

Reflections on general Red Cross objectives¹

by **Claude Pilloud**

The report on the re-appraisal of the role of the Red Cross has brought to light a fact which hitherto had been given no attention, namely that the objectives of the Red Cross movement as a whole have never been defined in writing. This omission is easily explained.

The first international conference in 1863, shortly after the birth of the Red Cross, expected committees in the various countries to help army medical services as much as they were able, if necessary, in time of war and, in time of peace, to make ready to be really useful in wartime, especially by preparing all kinds of supplies and equipment, and by training voluntary nurses.

For many years, such were the objectives of the Red Cross movement, including the ICRC. However, in 1870, the ICRC started a news service to seek and communicate information on wounded or captured soldiers. This led to the founding of the international Agency known today as the Central Tracing Agency. The ICRC also endeavoured to help prisoners of war by sending them comforts and visiting the camps where they were interned. These two, then new, activities were given the force of law in the 1929 Geneva Convention relating to prisoners of war (articles 79 and 88).

National Societies soon realized that preparing for wartime activities was insufficient to justify constantly maintaining an efficient organization. This was one of the reasons for which, in 1919, they founded the League of Red Cross Societies. Most of them had just been through a cruel world

¹ The views expressed are the author's, involving his sole responsibility.

war to end all wars, and looked ahead to regular and useful peacetime activities. They therefore sought a motivation strong enough to rally voluntary contributions and services.

As a consequence, in 1920, one of the first decisions of the League's General Council (as the governing body of the League was then known) was to define the aims of National Red Cross Societies. The League had unquestionably been influenced by article 25 of the Covenant of the League of Nations:

The members of the League agree to encourage and promote the establishment and co-operation of duly authorized voluntary national Red Cross organizations having as purpose the improvement of health, the prevention of disease and the mitigation of suffering throughout the world.

The aims of National Societies were stated to be as follows:

...

3. *every National Red Cross Society shall enable its members to provide such services as they are qualified to perform and as required for public welfare in their respective localities,*
4. *every National Red Cross Society shall organize the youth of its country with a view to Red Cross work,*
5. *every National Red Cross Society shall help in organizing relief in the event of national disaster and shall constantly be ready for emergency action,*
6. *the League of Red Cross Societies shall set up for its member Societies a service for quick transmission of news on disasters to permit immediate mobilization of all forms of relief, and shall maintain contact with meteorological and seismological stations throughout the world,*
7. *the three main functions of any National Red Cross Society in the field of health shall be :*
 - (a) *to encourage and sustain general interest in public health,*
 - (b) *to co-operate with, and if necessary substitute for, government services,*
 - (c) *to spread useful knowledge about health by demonstrations, education and any other means...*

The International Red Cross Statutes of 1928, revised in 1952, contain no definition of the movement's general objectives. What they

did was to allocate and define the respective functions of the ICRC, of the League and of the International Conferences of the Red Cross. Article 6 lists the functions of the ICRC, and article 7 those of the League, but the Statutes say nothing about National Society activities; they merely state in article 1 that National Societies form part of the International Red Cross.

It is surprising that the most important Red Cross statutes do not mention the movement's general objectives, but it must not be forgotten that they were the outcome of protracted negotiations following the founding of the League in 1919. These statutes are actually an agreement and a compromise between the League and the ICRC without regard for general ideas likely to give rise to further discussion and thereby delay adoption of the statutes which, since 1928, have proved their worth.

In 1946, the Oxford meeting of the League Board of Governors reconsidered the general aims of National Societies and issued a two-part statement covering principles and their application. The main change in the provisions of 1920 was the inclusion of wartime activities for the benefit of wounded, sick, prisoners of war and civilian population, for the tracing of missing persons, and for providing a news service, and so forth. A new idea was also included, namely, that each Society must do all it can to prevent and alleviate the suffering caused by epidemics and social evils.

