

From disaster relief to development

by Gunnar Hagman

The links between disasters and development have been extensively discussed in recent years among international organizations. It was primarily the African famine during the first half of the 1980s that initiated this discussion. Famine was no longer perceived as the inevitable consequence of drought. Instead, many saw the African disaster as the symptom of serious development failures. Had there been better foresight in earlier development, stronger efforts to reduce vulnerability in the populations, and a better preparedness to meet the crisis, it was observed, the devastating effects of the drought could have been prevented. Eventually, a similar perception began to embrace most disasters affecting developing countries. It led to the conclusion that disaster prevention, and the reduction of human vulnerability in particular, must be among the primary goals of development.

Many international aid agencies have also recognised that emergency assistance has little lasting effect if it is not linked to longer-term development. Some agencies even maintain that new development opportunities are created by many disasters, as the physical and social changes produced by traumatic disasters situations often create a climate wherein development changes are more accepted, if not demanded, in the affected communities. Thus, an important idea that has gained influence in the 1980s has been that disaster interventions as far as possible ought to be used as entry points for development assistance.

This is the point of departure for a new book published by the Henry Dunant Institute. The book is entitled *From Disaster Relief to Development*,¹ and is written by representatives of a few National Societies as well as experts outside the Movement. The Institute had asked the authors to draw on their experiences from different countries and bring up for discussion what they considered to be key issues, relevant to Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies. The most important conclusion of the book is that disasters can provide development opportunities both for the disaster victims and the National Societies in the affected countries.

¹ Hagman, G. (editor), Allwood, A., Cutler, P., Kassaye, E., Kesselley, L., Kourmaev, G. A., and Tolstoptiatov, B. I., *From Disaster Relief to Development*, HDI Studies on Development, No. 1, Henry Dunant Institute, Geneva, 1988.

1. What do we mean by development?

The meaning of the word “development”, as it is being used in this context, should perhaps be clarified. The international community has recently agreed on a useful definition of the term. This was when the General Assembly of the United Nations, in December 1986, adopted the Declaration on the Right to Development. It was recognised that

development is a comprehensive economic, social, cultural and political process, which aims at the constant improvement of the well-being of the entire population and of all individuals on the basis of their active, free and meaningful participation in development and in the fair distribution of benefits resulting therefrom.²

When, in the following, the term “development” is being used without any further explanation, it thus refers to *the process by which the well-being of individuals and communities is constantly improved*. The focus for this discussion will be the development process which takes place in the most needy communities in the poor countries, in the so-called Third World. Attempts by the Red Cross/Red Crescent to play a facilitating role in this process will be termed “development intervention”, “development assistance” or “development service”.

Within the Red Cross/Red Crescent Movement, some confusion may have been caused in the past by the particular connotations given to the word “development”. In Red Cross parlance a distinction has usually been made between **(i) development of structures, and (ii) development of services**.

Both aspects have been extensively analysed and discussed in the “Strategy for the Development of National Societies in the Eighties” which was adopted at the Movement’s statutory meetings in Manila, 1981.³ While both these terms certainly give name to aspects crucial to a successful evolution of National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, they tend to put the organization itself in focus.

The first connotation, “development of structures”, simply labelled “development” on many occasions in the past, clearly refers to the institutional strength and operational capacity of the Red Cross/Red Crescent Society itself (enrolling new members, establishing branches/local chapters, improving management and administration, etc.).

² UN General Assembly, Resolution 41/128 of 4 December 1986. On the occasion, 147 member countries voted in favour of the resolution.

³ *The Strategy for the Development of National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies in the Eighties*, adopted by the IInd General Assembly of the League and approved by the XXIVth International Conference of the Red Cross, Manila, 1981.

But, even the “services” referred to by the second of these connotations might appear to give more importance to the performance, or the “delivery aspect”, from the organization’s own point of view than to the needs of the communities or individuals who are to benefit.

To avoid confusion in the following text, reference will not be made to these two connotations only as “development”. When these issues are being discussed, attempts will be made to explain clearly what is meant.

