

Red Cross and the Problems of Environment

by Irena Domanska

The paper quoted below was submitted, under agenda item 21, to the League Board of Governors at its Mexico meeting in October 1971. We take pleasure in bringing it to the knowledge of our readers, in view of the importance and topical aspect of nature conservancy to which the Red Cross is known to be giving increasing attention in various countries. Several National Societies are drawing up plans for the protection and improvement of the environment. Others have already taken action and some co-operate with other organizations concerned about the subject and which often conduct their own publicity campaigns.

Further on, we give extracts from another communication which was presented by Professor Maurice Marois to the same meeting of the Board of Governors. It deals with the same problem as viewed by the Institut de la Vie from the angle of its own work for the protection of nature. (Ed.).

The rapidity with which our environment is degenerating, due mainly to the technological revolution and the population explosion in all large cities, is becoming a source of serious concern for the public authorities. Although the disappearing natural characteristics, fauna and flora of many regions long ago impelled authorities to take action to protect nature, recent developments are so harmful to the whole biosphere and man himself that they demand

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serious study of the causes of the blight on our environment, of its effects on human health, of corrective measures and of the best preventive action.

Industrial development has long been the main source of the wealth and welfare of the population; it still is, but it can no longer be thought that technical progress is all that counts for civilization, and we must realize that for every new branch of technology we must ask not only what its economic advantages are, but also its long-term social consequences.

These problems, which until recently could have been dealt with mainly by measures taken on a nation or even local scale, are increasingly demanding action on a world scale, for there are scourges, such as air and water pollution, which transcend political boundaries, threatening all creation. It is therefore only right, and high time, that many international organizations, particularly the United Nations and its specialized agencies, should include them on their agendas and study their various aspects with a view to finding a solution.

Accordingly, the U.N. Economic and Social Council is organizing a World Conference on environment problems, to be held in 1972 in Stockholm. In addition, the Economic Commission for Europe organized a symposium on the subject in Prague in May 1971. The symposium, at which the League was represented in the capacity of observer by the Chairman of its Health and Social Service Advisory Committee, was attended by delegates from nearly every country in Europe and from the United States, and it contributed to the preparation of the World Conference in Stockholm.

The symposium discussed what measures should be taken and what economic, social and institutional resources governments should devote to a policy for a wholesome environment, alongside programmes of economic growth.

It endeavoured to define the main influences on the environment and the causes of its degeneration. The discussions on a policy for environment clearly showed the need for overall planning covering various kinds of action and measures, from protection, conservation and prevention, to the reform, improvement and intensive exploitation of many areas, and their integration into development pro-

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grammes. Attention was concentrated on problems arising from the proximity of directly threatened regions, such as metropolitan zones, river basins, holiday, industrial and rural areas, many of which were in neighbouring countries and required international co-operation.

However, it was mainly the technological, economic and planning aspects of environment problems which were studied at Prague. Although they are of capital importance and essential in halting the deterioration of the environment, and whilst a prevention programme which did not take them into account would be inconceivable, there is another and no less important aspect which should be studied at the World Conference in Stockholm, namely the effects of environmental pollution on the physical and mental health of mankind, and ways and means of preventing them. In spite of his improved well-being, civilization, hygiene and medicine, man is constantly subject to the influence of a number of factors resulting from the deterioration of the environment and detrimental to his health. Those factors may not only bring about serious biological and structural cell mutations but may also affect homoeostatic organic adjustment. In some cases, production of new toxins occurs in the body.

Chronic effects which are potential sources of carcinogens, such as mutagen or tetratogen, should also not be ignored. Populations of areas of pollution are exposed to its harmful effects for many years, sometimes for a lifetime. Pollutants act not only on adults with their stronger powers of resistance, but also on young children who are particularly vulnerable and whose defence mechanism and adaptability are not fully developed. They also affect the elderly and the sick, whose biological reactions differ from those of people in sound health.

