

SILVER JUBILEE OF THE KENYA RED CROSS SOCIETY

**25 YEARS AT WORK...
PROTECTING HUMAN LIFE AND DIGNITY**

The Kenya Red Cross Society (KRCS) has been in existence for a quarter of a century. It was founded on 21 December 1965, recognized by the ICRC on 3 November 1966 and admitted to the League of the Red Cross Societies on 5 September 1967.

The National Society's Information Officer, Henry Wahinya, wishes to share with the readers of the Review his reflections on its "25 Years at Work... Protecting Human Life and Dignity" and the latest communication strategy of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement.

Health Programmes

It is nearly 1 o'clock in the afternoon. And there is a sigh of relief among passengers in the two land cruisers. The vehicles finally come to a halt, having reached their final destination some 450 km to the west of Nairobi.

Mr. Ephraim M. Gathaiya, the National Society's Secretary General, emerges from the truck. With him is the Society's Primary Health Care (PHC) Co-ordinator, Mr. Amos Odongo.

Their mission? To participate in an outreach immunization campaign launched by the Society against the six vaccine-preventable diseases which have wreaked havoc in the communities owing to the lack of medical facilities in Oyugis Division, South Nyanza District.

At Aolo Primary School, the hunt for the Red Cross jab by mothers is quite evident, as infants are strapped on their backs while those in their arms suckle.

Some children play hide-and-seek in a nearby maize plantation, oblivious to what is happening around them. A few kilometres away from the two classrooms converted into "wards", a crowd has sought refuge under a huge shade tree called an *Ober* in the local dialect.

A downpour had hit the area the previous night, making the air damp under the blazing sun. Mothers have endured the harsh weather conditions, covering many kilometres since the early hours of the morning to ensure that their children do not miss the Red Cross jab against polio, tetanus, measles, diphtheria, tuberculosis and whooping cough.

From the primary school, Mr. Philip Omolo, one of the Society's PHC Red Cross volunteer workers, discloses that the nearest dispensary is about 10 km away.

"Health facilities are hard to come by in Oyugis", mourns Mr. Omolo.

In this age of the AIDS (Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome) scare, the Red Cross does not take any chances. Syringes are well sterilized.

In one of the classrooms, Florence Matete, a nurse and a member of the National Society's field staff, has her right ear on the abdomen of a woman lying on a bed as the rest of the "patients", their faces drawn with despair and weariness, wait for their turn.

"She is suffering from a false pregnancy. She is also anaemic", explains Miss Matete.

The role of the Red Cross nurse in the provision of this health service to the community is to examine expectant mothers. She refers scores of them to the local dispensary.

The programme is a manifestation of the wide range of humanitarian activities that the National Society has carried out in part of its twenty-five years in existence.

"Under the PHC programme" says Mr. Odongo, "workshops are conducted for community leaders".

"Armed with the necessary knowledge", he adds, "community leaders impart basic health care skills to Red Cross volunteers who in turn advise at the grassroot levels, through Village Health Committees, on basic health measures to contain the incidence of preventable diseases and improve the quality of life of rural communities by means of this down-to-earth approach".

"Other community-oriented health programmes undertaken by the National Society", Mr. Odongo added, "include the protection of water sources and the digging of wells to provide clean water".

"Where the Red Cross has moved in, the high child mortality rate recorded in the past, which was caused by water-borne diseases due to consumption of contaminated water has declined", explains the PHC Co-ordinator, who has also introduced unique pit latrines in churches and primary schools.

The PHC programme is among others that the National Society has been implementing since it was founded by Act of Parliament on 21 December 1965. Prior to that date, what the country had was an extension of the British Red Cross, whose activities consisted mainly in providing welfare materials

and first-aid teaching. But under its Five-Year Development Programme of 1983-1987, the National Society, while retaining traditional activities, set out to introduce more programmes and diversify the existing ones.

Information and dissemination

Recognizing that it is hard to “market” the product — the humanitarian message — in a country which has known peace since independence, information and dissemination have been accorded priority.

Perception of the Red Cross by members of the public as a foreign institution whose sole mission in life was to dish out relief and provide first aid has had adverse effects on the Society in terms of membership recruitment and financial support.

For a population which only “received” from the Red Cross, especially in pre-independence days, and among whom the notion prevailed that the Red Cross exists only to provide and not to be given to by others, the change of attitude has been an uphill task.

