

Development of National Societies and co-operation: The ICRC contribution, 1981-1987

by Jeanne Egger

"If the new and frightful weapons of destruction which are now at the disposal of nations seem destined to abridge the duration of future wars, it appears likely, on the other hand, that future battles will only become more and more murderous. Moreover, in this age when surprise plays so important a part, is it not possible that wars may arise, from one quarter or another, in the most sudden and unexpected fashion? And do not these considerations alone constitute more than adequate reason for taking precautions against surprise?"

Henry Dunant
A Memory of Solferino

I. Introduction

Henry Dunant's prediction falls short of the terrible reality of 125 years later. Weapons of destruction are infinitely sophisticated, armed clashes are more lethal than ever but paradoxically none the shorter. Every new conflict makes clear the deliberate intention to do away with any distinction between combatants and non-combatants and, worse still, to take the civilian population as a target.

The Red Cross is facing needs of a new kind and on an unprecedented scale. It must strengthen its operational capacity, for more than ever before it must be prepared; it must not be overtaken by this escalation of barbarity. It has to be ready to intervene promptly and effectively while respecting its fundamental principles—principles that are increasingly challenged.

The XXIVth International Red Cross Conference (Manila, 1981) expressed this concern of the entire International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement by adopting Resolution XXV and the Strategy for the Development of National Societies in the Eighties. The latter reads:

“... Each of its members—National Societies, the ICRC and the League—must participate in the expansion of the Movement, by working for its own development and that of the other members.” (...)

“... *The ICRC is also directly interested in there being a strong and active Society in each country, this being the first condition necessary for the implementation of the basic Principles of the Red Cross and for improved assistance to the victims of conflict.*”¹

National Societies must be prepared, make themselves stronger, develop, and show *solidarity* within the Movement. This entails rethinking certain achievements and attitudes—the rethinking called for by Donald Tansley in his report “An Agenda for Red Cross”, published in 1975, whose recommendations were to start a process of dynamic development in the Movement.

II. The ICRC and the Development Strategy

This was a two-fold challenge to the ICRC: how was it to end its absenteeism in relation to the National Societies, and how was it to take part in developing the Movement? It is easier to retire to an ivory tower than to leave it, only to be assailed by other people’s problems. Wanting to participate is not enough; first of all there has to be a change of heart and a change in the mental reactions that have grown up in isolation. Following the Manila Conference the ICRC remodelled its structures, impressed on its delegates the problems of National Societies and trained them to work on those problems; it increased and strengthened its regional delegations, reinforcing them with delegates whose priority task was to set up co-operation programmes between the National Societies and the ICRC.

Seven years later, at the end of this first stage, what concrete contribution has the ICRC made to developing the Movement, and what are the strengths and the weaknesses of this contribution?

The Annex to the Strategy for the Development of National Societies in the Eighties enumerates the ICRC’s responsibilities. How it is to approach them, what its priorities are to be, and how far it is to go are only three of the innumerable questions confronting the ICRC.

The sphere of ICRC activities includes some objectives that might be called “intellectual” and others that are “operational”. What is meant by “intellectual” objectives?

¹ *Strategy for the Development of National Societies in the Eighties*, adopted by the second session of the General Assembly of the League of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies and the XXIVth International Conference of the Red Cross, Manila, November 1981, Annex: “ICRC contribution to the development of National Societies”, LRCS, 1982, p. 17.

1. Promoting public approval of the Red Cross and Red Crescent

There will be no point in strengthening the Movement unless there is a climate of opinion that enables it to make full use of its human, technical and material potential for the benefit of victims. In its determination to safeguard and promote the Movement's good works in spite of all the obstacles placed in its path, the ICRC is constantly concerned *to regenerate and maintain a climate of opinion favourable to its activities.*

For this three things are necessary:

- *National Societies must be aware of the problem.*

ICRC awareness must be matched by a corresponding awareness on the part of National Societies:

- National Societies have statutory responsibilities towards the victims of armed clashes and must prepare themselves for these responsibilities in the same way as for natural disasters;
- National Societies cannot possibly develop unless they have the will to take themselves in hand. Co-operation for development is a joint venture in which each partner has specific responsibilities.

- *More must be done* to encourage application of the four Geneva Conventions and their two Additional Protocols, and ensure better protection of the emblem.

- *Better knowledge* of Red Cross and Red Crescent principles and the humanitarian ideals contained in the four Geneva Conventions and their two Additional Protocols *is essential*; the Movement's national and international activities must also be publicized.

During these first years of co-operation for development the ICRC has done its utmost to promote information and dissemination, in response to the National Societies' basic need to be known and recognized by their authorities, young people and the general public.

In many National Societies, information and dissemination officers have been trained and supplied with the necessary equipment. The first issue of the magazine "Dissemination" was published in April 1985; it is a source of information and inspiration that has gone from strength to strength.

In all four corners of the world an increasing number of seminars and national and regional workshops have been held, thus setting in motion a current of exchange and co-operation between National Societies and the ICRC.