The industrially advanced countries have serious problems with air pollution by smoke, gases, vapours and solid particles in suspension. Water pollution is extremely harmful to human physical and mental health and well-being. Solid waste matter not suitably disposed of is another public health hazard and contributes to air, water and soil pollution conducive to the breeding of flies, rodents and other vectors of disease. Agriculture lags but little behind industry as a source of pollution through pesticides and chemical

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fertilizers which are soon drawn off the land. Noise has a cumulative effect on the human organism, engendering what we call aggression, the most quantifiable element of which is stress. In addition, high frequency sound can in the long run induce changes in cerebral function. Low frequency sound benumbs the central nervous system reactions. The concentration of industry in large towns gives rise to over-population and crowding into large irksomely identical buildings and into the public transport which workers have to use at least twice a day between their places of work and their homes. Hence, large scale commuting, which prevents the formation of "well structured communities". Man increasingly becomes a stranger in town. This trend is most marked among workers who come from abroad to work for a certain length of time in the industrialized countries where labour is in short supply.

Compelled to live year in year out in over-populated built-up areas, the city dweller longs for natural pleasures. Social progress and motor transport bring the countryside within his reach, but the invading hordes of tourists in search of verdant lands bid fair to destroy the natural sites to which they flock for the very purpose of seeking relaxation.

What should the role of the Red Cross be in coping with such important problems affecting all aspects of contemporary life? The meeting of the League Health and Social Service Advisory Committee in September 1970 discussed that subject. It decided to find out from all National Societies what they were doing in this field. Last spring, the League Secretary General organised a consultative meeting in which the Chairman, one of the Vice-Chairmen, the Director and senior staff of the Health and Social Service Bureau took part. It was decided to propose to the Committee of the Chairman and Vice-Chairmen of the League that environment problems be included on the agenda of the Board of Governors, in order to emphasise their importance and the place they should occupy in our humanitarian activities.

It is a fact that it should not be the ambition of the Red Cross, as an auxiliary of the public authorities, to take the place of those authorities. Neither should it embark upon projects which involve financial outlay for which it does not have the necessary resources. On the other hand, it should as always appeal to its voluntary workers,

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to their dedication, zeal, generosity and good will, to join in an unprecedented humanitarian operation affecting millions of human beings of all ages, and even unborn generations, threatened with slow physical and mental degeneration if pollution of the environment is allowed to continue unchecked.

Consequently, the Red Cross must set its sights in terms of each Society's possibilities and of the situation in each country. For its work to be of great social value, effective, and of maximum satisfaction to the voluntary worker, it must be co-ordinated with that of other voluntary organisations and, first and foremost, with that of the authorities. It is desirable to draw up for all environmental problems in a particular country or region a comprehensive long-term plan of action in which each participating institution and organisation knows exactly what it should do and for what it is responsible.

That does not mean that the Red Cross could not, in case of need, exert some sort of pressure through its local, regional or central committees on the authorities, to induce them to adopt legislative or other measures which it thought necessary.

However, the main Red Cross contribution to the safeguard of the environment and man's physical and mental health lies in its suitably adapted health and social development work. It can make that contribution by participating, for example, in large-scale campaigns to inform the public about the condition of the environment in particular regions or towns and about the application of necessary measures, or by helping the health authorities in the dissemination of knowledge, and the inculcation of personal, community, occupational, nutritional and other health principles which must be strictly observed to ward off the ill effects of a polluted environment. Noise, which causes so much harm, can be reduced through large-scale educational and explanatory campaigns to make known the harm it does man at home, work, leisure and rest. The Red Cross can play a role of primary importance and benefit in human relations which today are often the cause of great mental strain, so detrimental to health. Make contact with the individual to release him from his loneliness, from the anxieties which sometimes arouse hostility; to bring joy to the physically and mentally disabled and to the elderly living alone; to re-adapt them to society; that is

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what the Red Cross can and does do in certain countries through its dedicated and well-trained voluntary workers.

Red Cross activities related to the environment should be particularly well conducted among young people, with the co-operation of educators, doctors, sociologists and psychologists, helped, if possible, by Junior Red Cross volunteers. Young people, much more so than their elders, are physically and mentally sensitive to the deterioration of the environment. It may be assumed that the far out escapades in which some sections of the youthful population today indulge in many developed countries are attributable to the deleterious environment in the widest sense of the word.

It is of course not possible in a brief report to deal with all Red Cross activities related to environmental problems. Each Society, according to the needs of its country and its country's population, as well as its possibilities, may, without departing from its traditional functions, contribute to the safeguard of the environment and human welfare, and open up new fields in which its work can benefit mankind equally as much as it has in the past.

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