

Views on multilateral and bilateral relations in development within the Red Cross

by Troels Mikkelsen

1. The Development Concept

According to the *Strategy for the Development of National Societies in the Eighties*, adopted at the International Conference of the Red Cross in Manila in 1981, development is “the process of strengthening the capacity of National Societies to provide Red Cross services based on national resources. It is thus concerned with both the development of National Societies’ operational structures and with the development of the services they provide.”

The viewpoints in this article are based on this fundamental definition of the development process in a Red Cross context, which the Danish Red Cross feels is still valid, regardless of the result of attempts to implement the Strategy. The important points to stress are that development should be seen as a process (not as an event), and that an integrated approach should be applied to National Society development, implying support *both* to the central and regional structures *and* to services to the community ¹.

2. Role of the League Secretariat and National Societies in Development

There are three main actors in the League development programme: 1. the Operating Societies, 2. the League Secretariat, and 3. the Participating Societies.

¹ See *Development: Utopia or Reality? — League Priorities*, submitted by the Danish Red Cross to the League General Assembly in Rio de Janeiro in November 1987, in which it is pointed out that structural development and development of services are so closely interrelated that they cannot be regarded as separate issues.

● The **Operating Societies** are the ones ultimately responsible for their own development. This means that in all phases of the development process (planning, implementation, evaluation etc.), the Operating Societies have the most important role.

● The **Secretariat** should assist the Operating Societies in the overall planning of their development, i.e. together with the Operating Societies, set the priorities and the targets and help identify potential donors. In addition, the Secretariat has a role to play in the evaluation process of the development programme as a whole.

● The **Participating Societies** should make their support available in terms of cash, kind and services for specific projects within the framework of the total development programme. The detailed planning and implementation of individual projects should, as a rule, be left to the Operating and Participating Societies to work out on a bilateral basis, with the Secretariat playing a more supervisory role.

The Danish Red Cross feels that the above are broad guidelines on how to use resources most efficiently within the League development programme, guidelines which it would be useful for the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement to follow into the nineties. The Danish Red Cross has developed this view over about ten years of observing its own development activities, both on the bilateral and the multilateral scene, particularly in relation to the Southern African Programme (SAP).

The following paragraphs will, through examples from the SAP, try to justify this position.

3. Multilateral and bilateral co-operation—advantages and drawbacks

The best-known example of a multilateral approach to the development of National Societies is probably the SAP in its first five years (1979-1984). The programme had the overall aim of strengthening nine National Societies in Southern Africa and helping them move towards self-reliance. Funds for the programme, which was co-ordinated by the League Secretariat, come mainly from an equal number of Societies in North America and Europe.

Support from the Participating Societies took the form—at least in the initial phase—almost exclusively of cash contributions through the Secretariat and the provision of personnel put at the disposal of the Operating Societies as general League Representatives (general development delegates to help the Societies implement their individual development programmes). In some cases

a comparatively close relationship developed between the Operating Societies and the corresponding Participating Societies, but for all intents and purposes the direct administration of donor funds was handled by the League Secretariat's Southern African Programme Desk, which also did the reporting and accounting to the donors.

It is generally agreed that the programme was of great benefit to the region's National Societies. The multilateral way in which it was administrated had its advantages, in the sense that it ensured a *unified approach* to the development problems, in many cases similar, of the individual Societies, it made it possible to raise a remarkable amount of money (this might not have happened if donors had been approached on a case-by-case basis), and it led to the accumulation of a pool of knowledge and experience at the SAP Desk from all the countries in the region, enabling the Desk to put that experience to efficient use in the further implementation of the programme. Moreover, for the Operating Societies it was quite simple to deal with only one negotiating partner—the Secretariat.

However, the multilateral model was carried too far. The Secretariat was not only involved in assisting the Operating Societies in the overall planning of their structural development and in identifying priorities in the activity area. The actual implementation of individual projects, almost down to the level of ordering nuts and bolts, was also the task of the Secretariat. The Participating Societies therefore felt somewhat excluded from co-operation with the Operating Societies. This led, at least in Denmark, to a gradual decrease in interest to support the programme, which was to a large extent funded by voluntary contributions from local branches who felt they were getting less and less feedback.

Another difficulty was to attract government funds for the programme, which had become increasingly costly at a time when private contributions were declining. The reporting and accounting requirements of most governments do not correspond to those of the Secretariat, and usually a government agency will expect a Participating Society to assume full responsibility for a project as a condition for funding.

