperwork behind us, in the midst of a disaster we can focus on our relief efforts instead of negotiating and deciding the content of kits with NSs and analyzing competitive bids from various suppliers.” This strategy required a paradigm shift for the NSs. As one of the other operations managers pointed out, “We always have to remember that NSs are independent organizations. They may or may not follow our advice. At times we may even be going too fast for them. We can’t pretend to be Microsoft.” IFRC had in fact the delicate task of convincing NSs, independent organizations auxiliary to their governments, to make commitments by signing off on pre-determined agreements.

Financial preparedness

One of the oldest tools available at IFRC was the Disaster Relief Emergency Fund (DREF) of CHF ten million that was utilized immediately after a disaster and before the issuance of a disaster-specific appeal. Logan emphasized the utility of DREF: “To be effective on the ground, we have to have money in our pockets. Usually what I do is arrive at the Geneva airport, go to the bank, draw some cash out of the DREF account, and put it in my backpack. Once I am on the ground, people listen to me as I am able to initiate some activities and need not to wait for a bank transfer which may, by the way, take days to arrive.”

At the Federation, the availability of and access to DREF allowed the Disaster Management Division to “fire all its missiles at once” as it allowed for the fielding of the FACT members, down-payments for purchase of supplies, and deployment of ERUs. IFRC had failed to increase the size of DREF, as it had had no impact in changing the donor mind-set. It had, however, learnt to work around this mind-set which looked for the victims - hence the visual evidence of a disaster - before committing itself to the provision of resources, preferably through goods rather than cash.

IFRC’s fund mobilization capability through appeals was very much influenced by its performance in past disasters. Logan confirmed this reinforcing mechanism: “Once we prove that we can deliver and be there on the ground, we observe a more favourable response to our appeals. I remember we had been fast on two consecutive disasters in Central America (Peru and El Salvador), so when the third disaster hit the region (Panama), I had the appeal covered before even writing it.”

The Community

Although IFRC's improvement efforts were internally focused, attempts had been made to collaborate with other NGOs and UN organizations active in the humanitarian field. One of the objectives of the PADRU initiative was to forge strategic alliances with significant "non-Red Cross" organizations to capitalize on these organizations' country presence and infrastructure, areas of technical expertise, as well as human, knowledge and experience capital. Logan presented the Oxfam⁴ case: "Oxfam is a good example given its technical expertise in water and sanitation. With a strategic alliance in place, under specified conditions there would be no need to coordinate and negotiate our respective contributions and roles in a disaster as a framework would be already in place."

The media was considered another potential partner. Logan recalled, "I remember during the Cuba disaster, CNN acknowledged utilizing our satellite to broadcast live. My phone rang immediately afterwards. The European Community Humanitarian Office (ECHO) officer was on the line. They have a policy of providing funding to agencies that are on the disaster site within 72 hours. We were there and everybody knew it thanks to CNN!" The international and national press were also considered as a valuable source of information. They traveled on the territory, collected first-hand information on the disaster, and would share it with humanitarian organizations.

Prepared or not prepared?

Three years after Hurricane Mitch, Logan had to convince the committee set up to review the strategy and achievements of PADRU that with the right information, people, and processes today, it was possible to prepare for tomorrow's disaster. "To defend the PADRU concept we have to put things into context," Logan told his team. "We have to highlight the constraints, prove the applicability of the model in other regions and provide evidence that resources spent on disaster preparedness have an impact on effective and timely disaster response. To pull it off we also need to prepare a plan for what we intend to do in the future."

⁴ The Oxford Committee for Famine Relief was established in 1942. It adopted its abbreviated telegraph address Oxfam in 1965

Exhibit 1- The International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement

The International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement is composed of three independent bodies: the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), National Societies (NSs) and the International Federation of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC).

ICRC, established in 1863 in Geneva, was at the origin of the Movement. It was an impartial and independent organization whose exclusively humanitarian mission was to protect the lives and dignity of victims of war and internal conflict.

NSs, approved by ICRC, were independent bodies that acted as auxiliaries to their respective governments. Roughly 60% of funds raised by NSs came from their respective governments and the remaining 40% from income-generating activities and private donations. They provided a range of services including disaster relief, health and social programmes, and assistance to people affected by war. By 2001 there were 178 NSs (with more in the making) almost one in every country in the world.

