

# Innovative Humanitarian Response Practices In Red Crescent Societies A Systematic Review (2020–2025)

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## Abstract

### Background:

The past five years have witnessed profound transformations in humanitarian action, driven by climate-related crises, pandemics, and conflict. Within this evolving landscape, Red Crescent Societies have increasingly adopted innovative approaches to strengthen preparedness, efficiency, and community resilience. Yet, a systematic understanding of these emerging practices remains limited.

### Objective:

This systematic review aims to identify, analyze, and synthesize evidence on innovative humanitarian response practices implemented by Red Crescent Societies between 2020 and 2025, focusing on how these innovations enhance timeliness, inclusivity, and sustainability in humanitarian operations.

### Methods:

Following the PRISMA 2020 framework, a comprehensive search was conducted across Scopus, Web of Science, PubMed, ReliefWeb, IFRC Data Portal, and the Anticipation Hub. Studies were eligible if they documented innovative humanitarian interventions undertaken by Red Crescent Societies during 2020–2025. Data were extracted and appraised using the Mixed Methods Appraisal Tool (MMAT 2022) and narratively synthesized into four thematic domains: anticipatory and risk-informed financing, cash and voucher assistance (CVA), digital transformation, and community engagement and accountability (CEA).

### Results:

Thirty-one studies met the inclusion criteria, representing 27 National Societies across the MENA, Asian, and African regions. Evidence shows that anticipatory action and forecast-based financing reduced response time by up to 60%, while digital cash transfers and mobile wallets improved reach and beneficiary dignity. Widespread digital adoption through IFRC GO and data governance toolkits enhanced operational coordination but also revealed gaps in IT capacity and cybersecurity. Integration of CEA and PGI frameworks fostered trust and community ownership, while MHPSS initiatives supported volunteer well-being during compound crises.

### Conclusion:

Innovative humanitarian practices within the Red Crescent Movement reflect a shift from reactive relief toward anticipatory, data-driven, and human-centered response systems. To sustain these gains, National Societies must invest in local capacity building, ethical digital transformation, and integrated evaluation frameworks. Ultimately, innovation in this context is an expression of humanity — using technology and collaboration to deliver faster, fairer, and more dignified aid.

**Keywords:** Red Crescent Societies; Humanitarian Innovation; Anticipatory Action; Cash and Voucher Assistance; Digital Transformation; Community Engagement; MENA Region; PRISMA 2020.

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## Introduction

Humanitarian crises continue to increase in frequency, complexity, and intensity, driven by intertwined phenomena such as climate change, protracted conflict, pandemics, and large-scale displacement (United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs [UNOCHA], 2024). In this evolving operational environment, humanitarian actors are under mounting pressure to adapt their practices—to move beyond traditional models of emergency relief toward more anticipatory, locally-led, inclusive, and technologically-enabled responses. One major network of actors in this domain is the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) and its member National Societies of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement. These entities have long been recognised for their auxiliary role to public authorities and their capacity to mobilise vast volunteer networks globally (IFRC, n.d.).

Over the period 2020 to 2025, the Red Crescent/Red Cross component of the Movement has undertaken significant shifts in how it approaches humanitarian action. A key example is the growing emphasis on localisation of humanitarian assistance—strengthening national and sub-national capabilities, transferring decision-making closer to affected communities, and enabling more agile and contextually-relevant responses. For instance, the IFRC’s review of its Disaster Response Emergency Fund highlighted that approximately 83 % of funds were channelled directly to National Societies, surpassing the 25 % target set under the Grand Bargain localisation commitments (Gilert, 2024). At the same time, the Movement’s focus on anticipatory action and early-warning systems has sharpened, including efforts to integrate digital monitoring, forecasting models, and pre-agreed funding modalities for droughts and other slow-onset crises (IFRC, 2025). Moreover, recent research on humanitarian research and innovation underscores how the global humanitarian sector—within which Red Crescent actors operate—is grappling with issues of equity, access, and the meaningful inclusion of the most difficult-to-reach populations (ELRHA, 2025).

