

THE RED CROSS AND VOLUNTARY SERVICE

by H. Beer

When trying, in very popular terms, to explain what the Red Cross is, we sometimes define it in three ways: it is an emblem, a symbol, protecting or designating a movement; it is a world organization with 230 million members, almost all of them volunteers, brought together into 126 National Societies; but it is also an ideal, inspiring action to make this ideal a reality, based on a firm belief in a global, human solidarity, active in the fight against suffering.

In all these definitions there is one absolutely essential element—and that is the people—the men, women or children—who are protected by the emblem, or who take an active part in the organization or who believe in the ideal. It is therefore natural that among the basic principles of the Red Cross we find the statement that the Red Cross is a voluntary organization, not motivated by any desire for gain.

One could imagine that this went without saying, that it would be enough to note both the principle and the fact that the Red Cross depended on the interest, strength and activities of its voluntary workers. But it is not that simple.

Voluntary service is of capital importance for the various Red Cross activities, for among the 126 National Societies there are differences and their work is carried on in very diverse socio-economic systems. Moreover, with the enormously accelerated development of all types of human societies, sometimes even quicker in so-called developed countries than in the developing ones—we are faced with a new situation where the type of voluntary work that existed, say only fifty years ago, has radically changed.

It is almost banal to note that the old society, with a small affluent leisured class organized so that its members and in particular women, thanks to a great deal of help at home, could devote themselves to good works, in order to help the enormous mass of the poor in their immediate surroundings even during wars and disaster situations—that type of society does not exist any more.

From a purely Red Cross point of view, we sometimes deplore that the present society does not allow people to give so much time and money to the Red Cross as before.

But this argument could easily be countered by the fact that the standard of living has risen in many lands and that much broader categories of people are able to see beyond the fight for their daily bread and to feel the responsibility of active solidarity towards those who still need it. There is also the fact that fewer working hours, the rationalization of house work and other technical circumstances create conditions for voluntary work by a greater number of people.

Before making some more specific remarks, I would like to present some general problems.

We must first define what we mean by voluntary service and volunteers. In a limited sense and specifically when the French term “*bénévole*” is used, we mean people who give their services without remuneration. We would like, however, as Mr. Pictet mentions in his excellent *Comments on the Fundamental Principles of the Red Cross*, to use the word in a broader sense—meaning work without pressure from the outside, voluntarily, of one’s free will, the matter of remuneration being secondary.

We have here a direct comparison between the first Red Cross volunteers, the Italian women helping Henry Dunant in Solferino and Castiglione, and for example, the young Burmese students who give their three month’s vacation to work for food transport and food distribution to the homecoming refugees at the Bangladesh border, receiving as compensation only the bare necessities of life during their stay hundreds of miles away from their homes.

Mr. Pictet also points out that the voluntary character of the Red Cross is a direct consequence of the principle of humanity. It is a way of putting it into practice.

Are volunteers needed in our times when, in most social systems, responsibility for health and welfare is a matter for the State or local government? The question should be put, because there was in many countries a period, for instance in the years after the last World War, when the professionals and those favouring a greater role for the State had a tendency to thank the Red Cross for past history, for pioneer work, to say it was no longer necessary, and that they had taken on the responsibility.

Volunteers are not needed any more! Developments have however shown that this is not the case. Even in countries where, by ideology and law, the State is responsible for all services, it has become clear that the State is not only composed of offices, bureaucrats, hired officials, but that, in a wider sense, if it is to function, it needs the voluntary contribution of its citizens, over and above their daily remunerated tasks.

We have seen a development which makes the need for volunteers even stronger than before. Such is the case, for example, in the field of health, where the necessity for preventive measures has emerged, measures which must be based on a broad popular participation, with the right motivation, not only among the permanent technical staff, but also among the population itself. This motivation cannot be ordered from above, it must come from within, it must be promoted by organizations believing in what they are doing and their members, by necessity, volunteers. We have seen this when facing the need for vaccination campaigns or general health education, school hygiene, the fight against the causes of illnesses like tuberculosis, malaria, and many others; in the fight against alcoholism, the abuse of drugs—there are so many more examples which could be given.

In these last years we have seen how this general view has been implemented in the work for Primary Health Care. We have seen it also in the mobilization of popular interest for human environment, and in many other fields. But we have also seen that this calls for a new emphasis on leadership and training and a mentality that avoids the older ill feelings between the professionals and the volunteers—where we still have progress to make!

We have also seen in highly developed countries, with excellent medical systems, how the population changes have created a new poverty, the poverty of loneliness and isolation, of frustration because the old

contacts with the soil, with the home village, with the family have been severed by migration to the big cities and the disappearance of normal relations with a community, relations which in one form or another, have been constant for thousands of years but are now gone. Here, there is an obvious need for more efficient, more widespread volunteer services.

We have also seen that one field of Red Cross work, which earlier was wrongly thought to be a monopoly of legal or military experts within governments, academic institutions, etc., namely the dissemination of humanitarian law and Red Cross principles, has now received a new departure. Not only do we need the highly valued expertise from the specialists, directed by the International Committee of the Red Cross: more essential than ever is a popular approach based on volunteer leadership and motivation, but with proper training and organization, like all other tasks with our Movement.

