

Promoting Principles and Law

by Michael A. Meyer

In 1977 a number of resolutions were adopted by several international bodies on the importance of dissemination of knowledge of Red Cross Principles and International Humanitarian Law.¹ Although there had been earlier resolutions on this subject,² it was from that date that Red Cross and Red Crescent institutions began to approach dissemination in a more systematic manner.

The science of dissemination (if it can be called that) is still in its infancy. The only truism may be that what works successfully in one country or for one target group may well be ineffective in a different country or for a different audience. So in directing a dissemination programme, one must strive to be adaptable, to experiment and to accept some failures.

Another cliché is that at times one only learns from one's mistakes: a very appropriate saying in dissemination work.

Thus, after a decade of increasingly planned action, dissemination, while an evolving science, is still very much an art and in certain respects, is likely always to remain so.

These ideas, and those which follow, are based on the experience of one National Society—the British Red Cross, at least as seen through the eyes of this observer. It is in large part a personal view but one which I hope will be of use to disseminators generally.

¹ e.g. Resolution 21 of the Diplomatic Conference on the Reaffirmation and Development of International Humanitarian Law Applicable in Armed Conflicts; Resolution VII of the Twenty-third International Conference of the Red Cross (Bucharest); Resolution 32/44 of the United Nations General Assembly (97th Plenary Meeting).

² e.g. Resolution XII of the Twenty-second International Conference of the Red Cross (Teheran, 1973); Resolution 2852 (XXVI) of the United Nations General Assembly (December 1971).

Dissemination: An unappealing word

“Dissemination” may be an accurate and useful term as used in the Geneva Conventions and the Additional Protocols.³ However for many people the word can be off-putting or incomprehensible.

The dissemination programme of the British Red Cross Society did not enjoy much success until an alternative term was found for “dissemination”. The term adopted was taken from the then responsible Division at the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) based in Geneva: Principles and Law. The description “Principles and Law” — referring of course to Red Cross Principles and International Humanitarian Law — was more attractive to the Society’s members than “dissemination”.

Still the word “law” continued to bother some people, law being seen as a dry and heavy subject beyond many persons’ capabilities. Consequently while retaining the name “Principles and Law” for our overall dissemination programme, we changed the name of our four-session, four-hour course on the subject from the “Principles and Law Course” to the “Ideals in Action Course”. In the dissemination business much is in the name.

Institutionalisation: Gaining acceptance

The Red Cross and Red Crescent movement, in its basic form, consists of organisations located in most countries throughout the world. As everyone knows, organisations have a life and behaviour of their own. Form can mean as much as substance, if not more.

Within an organisation, it is important for a dissemination programme to have a recognised status and existence at every level: for example, national, regional and local. This may be achieved in various ways and is dependent upon the specific circumstances. As illustrations, it might be possible to include a provision requiring dissemination activities in the organisation’s constitution; for the

³ See common to Articles 47/48/127/144 the 1949 Geneva Conventions, Conventions I-IV respectively; Article 83, Protocol (I) additional to the Geneva Conventions relating to the Protection of Victims of International Armed Conflicts 1977; Article 19, Protocol (II) additional to the Geneva Conventions relating to the Protection of Victims of Non-International Armed Conflicts 1977.

governing body to adopt a policy on the matter; for an official to be appointed, or a mixture of several measures. It is helpful to have a budget and to have one or more staff members responsible for such work.

Having an accepted position within the organisation will help to ensure that dissemination has a basic and continuing level of support. One negative aspect of becoming part of the establishment is the possible growth of complacency or inertia. However at this relatively early stage in the development of dissemination activity, when successes are rarely assured or measurable, it is unlikely that many, if any, dissemination programmes will be prone to these maladies.

Despite strong support by the most senior officers of the British Society, there remains the need to sell the Principles and Law Programme, to bring people with us, rather than to impose dissemination upon them. We must still work to convince not only leaders at local level, but also ordinary members.