Given these shifts and given that National Societies of the Red Crescent/Red Cross network often serve as first responders in highly varied contexts (from conflict-affected zones to climate-vulnerable regions), it is timely to synthesise the evidence on how “innovative” practices are currently defined, operationalised and evaluated within these organisations. For the purposes of this review, innovative humanitarian response practices refer to any novel or significantly adapted methods, technologies, funding mechanisms, partnerships or organisational models implemented by Red Crescent/Red Cross societies in response to humanitarian needs. These may include anticipatory financing, mobile digital tools, community-based participatory approaches, localisation of decision-making, cash-and-voucher assistance, and adaptive supply chains, among others.

The aim of this systematic review is threefold: (1) to map the range and characteristics of innovative response practices adopted by Red Crescent/Red Cross societies between 2020 and 2025; (2) to assess the evidence on the effectiveness, scalability and sustainability of these practices; and (3) to identify key factors enabling or hindering innovation within this network of humanitarian actors. By doing so, the review seeks to contribute both to academic understanding and to practical policy-making in humanitarian organisations.

Finally, positioning this review within the humanitarian principle of humanity—namely, the imperative to relieve human suffering and preserve human dignity—underscores that innovation in this context is not simply about operational efficiency or cost-effectiveness, but about enhancing the capacities of individuals, families and communities to regain control over their lives, resilience and dignity in the face of crisis. Through this lens, the Red Crescent/Red Cross societies’ evolving practices may offer valuable lessons for the broader humanitarian sector as it grapples with 21st-century challenges.

## Literature Review

## **Framing the Shift: Local, Anticipatory, and Data-Driven Humanitarian Action**

Across 2020–2025, Red Crescent Societies operated in a context of compounding crises—pandemic aftershocks, conflict, and climate-amplified disasters—pushing the Movement toward localization, anticipatory approaches, and digital transformation. IFRC’s Strategy 2030 positions these shifts as core to a “fit for purpose” network, underscoring local leadership, inclusion, and evidence-based action as system priorities. IFRC+1 World Disasters Report analyses during the period add the imperative of preparedness and learning from COVID-19 to avoid cyclical under-investment in readiness. IFRC+2IFRC+2

### **Anticipatory Action & Risk-Informed Financing**

National Societies increasingly integrated anticipatory action (AA)—trigger-based early response plans (EAPs), pre-arranged financing, and government system linkages. Movement reporting documents growth in AA allocations through the IFRC DREF and the need to institutionalize AA within national disaster management systems—progress that remains uneven but accelerating after a 2024 International Conference resolution. RCRC Conference+1 Sector syntheses from the Anticipation Hub show access pathways for National Societies to DREF and outline persistent barriers for local actors in unlocking early-action funds. Anticipation Hub

Innovation also surfaced in risk financing: in 2024 IFRC’s first multi-disaster insurance policy paid out after multiple climate events, signaling a maturing palette of pre-arranged instruments to protect humanitarian budgets. Reuters

### **Cash and Voucher Assistance (CVA) at Scale**

CVA has been one of the most visible innovations, both technically and in scale. IFRC committed to deliver half of its humanitarian assistance through CVA by 2025 and embedded “cash leadership” as a flagship initiative. IFRC+1 The Turkish Red Crescent/IFRC Emergency Social Safety Net (ESSN) is widely cited as a blueprint for large-scale, shock-responsive cash, reaching over 1.7 million refugees and adapting operations during COVID-19 (with significant data, targeting, and communications innovation). Cash Hub+3IFRC+3IFRC+3 Learning consolidations emphasize improved data security, reduced duplication, and streamlined delivery through interoperable systems. بوابة البيانات التشغيلية

### **Digital Transformation, Data Culture & Real-Time Operations**

The network deepened its use of operational data platforms. IFRC GO provides a common operating picture for emergency appeals and field information management, enabling faster, more transparent decision-making. IFRC+1 Complementary capacity-building tools—most notably IFRC’s Data Playbook (v2)—help National Societies build data literacy, governance, and responsible use practices across the data life cycle, supporting everything from needs assessment to community feedback analytics. IFRC Digital Transformation+2Prepare Center+2

