Côte d'Ivoire: ICRC position towards web-based tracing: risk impact assessment and alternative approach

Concerns about web-based tracing services and current service providers include the following:

- Efficiency of the tools and methodology. As of considered as still publication, no reliable data or established records are available from various service providers regarding people who re-established contact with family members through their website.
- Long-term sustainability of the model. This is a problem in view of tough online competition and, notably, the model's relative added-value compared to vast social networking tools, such as Facebook, which have many more users.
- Target population. Some websites do not 'target' people affected by natural disasters.

But most importantly:

- Management of risks related to people who use such websites and their safeguards (data protection and security). Anybody can self-register without an intermediary, and nothing really prevents a child from registering his/her data on the website, which is public and could be accessed by persons wishing to abuse or exploit the child. Furthermore, the fact that the website is global and not context-related may prove to be problematic for two reasons:
  - It probably means that the same level of information and security is ensured for both sensitive and non-sensitive contexts.
  - The decision whether to launch a website is not context-specific.

The International Committee of the Red Cross has developed its own approach to web-based tracing for ICRC delegations and National Societies, which reflects the Movement's values and specific contexts, taking into consideration data security constraints and field needs. In this way, it offers the right combination from a very large choice of online tools, with different options offered by the new Family Links website (familylinks.icrc.org).

For example, when the ICRC delegation in Côte d'Ivoire proposed to put photos of unaccompanied children whose parents' location remained unknown on familylinks.icrc.org, prior to making a final decision they undertook a risk impact assessment based on the following questions:

- Have the children given their consent specifically for their photo to be put on the Internet?
- Does the group include children who are particularly vulnerable/exposed to a particular protection risk that might be heightened by putting their photo on the Internet?
- How can the ICRC make sure that the persons who contact the organization after having seen the children on the Internet are really their parents? What procedures have been put in place to ensure that no one misuses the system?
- Are the children in a secure place? Does the ICRC visit them regularly?
- What follow-up will the ICRC undertake?

In the end, based on the risk impact assessment, the ICRC decided to put the photos on its website. However, it is important to emphasize that this does not mean that that will be done automatically henceforth or in other situations. For every context and for every beneficiary group, a specific risk impact assessment will be conducted to decide whether or not it is appropriate to set up an online Restoring Family Links service for a specific context.[172]

(Communicated by the ICRC child protection adviser, 2015)

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[172] Please note that, following adoption of the Data Protection Framework of the International Committee of the Red Cross, the process will be further institutionalized by conducting a Data Protection Impact Assessment for all activities that entail the publishing of data.