

Reappraisal of the role of the Red Cross

A period of rapid change entails the continual reassessment of problems and values. Some years ago, therefore, it was felt necessary to analyse questions pertaining to the place of the Red Cross in the world today and its role in the future. In 1972, the ICRC and the League, in co-operation with the National Societies, decided to look ahead by studying the situation of the Red Cross from all angles. A joint committee was created for reappraisal of the role of the Red Cross; then, in 1973, the director of what came to be known as the "Big Study", Mr. Donald D. Tansley, aided by a number of research workers, and with the support of the relevant departments of the ICRC, the League and the National Societies, began his investigations.

Two years later, the International Review announced the publication of his final report, entitled "An Agenda for Red Cross", together with six background papers describing the present role played by the Red Cross and its position in various spheres.

These documents have been circulated to all the Red Cross organizations, to stimulate a widespread exchange of views at all levels, international as well as national.

We therefore thought it useful to quote from these reports some passages of special relevance. The first are from the paper on the protective functions performed under the red cross emblem, not only for people protected under international Conventions, but also for those with none to care for them, whom the Red Cross likewise includes within its mission of helping those in need.

Protection ¹

The subject of political prisoners is both important and controversial for the ICRC. If a government detains a foreigner for being an enemy in time of armed conflict, he is protected by international law as a prisoner of war or a civilian detainee. But if the government detains one of its own nationals as an enemy, the detainee has no international protection. (Indeed a foreigner may very well be better treated than a national.) In this situation the ICRC has perceived a need to try to protect that individual from his own government.

In general it can be said that in the last two decades the ICRC has carved out a niche for itself in world affairs in so far as the subject of political prisoners is concerned. Using its reputation for humanitarian and non-political activity, it has secured access to political prisoners (whatever they are called) in almost half the countries of the world. It was visiting them in approximately one-third of the countries of the world in the mid-1970s. Its action generally complemented rather than conflicted with other groups. . . .

. . . The ICRC has made an internal quantitative analysis which tends to support its belief that its activities improve the conditions of, and treatment for, political prisoners. The conclusion is suggested here, on the basis of field observation, that that is indeed the case.

Furthermore the work of the ICRC with regard to political prisoners is probably the most important protection activity it is now doing. The number of traditional prisoners of war has declined along with the number of traditional wars, and the number of those protected under the Fourth Geneva Convention is miniscule in historical terms. On the other hand, the number of people detained "by reason of political events" is increasing. Precisely because they do not fall under the Geneva Conventions and because there is no other functioning system of international protection of any importance except for the UN High Commissioner for Refugees and the European Convention on Human Rights, both of which have limited jurisdiction, these detainees are left at the mercy of national authorities whose policies can be quite inhumane. As political violence within states increases, so does the need for increased protection for those detained because of political events. The ICRC is thus em-

¹ David F. Forsythe: *Present Role of the Red Cross in Protection*. Background paper No. 1.

barked on an activity which is in keeping with changing trends of violence—trends which are likely to continue into the foreseeable future.

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Red Cross protection through the development of law, the supervision of applied law, and *ad hoc* diplomacy is a product of the history of international relations over the last 110 years. The protection roles of the Red Cross, in their broad outlines, are well suited to the international milieu in which they are played for precisely the reason that the roles have evolved as part of international relations rather than being recently interjected.

Legal development and codification are attempted where international consensus permits. There has been consensus in support of some supervision of the written law, though the consensus has been shallow in the sense that effective enforcement is still lacking. Where there has not been general consensus in support of Red Cross protection, the ICRC has pursued a policy of pragmatic and case-by-case protection without emphasis on legal questions. Thus Red Cross protection, as practised principally by the ICRC, is a blend of law-centred activity and pragmatism.

The specific tasks of Red Cross protection are varied, ranging from pure diplomatic activity—discussions and drafting of law and the presence of delegates in places of detention—to small-scale assistance. Red Cross protection is interpreted by the ICRC not only in the minimum sense of deterring bodily harm but also at times in the maximum sense of developing the individual's qualities as a human being. Thus the ICRC facilitates educational programmes and seeks to preserve personal ties through family reunification or visits of relatives to detainees.

The intent of Red Cross protection is to help the individual in need without regard to the reasons for that need. In some ways the work of the ICRC is similar to groups which defend civil liberties without regard for the political philosophies in question . . .

