

# Challenges facing the Swiss Red Cross at the dawn of a new millennium

by Kurt Sutter

One hundred and twenty five years after it was founded, the Swiss Red Cross (SRC) benefits from the fact that people in Switzerland remember Henry Dunant and his achievements. Though most of them do not know exactly what the SRC does or distinguish between the various Red Cross institutions, 98% of the adult population are nevertheless familiar with the Red Cross, and consider it to be a good and important organization.

This goodwill is a great help to the SRC in that the confidence placed in us holds promise of the support the SRC will need to deal with the humanitarian tasks of the future. At the same time, however, it creates an obligation for the SRC in view of the developments forecast for our country.

If the SRC is to meet the challenges that lie ahead, it must:

- demonstrate its operational capacity at home and abroad;
- further develop its own structures and facilities for cooperation with its partners in the national and international arena;
- win the necessary support through modern public relations work to inform and convince the government, business circles and the general population.

To be sure, these various goals are interrelated: the restructuring of our Society, for example, will correspond directly to its changing tasks, and new projects will require well-timed public relations programmes.

Several important issues for the future of SRC operations at home and abroad are discussed in some detail below. The conclusion deals concisely with new forms of cooperation within the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement.

# 1. CHALLENGES IN DAY-TO-DAY RED CROSS WORK AT HOME

## A. What lies ahead for Switzerland?

There are enormous challenges ahead for the Red Cross, even in wealthy Switzerland, as shown by forecasts for the Swiss public health, social welfare and emergency services:

- *Growing number of elderly people*

The proportion of elderly people in the population as a whole will rise markedly, whereas the number of young people entering medical and paramedical professions will drop. Self-help and non-professional help will play a far greater role in providing care for the sick and the elderly than in the past 20 years, even though the already high proportion of non-Swiss nursing staff continues to rise.

- *Gaps in the coordinated medical services*

In spite of the new system of coordinating all public health and emergency medical services and in spite of considerable public relations work, it has not been possible in recent years to recruit sufficient staff to deal with possible natural or man-made disasters. There are not enough Swiss women who are willing to volunteer for the medical services of the Swiss civil defence organization or those of the army.

- *Too few blood donations*

We are proud to note that Switzerland is completely self-sufficient in blood products. The foremost blood-donation service in the country is unquestionably that of the SRC. However, the number of blood donors is declining slightly every year and shortages are beginning to appear here and there in the summer holiday period.

- *Growing numbers on the fringes of society*

It has been somewhat of a shock in recent months to learn the results of surveys showing that 10-15% of the Swiss population live beneath the poverty level and that a further 10% are in danger of sinking below that level. Poverty is most frequently found among old people who, not having contributed to any supplementary pension fund, receive only small basic state pensions, as well as single parents, the chronically unemployed, drug addicts and people whose lives have been disrupted by personal hardship (divorce, illness, etc.).

More and more people are in danger of being marginalized (drugs, AIDS, poverty, alcohol, etc.) and no longer being able to meet their most basic needs. This includes the growing number of homeless people.

- *Asylum-seekers and refugees*

A steadily growing group on the fringes of society consists of asylum-seekers and people with acknowledged refugee status. With Swiss refugee policy virtually at a standstill, the sharply rising number of applications for asylum cannot be processed within 3-6 months and the sheer number of asylum-seekers not only exceeds the available accommodation but is touching off a dangerous xenophobic reaction in the population. Such xenophobia is a manifestation of fear vis-à-vis representatives of strange foreign cultures who are perceived as a threat to the standard of living achieved by the local Swiss.

## **B. What are the implications for the Swiss Red Cross?**

### **Strengthening people's ability to help themselves**

For many years, the SRC has been organizing public courses in health maintenance and home nursing.

It is an unfortunate fact that people are often interested in such a course only when a family member has fallen ill and they have to learn how to care for him. Learning how to care for sick people means facing up to an unpleasant aspect of life which most people would rather ignore as long as possible.

The SRC must therefore constantly seek new ways of promoting these courses, making them an attractive leisure activity. It will also have to seek and test various new methods of disseminating information.