It is clearly not fair to expect the Secretariat to be able to cater to all these different needs for reporting, accounting and general feedback to the constituencies of the Participating Societies. But this is confirmation that when it comes to detailed planning and implementation of individual projects within an Operating Society's total development programme, a direct relationship between Participating Societies and the Operating Society should be actively encouraged, thereby utilizing the expertise which is increasingly becoming available in National Societies.

Another good reason for the Secretariat to refrain from becoming too

involved in details is the enormous administrative burden such involvement would imply if the model of the SAP in its initial phase were to be replicated for League development programmes throughout the world. The Secretariat would also risk losing its co-ordinating role in the planning phase.

The above argument has gradually been developed to demonstrate the advantages of bilateral co-operation between Operating and Participating Societies when planning and implementing specific projects within a total development programme. Bilateral co-operation, however, may have its disadvantages as well, mainly because of a failure on the part of both Operating and Participating Societies fully to appreciate the importance of the priorities as identified by the Operating Societies and the League Secretariat as co-ordinator.

It is tempting for a Participating Society to by-pass the Secretariat and approach an Operating Society directly with a tailor-made programme without due regard for the development plan of the Operating Society. And it is equally tempting for the Operating Society to accept such a programme, especially when large sums of money are involved, perhaps for fear of the consequences of not doing so ("when will we ever get such an offer again?").

The main loser is the Operating Society, which runs the risk of sacrificing healthy on-going activities and being generally overburdened with what are often very donor-oriented projects for which its general structure is not yet sufficiently prepared. This tendency is especially pronounced after large-scale relief operations, when donor interest in a particular country is sharply heightened. The important point is not so much the role of the Secretariat, but rather the importance of respecting the plans and priorities of the Operating Society. However, especially for relatively weak Operating Societies, the Secretariat has the task to make sure that priorities are properly matched with the many well-intentioned offers made.

4. Specific service projects

The eighties have seen projects run by Participating Societies in co-operation with non-Red Cross counterparts, e.g. government ministries. For example, in Uganda the Danish Red Cross is responsible for a nationwide Essential Drugs Programme, funded by the Danish Government and where the principal local partner is the Ugandan Ministry of Health. Since 1985, the Uganda Red Cross has become involved in the part of the programme which aims at public information on the use of drugs. Also in 1985, the project extended its services and drug supplies to all functioning Mission health units (Catholic and Lutheran). The Danish Red Cross had been involved in pharmaceutical advice to

the Ministry of Health as early as 1980. Although the Uganda Essential Drugs project is a bit atypical because of its size and many components, it also illustrates the important aspect of long-term involvement in sectoral development.

This relatively new type of relation in co-operation for development has been the target of criticism in Red Cross circles. Some criticisms are justified, others are not.

It is argued that Red Cross Societies operating in another country under their own name, and not under the co-ordinating umbrella of the League or the local Society, create confusion in the mind of the general public about what the Red Cross really represents. This may well be the case, and such confusion should be limited as far as possible.

It is further argued that such activities contribute nothing to the development of the National Society. This is true insofar as the National Society is not involved at all in the activities, but then it can also be argued that nor is any damage done to the National Society. It should be noted that we are not dealing with a case of bilateralism, implying the possible negative effects described in the previous paragraph, but a working relationship which—in its purest form—has no effect whatsoever on the National Society.

On the other hand, it is clear that such activities satisfy a need in the community, and a formal discussion on the choice of channel of assistance should not overshadow the principal aim of bringing that assistance to the needy.

In the Danish Red Cross we feel that the Movement as a whole should be open to such initiatives. However, all parties concerned, and particularly the Participating Societies, should spare no effort to ensure that the local Red Cross Society reaps as much benefit as possible, preferably through direct involvement in the project or, at the very least, through consultation. The local Society should formally be party to the agreement, thereby benefitting from public goodwill.

In the Ugandan case described above, the National Society enjoyed good public relations and credit, because the overall project was received very favourably by the health sector and the rural population. The Society and the Red Cross Movement as a whole were associated with improved conditions for the people.

5. Conclusions

If the Red Cross is to make substantial headway in development, all the Movement's resources should be fully utilized. This implies both multilateral and bilateral relations in development co-operation. The previously widespread

conception that the two types of co-operation are mutually exclusive should be reconsidered.

In order for the Secretariat to fulfil its co-ordinating role in the League development programme, this role must be widely respected by both Operating and Participating Societies. The Secretariat should see its role as a systematic collector of information relevant for Operating and Participating Societies, creating a pool of knowledge which it is always ready to provide to the National Societies. To achieve this, however, the Secretariat will have to be strengthened, especially with a view to upgrading its analytical and planning capability, both in Geneva and in the field.

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