The president of the American Red Cross War Committee, Henry Davison, founded IFRC in Paris in 1919 in the aftermath of World War I. The five founding members of IFRC were the following NSs: Britain, France, Italy, Japan and the United States. NSs, through their statutory contributions, covered 50% of IFRC's operational budget. The Federation directed and coordinated international assistance of the Movement to victims of natural and technological disaster, to refugees, and in health emergencies. The Federation provided support to NSs during disasters by launching international appeals to raise funds, mobilize goods and personnel and coordinated the relief operation of the network. Through its 14 regional offices, 63 country field offices, six sub-delegations and two regional logistics centers it provided assistance in the aftermath of disasters through rehabilitation and capacity building programmes. IFRC, the world's largest humanitarian organization, focused on four core areas: promoting humanitarian values, disaster response, disaster preparedness, and health and community care. By providing assistance to around 30 million people annually – from political refugees to victims of natural disasters - disaster response activities continued to be IFRC's largest portion of work.

Exhibit 2 - ERU – Emergency Response Unit

ERUs were specialized equipment and people provided by 10 donating NSs (Austria, Belgium, Britain, Denmark, Finland, Germany, Japan, Norway, Spain, and Sweden) on standby and made available through IFRC to disaster areas. They addressed logistics, health (basic health care and referral hospitals), telecommunication and water and sanitation issues. The Logistics ERU organized field logistics (arrival, clearance (customs), storage and distribution of relief items) and prepared the arrival of other ERUs. The Basic Health Care ERU provided immediate curative, preventive and community health care. It also assisted, rehabilitated or further developed existing health care structures. There were four main types of Water and Sanitation ERUs in terms of treatment, supply, storage, and distribution capacity. The Referral Hospitals ERU provided full range of medical services. The Telecommunications ERU established telecommunication between the disaster area, field offices, delegations, NSs and the Federation.

The sponsoring NSs were responsible for the staffing of their ERUs and coverage of all personnel and operational expenses. Local professionals employed by Red Cross and Red Crescent offices supplemented the ERU's core technical staff. Each unit was equipped with survival equipment (food, beds, tents, electricity generators, mobile telephones, office equipment, etc.) and was self-supporting for up to four weeks. Most ERU equipment was standardized. Upon completion of assignment (within four months), the ERU equipment was usually handed over to the host NS, local authorities, Federation's country or regional delegation.

ERU Deployment. IFRC estimated the magnitude of a disaster and prepared a disaster response plan recommending, among other things, the deployment of specific ERUs. NSs sponsoring ERUs upon receipt of an alert would consider making them available subject to status of readiness, will and availability of government funding. The director of the Disaster Management and Coordination division of IFRC would make the final decision on the deployment of ERUs and the Secretariat issued a deployment order to the sponsoring NS. The NS was expected to dispatch the ERU within 48 hours of receipt of a deployment order. It took up to one week for an ERU to become fully operational.

Exhibit 3 - The Pan American Disaster Response Unit (PADRU) at a glance

Objectives:

1. To establish, staff and train the PADRU, including a regional logistics cell
2. To coordinate and when necessary, participate in a rapid, expert Federation disaster response at the request of a National Society in the Americas facing a situation beyond its capacity
3. To develop and deliver response training and capacity building function
4. To enhance monitoring, reporting and coordination in disaster situations in the Americas
5. To strengthen relationships with internal and external partners

Expected results

1. Analyze and bring together the response resources available in the region
2. Create a technical relief and response capacity through the following functions: health, logistics, water and sanitation, and telecom
3. Identify and train Regional Intervention Team (RIT) members in: logistics, telecom, health, water and sanitation
4. Capacity building: information, finance, health, monitoring, reporting and coordination
 - Trainings:
 - a. Logistics training (procurement, transport, warehousing and systems management)
 - b. Specialized disaster response workshops (logistics, telecom, water & sanitation, & relief)
 - c. Field experiences (FACT/ERU)
5. Complete disaster risk and vulnerability assessment for top 20 high risk countries in the Americas with action plans and recommendations
6. Forge pre-disaster agreements/MoUs with NSs in the region and donating NS
7. Standardization
 - Prepare logistics manual in English, French and Spanish
 - Prepare standard operating procedures manual in the three languages on disaster response
8. Establish a regional logistics cell (Panama)
9. Cooperation with other humanitarian agencies
 - Establish strategic alliance with significant non-Red Cross organizations.

