

# Developing National Societies: An ongoing challenge

by Yves Sandoz

## **Introduction**

Let's face it: a world of peace and justice, devoid of violence and misery, is not around the corner.

Stating this unhappy reality is not meant to discourage those of goodwill who keep the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement going. Rather, it is to stress just how important it is in humanitarian endeavour to bring our forces into concert so that we can all pull together. The best use possible must be made of every individual, every penny, if we are going to make headway in this unequal struggle in which we are engaged to assist the victims of war, natural disaster and poverty. Rivalry is all the more shocking when it arises in the area of humanitarian aid as the needs are so enormous and there is more than enough room for everyone. But everyone must find his proper place in the joint effort; effectiveness is impossible without good co-ordination.

Everyone who takes part in such an undertaking must first define his role; and this naturally applies to our Movement as well. We must be clear about what our tasks are with regard to the rest of the world and it must be readily discernable how each component fits into the Movement itself.

## **The role of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement as a whole**

Bringing relief to the wounded and sick on the battlefield—the Movement's original task—had the advantage that it was perceived as feasible.

There are two reasons why that initial role has grown to cover so much more. First, war has expanded in scope; it now ravages entire populations which require all the more assistance as they were usually already vulnerable to begin

with. Second, the end of the First World War brought with it great hopes for peace and the Movement therefore turned its attention to developing social activities.

The ICRC's role in conflict situations and the role of the League in the wake of natural disaster result from long tradition; their activities in those spheres are uncontested. It is the activities of the National Societies, however, which are most apt to raise questions about the Movement's identity.

Originally created to act as auxiliaries to armed forces medical services in wartime (it should not be forgotten that their appellation and emblem are explained by this fact), the National Societies today find themselves playing their original role as only a small and relatively minor part of their activities. One reason for this is that the armed forces medical services have been greatly expanded in many countries and thus have less need of the National Societies' support. Another reason is the above-mentioned change of emphasis following the First World War, a very desirable development as without it the Societies may well not have survived.

This in no way changes the original purpose of our Movement, for the world continues to be full of situations requiring emergency action to be taken and relief brought to the victims of natural and man-made disaster, the two being more often linked than had previously been thought. Effective emergency assistance cannot be improvised and the National Societies must remain constantly prepared to play a major role in such situations.

But it is not enough to prepare for hypothetical disasters, especially in the poorest countries where no Society could ignore the urgent need for humanitarian assistance which widespread poverty presents. Any Society which did so would not enjoy popular support. To attract volunteers in such conditions, a Society must attack immediate, specific problems and it is only through popular support that any Society will acquire vitality, strength and independence.

Knowing this, the Society must come to grips with an objective which it will never be possible to attain completely. For our Movement to set out to eradicate poverty and underdevelopment is to engage in an unequal struggle which it alone is not able to win. Governments are in a much better position to take on such a struggle. If it were to engage in such a struggle, our Movement would end up working side by side with government aid agencies and the big international organizations. How would we then maintain a separate identity and how could we avoid being absorbed?

There is no simple solution and the Movement as a whole is certainly not in a position to provide a detailed answer, valid for each Society, to such a delicate question. Each Society must find its own place within the national context, bearing in mind the most pressing needs of the population, the country's development plan and the humanitarian support activity coming from

other countries and other organizations. And it must never lose sight of the fundamental principles or the spirit of the Movement.

In setting tasks for themselves, the Societies should always be guided by one simple priority—meeting the most urgent human needs. The appeal made by Henry Dunant, which led to our Movement's creation, was above all a reflex of compassion for people who went unaided in their suffering. That Dunant's entreaty was sparked by the sight of wounded soldiers on the battlefield is due to historical circumstances. What the Societies must keep in view is the principle of reaching out to help all those who would otherwise be abandoned to their suffering.

## **The priorities in international development aid**

It is, as we have seen, up to each Society to establish its own priorities. In spite of this, the Movement as a whole has an obligation to be more precise in setting its objectives for international development aid. In doing so, we should not cease to assign priority to providing emergency assistance in the event of armed conflict or natural disaster, an area of endeavour in which the Movement has performed indispensable humanitarian work and from which its image has arisen.