In all probability, however, the number of people attending these public courses will rise in the next 10 years, mainly because the limited capacity of hospitals and nursing homes will force more and more people to take care of relatives and neighbours.

The SRC's main task will thus be to ensure that people know what courses are on offer and are able to take the SRC course they need within the shortest possible time.

### **Offering a wide range of volunteer activities**

- ***Overburdened state services***

Since the Second World War, the Swiss have become used to ridding themselves of difficult medical and nursing-care cases by 'unloading' them in state institutions. Growing materialism and a leisure-oriented mentality have not exactly facilitated the SRC's attempts to encourage as many people as possible to take on volunteer humanitarian commitments. This probably ties in with the above-mentioned slight but steady decline in blood donation.

However, the situation is likely to change by the year 2000. When state services are no longer able to cope with all the social welfare and nursing-care needs, and everyone has to face the painful fact that life means giving as well as taking, people will once again become more willing to do their share.

- ***New trends in volunteer work***

Whether people are prepared to do volunteer work partly depends on whether they can find an activity that they like doing. The range of SRC volunteer activities is very broad and in some regions includes 'meals on wheels', visiting services, mobile libraries and transport services. Other important activities are home nursing, assistance for refugees and administrative work. The SRC's goal is to provide the greatest possible variety of volunteer activities for all sectors of society, including young people.

It is interesting to note that technological innovations can make new volunteer activities possible. Twenty years ago, for example, buses specially designed for disabled people were put into service not only to take people confined to wheelchairs in institutions on an outing once a year, but also to arrange get-togethers with school classes or give them and the volunteers taking care of them a chance to share new experiences. The advent of such buses has therefore served to motivate volunteers.

Recent years have seen a growing number of personal alarm devices in Switzerland. These are small radio transmitters that elderly or disabled people living alone wear around their neck or like a wrist-watch. Should they have an accident, they can press a button on the device that activates their telephone to call a neighbour, a relative or the police.

These devices need to be checked twice a month, meaning that someone must go to the person's home. This has led to a new SRC visiting service. The alarm device gives the Red Cross volunteer a reason to come by every two weeks, the visit usually extending to a chat over tea or coffee.

The more challenging the task, the more closely volunteers must be supervised by professionals for whom the ability to work together with non-professional assistants is becoming increasingly important.

The SRC leads the field in Switzerland when it comes to ensuring optimum cooperation between professionals and non-professionals. It will have to place even greater stress upon this aspect of its work in future.

In recent years, the number of Red Cross volunteers and assistant nurses has steadily risen, but not as fast as have the needs.

- ***New opportunities for non-professional staff***

With staff shortages growing serious, hospitals, old people's homes, nursing homes and out-patient services have been increasingly obliged to hire non-professional assistant nurses on full-time or part-time basis. This arrangement suits many women looking for paid work. Often their tasks as housewives and mothers have led them to give up their previous jobs and, unable to become reintegrated in their original profession, they are now looking for jobs either because they need the money or for their own self-esteem (feeling exploited in the woman's traditional domestic role).

As a result, the SRC is becoming the nation's leading institute for the training of non-professional nursing staff. In several cantons, the SRC recruits and trains assistant nurses for the various institutions that need them. SRC nurses advise the professional staff who will be working together with the assistant nurses, arrange for the latter to meet and discuss their experience, and ensure that their training goes on.

As the SRC also organizes and supervises the training of qualified nursing staff, it will do even more in the future to ensure that professionals are prepared for working together with non-professional assistants.

### **Medical services when disaster strikes**

Changes in East-West relations have prompted a discussion about the future of the Swiss army. Plans to reduce the army's size will also affect the SRC, as it helps with the military medical services.

The reform of the army, scheduled for 1995, will therefore be accompanied by a reform of the civil defence organization. Both will entail a reorganization of the medical services for natural and man-made disasters. As already mentioned, these services are extremely short of staff.

