

## **The League of Red Cross Societies in the Modern World**

**by H. Beer**

It is a pleasure for me, as Secretary-General of the League of Red Cross Societies, to write an article for the outstanding review produced by the International Committee. It is also a further opportunity to give fresh testimony to the cordial and harmonious co-operation between our two institutions, not that this needs any corroboration.

The League of Red Cross Societies, the world federation of National Red Cross, Red Crescent and Red Lion and Sun Societies, came into being on the morrow of the First World War in 1919, when the importance of the Red Cross mission in time of peace was receiving greater and greater recognition and when the need for a federative body to co-ordinate the work of National Societies was being felt.

After a certain slowing down of its activities during the Second World War, the League expanded rapidly from 1945 onwards as a result of the widespread decolonization which occurred mainly in Africa and Asia. In 1948, for instance, there were two African Societies and eleven Asian Societies which were members of the League; at the present time the figures have risen to twenty-two and twenty-five respectively, while during the same period the total number of member Societies has grown from 65 to 106, an increase

of 65%. In addition the number of members in the Red Cross, Red Crescent and Red Lion and Sun Societies jumped from 91 million in 1945 to 190 million at the present time.

This vast movement is still gathering strength, particularly in Africa, a fact which is most gratifying. It demonstrates that a National Red Cross or Red Crescent Society is a power to be reckoned with. It is recognized by governments as an auxiliary to the public services, for one of the first aims of newly independent countries is to set up a National Society. It is, however, not sufficient to institute a National Society; it must be made an organized living force. That is the aim which the League has set itself in its Red Cross Development Programme.

This is not a new mission; it has indeed been one of the League's specific aims since its foundation, but this League programme of technical assistance, having assumed greater breadth and width over the last few years, has become the mainspring of a dynamic Red Cross movement.

Nowadays it is no longer sufficient to understand in isolation the problems confronting the Red Cross; they have to be considered in the political, economic and social environment. The Red Cross is no longer the preserve of a particular social class but the product of the combined efforts of the whole population in any country and covers a wide range of activities. That is why, in an emergent country, the Red Cross cannot be considered as an entity introduced from outside. It has to be organized as a force for the purpose of aiding and assisting populations, drawing its strength from the combined efforts of individuals and adapted to the specific problems arising in the country. The building of such a force can no longer be carried out in splendid isolation but only in co-operation with the central government, local authorities and international and national organizations.

This new dynamic Red Cross must be carried forward on the impetus of new principles. It resolutely turns its back on paternalism which has been superseded by fellowship and full team spirit. It is this which is the originality of the League's mission. At the same time, under the drive and impetus of a spirit of understanding and harmony, it has undertaken the challenging task of weaving a vast network of technical co-operation in the most widely varying fields.

Such dynamism makes certain demands. It even sets more problems than it solves. It brings out, especially, the disproportion between the aims on which the League has set its sights and the material and human resources which the League can muster.

It must not be thought that the League has to overcome resistance to the work it wishes to undertake in new countries; quite the reverse. Its intervention is solicited, but many new Societies believe their federation can do everything for them, and do it immediately, no matter how great their needs or how feeble their resources.

To settle these problems and satisfy its members the League must adopt a realistic attitude. It must realize that independence newly achieved and a budding political system are not automatically endowed with a perfect administrative organization. The League must be aware of the technical problems which these countries have to face, particularly the limited number of persons capable of undertaking voluntary Red Cross work requiring professional qualifications. In fact, it is only in the long run that results will become evident.

In spite of these difficulties, the League must retain its idealism, for it is committed. The warm welcome it receives is not due solely to its tangible contributions but also to the fact that it does not preach any religious or political belief and that its principles are freely accepted everywhere. It is in this way that the Red Cross is unique, that its enterprising spirit is equal to the responsibilities it undertakes.