. . . The indeterminate or intermediate nature of Red Cross protection has been precisely what has made Red Cross protection useful. It does not seek total protection through total solutions; it does not seek to protect people by changing régimes or eliminating the basic cause of detention. While many groups have wished to do away with war or with one political movement or another, Red Cross protection has been

consistently oriented to the individual without regard for other considerations. While this philosophical underpinning has provided uniqueness to Red Cross protection, it has also produced criticism and controversy. For there have always been those who regard ICRC activity as getting in the way of total solutions or unduly favouring a given régime. The roles—and the controversy—continue.

Aid to the victims of natural disasters and of armed conflicts remains one of the principal purposes of the Red Cross. "Because of its long experience and reputation for neutrality and impartiality, Red Cross has established itself as the leading non-governmental organization in the relief system". So says the author of the background paper on aid; however, he goes on to point out that today the Red Cross needs to rethink its policies and methods of operation.

Assistance ¹

Despite its reputation and wide experience in the international assistance field over the past years, Red Cross is by no means assured that it can maintain its position without constantly adapting to new conditions. For as noted at the outset, Red Cross does not operate alone or in a static international context. The growing involvement of other agencies and governments in the field of relief, the wider development crisis in the poorer regions of the world, and the changing views of charity, all constitute pressures to which Red Cross must begin to respond if it is to avoid a crisis of relevance. Moreover, the growing scale and complexity of major disasters of the past few years, both in managerial and policy terms, reinforce the need for greater professionalism by all actors in the field of assistance. Better planning, an awareness of the relation between disasters and development and, most important, closer cooperation between Red Cross and other agencies are but a few of the elements needed to give professional substance to the goodwill and humanitarian intent of those concerned with the victims of disasters abroad.

No less than other actors in the international assistance field, therefore, Red Cross is confronted with the need to rethink its policies and methods of operation, and its roles in relation to others.

¹ David J. Holdsworth: *Present Role of the Red Cross in Assistance*. Background Paper No. 3.

To these challenges, it brings a remarkable potential, based upon its symbol and experience. At issue is simply whether the Red Cross will be able to exploit this potential to its fullest.

That it should do so is underlined by the comment of the editor of a renowned international publication: "After all, the *only* reason for Red Cross is to save lives and help people".

We have also made excerpts from the texts examining the role and the significance of voluntary service, the concept which gave rise to the whole movement. For the true work of the Red Cross is founded on a moral attitude. If this is lacking, then it will provide no more than the efficient output of a well-run enterprise. No more—and it is precisely the more that is desired. It is the sign of a civilized society based on service, because Red Cross work is regarded as service and those who perform it, whether paid or not, do it for that reason.

Role and Significance of Voluntarism ¹

Before proceeding further we must pause to consider briefly some features of the voluntary principle, which, in the author's view, is an essential element in health and social welfare activities.

It is true that some National Societies make little or no use of volunteers, but the great majority can marshal a sufficient volume of good will to base a large part or even all of their activity on volunteer effort. Among the most effective activities of certain Societies, some are carried out exclusively by volunteers.

Nevertheless, some well-meaning people cast doubt on the possibility of mobilising or maintaining a steady inflow of volunteers. One argument by National Societies is that social and economic conditions in certain developing countries do not lend themselves to such action. Yet there are examples of the use of volunteers in every region of the world and in a variety of development situations. Another argument is that the conditions of modern life make it more and more difficult to persuade men and women to devote part of their time to routine benevolent activities, in contrast to more dramatic occasional activity, such as aid in the event of disaster, for which volunteers always come forward.

¹ Dr. Pierre Dorolle: *National Red Cross Societies and Health and Welfare*. Background Paper No. 4.

On the contrary, the author believes that with the steady reduction in working hours and the consequent growth of leisure time, along with longer life expectancy, which is resulting in greater numbers of elderly but still active individuals, the potential for voluntarism has increased. As was suggested in connection with rural community action, voluntarism might have expanded to include those social groups to which little recourse has been had up to the present.

The responsibility falls upon the National Societies to motivate "giving your time" and to recruit volunteers. Many have succeeded, and all should make some attempt.

