

NIGER RED CROSS

OUR SELECTED EXPERIENCE

PRACTICAL RESOURCE PACK



Our context

The Safer Access Framework (SAF) was first developed by the **International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC)** in 2002–2003, in consultation with National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (NSs) and the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC). The SAF supports National Societies to prepare for and respond safely and effectively to humanitarian needs in sensitive and insecure contexts. It helps them **earn the trust and acceptance** of people and **communities** in need, as well as of those who **control or influence access** to them. In other words, the SAF helps the NSs securing and maintaining safe humanitarian access.

SAF measures are put into practice and updated based on National Societies' evolving experience, so that they remain relevant to today's operations. This includes the response to **COVID-19** pandemic, as exemplified by the case of Niger.

While it is especially pertinent in situations involving violence, the SAF is relevant for National Societies **at all times**. Its application can help them to deal with *challenges to perception, acceptance, security and access whenever and wherever they may arise and to manage security risks* in their day-to-day operations.

How our acceptance, security and access were affected

This is why NSs which were already familiar with the SAF and had started putting it into practice had a **head-start in responding** to the Covid-19 pandemic. *Adamou Amadou Tidjani*, Communication Coordinator at the Niger Red Cross (NRC), is adamant when he says that the connections built by the National Society with the communities over time, based on the SAF element of external communication have played a **pivotal role in granting secure access to the NRC volunteers throughout the response to the pandemic**. Knowing the importance of



engaging with communities while respecting their cultural and religious beliefs, Amadou and his team immediately organised TV and radio spots. “*Those spots really facilitated a lot our safe access*” says Amadou. “They helped to sensitise the population about the role the National Society had in responding to Covid-19”. The volunteers were trained not only in security protocols for personal protective equipment, but also in how to communicate with family members and religious leaders to explain to them how to ensure dignified and safe burials. Such training was essential as some families in the begging of the pandemic did not fully accept or understand the infection prevention and sanitization measures which were applied by the NRC volunteers during burials and in the communities in general. At times, this translated in threats against the health workers and volunteers and/or in stigma.



What we did and learned

“Sometimes we were threatened by the families until the *last mile to the graveyard*” says Mahamadou Moussa Ide, who volunteers within the Niger Red Cross’ team for Infections Prevention and Control – “but we kept explaining to them the importance

of being protected and we offered psychosocial support to those families who had lost relatives due to Covid-19. We even managed to dress up¹ a couple of members per family to allow them to accompany their loved ones for the burial. It really helped our work!”.

“In the communities where we had already disseminated messages through the SAF about the Red Cross mandate and had activities happening, people **just knew what the emblem meant.**” continues Amadou. “It granted our access and increased our acceptance. Wearing our NRC bibs and good communication were instrumental to our response! In the end, the pandemic allowed the Niger Red Cross to be even more known. We used what we were already doing to increase the knowledge of our role in the communities, even in the ones where we had never worked before. *We knew what we had to do.*

We produced videos on stigma and on burials, to reassure the population on how we were operating without breaching the funerary rituals”.

“Those communities which did not know our work and purpose *threw stones at us*”, says Mahamadou, but after putting into practice what we learned through the SAF and engaging with them and explaining to them what we do, why we do it and how we do it, **we managed to have greater access** and do our activities. We were able to respond even in those areas where not all people knew us from the start because of insecure conditions, like in Tillaberi², at the border with Mali and Burkina Faso. Our volunteers were well prepared; we assessed the risks for the area and we followed strict procedures. The families were well informed in advance of our visits to sanitise their homes; and the “*parrains*”³ knew how the funeral rituals would be adapted. **We reached a lot of communities throughout the country and we did it safely**”.

As described through Amadou's and Mahamadou's words, **the SAF is part of the ICRC's long-term investment in strengthening the capacities of the National Societies**. Supporting them in their engagement with the communities to deliver humanitarian services and drawing on community-based solutions and continued two-way communication are amongst the foundations of the safer access to build trust and foster acceptance and security. Together with a well-managed, trained and supported base of volunteers, they ensure that risks are mitigated.

The Covid-19 pandemic exposes NSs across the world to diverse and unprecedented sets of challenges. Putting SAF knowledge into practice represents an opportunity for National Societies (and the Movement) to optimise the response. An opportunity to find synergies with other ongoing or new Movement efforts to strengthen NS response capacity to multiple hazards and contexts⁴.

¹ i.e. family members wearing PPE to prevent contamination.

² Tillaberi is an area affected by conflict spill over and movements of displaced populations.

³ “Parrains” are extended-family members having specific relationships with the deceased.

⁴ For example, adding SAF lenses whenever possible or if SAF is already applied explore the opportunity to consider additional Preparedness or Development aspects for the NS to address during the response to Covid-19 (e.g. [PER](#))