Assistance to National Societies demands not only staunch faith in the Red Cross mission, but also systematic planning of development activities. Improvisation can no longer be tolerated; assistance requires organization adapted to cope with needs in accordance with an established order of priorities. It is useless to draw up a programme of activities if a Society has no organizational structure, or its administration and finance are ineffectual. In addition, the League must stress the importance of the teaching and training of those who will be called upon to lead new National Societies. For this purpose seminars, training courses, conferences and study visits are regular features in the yearly plans of the Development Programme. Results over the last few years have been encouraging, without however concealing shortcomings such as, in the first place,

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lack of finance by comparison with the resources of international organizations or governmental technical services and the shortage of qualified personnel for the achievement of specific objectives. It is no easy matter to plan long term programmes dependent on voluntary contributions.

It would be only too easy to adopt a pessimistic or resolutely negative attitude. But the Red Cross has no such complex; it believes in miracles. In the case in point, the miracle is that the Red Cross has been able to launch and implement an assistance programme which has been in operation for more than five years, thanks to the help granted by a large number of Societies<sup>1</sup>.

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It is a fact that new Societies have played an important rôle in the reshaping of the League's programme. But there are older members of the Red Cross family, most of them in countries which have achieved an advanced stage of development. Problems are no less tricky for that. Some twenty years ago the opinion was expressed in certain quarters that in developed countries where the State bore a general responsibility for social health and welfare, the Red Cross was becoming less and less necessary and its work could be relegated to some museum of memorials to charity.

How wide of the mark this misconception of the present and future mission of the Red Cross! Although it has not retained its former monopoly of the activities it undertakes, it would be a great error to consider that the Red Cross is no longer of any service to Society in a State with sound and specialized institutions, where everything is planned and settled in advance. In actual fact, no government may claim to do everything in the field of social service. It needs the close co-operation of voluntary organizations.

In modern Society, compounded of pressure groups purveying new ideas, the volunteer and the professional work side by side.

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<sup>1</sup> *Plates* : 1) India, distribution of milk. 2) Quito, Inter-American Junior Red Cross and Health Education Seminar. 3) In Geneva, 86th Session of the League's Executive Committee.

It may even be said that in industrial society voluntary work has been rejuvenated.

The Red Cross at the beginning of the century and in a number of medical and social fields played a pioneer rôle which has since been taken over by the State. Today the Red Cross is in the vanguard against the besetting problems arising from the development of huge cities, the increased proportion of elderly people in the population, etc. The man taken off the sick list by the Social Security Office may not always have been cured; the farmer turned factory worker in some suburb of a large town is not always happy in his flat in a huge residential complex; the pensioner with a low fixed income cannot always make ends meet during his old age. The State may provide for material needs, it may improve living conditions; it cannot always provide the fullness of the heart and the spirit. Many are the problems which can only be solved with group help, particularly from voluntary agencies. They are a responsibility which should be shared by all members of society and not solely by the medical profession, for example.

This does not imply any rivalry between State social services and those of private organizations such as the Red Cross, but the awakening of public conscience to collective responsibility, philanthropy and self-sacrifice.

We might give a number of illustrations. For instance, the Red Cross shoulders responsibility in ten countries for the operation of a national blood transfusion service; in others it provides a public information service on blood transfusion, recruits donors and collects blood donations. In all countries it is the State's best public relations agent endeavouring to inure all strata of society to the principle that blood should be donated gratuitously. These are not the activities of a moribond organization but of one which has reached maturity and is resolutely facing the future.

This reference to some activities was hardly necessary to prove that the voluntary worker is far from extinct, and that selfless people will always be able to devote themselves to socially useful activities.

It may well be asked, however, what is the League's function, seeing that all these problems have to be settled on the national level. The fact is that the world is a small place and the experience

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acquired by one National Society may benefit another and it is in this respect that the League fulfils the rôle of an intermediary or "clearing house" of ideas among National Societies, dispensing advice, giving training to some and inspiration to others. It is a League responsibility to ensure that Red Cross training and administration reach a high professional level and to see to it that Red Cross methods keep pace with scientific developments. This applies to the traditional activities of the Red Cross such as nursing care, the organization of blood banks, first-aid and the innumerable fields of activity involved in social work.

The projects and achievements of the League and developed National Societies over the last few years would make an impressive list. We would not fail to point out, in addition, the sound link binding the developed and the developing Societies.

Development is a relative thing. Some Societies may be superbly organized for action in a particular field, yet unprepared for others. Everyone has something to learn from others. A Society in a remote region where living conditions are difficult will always have something to teach the older Societies, either on a spiritual level or in some technical field.