Very often, when studying the methods of increasing the efficiency of work, we look into our internal organization—how shall this be arranged in order to keep the necessary flexibility with an accent on professionalism but also the service character both necessary for the training and orientation of volunteers. We are facing, as Mr. Pictet also points out, two dangers. One is bureaucracy, the other amateurism.

The first means that we have, as in all administrations, a tendency to perfectionism, to create even more bureaucracy. The loyalty within an office and within a specific group of professionals, and their lack of real interest in working with volunteers (partly because they are afraid of them) is a fact we have to live with. The tendency of bureaucracies to make themselves permanent—to grow—and to create a language and a working technique which are getting incomprehensible for normal people, has also been seen in the Red Cross. Fortunately it is limited, partly by the surveillance from volunteer leadership, partly by the simple fact that the lack of economic resources means it is impossible to make central administration too strong. But the danger is there.

The danger of amateurism was pointed out quite strongly in the Tansley Report. It stated that many Societies still had an old-fashioned approach. It mentioned the isolation of Red Cross Volunteer efforts, the lack of planning, the lack of co-operation with responsible Government agencies and the lack of understanding the necessity of training for specific tasks, and lastly, a lack of discipline in the execution of tasks

which made impossible planned, systematic and efficient efforts. Surely there is much in this—one has to create a new type of volunteer, as has been done in many lands—with a sense of responsibility, a sense of discipline and a sense of the necessity of co-operating with other organizations, authorities and people instead of trying to do Red Cross work in splendid isolation.

The Tansley Report also points out what has to be improved. Most of the Red Cross volunteers come from cities: we have too few of them where they are most needed—in the rural areas. Many of them have not been trained to work within the framework of their own communities. There are, still, class distinctions between Red Cross volunteers and the great mass of the people. But all this can be improved. The Report expresses the hope that the Red Cross could become professional without threatening its traditional strength—the action of volunteers—and this notably in developing countries.

The integration of Red Cross work with community services requires that we take a thorough look at these problems.

However, all that the Tansley Report says is not negative. To do justice to this report, its main tendency is to emphasize the basic role of volunteers in the Red Cross and to give many positive examples of how this has worked out to the benefit both of the Red Cross and mankind. The criticism is positive and indicates what could be improved.

The responsibility of Red Cross leadership is to make this work so meaningful and so attractive that it will, by itself, draw in the right people. When I say attractive, I do not mean that it should be something of the “old lady bountiful distributing Christmas parcels to the poor”. On the contrary attractive work can be dirty and difficult, but its attractiveness lies in the feeling of the one who does it, that it is necessary to help the community or individuals in fields where this person can give meaningful services.

One of our great problems is therefore, after having looked into the needs of the community, both on the practical and ideological sides—the community being either the home, village or the whole world—to see that there is a possibility for giving services, under specific conditions after specific training, which in themselves create the willingness to continue.

Here the Red Cross leadership, a combination of professionals and volunteers, has a very great task to fill because we have too often seen situations where the interest of volunteers is high at first but where it fades out when there is no proper leadership or motivation to continue and maintain it.

What we also have to fight within the Red Cross is the feeling among some volunteers that their work is ethically more valuable than the work done by professionals, or paid staff in any capacity. This is very dangerous indeed. It creates a negative attitude and sometimes even sabotages the work of those who think that they are looked upon as second-class citizens, just because they have to be paid for their work. Even they are, in a way, volunteers when they give that extra enthusiasm, efficiency and time to the work for which they are paid. It is therefore absolutely necessary to point out the equality of all workers and the identical human values of all who work for humanitarian purposes.

We have limited ourselves to speak about volunteers in general. There is one section of the population we should never forget, namely Youth. The method by which Red Cross young people are integrated in the organization is, from this point of view, of secondary importance. What we have to think of is that in most parts of the world, half of the population is under twenty-one years of age. If we cannot inspire the youth, if we cannot get sufficient youth volunteers, our movement will go backwards. Fortunately, there are many good signs that this job can be done; we have practical aids to do it and we think that the Red Cross youth may be our greatest asset for the future.

To sum up, we believe that with the steady reduction in working hours and the consequent growth of leisure time, along with a longer life expectancy—which is resulting in greater numbers of elderly but active individuals—the potential for volunteers has increased and this does not in the long run only concern developing countries. But we have to have better training, a clear motivation, a feeling that they are integrated in their own communities and also belong to the International Red Cross. We should broaden the basis for recruitment and try to give priorities to those areas or countries where we most need them. We should also see to it that all social frontiers disappear and that one gives the same motivation to the necessary professional staff. We should try to make a reality of the optimistic slogan that the Red Cross is doing a professional job with volunteers. This work in the field is one dimension; the other dimension is the ideological one. We can never get Red

Cross or humanitarian principles in general accepted in the world if we do not prove through our volunteers that this is not the exclusive province of professionals and governments, this is man's best defence against evil—the Red Cross volunteer who believes and can speak inspiringly on behalf of our movement and do practical work at the same time. This is one of the main hopes we can cherish for the future.

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