In some cases where volunteers are not used, the cause may lie in directors of National Societies clinging to an élitist professional attitude of contempt for the volunteer as a technically inferior amateur.

For his part, the author believes that voluntarism is an essential characteristic of Red Cross action at the national level, and indeed that in some cases it justifies certain activities.

The human character of Red Cross action is indeed closely bound up with the notion of voluntary participation. The fact that the volunteer acts entirely of his own will, in complete detachment, inspires confidence. People will listen more readily to his advice and recommendations than to those of an agent of the public authority, who is known to act under orders and not necessarily by conviction.

If proof were needed, one could point to the use of volunteers in health and social welfare in countries with a completely State-controlled politico-social system. This theory is not put forward here to strengthen the argument. The author developed it some years ago, long before the present study had been conceived. He then brought to light the official part performed by voluntary workers acting as auxiliaries in State-controlled health services for purposes of health information and education (both individual and community). They were employed precisely because they were more acceptable to people than agents of authority. He concluded at that time that voluntary action was all the more necessary where centralisation and State control had reached an advanced stage.

It is no accident that in the course of this study senior officials of strongly State-dominated countries described the pre-eminent task of a National Society as acting as "a link with the population", or as "a humanising factor" in the political system and government services.

Again, in one parliamentary “welfare state”, providing virtually complete social security, we find explicit recognition of the humanising function “in a de-humanised world”, examples of which are marginal social cases “that fall through the welfare sieve”. Precisely such cases need the human touch, the human contact which is denied to individuals condemned to a kind of isolation that is often self-created as a form of reaction. The direct intervention of the State machinery would enclose them still further in their isolation, while a disinterested offer of help from an identifiable individual, a volunteer, might perhaps establish contact. One is thus brought back to the role of link, of intermediary—one might almost say buffer—between the State and the individual, a function that becomes more necessary as the State becomes more socialised and omnipresent. National Red Cross Societies can and must play this role by reason of the human approach inherent in voluntary action.

Admittedly, paid workers of National Societies benefit to some extent from the Red Cross image; but they lack the irreplaceable element of disinterested action, undertaken freely and spontaneously, to which we have paid tribute.

Another aspect of voluntary action has been stressed by a National Society leader in a country which is the epitome of the “provident State”, providing the individual with every kind of facility. He noted that its citizens are losing all sense of responsibility for their own health and welfare as well as for that of others. He suggested that a growing demonstration of voluntary social welfare and health activities would surely play a great part in reawakening the sense of social responsibility among individuals. The National Society would thus be carrying out a broad-based mission of social education. It need hardly be added that this teaching by example can only succeed if those working among the people are volunteers.

We have noted that all our examples occur in a context of socialised health benefits and more or less complete state-assured security. There can be no doubt, whether one likes it or not, that socialisation and State-provided security are a distinct trend—varying in pace but widespread and irreversible. Even under social and economic systems that call themselves liberal, the State is increasingly omnipresent. As has just been seen, it is precisely under conditions of State omnipresence that voluntary action is particularly necessary. We can therefore assert without any hesitation that the voluntary principle will impose itself

increasingly. By ensuring the humanisation of social welfare activities it will provide complete justification for the pursuit of the national Red Cross activities.

What is to be the future of the movement that has spread so widely under the symbols of the red cross, the red crescent, and the red lion and sun? That is the fundamental question asked by a paper that outlines the early years and the century-old history of the institution.

Evolution ¹

The future of the Red Cross can hardly be projected from its past evolution. Its own resources are sharply limited in relation to the needs it seeks to fill. Many other organisations are at work in its fields of interest. The Red Cross is accordingly challenged to choose and to define roles in which it can serve distinctively and effectively. It is also obliged to plan more systematically than in the past and to achieve better coordination within its own organisation and with other institutions.

Since the Red Cross was established there have been radical changes in technology and in the relations between states. The condition of individuals on a vastly more populated planet is also quite different from what it was a century ago. By looking to the past the members of the International Red Cross can see that lofty humanitarian ideals have been sustained and that the Red Cross still enjoys great public esteem, which is no mean asset in an age of cynicism and distrust of established institutions. The present challenge is to capitalise on these intangibles by defining its future purposes and fulfilling them with skill and renewed inspiration.