Institutionalisation may also bring with it rigidity. As far as possible this must also be avoided. Having a recognised role also brings with it the possibility to plan and, within budgetary constraints, to take advantage of unforeseen opportunities to disseminate.

Recognising limits

It is important in dissemination activities, as it is in life, to recognise limits and to try to remain flexible. The international Red Cross and Red Crescent institutions have set out very helpful priorities and suggested means and methods of dissemination to the various designated target groups. But in the circumstances of a National Society's own community, the same priorities and techniques may not be applicable. So the Society must adapt ideas from various sources to the realities of its own public life and, if necessary, abandon or discard others. It is also necessary to experiment, for example by running pilot schemes.

Originally the British Red Cross had a four-session, four-hour course aimed primarily at its own members, involving visual aids and including discussion. The course was admirable for persons

very interested in the subject. However after a few years it became clear that the course was too rigorous and unexciting for most of the Society's members. A plateau had been reached. As a result, a two-tiered arrangement of instruction is being developed, consisting of a one-hour basic talk, with a video and, for highly motivated people, a revised four-session, four-hour course.

Will this new approach produce better results? One cannot say for certain. However before pursuing the idea, support was obtained from the various leaders and bodies within the British Society. It is felt that the new arrangement will help to reach more people, both within and outside the Red Cross. But if not, we will try to learn from our experience and then explore a different method.⁴

The importance of advisers

The British Red Cross has a Working Group on dissemination. This "Principles and Law Working Group" consists mainly of experts from outside the Society such as a former Director of Army Legal Services, an eminent historian, a professor of international relations and the present Head of Army law training. It also includes a senior officer of one of our local Branches who is expert in dissemination to our own members. The Group meets four times each year, offering advice on the general direction of the Principles and Law Programme. However Working Group members give additional time by speaking at training weekends for our Speakers in Principles and Law ("disseminators") and at seminars for academics and other target audiences. The help of such people, their contacts beyond the Society, have proved to be very valuable. Committed volunteer disseminators of such quality are extremely important.

⁴ The ICRC, often with the assistance of the local National Society, has given a lead by developing methods of dissemination to suit the specific needs of the audience concerned. These include the use of radio spots in the midst of the conflict in El Salvador; comic books in the local language for rural areas in the Philippines and Africa; mixing training in first aid and dissemination for Afghan refugees; staging theatre plays conveying a dissemination message for refugees at the Thai-Kampuchean border.

Problems and successes

It has been difficult to convince many of our members, including some leaders, of the relevance of knowledge of Red Cross Principles and International Humanitarian Law to their own work as volunteers. Perhaps understandably they cannot readily see its importance when their work for the Society is confined, for example, to pouring tea at a club for elderly persons or to providing first aid cover at public events. They live in a country fortunate enough not to have required the full application of the law of war for many years and consequently, there is a sense of irrelevance or unreality to dissemination efforts. Moreover the subject of Principles and Law is sometimes seen as technical and boring.

The one-hour basic talk, described earlier, may help with this. The presentation will be kept as short and simple as possible, eschewing unnecessary facts. Every effort is being made to make the talk attractive to a wide audience.

In addition the new conditions of adult membership, recently adopted for our Society, include a requirement for every new adult member to become acquainted with the origins, objects, Principles and activities of the Movement. This new rule may well assist dissemination—another example of the benefits of institutionalisation, of having a statutory foundation.

Our pilot training scheme for recruits of the Territorial Army, Royal Army Medical Corps was not a great success. However the experience was very useful in that it showed the importance of credibility, of our Speakers having the experience to be able to “talk the same language” (as it were) as the audience. Our relations with the Army, if anything, have been strengthened as a result of this venture. As noted before, good can arise from failure.

A seminar held for journalists soon after the South Atlantic (Falkland Islands/Islas Malvinas) Conflict in 1982 did not attract large participation. This illustrates the need to know the right people to approach and when and to know what will interest them. Advice from individuals knowledgeable about the characteristics of the specific target audience is invaluable.