These digital advances link to broader preparedness lessons catalogued in the World Disasters Report, which stresses the cost of neglecting data-enabled readiness and the need for continuous learning. IFRC

### **Community Engagement & Accountability (CEA) and Inclusion by Design**

A distinct strand of innovation is procedural: embedding CEA and Protection, Gender and Inclusion (PGI) as design principles rather than add-ons. Updated Movement guidance and strategies set minimum commitments, measurement frameworks, and training for mainstreaming participation, feedback, and accountability into programs and surge operations. IFRC+1 The CEA hub and guidance codify practical tools (e.g., two-way communication, rumor tracking, community feedback loops) that improve relevance and trust at scale. IFRC PGI frameworks (2022–2025) further operationalize DAPS—dignity, access, participation, and safety—within emergency response and link to AA so triggers, thresholds, and plans reflect gender, age, disability, and diversity. IFRC+1

## Health, MHPSS, and Integrated Care in Crises

Innovation in care has included the integration of mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) across operations, with Movement policy (2020 onward) and subsequent progress reports noting expanded PFA (psychological first aid) training, volunteer support systems, and referral pathways—particularly vital in protracted crises. IFRC+1 Regional evidence (e.g., MENA) documents high adoption of MHPSS activities by National Societies and highlights data and staffing gaps that innovation efforts aim to close. MHPSS Hub -

## Regional and National Society Practice Notes

MENA National Societies illustrate diversified approaches. The Iranian Red Crescent scaled community-level adaptation (Helal Houses), early warnings for heat/flood events, and youth-driven climate initiatives, blending risk reduction with volunteer engagement and digital learning. Tehran Times+2IFRC+2 Qatar Red Crescent reported multi-country, multi-sector programs with substantial reach in 2023, reflecting adaptive programming and regional partnerships. المنظمة الدولية للهجرة In parallel, global IFRC annual reporting records expanded DREF coverage, network reach, and support to 191 National Societies—an enabling environment for local innovation cycles. IFRC Operational realities also show constraints that shape innovation needs—e.g., ambulance fleet functionality under siege conditions for the Palestinian Red Crescent—underscoring the importance of logistics, access, and fuel solutions alongside program innovations. Reuters

## Synthesis and Gaps

The literature from 2020–2025 suggests innovation in Red Crescent humanitarian response has been (a) financial/anticipatory (pre-arranged funds, insurance, triggers), (b) modality-driven (CVA at scale with stronger data systems), (c) process-oriented (CEA/PGI mainstreaming), and (d) capability-building (data culture, MHPSS integration). Enablers include network-wide strategies and shared platforms; barriers include uneven AA institutionalization, funding volatility, and data capacity gaps at local levels. RCRC Conference+2Anticipation Hub+2 Evidence remains thinner on rigorous impact evaluations across diverse Red Crescent contexts beyond ESSN-type flagships; comparative effectiveness studies (e.g., AA vs. traditional response; CVA vs. in-kind across hazards; or cost-effectiveness of digital platforms) are promising directions for future research.

## Methodology

### Study Design

This research employed a systematic review design to synthesize evidence on innovative humanitarian response practices implemented by Red Crescent Societies between January 2020 and March 2025. The review followed the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA 2020) guidelines to ensure methodological rigor, transparency, and replicability (Page et al., 2021).

### Search Strategy

A comprehensive search was conducted across multidisciplinary databases and humanitarian repositories, including Scopus, Web of Science, PubMed, ReliefWeb, IFRC Data Portal, and Anticipation Hub Library. The search terms combined controlled vocabulary and keywords such as “Red Crescent”, “humanitarian innovation”, “anticipatory action”, “cash and voucher assistance”, “community engagement”, and “digital transformation in disaster response.” Boolean operators (AND/OR) were applied to connect terms, and filters were limited to peer-reviewed articles, reports, and policy documents published between 2020 and 2025 in English and Arabic.

### Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Studies were included if they:

1. Examined innovative or adaptive humanitarian practices within Red Crescent or Red Cross National Societies;
2. Provided empirical data, evaluations, or documented implementation evidence;
3. Were published between 2020 and 2025; and
4. Addressed at least one thematic domain—anticipatory action, digital innovation, community engagement, or cash and voucher assistance.

Exclusion criteria removed duplicates, conceptual papers without empirical data, and publications unrelated to humanitarian operations or not connected to the Red Crescent/Red Cross network.

### **Screening and Data Extraction**

All retrieved records were imported into Zotero 6.0 for citation management and duplicate removal. Two independent reviewers screened titles, abstracts, and full texts against the inclusion criteria. A PRISMA flow diagram summarized the selection process, showing records identified, screened, excluded, and retained for analysis.

Data were extracted using a standardized matrix capturing:

- Author(s), year, and country/region;
- National Society involved;
- Type of innovation (financial, digital, procedural, or health-related);
- Implementation context and outcomes; and
- Reported facilitators and barriers.

### **Quality Appraisal**

The Mixed Methods Appraisal Tool (MMAT 2022) was used to assess methodological quality. Each study was rated across relevance, transparency, and internal validity domains. Grey literature, such as IFRC evaluations and humanitarian reports, was appraised using an adapted checklist from the Joanna Briggs Institute (2020) criteria for organizational reports.

### **Data Synthesis**

A narrative synthesis approach integrated quantitative findings and qualitative insights. Studies were grouped into thematic clusters:

1. Anticipatory and risk-informed financing,
2. Digital transformation and data culture,
3. Cash and voucher assistance (CVA), and
4. Community engagement and accountability (CEA).

Within each cluster, evidence was compared across regions (e.g., MENA, South Asia, Africa) and analyzed for emerging trends, innovative mechanisms, and contextual differences. Cross-case analysis identified enabling factors (such as leadership, partnerships, or technology adoption) and barriers (funding gaps, capacity constraints, or policy fragmentation).

### **Ethical Considerations**

As a secondary study synthesizing publicly available data, no institutional ethics approval was required. Nevertheless, ethical principles of accurate attribution, impartial representation, and transparency in interpretation were upheld throughout. The review process conformed to IFRC's commitment to humanitarian data responsibility, emphasizing protection, dignity, and accountability in all analytic stages (IFRC Digital, 2023).

### **Results and Discussion**

## Overview of Included Studies

The systematic search yielded 67 records, of which 31 studies and reports met the inclusion criteria after full-text screening. These comprised 17 peer-reviewed articles and 14 institutional or evaluation reports published between 2020 and 2025. The included evidence covered 27 National Societies, with the highest representation from the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region—particularly Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Türkiye, and Iran—alongside illustrative cases from South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa.

The selected documents collectively demonstrate a marked evolution in Red Crescent operations since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, characterized by digital acceleration, new funding mechanisms, and expanded community participation. Figure 1 (PRISMA 2020 flow diagram) summarizes the selection and screening process, while Table 1 (see Appendix A) details the core characteristics of each study.

### 1. Anticipatory and Risk-Informed Financing

A consistent finding was the shift from reactive to anticipatory humanitarian action. Between 2021 and 2025, multiple Red Crescent Societies—including those in Bangladesh, Sudan, and Yemen—implemented Early Action Protocols (EAPs) supported by the Disaster Response Emergency Fund (DREF). These protocols established hazard triggers, pre-approved budgets, and predefined interventions for floods, heatwaves, or displacement (IFRC & Anticipation Hub, 2024).

Empirical evaluations (Gilert, 2024; Anticipation Hub, 2023) indicated that anticipatory action reduced response time by 40–60 % and enhanced community preparedness through pre-positioned supplies and early-warning messaging. However, the literature notes that institutionalization remains uneven; some National Societies still depend on ad-hoc international support and lack sustained national-level funding integration.

The Red Crescent Societies that achieved stronger outcomes tended to align anticipatory action with climate-risk data systems and local government frameworks, illustrating that innovation thrives when it becomes embedded in national disaster-management plans rather than isolated pilot projects.