The SRC's own favourable experience can help, however, in planning for these reforms. Over the past four years the SRC has in fact, at minimal cost to itself, managed to attract almost one thousand former nurses to a two-day introductory course on medical care in disasters. Many of the participants said that they would be interested in further training and would be prepared to join in a Red Cross disaster-relief programme.

The Swiss Samaritans, an organization of first-aid volunteers that is affiliated to the SRC, has likewise found that many of its 50,000 members would be prepared to take part in disaster-relief work.

Thought is therefore being given to the possibility of both organizations jointly assuming responsibility for local first-aid posts. The SRC would provide the professional staff, the Samaritans the volunteers. Trials with this system will probably begin in 1992. It promises a way for the SRC and the Samaritans to provide sorely needed staff for the coordinated medical services.

## **Involving marginalized groups in Red Cross work**

There is again visible poverty in Switzerland, due partly to the appearance of drug abuse in a number of cities and towns in the German-speaking part of the country, but also to soaring rents resulting from sharp increases in the mortgage rates. Both these causes of hardship in certain sections of the population have sparked a great deal of public debate over the past two years.

The problems associated with poverty will certainly loom ever larger for the SRC in coming years. The Red Cross cannot be expected to provide direct financial assistance to individuals or families. In any case, a social assistance safety net exists in Switzerland. But many poor people are ashamed of their situation or simply do not know what possibilities exist. This is where local branches of the SRC can play a role by offering encouragement to those in need, advising them in a tactful and kindly manner so that they can retain their dignity, approach the authorities without feeling humiliated and receive the assistance to which they are entitled.

### **● *Drugs and AIDS: help is possible, but there are limits***

In addition to the precautions taken within its blood donation service, the SRC has been working since 1988 to deal with the AIDS problem. But the SRC has nothing to do with the information campaigns being conducted among the general population and in schools. It limits its work to imparting more specific information during its public courses on medical care and preparing both its own personnel and non-Red Cross health workers to assist HIV-positive people and AIDS patients.

The Zurich branch in particular is active among drug users in the struggle to prevent the spread of AIDS. It is thought that drug addiction (including secondary manifestations such as prostitution) will become the main focus of the fight against AIDS.

The SRC is closely following the controversial debate on drug abuse and how to tackle it. Its sole concern in this is to stop the spread of AIDS. More ambitious objectives are for the moment unrealistic: social welfare activities for drug addicts would require highly qualified specialists and changes in the law. Reintegrating drug addicts into society is otherwise simply impossible.

Since opinions diverge widely as to the policy to be adopted towards drug addiction and those afflicted by it, any SRC activity in behalf of the latter inevitably comes in for criticism and the Society must use sound Red Cross arguments in its defence. But such arguments are not always understood, with the result that the SRC is from time to time refused contributions. Learning to cope with such conditions is a new challenge for the SRC and its local branches.

### **Steadfast help for refugees**

When it comes to Switzerland's asylum policy, we encounter political controversy of the same order that surrounds drug addiction. The right of asylum-seekers to receive humanitarian assistance from the Red Cross, and the latter's duty to help them, regardless of whether or not their request for asylum is ultimately granted, constantly have to be made clear at all levels within the SRC. It is nonetheless already one of the two biggest refugee relief organizations in Switzerland and its allocation of staff and funds to this work has grown at a higher-than-average rate over the past three years.

It looks as though the SRC's refugee-related work, too, will grow still further in the future as, among other things, it is becoming more and more difficult for state services to meet medical needs. For example, the University of Berne is currently conducting a study on refugees in Switzerland who have been tortured in their country of origin. Switzerland does not yet have the specific modes of treatment required to help such people.

Another area in which the SRC will be increasingly active in future is measures to conduct quick border checks on asylum-seekers to prevent the introduction into the country of dangerous communicable diseases.

## **2. CHALLENGES ABROAD**

Assistance abroad has been an integral part of the SRC's work for many years. In the past two decades, the extent of these activities has continuously grown, with dramatic surges when major disasters occur.