Basing his arguments on his background papers, the author of the final report, Donald D. Tansley, has drawn up an agenda for a wide and deep discussion of problems which, as he says, originate not in the environment but in the Red Cross itself. His analysis of the institution as it is today is intended to demonstrate more clearly what will change or must change in a different context, while continuing to bear in mind the permanent attributes of Red Cross, such as humanitarian values. It is true, as he points out, that "the development of Red Cross principles has had rather an

¹ Ian Reid: *The Evolution of the Red Cross*. Background Paper No. 2.

uneven history". According to Jean-Georges Lossier, "The Red Cross owes its universality in a large degree to its discretion in avoiding every attempt to establish a universalist code of its own". He shows how important for the future of the movement were the fundamental principles set down by Jean Pictet.

In dealing with the present activities of the institution, the final report, while questioning some aspects of these, gives an affirmative reply to the first question asked by the joint committee in reappraising the role of the Red Cross: "Will Red Cross survive and should it survive?" At the same time, Mr. Tansley postulates the conditions in which the institution will be able to continue its work in a future world very different from that which gave it birth.

The Environment of Future Action ¹

If the Red Cross has considerable potential as a humanitarian force, how can it use this to best advantage in the world of the late 1970s and beyond? What should be its future role?

The answer lies in part within Red Cross itself. But it also depends upon factors outside Red Cross, in the environment in which it operates. As it looks to the future, therefore, Red Cross must consider the dominant trends in this environment which will affect or even shape its actions in the coming years.

In one sense, the humanitarian needs which Red Cross seeks to meet are timeless. It cannot be said, for example, that the suffering of individual victims of the Indo-China conflict or the famines in Bangladesh during the 1970s was less or more intense than that of the wounded on the battlefields of Europe in the 1860s or the famine-stricken populations of China in the late nineteenth century.

However, the scale and impact of these same needs, and the world context within which they occur, have changed dramatically in the 110 years since the founding of Red Cross, and may be expected to continue changing in the future.

Although there are obvious limitations to predicting with any confidence what the future "at middle and long range" is likely to hold in store, a review of some of the more important recent world trends might provide some insight into the nature of humanitarian needs in the coming years.

¹ Donald D. Tansley: *Final report: An Agenda for Red Cross*.

There is a growing body of evidence to suggest that the world may have recently crossed the boundary into a state of permanent emergency. It is widely believed to be one whose impact will continue to be felt well beyond the next five years...

... The medium and longer term outlook for food is equally alarming, particularly for the developing countries. Scientists point to the grim facts: all the easy gains in food production have been made. In the past ten years, there has been no increase in productive acreage around the world. The Green Revolution, which depended heavily upon fertilisers, has been stopped by shortages and the inability of the countries most requiring fertilisers to pay increased world prices.

The growth of world population is another element in the crisis. The stark fact to be faced is that world population will continue to increase inexorably over the next two or three decades. The world's population reached 3.8 billion people in 1973, and will certainly grow to between six and seven billion by the years 2000. The women who will bear the new billions between now and the end of the century are already born. Most of this increase will be in the developing countries, thus raising the proportion of the world's population in the poor regions from two-thirds to three-quarters.

The vast scale of needs to be met in the developing world might be illustrated by a few facts. It is estimated that over the next 30 years the governments of developing countries face the enormous task of providing food, shelter, employment, and social services for 2.8 billion inhabitants in addition to their present population. This represents an increase of more than the total population of the world in 1950.

Urbanisation will also be an important factor during the remainder of this century. Although it is a world-wide phenomenon, urban growth is particularly serious in the developing countries. Millions of rural workers are moving to the cities. Urban populations are growing much faster than overall demographic increase, in many cases three or four times as fast. Of the twelve fastest-growing cities in the world over the next decade, *all* will be in developing countries—four in Latin America, seven in Asia and the Pacific, and one in Africa. Between 1970 and 1985, these cities are expected to increase their population from 46.5 million to 106.9 million.

Another possibility for the future concerns new kinds of disasters which may emerge from the growing impact of technology upon the

environment. Deterioration of the environment through various human activities can be expected to have an important effect on human populations, particularly in large urban agglomerations and densely populated areas. Pollution of the air and of the water cycle raises the possibility of increased "technological disasters" in the future. Many of these can be expected to be local in impact, confined to a single city, region or country. But concern is also growing over the extent to which human activities might also touch the "outer limits" of the ecological systems of the earth. Prediction in such a difficult area is hazardous. It is perhaps enough to note the concern expressed by the Club of Rome and, more recently, by the United Nations Environment Programme, over the extent to which these limits may be reached in various ways over the coming years.