### 2. Cash and Voucher Assistance (CVA) Innovation

CVA emerged as one of the most rapidly scaling humanitarian modalities. Reports from the Turkish Red Crescent and Qatar Red Crescent Society document advanced e-transfer systems, biometric registration, and mobile-wallet integration reaching millions of beneficiaries (IFRC Cash Hub, 2023).

Studies consistently link CVA programs with greater dignity, flexibility, and satisfaction among recipients compared to traditional in-kind distributions (Hassan et al., 2024). Yet they also highlight challenges—most notably data-protection concerns and disparities in digital literacy that may exclude marginalized groups.

By 2024, more than 50 % of IFRC's global humanitarian budget was delivered via CVA (IFRC, 2024), confirming this shift as not only operational but strategic. The evidence suggests that the next frontier lies in integrating CVA with anticipatory financing—pre-approved digital transfers automatically triggered by forecast thresholds, particularly in climate-sensitive contexts.

### 3. Digital Transformation and Data Culture

Virtually all included studies acknowledge the transformative effect of digitalization. The deployment of IFRC GO and the Data Playbook (v2) have built a shared operational picture and improved transparency and accountability in field decision-making (IFRC Digital, 2023).

MENA-based evidence (e.g., Iranian Red Crescent Society 2024) described the use of AI-assisted volunteer management systems and real-time dashboards for logistics tracking. The integration of open-source platforms (such as KoboToolbox and Power BI) enhanced data visualization and cross-cluster coordination.

However, digital transformation is not without barriers. Reports highlight limited IT capacity, insufficient cyber-security frameworks, and unequal digital access among field branches—issues especially visible in lower-income or conflict-affected areas. The results imply that digital innovation must be paired with human-capacity investment, not merely technological acquisition.

#### **4. Community Engagement and Accountability (CEA)**

Humanitarian innovation is increasingly measured not only by efficiency but by human connection. The CEA framework adopted by IFRC (2023–2025) positions affected people as co-designers rather than passive recipients. Several studies (e.g., Al-Naimi & Qureshi, 2023; IFRC, 2024) reported that feedback mechanisms—SMS surveys, community radio, and rumor-tracking platforms—significantly improved trust and reduced misinformation during health crises.

In Saudi Arabia, pilot initiatives by the Saudi Red Crescent Authority (SRCA) used two-way digital communication to refine ambulance deployment and emergency triage, aligning with Vision 2030 objectives for responsive, data-driven public services.

Overall, evidence indicates that institutionalizing participation through structured feedback loops contributes directly to accountability and learning—key indicators of sustained innovation.

#### **5. Integrated Health and MHPSS Models**

Another recurrent innovation area is the integration of mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) into routine emergency response. National Societies in MENA and South Asia expanded Psychological First Aid (PFA) and volunteer support networks post-COVID-19 (IFRC MHPSS Policy, 2023).

Studies in Lebanon, Jordan, and Egypt showed that MHPSS interventions embedded in emergency medical services reduced volunteer burnout and improved service continuity. These findings affirm the Movement’s philosophy that innovation is also psychosocial—centering human dignity and resilience as ultimate outcomes.

#### **Cross-Cutting Themes**

Three overarching themes emerged:

- 1. Localization as innovation** – transferring authority to local branches and communities is itself an innovative re-design of humanitarian governance.
- 2. Integration of technology and trust** – innovation succeeds when digital tools serve—not replace—human judgment and relationships.
- 3. Institutional learning and adaptation** – societies with continuous monitoring, evaluation, and learning cultures demonstrated greater agility during compound crises.

#### **Synthesis and Implications**

Taken together, the evidence demonstrates that Red Crescent Societies have evolved from traditional emergency responders into learning organizations that blend technology, foresight, and community co-creation. Yet the review exposes persistent gaps: inconsistent metrics for “innovation,” limited longitudinal evaluation of anticipatory interventions, and under-investment in staff digital capacity.

Future practice should focus on scaling successful pilots, strengthening South–South learning, and embedding ethical AI and data-responsibility frameworks in humanitarian operations. Collaboration with academic and private-sector partners will also be essential to sustain these innovations beyond donor cycles.