The SRC is currently engaged in emergency relief projects, reconstruction work (of a humanitarian nature) in disaster areas and development cooperation. In all three domains it has the official status of



partner to the relevant Swiss government agencies and thus is able to make use of public funds.

As the Society of a country in the heart of Europe, the SRC, like others, has questions of future cooperation between European National Societies to resolve.

Viewed from the angle of the fundamental principle of humanity, the prevention of human suffering is the best form that Red Cross work can take. Let us therefore look first at the SRC's commitment to development cooperation and the challenges involved, before going on to the more traditional tasks of emergency relief and reconstruction. Finally, we shall consider a few aspects of European cooperation.

## **A. Development cooperation**

The goal of the SRC in this domain is to help check the mounting impoverishment of the Third World and to promote improvements in the health of the people living there. By so doing, the SRC intends to help redress the balance in standards of living not only between North and South but also within each Third World country, and generally preserve human life.

Conducted in close cooperation with its local partners, the SRC's projects are specifically designed to foster self-determined, balanced social development.

SRC projects also regularly aim to improve communication, encourage the use of appropriate technologies, protect the environment, promote cultural exchanges and improve the management skills of the Society's local partners.

Every operational objective is compatible with the organizational development of the local partners, in particular that of other Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies.

- ***Primary health care is a key concern***

The SRC will continue to attach great importance to primary health care and community development. It will concentrate on countries where needs are greatest and where other pressing requirements make a reduction in government expenditure on public health and education imperative.

In its work to improve primary health care, the SRC concentrates on training “health promoters” and building up self-help community organizations, in particular in rural areas. In addition, support is provided in specific medical areas such as ophthalmology, blood donation services in Africa (including HIV checks) and intermediate health-care services, in particular in Indo-China. When possible, several projects in one country are combined to form a national programme so as to share resources and increase effectiveness.

The needs of the Third World are enormous. There is no limit to the possibilities for SRC projects around the world. Red Cross work has always been, and continues to be, the difficult task of making as much humanitarian progress as possible with far too little staff and money.

The SRC must therefore be very rigorous in selecting its priorities and must often turn down requests for help. Its responsibility towards its donors requires the SRC to demand a high degree of efficiency not only from its staff but also from its local partners. Nothing would hurt the SRC’s credibility more than media reports about mismanagement in its development projects. Regular monitoring by the Society itself and evaluations by outside experts are therefore an integral part of SRC development projects.

## **B. Humanitarian assistance**

The SRC has been saying for years that emergency disaster relief should be provided with greater restraint, ensuring that it is appropriate and thus efficient. This recommendation remains as valid as ever. Disaster situations are still being misused to get rid of excess food stocks or to promote exports.

- ***Image-boosting — a dangerous obsession***

The pressure created by the modern media (television teams seem to be at the scene of a disaster almost before the very first relief workers arrive), which are after sensational stories to catch the public eye, encourages the tendency of many humanitarian organizations to deploy huge human and material resources to get into the limelight and only then look around for a way of legitimizing their presence.

However it may wish to maintain its media image, the Red Cross must resist the temptation to follow suit.

This refusal can, in the short term, prove difficult and costly in terms of image. The SRC, for example, risked criticism when it refused to take part in an emergency programme to send relief parcels which was being promoted by major retailers and local radio stations. Nothing would have been worse, however, than to have been involved in an operation that was recognized by SRC representatives on the spot to be unnecessary. The competing media would certainly have criticized the SRC's misjudgement. The Red Cross does not need to react faster than it already does with its modern means of transport and communication. What it must do, above all, is remain reliable and credible for the general public on whom it depends.

- *Tried and tested cooperation*

In Switzerland, the government-financed Swiss Disaster Relief Corps, the Swiss Federal Air Ministry, two member organizations of the SRC, namely the Swiss Airborne Rescue Service and the Swiss Association of Rescue Dog Handlers, and the SRC itself with its store of equipment and experts experienced in sending and distributing relief supplies have all banded together to form a "life line". It has a firm policy of launching relief action only on the basis of well founded and specific appeals for help from countries concerned or of reports from its own investigation team.

