

What is a volunteer?

 media.ifrc.org/ifrc/what-we-do/volunteers/what-is-a-volunteer/

What do you think of when you hear of the Red Cross or Red Crescent? Some people might think of volunteers running with stretchers or distributing food. This is only a small window into our work. Our volunteers are also engaged in youth programmes, first aid, ambulance services, mountain rescue, telephone help-lines, disaster management, support for refugees and internally displaced people, health campaigns, advocacy and a myriad of other services with the aim of improving the lives of the vulnerable in communities.

Volunteer work is different from paid work. Volunteering has its own unique qualities:

- **Volunteers have a strong personal motivation**

This makes a big difference to our beneficiaries

- **Volunteers work part-time**

Most people only volunteer a few hours each week. Therefore, volunteering can be combined with any occupation and can continue for many years.

- **Volunteers are local**

They are part of the community. Volunteers know the needs and resources in the community because they are already there.

Volunteer action has been part the Red Cross Red Crescent Movement since the very beginning. In 1859, a young Henry Dunant became the Movement's first volunteer manager, by organizing local volunteers to assist the wounded and dying who lay deserted by their own forces. This was also the first time in Europe that the wounded were treated impartially, regardless of the side on which they had fought. He returned home to write the book *A Memory of Solferino*, which led several years later to the founding of the Red Cross.

"Would it not be possible, in time of peace and quiet, to form relief societies for the purpose of having care given to the wounded in wartime by zealous, devoted and thoroughly qualified volunteers?" he wrote.

"For work of this kind, paid help is not what is wanted... There is need, therefore, for voluntary orderlies and volunteer nurses, zealous, trained and experienced, whose position would be recognised by the commanders or armies in the field, and their mission facilitated and supported."

From those words, the whole Red Cross Red Crescent Movement grew, spreading from country to country as local people came together, founded a society, elected a volunteer governance board and started to recruit volunteers. The Red Cross Red Crescent Movement has of course now moved from exclusively working in conflict situations, and also deals with natural disasters, food shortages and other social challenges, but we still do most of this work through our global network of local volunteers, just as Dunant envisaged.