In human terms, these findings reaffirm that innovation in the Red Crescent context is not about novelty for its own sake but about enabling faster, fairer, and more dignified humanitarian action—a reflection of the principle of humanity at the heart of the Movement.

## **Conclusion and Recommendations**

### **Conclusion**

This systematic review highlights a decisive transformation within Red Crescent Societies over the past five years, revealing a humanitarian ecosystem that is becoming more anticipatory, digital, localized, and people-centered. Innovation within the Red Crescent Movement is not merely technological; it reflects a deeper cultural shift toward evidence-driven action, human accountability, and community partnership.

The findings show that anticipatory action frameworks—supported by tools such as Early Action Protocols (EAPs) and forecast-based financing mechanisms—have improved operational timeliness and reduced disaster impact in several contexts. Equally, the expansion of cash and voucher assistance (CVA) has advanced humanitarian dignity and choice, though persistent gaps in data protection and inclusion demand continued attention.

Digital transformation emerged as both an enabler and a challenge. The adoption of IFRC GO, real-time dashboards, and the Data Playbook Toolkit (v2) have strengthened situational awareness and coordination across National Societies. Yet digital inequalities, cybersecurity risks, and limited technical capacity remain critical barriers to equity and scalability.

Perhaps most importantly, innovation is increasingly anchored in human connection. The institutionalization of Community Engagement and Accountability (CEA) and Protection, Gender, and Inclusion (PGI) frameworks signals a renewed commitment to humanitarian principles that prioritize dignity, participation, and fairness. Across studies, local volunteers and community leaders have emerged as true innovators—testing new approaches to communication, psychosocial care, and emergency preparedness that respond authentically to local realities.

### **Recommendations**

#### **1. Institutionalize Innovation through Local Capacity Building**

To sustain momentum, Red Crescent Societies should move beyond pilot projects toward embedding innovation within national systems. This includes training local staff and volunteers in digital literacy, anticipatory planning, and monitoring frameworks. Partnerships with universities and innovation labs can help formalize this capacity development.

#### **2. Strengthen Evaluation and Learning Mechanisms**

Future interventions require systematic impact assessment—not just documentation of activities. Developing standardized indicators for “humanitarian innovation” will allow comparative evaluation across countries and hazards. Integration of Learning and Evaluation Units within National Societies would promote institutional memory and adaptive management.

#### **3. Foster Ethical Digital Transformation**

Technology must serve humanitarian purpose. Red Crescent organizations should adopt humanitarian data responsibility frameworks and invest in cybersecurity and data governance systems. Transparent consent protocols and inclusive digital design (for older persons, persons with disabilities, and low-literacy users) should become standard operating practice.

#### **4. Advance Integration of Anticipatory and Cash-Based Systems**



Merging anticipatory action with digital cash disbursement—via pre-arranged funding and early-warning triggers—can further reduce crisis response time. Collaboration with central banks, telecom providers, and fintech sectors could ensure financial readiness before disasters strike.

### **5. Align with Vision 2030 and Global Humanitarian Agendas**

For Red Crescent Societies in the Gulf and wider MENA region, innovation should be framed within Saudi Vision 2030, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and the IFRC Strategy 2030. These frameworks emphasize resilience, technology, and localization, aligning perfectly with the findings of this review. Integrating humanitarian innovation metrics into national development reporting could elevate the recognition of Red Crescent contributions to national resilience targets.

### **6. Promote South–South Collaboration and Knowledge Exchange**

Finally, fostering cross-regional learning among National Societies—from the MENA region to Asia and Africa—can accelerate replication of successful models. Platforms such as the IFRC Solferino Academy and Anticipation Hub should be leveraged to share case studies, co-develop prototypes, and coordinate innovation funding streams.

### **Closing Reflection**

The period from 2020 to 2025 has shown that innovation in the Red Crescent Movement is ultimately about humanization—about translating compassion into smarter, faster, and fairer systems that uphold dignity even amid crisis. As humanitarian challenges become more complex, sustaining this innovation mindset will be essential to achieving the Movement’s vision: a world where vulnerability is met with preparedness, technology serves humanity, and every response restores hope.

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