The implications of these trends seem clear. Pressures upon food and other resources, over-crowding, disease and growing frustration will all contribute to a greater vulnerability to disaster and instability for the world as a whole.

The crisis now imposed upon the Third World has not only increased its vulnerability to disaster but has raised more sharply than ever before the possibility of confrontation between the rich and poor countries of the world—the North against the South. The revolution of rising expectations which swept over the developing world in the past decades has begun to give way to frustration, anger, and a heightened sense of injustice.

More and more, it may be expected that the developing countries will attempt to exercise whatever leverage they possess to reduce their vulnerability and dependence upon the industrialised nations. The forms of leverage open to them are various and each brings with it major implications for international stability or security. Should frustration continue to mount, the possibility of violent responses cannot be ruled out.

Yet it is not necessary to think only in terms of international wars if the pattern of recent world conflicts is considered. One result of decolonisation has been a rise in the demand for self-determination within national boundaries by minority groups in developing countries as well as in other parts of the world. A significant number of conflicts of the past decade have been internal ones generated by dissatisfaction with the rule of the majority and the inability of states to control their citizens.

International conflict in the form of civil disobedience and armed violence is also likely to occur increasingly in industrialised countries as social structures break down under various pressures. Inflation, high rates of unemployment, declining standards of living in countries accustomed to a decade or more of uninterrupted affluence, have in the recent past threatened certain countries with varying degrees of social disintegration and violence. In some, ethnic or racial factors have been important in determining the nature of the violence; in all, the pressures of urban life have contributed to the break-up of what are, to some, more peaceful patterns of existence.

Perhaps the most alarming development of recent years has been the surge of terrorist activities. Hijackings, kidnappings, bombings, and other acts of terror have increased dramatically and are now an expected part of national and international life, with profound implications for the future.

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One conclusion which must be drawn from this glimpse into the future is that the world has entered an era in which disasters, on an increasingly large scale and marked by a continued and ever-heightened state of tension and violence, will be an inevitable fact of national and international life. It seems clear that:

1. disasters are likely to occur with more frequency and with greater impact, particularly in the developing world;
2. new types of disasters may be expected;
3. conflict situations are likely to increase.

It can be safely assumed that the need for humanitarian interventions of the type which Red Cross has provided in the past are certain to continue and to increase in the coming years. Further, the needs are of a kind which must be met at the local level, at the national level and at the international level. Red Cross is better placed than most organisations to act at each level in most of the countries of the world.

What is also striking from this review is the growing reality of global interdependence in almost every aspect of human activity. This is now perceived more clearly than a few years ago. Indeed, it would appear that the major problems faced by the world are no longer amenable to national solutions alone. An effective approach to these problems requires re-

cognition, first, of their interlocking causes and effects, and second, of the interdependence of nations and peoples, and of the ecological, political, economic, and social systems of the world. At the same time, people are no longer under the illusion that a single world government can solve the problems of interdependence, any more than they believe that solutions can be dictated to nations by an international authority. There is increasing understanding that solutions will only emerge from initiatives at the local and national levels, though they must be conceived with an awareness of their international implications.

For this reason, it seems likely that one quality of Red Cross today—its aspects as an international network—will be its most important strength in the future world context. In the past few years, various private non-governmental networks have had an important influence on the thinking of governments. On the occasion of major international conferences, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) have forced governments to examine issues which would otherwise have been ignored or accorded a lower priority. NGO networks had a great impact on certain national governmental delegations at the World Food Conference in Rome in 1974 and upon the Conference as a whole. They organised highly effective counter-conferences during the 1972 Environment Conference in Stockholm and the recent Conference on the Status of Women in Mexico City. Their strength lies in their ability to link concerned individuals and groups around the world through a network which can force government to face the international implications of decisions on ostensibly national problems.

The future world environment thus seems likely to present Red Cross with a particular challenge. Whatever role it may choose to play, it seems likely that Red Cross potential in the future will in large measure arise from its international attributes as a movement and as a network.
