

# EVALUATION REPORT

*Establishment of the Surgical Learning Hub  
in Bukavu, DRC, 2022*

## Executive Summary



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## Executive Summary

The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) Health Team commissioned an evaluation of its “Hospital and Surgical Capacity-Building” (HSCB) project in Bukavu, Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). The project’s main objective is to strengthen health workers’ capacities to address shortages of qualified staff, as such shortages often occur in complex and under-resourced settings like Bukavu. The staff in question comprises local residents, staff on short assignments and long-term staff. The Surgical Learning Hub (SLH) concept is one component of the HSCB project. The main objective of such hubs is to sustainably strengthen the capacities of both local surgical teams and staff on humanitarian assignments. The hub also provides integration programmes (onboarding) for ICRC staff joining surgical teams. It aims to promote an effective, continuous learning environment supported by a community of experts and the latest digital technology.

After the establishment of the first SLH in Bukavu, the ICRC Health Team commissioned an evaluation to collect lessons learned, best practices and recommendations to inform plans for similar hubs in two other places.

The main report presents detailed results of the evaluation. It contains an introduction to the project’s context, the objectives of the evaluation, methodology, results, lessons learned and recommendations.

The objective of the evaluation were to identify facilitating factors and barriers to establishing the SLH. The evaluation focused on the period when the SLH was being established (June–December 2022) and used qualitative data such as semi-structured interviews (in-person and virtual) with key people involved. The evaluation method used the criteria of effectiveness, relevance (in terms of coordination) and sustainability set by the Development Assistance Committee (DAC) of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). The DAC evaluation criteria for impact, efficiency and coherence were not used in this evaluation, as the focus was on internal procedures rather than observable outcomes.

Twenty key stakeholders were interviewed for the evaluation: five women and 15 men, of which ten were ICRC staff and ten were external (employed by Bukavu Provincial General Reference Hospital and the Catholic University of Bukavu Medical School). Interviewees included staff from the SLH, the ICRC delegation in Kinshasa, the ICRC subdelegations in Bukavu and Goma and the ICRC headquarters in Geneva, as well as local partners in Bukavu. Results of the evaluation are grouped by criterion and are in line with the evaluation objectives.

### Relevance

The evaluation results show that the SLH meets the capacities-strengthening priorities for health workers and hospital staff. It is also in line with the ICRC’s organizational objectives to embed the values of sustainability into its cooperation with local partners and to “localize” its humanitarian action over the long term. Local partners described the SLH as the logical next step in their long-running partnership with the ICRC. The possibility of replicating the SLH model in other contexts – while ensuring that local differences are taken into account during the planning phase – was another significant result cited in the evaluation. However, some ICRC staff reported that some of their colleagues at headquarters had expressed reservations as to whether the project fell within the ICRC’s mandate, since the SLH could be considered to have more of a development focus than a humanitarian one.

### Effectiveness

The evaluation covered the timeline of the hub's establishment, budget distribution and hiring process. The evaluation assessed whether these aspects matched the project specifications, and whether any changes or delays had occurred.

The evaluation found that the ICRC team encountered a number of challenges during the establishment of the hub in Bukavu, which were addressed and progress was made through end-December 2022, including a first trip to Bukavu by nurse-trainers. Integration programmes and two training sequences for health-care providers in Bukavu and Goma were also carried out by a team of mobile ICRC surgery staff, supported by partner surgeons. Finally a location for building the future training hub building was selected.

Challenges included: hiring of qualified staff to manage the SLH; rotation and reassignment of ICRC staff; lack of deadlines with a clear, regularly updated action plan; lack of clear communication among stakeholders at different levels; and unstable security conditions. SLH staff responsibilities in the field require a particular type of experience and interdisciplinary skills, which are not always easy to find in complex, vulnerable regions. Implementation of the project was affected by delays in designing training modules with clearly defined objectives that were adapted to the local context.