2. Development of people

When we discuss how disaster situations can become opportunities for development, we should focus on the most vulnerable individuals’ and communities’ needs in the first place. It seems quite reasonable that these needs should determine what kind of services the National Red Cross or Red Crescent Society in a particular country should provide. This, in turn, may have a bearing on what type of organizational structure is needed, and what kind of external support is required. It must, of course, also be seen in the light of the Movement’s particular mandate, Fundamental Principles, fields of competence and capabilities.

Many aid agencies working directly with poor and vulnerable people in developing countries, including some National Societies within our Movement, have now adopted the community-based approach to development. At the heart of this approach is the experience that appropriate, sustainable development cannot be done *for* people. As development is a process by which the quality of life is constantly improved, the people in the community must be fully involved and be encouraged to take the main responsibility themselves. This is based on the conviction that most human beings are capable of (and have the right to) assuming full responsibility for their own lives, if only the right opportunities are created. Hence the UN Declaration on the Right to Development.

Many maintain that the same philosophy must be kept in mind even when a disaster intervention is being made in a poor and vulnerable community. A disaster in such a context, regardless of its apparent causes, can be perceived as a crisis which disrupts the development process and outstrips people’s capacity to cope. More often than not, this crisis tends to be a long-lasting rather than a short-lived phenomenon. This implies that, in order to become meaningful, a disaster intervention must also be of a longer-term nature, aiming at improving people’s coping capacity and helping them back on the road to self-reliant development. Hence the concept “From Disaster Relief to Development”.

The needs among disaster victims and vulnerable communities can be divided into three main categories: *physical*, *organizational* and *psychological*.⁴

Most relief agencies, perhaps even development organizations, have in the past been preoccupied with the physical needs—tangible things like food, shelter, clothing, medical services, physical environment, etc. Less attention has been paid to people's organizational needs—to deal collectively and in an organized manner with their own disaster and development problems. Even less consideration has been given to the psychological or motivational needs, which have to do with attitudes, values and feelings. All these needs exist, though, but it may be difficult to determine what the real priority needs are in a particular community, unless one goes there and starts a dialogue with the people concerned. Respectful contact and dialogue are thus key factors in the community-based approach to disasters and development.

3. What could be the Movement's role?

The main objective here is not to argue whether or not our Movement should be involved in development, but rather to discuss *how* development services can be provided by the Red Cross/Red Crescent, and, in particular, how disaster response can be transformed so that it has a development impact both on the disaster-stricken communities and on the operating National Societies' services and structures. Some contrasting opinions are being displayed when the possible roles of National Societies and the Movement are being discussed.

Peter Cutler, for instance,⁵ writes extensively about rural disaster problems and development needs but in the event he wonders if the Movement, or at least the League, should not stress the activities where, through long experience, it has a comparative advantage—activities such as disaster preparedness planning, medical care, and the promotion of public health. He is not convinced that National Societies would be able to act professionally in rural development.

A different view is held by Elizabeth Kassaye,⁶ who looks at the reality as it appears in a more or less constantly disastrous situation in a Third World country, in this case Ethiopia. Having seen her Society's rapid expansion in rural services, Kassaye firmly believes that the time has come to reconsider

⁴ See Anderson, Mary B., "A reconceptualization of the linkages between disasters and development", *Disasters/Harvard Supplement*, London, 1985. The concept described by Anderson is the basis for the Harvard International Relief/Development Project, which involves studies among some 30 national and international NGOs.

⁵ *From Disaster Relief to Development*, op. cit. Chapter III.

⁶ *Ibid.*, Chapter V.

and diversify the Movement's approach to disasters. She is convinced that interventions, in her country most often rural, must be of longer-term nature, aiming at strengthening the vulnerable communities own coping capacity—actions which should help the victims to prevent disasters from recurring, in short, development.

In doing so, Kassaye contrasts with some other authors: she puts the needs of the victims and not the existing competence of the organization first. She does this with the conviction that competence can be built up once the organization has understood what the priority needs are and what role the organization needs to play.

However, the most common view seems to be that National Societies, and the League, already provide relevant services and have useful competence, particularly within disaster preparedness and primary health care (PHC), and that these sectors should be extended first of all.