We have held successful meetings for academics from universities and polytechnics, which have included participation by government officials and by lawyers from the Armed Forces. These people are interested in the subject and in learning more about it. Here, we have fulfilled an interest, if not a need. Our conference speakers have included staff members of the ICRC and the Henry Dunant

Institute, and their participation has been extremely beneficial. It has also helped to have as a speaker an academic expert in the field from outside the United Kingdom.

The general training programme for our youth members has always contained an international element. Thus in this respect they have been in advance of their adult counterparts. In conjunction with our Youth department, we will soon be holding a weekend for youth trainers, to consider ways of improving the presentation of Principles and Law to Youth members. The decentralised school system within the U.K. has made it difficult for our Society to do much in schools. However a national Schools Strategy has recently been approved which could include talks on Principles and Law matters.

We have done very little with medical circles, concentrating heretofore on our own members and academics. We feel we need to find disseminators capable of making the subject relevant to health professionals—again illustrating the need to “speak the same language”.

Difficulty of evaluation

How effective has our dissemination programme been? This is very difficult to assess. Indeed without scientific methods of testing, one is tempted to say that the effectiveness of our programme will only be known at the time of the next armed conflict in which we are involved! Actually the situation is not quite as macabre as this. We know, for example, that as a result of our work with academics, a few universities have established a course in the law of war or have included more law of war in existing courses. We also know that we have reached a certain small percentage of our membership, although we do not know the depth of their understanding. An increasing number of students and scholars use our reference library and seek our advice on their research. Contacts are good with the armed forces and with certain government departments, whom we can help with information and, to a limited extent, aspects of training. We have a lot of work to do all round but one can say with certainty that our dissemination programme has made a positive contribution to increasing knowledge of Principles and Law in different, albeit somewhat limited, areas.

Viewing dissemination in a broad sense, the public profile of our Society has improved in recent months, largely (it would seem) through the efforts of our Information (publicity) Department. Our work, especially in the international sphere, has received increased media attention and to date our fund raising is up. Events at the recent International Conference may cost the Society some support, at least in the short term. However the letters received from the public show awareness and appreciation of the unique role of the Red Cross and of support for its established Principles.

A two-to-five year plan

The British Red Cross is in the process of formulating a two-to-five year plan which will cover each of the designated target audiences. Although such an approach has been under consideration for some time, the recommendations arising from the regional seminar on Dissemination held in Baden/Vienna in June 1986 have served as a catalyst, thus showing that international meetings can produce concrete results. Our priorities may not match those of the movement internationally: for example, the need for our Society's assistance to our armed forces may be less than the need for our help to academics. Also, to date it has been felt that we can achieve more through informal contacts with the relevant government officials than through promoting the establishment of a formal Inter-ministerial Committee (this is despite earlier advice on institutionalisation). Again, a National Society must know the peculiarities of its own country or system and act accordingly.

Concluding thoughts

Dissemination is a continual learning process for everyone involved. A hard-nosed, realistic approach is needed, along with a creative and crusading spirit. It is important to set tangible targets and priorities, while retaining flexibility and a sense of dynamism: another difficult balancing act. It would be useful too to develop methods of evaluation in order to be able to measure the programme's effectiveness. One needs to be able to put oneself into the

position of the target group under question and to understand how to make the subject meaningful for them. In this respect, expert advice can be invaluable. One should have the sensibility of both a preacher and sceptic, maintaining as far as possible a certain distance and perspective. One also needs to be a good organiser and have a sense of professionalism. Within this small island kingdom, the way forward seems to be through eclecticism: in part we need to show that understanding of international or supranational concepts and issues is in the individual's own self-interest. The importance of personalities, of the contributions of talented and respected individuals, cannot be overemphasised. It is hoped that perhaps in some small way, the preceding observations will be interesting to all those engaged in the vital, often unsung, humanitarian mission of dissemination.

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