The SRC thus refuses to be drawn into poorly organized but media-hype relief operations. Like all other private aid organizations, however, it is faced with the fact that part of its previous high-profile emergency aid is being superseded by food aid from governments, sometimes also using military units (means of transport).

- *A new role for the Red Cross*

It goes without saying that traditional aid organizations still have a role to play, but that role tends to be discreet and inconspicuous. The desire, particularly in military circles, to appear in a good light at the expense of the Red Cross is a long-term problem and requires changes in the ground rules for cooperation. Would it not be possible to put military units temporarily under Red Cross command?

When the acute phase of a disaster is over and the media have departed, the Red Cross and other experienced aid organizations remain behind to get to grips with the vital task of reconstruction.

After the initial emergency response, reconstruction work often leads into longer-term development cooperation. We are increasingly forced to recognize that natural disasters and the ravages of conflict are only the visible and most spectacular part of chronic crises with economic, ecological and political causes. Being brought face to face with the immediate needs of a disaster area should not blind us to the root causes of the problem or prevent us from taking appropriate action to help the most disadvantaged people in the Third World.

The knowledge that reconstruction must follow in the wake of disaster will in future influence the conduct of emergency operations to a greater extent than previously. Among other things, care must be taken as regards the delivery of foodstuffs and clothing that quickly have a disruptive effect on local markets. The local procurement of supplies will probably continue to gain in importance.

### **3. NEW AREAS OF COOPERATION IN EUROPE**

Like many of its sister Societies, the SRC has separate departments for internal and foreign affairs and they have long worked practically independently of one another. This has been possible because their respective tasks were very different.

Over the past three years, however, mass migrations and the growing number of refugees have brought about a change in this respect. It started when counselling offices for asylum-seekers who have been turned down by the Swiss authorities were opened by the SRC branches in Lausanne and Geneva in late 1985 and early 1986 respectively. The increasing number of such cases has prompted the SRC's Refugee Service, which is attached to its Internal Affairs Department, to study the situation not only in the asylum-seekers' countries of origin but also in potential host countries.

- *Coordinated thought and action to deal with complex problems*

Since 1989, when means of tackling the root causes of forced migration and refugee flows began to be considered in Switzerland, an exchange of views has been established between the SRC's Internal Affairs and Foreign Affairs Departments.

At the same time, the refugee services of the various Western European Red Cross Societies have begun working together very closely to share their experience and seek solutions. Policy matters have also been discussed.

International contacts have thus ceased to be the prerogative of departments for international humanitarian assistance and development cooperation.

In addition, an AIDS task force was set up two years ago by the North American and Western European Red Cross Societies. This is yet another example of international contact between domestic services.

It is becoming increasingly clear that virtually every activity carried out by the domestic services of Western European National Societies stands to gain by a regular international exchange of experiences even though what works in one country cannot automatically be taken over by another. Joint discussion about the process of political integration in Europe is of growing importance and the social consequences of that process have quite rightly been raised on several occasions at international Red Cross meetings.

- *Improvisation will not be enough*

All this is still largely unstructured and is often the result of spontaneous initiative. There is as yet no satisfactory, institutionalized pan-European Red Cross forum. It does not exist in Western Europe, where the SRC as the National Society of a non-EC country considers itself fortunate to be able to take part in international meetings, to say nothing of Europe as a whole from the Atlantic to the Black Sea.

Cooperation with the Red Cross Societies of the former Eastern bloc is therefore a new experience for the SRC. This task will probably have to be shared by our Society's Foreign Affairs and Internal Affairs Departments, because of its dual nature. On the one hand, the recent political upheavals in Eastern Europe have left some National Societies there in a void, reducing them to the same level of development as some National Societies in the Third World. At the same

time, however, the National Societies of Eastern Europe find themselves confronted with tasks for which the know-how of the internal affairs departments of their sister Societies in Western Europe is needed.

Thus along with the changing political scene, reorganization and reorientation is the order of the day for the Red Cross in Europe. The Swiss Red Cross has no pat solution to offer, but it is ready to take part in the search.

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