For example, there seems to be no doubt in Linnie Kesselly's mind ⁷ that PHC is a major path to take for National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies. But she hits on something that has become a stumbling-block to many development workers. This is when she briefly describes the contrasting philosophies of the *generalists*, "who favour what the community perceives as priority", and the *selectionists*, "who prefer to focus on a certain speciality in a project" (i.e. the intervening agency's priority). Kesselly does not seem to think that the generalist and the selectionist approaches need to be in conflict with each other, although "selectionists should be warned", as she puts it, "that PHC constitutes a group of activities to execute either at the same time or progressively but not in isolation or in bits and pieces".

The conclusion here must be that the more narrowly the specialist agency selects its activities and builds up its technical competence, the greater is the risk that it will overlook the community's general needs. The broader the field of interest, the greater the possibility of giving appropriate support to the community. This underscores what has been termed the *programme approach* to development assistance. A development programme involves integrated activities, rather than sectorial ones. A rural development programme, such as the one introduced by a group of Societies in Wollo, Ethiopia, might simultaneously involve activities in health, water supply, agriculture, physical infra-structure, social welfare, education and administrative development over a period of a decade or more. To be involved in such programmes in a fully professional manner may be very different from the short-term involvement in sectorial projects, preferred by most donors.

⁷ *Ibid.*, Chapter VI.

Would it be possible for National Societies to become involved in rural development in a fully professional manner? How could the League Secretariat, the ICRC or the participating Societies in the “North” provide specialist know-how in so many technical sectors? How could the operating National Societies themselves ever afford such professionalism? In the case of the Ethiopian Red Cross, is this Society’s technical expansion in rural development not merely an exception, enabled by extraordinary favourable donor support? Such rhetoric has from time to time been used as arguments against the involvement of the Movement in development.

It is interesting to note that Linnie Kesselly wants to discuss an altogether different role for the National Societies. She does not insist that the Red Cross/Red Crescent needs technical competence in all sectors, as if it would have to carry out all sorts of development work *for* the communities. Instead, Kesselly’s view reflects a new trend among international NGOs involved in development support. It is now commonly suggested that the intervening agency, rather than assuming responsibility as “implementor”, should act as “facilitator” and create the “enabling environment” for development within as well as outside the community.

The constraints that hold back progress are found not only within the community but in the wider context of policies, attitudes, practices and inter-relationships on the part of some governments, donor organizations, specialists, professionals and other groups influencing the life of the community. When things are at their worst, such constraints may amount to no less than human rights violations.

A different type of professionalism may be needed if National Societies assume the facilitating role and start to deal with the enabling environment. Kesselly suggest skills to act at three levels: (a) to promote self-help actions at community level, (b) to establish linkages with other resource agents, and (c) to interpret the needs of the people to government. She calls these roles *facilitator*, *coordinator* and *liaiser*.

To some extent these may be the roles the Salvadorean Red Cross and the ICRC already have assumed among the conflict-affected population in El Salvador. Adela de Allwood ⁸ describes how the two organizations, after years of relief, protection and dissemination work, have changed their assistance towards rehabilitation and development of some 125,000 beneficiaries in El Salvador. Seeds, fertilizers and pesticides have been supplied to the victims of conflict, and the first target was to help stabilise the conditions of 500 rural families in 1987, so that these families should become self-reliant.

⁸ *Ibid.*, Chapter IV.

4. How far can volunteers be used?

When El Salvador's capital city, San Salvador, was struck by earthquake in October 1986, hundreds of Red Cross volunteers were immediately mobilised to assist the disaster victims. De Allwood describes how a large number of volunteers, mostly young people, even came from the interior of the country to join the operation, and many continued to work with the Society for several months. The Salvadorean Red Cross reported that over 9,000 volunteers participated in its relief work after the earthquake, providing about 4.7 million man-hours of service.