It should also avoid spreading itself too thin in international development aid, a domain in which the needs far outstrip the Movement's means. At the risk of sacrificing part of its identity, the Movement must restrict itself to supporting the work of the National Societies in this area. Restricting itself in this way is entirely compatible, at the international level, with the original aim of the Movement, i.e. emergency assistance.

Indeed, when an armed conflict or natural disaster strikes, the Movement must be able to rely on strong, independent and well-prepared Societies. As we have seen, however, these Societies can develop and gain true independence only if they have popular support; and they will not have that unless they are first seen to be dealing with specific human problems. Therefore, helping National Societies to tackle such problems *through co-ordinated development of their structures and range of activities*—and many say that this is the only viable approach—becomes necessary as a way ensuring that it will be possible to provide emergency assistance should the need arise. For only National Societies with a sturdy structure and the benefit of popular enthusiasm can properly prepare to play their role in times of armed conflict or other disaster and persuade the general populace to embrace the principles and ideals of the Movement and international humanitarian law.

We cannot ignore the value of the work done by those Societies who do not have as their *sole aim* the preparation of the activities they would carry out in an armed conflict or natural disaster. And one can only welcome activities which, as part of a national plan, make use of the experience accumulated by the Movement in natural or man-made disasters to prevent others from occurring.

## **Each of the Movement's components has its own role to play**

Though it is possible to draw together the strands of the Movement's development role into a coherent whole, that whole must be divided into separate tasks within the Movement.

### **The League of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies**

The League undeniably plays a key role. But its tasks in this area are so great that it feels ill-equipped to do everything which is necessary to co-ordinate the development process, and this process is made all the more difficult by the fact that the grassroots projects do not necessarily have much in common because the needs which they meet differ greatly from country to country. Finding a co-ordination method which will enable the Movement to create coherent projects which are viable in the long term, in harmony with the spirit of the Movement, meet specific national needs and, what is more, interest the donors is a goal toward which the League must strive without entertaining the illusion that it can ever fully be attained.

### **Participating National Societies**

The demands faced by participating National Societies are also many and varied: surmounting the thorny technical problems which development projects pose, finding funds for those projects without adopting the criteria and interests of the governments which provide them, being willing to labour inside the Movement to do the co-ordination work without which it would lose the strength afforded by its unity and consistency and, finally, showing the necessary tact and discretion in putting into effect projects designed with and for the developing Societies.

## **Operating National Societies**

The operating National Societies must play the leading role as each project, in addition to its primary purpose, has the aim of developing those Societies. In addition, they have the delicate task of striking a balance, true to the Movement's spirit, between the participating Societies which must be won over—along with their sponsors—and a government which tends to forget the specific criteria of the Movement, especially the principle of independence.

## **The ICRC**

Given the tasks of co-operation which the ICRC has understandably been assigned, our institution must help build National Societies in peacetime for it is not possible, as we have seen, to train the National Society in dissemination or prepare it for its activities in wartime if it has not already acquired sufficient structure and a certain degree of popularity through activities of direct interest to the general populace. The ICRC's development role, though relatively minor in peacetime, becomes vital in the event of armed conflict. The urgency of spreading knowledge of international humanitarian law, for example, is then beyond doubt, because if it is successful it will serve every day to save lives and relieve suffering.

## **Conclusions**

The points made above are, inevitably, generalizations. But that merely underlines once again the inspiring fact that we all belong to the same Movement. The National Societies, the ICRC and the League must work together, each respecting the other's areas of competence, or better yet, each simply respecting the other in their work together to build a strong and united Movement to serve the victims of armed conflict, natural disaster and poverty.

I wish to end with a specific proposal.

First, I think that it would be a good idea to organize joint training courses for senior ICRC, League and National Society officials who must work side by side in the field. Such courses would give the participants a more comprehensive view of the Movement and would strengthen the bonds of brotherhood which are so necessary, especially in the field, for our effectiveness and image.

Finally, I would like to express the hope that the Strategy for the 90s will be, like the Strategy for the 80s, a project around which the entire Movement can be mobilized. It is my hope that the lessons of the past will enable us more effectively to develop National Societies which can help roll back suffering, fear and poverty.

The development of National Societies is an ongoing challenge for our Movement. But it is a stimulating challenge and we must meet it united and with confidence.

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