

FAMILY IS EVERYTHING: THE FAMILY LINKS "ANSWERS" APPLICATION REPORT ON THE CONTRIBUTION MADE BY THE CREDIT SUISSE FOUNDATION TO ICRC OPERATIONS IN 2014



A. Ruhyam/ICRC

Every year, armed conflicts, natural disasters and migration split up countless families. When fleeing a conflict or natural disaster, children can lose their way in the chaos. Elderly or sick people may not have the will or ability to leave. Injured people are taken to hospital without being able to let their loved ones know what has happened to them. People are sometimes detained without their families being informed of their whereabouts.

Families suffer terribly when they lose contact with their loved ones and do not know where they are and whether they are safe.

The ICRC and the National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies work together as part of a worldwide network to help people separated from their loved ones.

Restoring family links (RFL) involves a range of activities such as putting family members back in touch by means of telephone calls, the Internet and handwritten Red Cross messages, and tracing people who are unaccounted for. Particular attention is paid to vulnerable individuals, such as unaccompanied children or people held in detention.

When tracing is successful, families are informed where their loved ones are and, when possible, they are put back in touch or reunited.



ICRC

Adapting to technological advances

The availability of cheaper and faster means of communication – notably through the Internet, mobile phones and social media – has drastically altered the way people keep in touch with one another and look for information. Access to such means of communication remains essential for all people, but more so for those affected by the constantly evolving nature of armed conflicts and other situations of violence and by the higher number of natural and man-made disasters.

The emergence of new actors in the humanitarian field, as well as the increasing involvement of Internet-based businesses in large-scale emergencies, has had an impact on the role played by longstanding organizations, such as those of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement.

From outdated tools

Assessing the situation in 2010, the ICRC found that, while many National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies had set up individual websites to promote their RFL services, their case-management systems faced limitations that affected their ability to provide these services in a timely and efficient manner.

Furthermore, the ICRC itself had been assisting people separated from relatives with the same RFL website technology for 12 years. Its protection case-management system, designed in the late 1990s, could no longer evolve to the changing needs of beneficiaries and staff. The lack of a unified case-management system or online tool hampered the exchange of information between National Societies and the ICRC; the organizations' staff also voiced concerns on how these constraints did not allow them to maximize their skills and time in delivering RFL services to people.



R. Sidler/ICRC

To a modern, agile system

In cooperation with National Societies, the ICRC has developed a new case-management “ecosystem”. The development process relied heavily on end-user input (primarily National Society and ICRC staff) to help ensure that the new ecosystem is relevant for them and sustainable.

The new ecosystem aims to facilitate beneficiaries' and other stakeholders' access to RFL services and to increase the efficiency, consistency and safety in the treatment of sharing of RFL and protection cases across the network.

The new ecosystem includes:

- 1 new website <http://familylinks.icrc.org>, which was launched in 2012, providing online RFL services to people affected by emergencies and information on these services for potential beneficiaries around the world, and facilitating the exchange of information and learning tools among Movement partners
- 2 case-management systems
 - *Family Links ANSWERS* for the RFL activities of National Societies
 - *Prot6* for protection activities of the ICRC (protecting the vulnerable, including unaccompanied children and detainees), ensuring the coherent processing and follow-up of cases and monitoring of provided or available services

Family Links ANSWERS application

Only a limited number of National Societies, such as the American Red Cross and the British Red Cross, have ever invested, or been able to invest, in developing an effective case-management system.

To address this, the ICRC has developed and is deploying Family Links ANSWERS (Application for National Societies for Worldwide Enquiry and RFL Services), a standard case-management system to help National Societies manage their RFL cases. The system enables National Societies to securely access or update information from multiple sites and mobile devices.

To be able to use Family Links ANSWERS, National Societies need to have an RFL department already handling related cases according to established internal working procedures and processes, and a minimum information technology capacity; to date, about 65 National Societies meet these requirements.



N. Danziger/ICRC

NATIONAL SOCIETIES' CAPACITIES TO MANAGE CASES

Before Family Links ANSWERS

From outdated tools

- The capacities of National Societies to properly and quickly manage RFL cases and data varied greatly. This was the case for various reasons, including that many lacked efficient and modern case-management systems, mainly because of limited funding and competencies to develop such tools. They therefore relied on Microsoft Excel spreadsheets and other outdated programmes, making their work tedious and impractical.
- The sharing of information between National Societies and the ICRC was limited and slow.



T. Gassmann/ICRC

After Family Links ANSWERS

To a modern, agile system

- National Societies can now use a standard, secure, user-friendly and configurable case-management system that is based on up-to-date technology. Additional RFL specialists deployed during emergencies are also able to use the system.
- With the full implementation of Family Links ANSWERS, end-users are able to:
 - register people and the different activities carried out in providing RFL services; attach photos of beneficiaries; update information individually or collectively;
 - access data offline or using a mobile device and update from multiple sites;
 - draw up various reports, including with maps, for sharing with internal and external partners;
 - export/import data to/from databases of other National Societies, the ICRC or external stakeholders; publish information on the new family-links website
 - treat RFL cases in a more consistent way and in respect of data protection requirements.

PROJECT TIMELINE

- **2010–12:** consultation group (comprising National Society members and ICRC staff) formed, along with an ICRC project steering committee; prototype developed.
- **2013:** Family Links ANSWERS launched for 2 National Societies as a pilot; 2 additional National Societies used the first version of Family Links ANSWERS; end-users from these 4 National Societies (Belgian-Flemish community, Belgian-French-speaking community, Canadian, and Swedish) underwent training;
- **2014:** Family Links ANSWERS deployed to a further 10 National Societies in Europe, Africa and Asia-Pacific, bringing the total number using it to 14 (Italy, Finland, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Denmark, Norway, Kenya, Burundi, Croatia, Rwanda and New Zealand);
- **2015:** deployment to another 10 National Societies under way (Senegal, Nepal, Spain, Greece, Portugal, Ireland, Bangladesh, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Australia and Switzerland).

Furthermore, there will be an important upgrade in 2015, introducing many new functionalities, such as 'quick forms' for speedier updating of cases in the event of emergency deployment and a dictionary of various spelling of names to assist users in locating cases in the database.

Thank you for your support for this valuable project that will enable family members to find one another again after the agony of separation.



J.-Y. Clemenzo/ICRC

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