When the International Red Cross Statutes were revised at Toronto in 1952, these general questions were not discussed, but in 1965, the twentieth International Conference of the Red Cross, at Vienna, issued a statement of Red Cross principles which to some extent relate to the problems discussed here. According to that statement, *the Red Cross endeavours to prevent and alleviate human suffering... Its purpose is to protect life and health and to ensure respect for the human being. It promotes mutual understanding, friendship, co-operation and lasting peace amongst all peoples.*

This is of very general purport. It could well apply to other organizations and does not perhaps reflect the special characteristics of the Red Cross, as the authors of the report on the re-appraisal of the role of the Red Cross clearly understood. They considered that the Red Cross must

examine anew what its basic and special role should be. They themselves suggested the following definition:

*The basic role of Red Cross is to provide emergency help, on an unconditional and impartial basis, wherever and whenever human needs for protection and assistance exist because of a natural disaster or conflict.*¹

This definition could well suit the ICRC, since the words “assistance” and “protection” are contained in article 6 of the International Red Cross Statutes which set out the functions of the ICRC.

It does not, however, suffice for National Societies or for the League, their federation, of which the objectives are the same as those of its members, whose activities it must encourage, facilitate, co-ordinate and promote.

As already mentioned, National Societies came to the conclusion in 1920 that preparation for wartime activities did not of itself permit them to have a lasting organization and to motivate their members to voluntary service and dedication. National Societies can of course play an important part in protection and assistance during armed conflicts, but these are fortunately becoming less frequent. Moreover, although one qualifying condition for a National Society’s recognition is that it shall be duly recognized by its legal government as a voluntary aid society auxiliary to the public authorities in accordance with article 26 of the First Geneva Convention of 1949, there are actually few National Societies which still give any substantial aid to the army medical services by training, and making available, personnel. Since 1864, many army medical services have considerably developed and are now able to meet demands made of them without calling on voluntary aid societies. In 1948 the conditions for recognition had to be amended, and it was stipulated that in States which do not maintain armed forces the new Society must be recognized as a Voluntary Aid Society auxiliary to the public authorities and acting for the benefit of the civilian population.

Natural disasters occurring frequently in any very large country, it might be thought that they provide adequate objectives for the National Society. However, in most such countries the National Societies are active not only to relieve the distress of natural disaster victims but also

¹ Tansley, Donald D.: *Final Report: An Agenda for Red Cross*, p. 64.

to perform permanent functions in a number of spheres which we shall have occasion to discuss. On the other hand, there are a fair number of small or medium-sized countries where natural disasters are rare, having no earthquakes or floods and only rarely bush or forest fires. In such countries, the National Society obviously cannot only prepare for war or natural disaster. They can, and many do, devote part of their resources to helping other Societies at grips with war or disaster, but they need a national foundation, in other words, a permanent activity for the benefit of their own people. Moreover, experience has shown that, if never or hardly ever put to use, sooner or later preparations become obsolete and trained personnel apathetic.

In addition to the provision of protection and assistance in the event of conflict or natural disaster, National Societies must have other activities. There is no lack of examples of National Societies active in medico-social or other community services which they consider as important as preparation for war or disasters. This is, incidentally, in line with resolution 5 adopted at the latest meeting of the League Board of Governors, in October 1975, which considered:

that the League should encourage National Societies to intensify their efforts to meet the needs of the public for elementary medical assistance, especially in rural areas and in slum districts of large towns, and to develop and perfect ways and means of helping health bodies to solve their medico-social problems.

Of all suggested National Society activities, it must be admitted that blood transfusion is the one most suited to Red Cross ideals and aims. As Dr. Pierre M. Dorolle said in background paper No. 4:

*One thing is certain: whenever a National Society has decided to take up blood transfusion seriously, the outcome is a success.*¹

Consequently there would be advantages, without drawbacks, to referring, in a definition of the general objectives of the Red Cross, to the example of the creation and operation of a blood collection and transfusion service. This in no way excludes other important activities considered by Dr. Dorolle. National Society co-operation with public health services would seem to offer bright prospects. There also seems

¹ *National Red Cross Societies and Health and Welfare*, p. 44.

to be new scope for National Societies in protection of the environment and in all related social problems.

To avoid any misdirection of such activities, it will probably be necessary to decide and set forth the criteria which will permit National Societies to make a judicious choice among the possible activities, in order to maintain the specific voluntary and auxiliary nature of Red Cross work.

In conclusion, it will no doubt be very useful to define the fundamental Red Cross role. In particular, a decision must be made as to what activities should be added to protection and assistance in conflict or natural disaster.

Claude PILLOUD