2. The Red Cross and Red Crescent are “Action”

Without down-to-earth activities, however, these intellectual objectives soon lose their credibility, and their message loses its freshness. The Red Cross means action. It will not recover its old spirit of dedication unless its volunteers and leaders get down to specific tasks to alleviate suffering.

At the dawn of the twenty-first century, Henry Dunant's achievement has lost none of its power to inspire enthusiasm and humanitarian concern for those who suffer; but to be actively, physically and materially put into practice it calls for planning, training, accuracy and resources. Enthusiasm and good will are no longer enough; aid and assistance cannot be given without training. Hence the *operational objectives* that the ICRC has set itself to enable the National Societies to act effectively.

III. Building and acting together

Whatever the cause of a disaster—climate, geology, economic failure, social or political unrest, racial friction or political belief—a National Society must be ready to cope with it, with the help of the ICRC in some cases, of the League in others. Disaster preparedness must not be limited to any one kind of disaster; it must cover the entire spectrum of events justifying the existence of the Red Cross and Red Crescent, and all the components of the Movement must take part in it, all pulling together and each adding its contribution to that of the others.

For its part the ICRC has focused its efforts on training and on supplying basic equipment in the following fields:

- tracing missing or displaced persons;
- relief techniques and security measures to be observed by the Movement's volunteers in situations of armed conflict;
- nutritional rehabilitation, sanitation, supplying orthopaedic appliances and rehabilitating amputees, and supplying the blood needed for war wounded;
- installing and operating radio networks.

In 1986 a *Guide for National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies on their activities in the event of conflict* was prepared to supplement the work of the seminars, workshops and training courses held since 1981.

The ICRC's contribution to the development of National Societies may be made in the heat of battle or in a quiet peacetime situation.

The former context calls for *emergency development* in selective fields to meet victims' immediate needs—an essentially operational objective. This one-sided development may upset the National Society's normal routine, but the risk has to be taken, though with all possible precautions, relief of victims being the first consideration. On the other hand the ICRC must not suddenly cut off all aid to the National Society at the end of the emergency, for this would compromise the Society's future. For the last few years, therefore, the ICRC has carefully considered at the beginning of every emergency operation how this particular kind of development could later on be fitted into the National Society's other activities and, better still, how it could stimulate them.

In armed conflicts and other similar long-term situations civilian populations must be protected from the fighting; they must also be able to look after themselves and gradually do without emergency aid from outside. Jointly with the National Societies and the League Secretariat, the ICRC supports any initiative likely to contribute to the rehabilitation of the assisted population.

In peacetime, the ICRC's contribution is made in the framework of the National Society's general development plan and conforms as far as possible to the plans drawn up by League Secretariat.

For a National Society to develop in a balanced and harmonious way, external aid has to be tailored to needs and to national conditions.

The ICRC supports, and will continue to support, any joint policy for improving the selection and co-ordination of national or regional projects. It has accordingly been an active partner in the consortia from the very beginning and supports the work of the Henry Dunant Institute for the harmonious development of the Movement.

When the ICRC began this co-operation in 1981 the Movement comprised 126 National Societies, large and small, and operating in widely differing political and economic conditions. Because of its limited human and material resources the ICRC had to set itself priorities when offering its co-operation. These were:

- **first**, National Societies of a country or region in a conflict situation or running high risk of conflict;
- **secondly**, National Societies in the process of formation, and regional pilot National Societies. With limited technical or material support from the ICRC, pilot Societies can bring know-how and resources to National Societies in their region whose customs and practices they share.

At the request of certain National Societies, co-operation agreements have been concluded between them and the ICRC, on four preliminary conditions:

- the National Society must have a basic structure and a general development plan;
- the project which is the subject of the agreement must be carried out within three or five years;
- from the beginning the National Society undertakes to cover part of the budget, either financially or materially, to a gradually increasing extent, so that by the end of the three or five years it is fully self-reliant;
- the National Society must appoint a full-time employee as project leader.

At present the ICRC has some fifteen co-operation agreements with National Societies in Africa, Latin America, Asia, the Middle East and Europe. The experience gained since the Manila Conference confirms that, whilst each component of the Movement has to work for its own development, it cannot succeed without at the same time participating in the development of the other members of the Movement. For the ICRC contributing to the development of National Societies has provided a new insight into their day-to-day difficulties and has added a new dimension of fellowship to the experience of its delegates.

It is absolutely essential for the ICRC to increase its operational capacity and gear it to the wide variety of needs for assistance and protection. The International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement must use its imagination to meet the challenge of tackling the humanitarian problems caused by current developments in society everywhere, and by the radical changes taking place in its environment. The “havens of humanity” hoped for by former ICRC President Alexandre Hay do not depend only on people struggling for power. The influence of its message and the efficacy of its work can make the Red Cross the most stable and durable humanitarian haven of all.

It must be ready to supply all the effort and make all the sacrifices this entails.

Jeanne Egger

Former Deputy Head

Co-operation and Dissemination Division

Engaged in research at the ICRC