Such is perhaps the main conclusion to be drawn from the experience of the last twenty years; the idea of a quid pro quo has been substituted for that of "something for nothing". Gone the "haves" and the "have nots" outlook which has given way to one of a community drawing strength from interdependence and the team spirit.

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One of the League's basic and perhaps most dynamic missions is the co-ordination and development of relief in the event of natural disaster, war and all kinds of civil commotions.

For almost fifty years the League has been alleviating the distress of flood and earthquake victims and of refugees. During the last few years its scope has been continuously expanding as it contended with more and more of disaster's consequences. Today's programmes do not stop at the provision of the actual relief itself,



**India, September 1966** — In the framework of the supplementary food programme for India, distribution of milk received from sister Societies through the League.

Photograph G. Gordon-Lennox



**Ecuador, November 1966** — Inter-American Seminar on Junior Red Cross and Health Education.

**Geneva, October 1966** — 86th Session of the Executive Committee of the League of Red Cross Societies.

Photograph Jean Zbinden, Geneva



but are inseparable from medico-social operations. In addition, the need for long term action has been felt with increasing frequency. Often, instead of withdrawing after an emergency operation, the League has had to step up its action for months on end for the *benefit of the destitute and of refugees.*

Between 1919 and 1967, the League carried out almost three hundred emergency relief operations, a frequency which speaks volumes for the bond of fellowship with the victims of adversity. Nevertheless, it would be wrong, especially today, to believe that a relief operation, from the appeal to Societies to distribution of their donations, is a simple task calling for empirical improvisation. It is now more than ever necessary to promote, steer and develop the community spirit among National Societies and hence to have a body capable of centralizing the organization of relief actions and of acting both as a look-out post and as a centre for research and assessment of resources.

It cannot be over-stressed that in any relief operation the League has a responsibility both to disaster victims and to donors. For this reason it must ever seek to improve. Each of its actions is fully discussed in conferences and committees; methods are constantly examined in the light of experience, for it is essential to save time even if only a matter of seconds, and to take effective action without delay.

Over the last few years, the League has been launching general or restricted appeals about once every three weeks, and the donations in cash and in kind sent by National Societies are impressive.

There is however no shortage of problems. The League is not the only organization concerned with relief; many other movements also carry out sustained action. Even governments, either for political or purely philanthropic reasons, sometimes pursue activities parallel to those of the League, thereby giving rise to complicated co-ordination problems. In this respect a decisive step was taken recently by the UN Economic and Social Council which requested the UN Secretary-General, U Thant, to initiate, in co-operation with the UN Specialized Agencies and the League of Red Cross Societies, measures designed to permit the organization of immediate and concerted action for relief and reconstruction in the event of natural disaster. The League's activity in this field was

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referred to many times and the finest tribute paid to our movement was the recognition of the unique rôle of the Red Cross in disaster relief. In addition, a resolution was adopted by the UN General Assembly in 1965, inviting governments to draw up general plans for the organization of relief to meet disaster, and stressing the need for the United Nations to extend their activities in the field of emergency relief planning in close association with the League.

One of the problems in this connection is the need for funds. In most countries, relief supplies depend on the support which the public and the government are prepared to grant the National Red Cross Societies. In general, this support is given during the early days of a catastrophe when public interest is aroused and maintained by the press and television. It is therefore necessary when disaster strikes that the Red Cross endeavour to obtain adequate facts and figures which can be turned to account in fund collection drives.

When the cause does not receive sufficient backing from modern information media, it is the League's duty to see to it that assistance does not fall short. The League thus has the thankless task, when disaster produces a great surge of goodwill but relatively little distress, to moderate public enthusiasm.

The League, of course, works hand in glove with the ICRC. On many occasions action has been initiated by the International Committee when it came within its purview, and was subsequently taken over by the League when political troubles, for example, had subsided. But it is more frequently the case that operations require ICRC and League co-operation; these are always carried out in perfect unison.

The Red Cross would be failing in its mission if it did not take an interest in youth. In recent years, in many densely populated countries, youth has shown itself as a force with which to be reckoned; more than half the world's population are under twenty years of age. The demographic "explosion" of our times is indeed revolutionary, and youth, which is a potential striking power, is also a tender shoot which must be given support and must be trained.