But the task has had to be accomplished, though gradually, through specific communication/dissemination projects whose channels have been put into good use to “transport” (convey) the “product” (message) to the “consumer” (target audience) on who we are, what we do and why, where, when and how.

Radio talk-shows with both English and Kiswahili commentaries highlighting the humanitarian work of the components of the Movement besides regular press releases and bulletins have been utilized to reach a wider audience. The same has been done on television.

Editorials, special supplements especially during World Red Cross Day, public awareness campaigns, news articles and photographs either emanating from press releases or skilfully staged press conferences have captured the attention of print media editors.

The Nairobi-based Organization of African Unity (OAU) Pan African News Agency has “hit” 44 African countries with information material as the Society’s contribution to a wider dissemination of the whole Movement’s humanitarian work.

Although seen as a service arm of the Society, arranging for eye-catching public events that gather crowds and the attention of the media, the department organizes specific events aimed at raising the “profile” of the Society such as tree-planting, exhibitions, contests, garbage collection and special awareness campaigns so that the Red Cross can be seen, read, heard, remembered and supported in terms of financial backing and volunteer service.

Humanitarian activities for the last quarter have been quite visible in the field of relief. Volunteers have gained useful skills to prepare them to handle disasters as members of Red Cross Action Teams. These members have been mobilized at the national and branch levels at short notice to render volunteer service in drought-, flood- and fire-stricken areas.

Inspired by the Red Cross principle of Humanity, volunteers over the years have provided care to sudden influxes of refugees from neighbouring countries.

Though recent, the AIDS programme has protected human life in several respects. Memories are still fresh among the public of a nationwide information campaign launched by the Society in 1987, with posters and leaflets on the dreaded malady bearing the famous "Help Crush AIDS" logo.

Printed in English and Kiswahili to reach a wider audience, the "Spread Facts... Not Fear" materials brought hope to a desperate population ignorant of what the disease was, how it spread and how to avoid contracting it. Blood-screening equipment to detect the AIDS virus was donated to key government hospitals.

Since the campaign, the programme has taken on a new dimension — the training of volunteers, staff and youth on counselling techniques so that they may bring hope to AIDS sufferers and the orphaned.

Other humanitarian activities that the Red Cross has carried out in the past 25 years include the training of first-aid volunteers at national and branch levels to save life in emergency situations. Community programmes carried out at the grass roots level are as diverse as the existing Red Cross branches. They range from homes for the handicapped to youth programmes and various welfare services. Assistance is based on the need of a particular community or affected families.

Recognized as a National Society by the ICRC in 1966 and admitted to the League the following year, the Society has set out to reverse the up-down approach to development in order to strengthen the capacity of branches to cope with the various humanitarian domains in which communities have looked to the Red Cross for help. The Society's development should begin at the grass roots level, not the other way round.

Information policy

A detailed informative, educational account was given by Helena Korhonen, Head of Development Programmes with the Finnish Red Cross in

the *International Review* dated May-June 1990.¹ Her article dwelt at length on the lack of trained manpower, finance, equipment and vital materials.

These obstacles pose a challenge to the Movement in our endeavours to heighten the "profile" of the Red Cross by projecting a common image in order to compete favourably with other agencies seeking for assistance from the same sources.

Implementation of the communication strategy furthermore requires experienced staff to draw up budgets, to formulate and implement information plans at regional and national levels, and especially to co-ordinate the production of relevant information/dissemination materials so as to convey the message in dialects the populations would understand, taking into account the diverse cultures and languages in operating National Societies.

Imbalances with regard to resources have also constituted further setbacks for personnel responsible for information sections.

As Helena Korhonen implies in her article, the leadership in operating National Societies has miserably failed to institute information policies to be integrated into the overall operations of those institutions.²

According to her, there is pressure to "produce". But the question is to "produce" what? Marketing a "product", or public relations, is an expensive undertaking. In some operating Societies, proposals to produce materials aimed at raising the profile or enhancing the image of those institutions is seen as "too expensive".

Although the League stipulates that public relations budgets be set aside by National Societies for sustaining Red Cross contacts, in certain Societies such requests are silently resisted. Whereas for the leadership, this "entertainment" amount is automatic, those responsible for information matters can use their own incomes.

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¹ Helena Korhonen, "Support for information services in developing National Societies", *IRRC*, No. 276, May-June 1990, pp. 249-258.

² *Ibid*, p. 253.