**Exhibit 4 - Federation Secretariat Structure
September 1999**

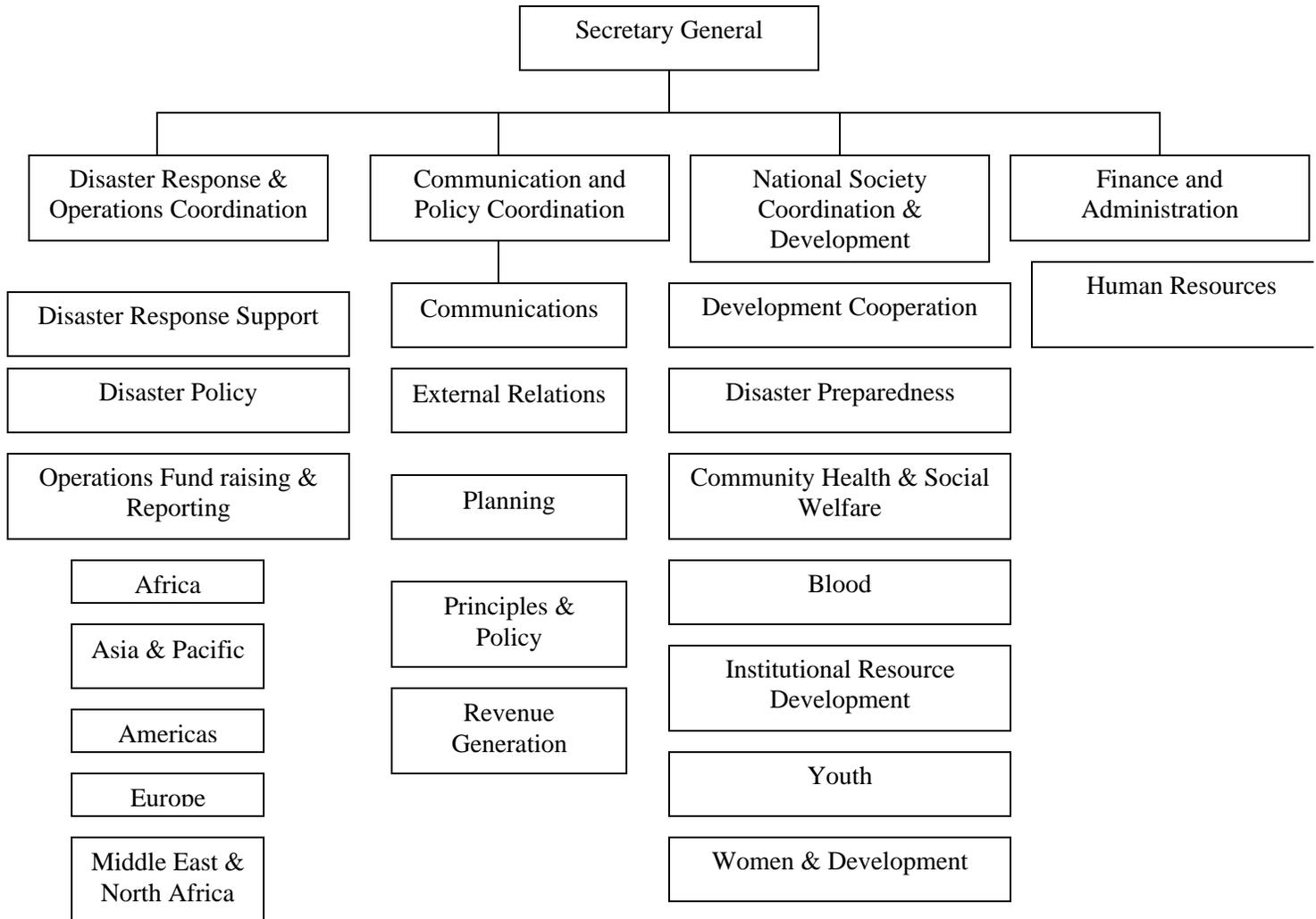


Exhibit 6 - Concentric Circles of Resource Involvement

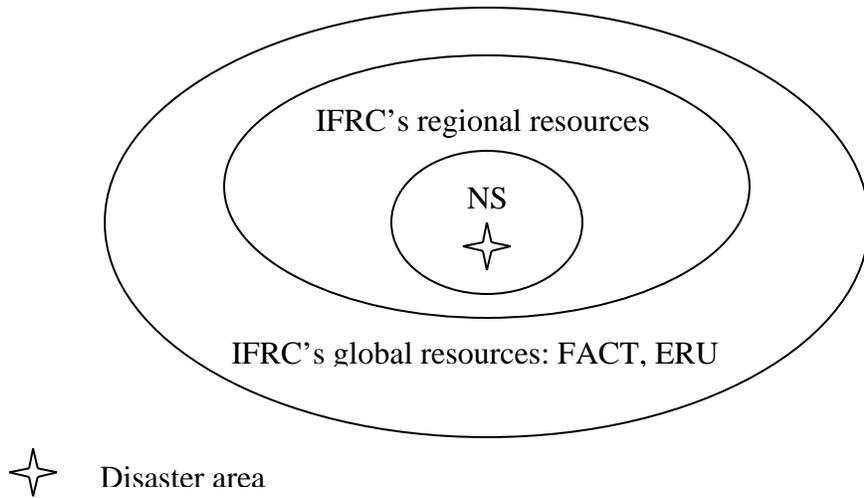


Exhibit 7 - Disaster Management at IFRC