The Junior Red Cross, the younger branch of the Red Cross movement, has for its part kept abreast of this demographic development; its membership during the last eight years has risen from 58

to 68 million whilst the number of National Junior Red Cross Sections has increased from 69 to 85. Its triple programme of protection of life and health, international friendship, and mutual assistance, is the loom on which is woven its mission which has known an unprecedented expansion. But the world evolves rapidly, carrying youth forward in an irresistible movement, a vortex of technological pursuits and facile philosophy. As for all Red Cross activities, the Junior Red Cross programme has had to be revised and adapted to suit the aspirations of youth.

Young people are ideal voluntary workers. They are ready for anything which arouses their interest, demands effort and satisfies their zeal to shoulder responsibility.

The Red Cross has endeavoured to shape its programme to the needs of modern youth, as suggested some years ago by several outstanding educators.

The Junior Red Cross five year plan, by its appeal to youthful knowledge and experience, by opening the way for young people to take part in the framing of programmes useful to society, should give new life to the Junior Red Cross programmes of National Societies and help the development of those which are as yet inchoate.

The problems facing the League's leading officials, organs and Secretariat, are immense. It has been demonstrated that in 1967, as it has been doing from the outset, the Red Cross is performing a useful function, but it needs more than ever the confidence of its members and of such organizations as the UN and its Specialized Agencies in order to enable it to carry out the duties expected of it.

It is true that a comparison of the League's tasks with its meagre resources might well give rise to apprehension, the more so as the Red Cross mission cannot always be expected to meet with understanding and be appreciated at its full value.

However, the situation must not be viewed with pessimism. Red Cross resources have never kept pace with its aims, but this has never prevented it from "pulling off the miracle". Its "raison d'être" is to overcome difficulty, the obstacle which it must surmount in war-time or in the event of natural disaster. Its field of application is the ceaseless fight it wages against human suffering, the best remedy for which is not always the availability of vast

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material resources. The presence and personal touch of the dedicated Red Cross worker sometimes accomplishes what is beyond the ability of a heavy administrative machinery backed by an arsenal of resources.

The very underlying ideal of the Red Cross precludes its becoming affluent; it is destined never to reap a profit. The general public would not show any understanding for a humanitarian movement which was identified or associated with professional activity where the profit motive is the overriding consideration.

Yet the Red Cross can no longer function as it did fifty years ago; it must adapt itself to the progressive trends of technical developments; to keep pace with the demands of modern life, it must give its members up-to-date training, specialize and rationalize. Especially must it keep the public informed of what it is and what it does.

For the Red Cross to ignore modern trends and developments would be unthinkable. It is ever increasingly called upon to undertake activities which require ever greater qualifications, and it must therefore keep its methods abreast of the times. Would it be out of place for the Red Cross to "sell" to recently formed National Societies plans for their organization, or to "invest" profitably by providing those Societies with audio-visual equipment; is there any contradiction in the statement that the Red Cross must have its own central planning agency to help National Societies to make preparations to contend, for example, with the consequences of disasters? We believe the answer is an emphatic "no", for we are convinced that the only "investments" which the Red Cross may make are moral, and that the dividends therefrom take the form of a better understanding and application of the basic principles of the Red Cross.

What is of over-all importance today is not to explain the complexity of the Red Cross organization, its various bodies and functions, but to strengthen the united Red Cross front everywhere, and only by and for that unity is its mission fulfilled. In this year of 1967, we are no longer concerned with differentiating among the various constituents which go to make up the Red Cross and with emphasizing the respective merits of each of them. Rather must we make it clear that the ICRC, the National Societies and the League

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have a common responsibility; that the achievements of the one are a reflexion on the others and are of benefit to the whole Red Cross movement.

It is a matter for satisfaction that in these times of modern activity discussions on who should do what do not arise, team-work among the various bodies being the order of the day. The " hermetic compartment " concept is a thing of the past, having given way to the full significance of the international concept of the Red Cross. Clearly then there are many basic factors of Red Cross activity which justify our looking forward to the future with confidence.

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