The evaluation also highlighted factors that could contribute to the project's success, including: ICRC support, especially in terms of securing long-term financing; the enthusiasm, collaboration and availability of the main project leaders at ICRC headquarters and in Kinshasa; the eager willingness of local partners in Bukavu to engage; a years-long, trusting relationship between the ICRC and local partners; advanced infrastructure at Bukavu General Hospital, including electrical equipment, internet connection and other telecommunication tools; a well-established relationship between the university hospital and the broader university system; skilled health workers with a wide variety of specialities; and the ICRC's significant institutional experience in treating war wounds. These factors – in addition to the skill level of the people involved, prior experience in the region, teamwork, and the ICRC's collaborative approach in the field – all facilitated the project's launch and encouraged local partners to support it.

## **Sustainability**

The final criterion applied in the evaluation was sustainability. The main conclusions show that the ICRC gave priority to ensuring the project's longevity, as evidenced by specific actions taken from the planning phase through to implementation.

Two key aspects promoting the sustainability and localization of the project were achieved: the ICRC committed to funding the project over several years (through the Multi-Year, Multi-Partner workstream); and local partners were consulted from the beginning to strengthen their commitment to and sense of shared ownership in the local objectives.

In summary, the evaluation results show the SLH concept to be innovative and relevant. It meets local needs and is based on a consultative model that was essential in obtaining early support and inspiring local institutions to take part in the launch. However, a work plan with a detailed and regularly updated timeline will be essential to organize the SLH's activities. Clear communication among partners, and a focus on deadlines and challenges to be met, is also needed. Because of the complex and unique situation in Bukavu, the SLH was launched before its training modules were fully developed and ready to be taught. A balance must be struck between supervision from headquarters and autonomy on the part of the ICRC team in the field to manage unexpected hurdles and adapt deadlines in light of the situation on the ground. Sustainability remains an important issue for this project, as the ICRC will eventually be forced to end its involvement. It is therefore essential that the SLH should be able to function independently.

The evaluation generated six recommendations based on evaluators' observations and conclusions following a debriefing with the project's administrative team at headquarters.

**1. Strengthen communication across all levels of the project**

Smoother communication focused on necessary areas for action in the launch plan would allow for more flexibility and cooperation among project stakeholders. Improving communication will also require regularly updating the project roadmap to reflect conditions and challenges on the ground. Objectives and priority actions should also be better defined. Completed, observed results should be better communicated within the ICRC, and more frequently. In the evaluation, it was recommended to strike a balance between supervision that helps guide activities on the ground and autonomy that allows the team in the field to revise their timeline and adapt to unforeseen events as needed.

**2. Invest in more in-depth preparatory field research**

Future projects like this one should be preceded by more in-depth preparatory field research, both to ensure that the project is anchored in the local context and to identify gaps in terms of technical staff and training. Preparatory research will also help to foster trust between the ICRC and local partners. Every region and situation is different; it is therefore essential to invest in preparatory research so that the next steps build on a solid foundation and are rooted in mutual trust.

**3. Promote ICRC staff's well-being**

The ICRC should organize a workshop on staff well-being to improve stress management, team-building and creativity – and prevent burn-out – before the next phase in rolling out the SLH.

**4. Hire staff with diverse skill sets specific to field work and the technical aspects of the project**

Working at the SLH will require technical, multidisciplinary skills and good project management. The evaluation underscored the importance of developing a hiring strategy that reflects those needs, which will require creativity and advance planning and may take some time. A truly multidisciplinary staff will give the project what it needs to meet its objectives.

**5. Complete and pilot-test the training programme before rolling it out in Bukavu and beyond**

Before rolling out a training programme in Bukavu or at other hospitals, the project team should test it to ensure that it addresses gaps in participants' knowledge and takes local constraints into account.

**6. Keep sustainability central to the project**

The ICRC team should continue to apply a sustainability-focused approach in regions like Bukavu and take into account any new internal directives on exit strategies. Projects like this one must involve local partners, starting from the preparatory phase, so as to forge a shared vision of the goals and build a strong relationship based on respect and trust.