It has been convincingly shown in all parts of the world that volunteers can be tremendously useful in Red Cross/Red Crescent emergency operations and other temporary activities.⁹ They are often willing to identify themselves with the organization on such occasions, and give a high, visible profile to the emblem and the National Society. Many take for granted that this voluntary spirit could be maintained and become equally useful in extended development work.

However, it is not clear to what extent and how far volunteers can play a role when a National Society transforms its emergency intervention to longer-term development assistance. One question is whether, and for how long, continuity could be assured if development assistance would depend on voluntary services. It may even be doubtful whether it would be an advantage in the long run to have volunteers with a strong Red Cross or Red Crescent identity carrying out development tasks at community level. It might give the impression that development was implemented under the organization's banner *for* the community and not primarily *by* the community itself.

These issues have been discussed in a series of workshops on community-based development organized by the League for National Societies in east and southern Africa.¹⁰ For several reasons, the participants raised warnings against having longer-term development programmes depending too much on Red Cross volunteers. It was stressed that the volunteer involved in decision-making and implementation must be someone from within the community, identified, selected and maintained by the community itself. In order not to have the identity with his or her own community lost, this person might be called community volunteer or community worker, but not Red Cross volunteer. Experience had shown that community workers identified too strongly as Red

⁹ See Meurant, J., *Red Cross Voluntary Service in Today's Society*, Henry Dunant Institute, Geneva, 1984.

¹⁰ See "Community Based Programmes, Report on the workshop held in Harare, 22-26 July, 1985" (p. 3), League, Geneva, 1985.

Cross volunteers had a tendency to drift away from their own community and consider themselves primarily as Red Cross employees.

It seems that a National Society wanting to support community-based development would need to employ a certain core staff, professionally trained to promote self-help actions at community level. It also appears that further studies are needed on how National Societies could match their voluntary services with professionalism, particularly when the concept "From disaster Relief to Development" is adopted.

5. The importance of organizational development

The need—and the opportunity—to strengthen the capacity of the host National Society in conjunction with a large-scale relief operation must be emphasized. Tolstopiatov and Kourmaev¹¹ observe that the recent large-scale international relief operations among drought victims in Africa also helped to strengthen the operational capacity of some National Societies. They cite the positive influence of relief operations on the Red Cross Societies of Burkina Faso and Mali as good examples.

Similar observations are being made by Cutler, who describes the impetus for change created in the Kenya Red Cross Society by successful famine relief operations during 1979-81. "Thus disasters clearly can stimulate positive changes for the better", concludes Cutler. He notes a very similar change in the Sudanese Red Crescent after the massive famine relief operation supported by the League in the mid-1980s.

It is also shown that disaster interventions and the resulting good public image helped to develop the National Society in El Salvador, which, like Ethiopia, is a conflict-affected country. Adela De Allwood recalls how the violence of 1979 made necessary urgent services to the injured, displaced persons and refugees. "This attracted international aid and with it the opportunity of accelerated Red Cross expansion. The number of branches quickly grew, reaching 56 early in 1980."

Disaster assistance—national as well as international—apparently had a considerable impact on the overall development of the National Society in Ethiopia. Elisabeth Kassaye says that a significant growth both structurally and functionally has been seen at branch level after the large famine operation in the 1980s. Red Cross branches which were earlier identified only with ambulance services took the opportunity provided by the massive relief operation of the 1980s to launch huge membership drives. The total membership of the

¹¹ *From Disaster Relief to Development, op. cit.* Chapter II.

Society, which was less than 100,000 before 1985, rose to 300,000 at the end of that year and had reached 750,000 in 1987.

The Ethiopian Red Cross Society, although it exists in one of the poorest countries of the world, has shown that financial self-reliance may not be merely utopian. According to Elizabeth Kassaye, the regional branches of the Ethiopian Red Cross are now self-sufficient with regard to their core costs. «The branches now remit subsidies to the headquarters, which used to subsidize them until two years back.¹²»

However, it can be extremely difficult to build a sustainable, self-reliant and effective organization in a developing country. Furthermore, it seems to be particularly difficult to obtain adequate support for organizational, or «structural», development.

Tolstoptatov and Kourmaev point out that, unfortunately, donor Societies rarely provide resources for the support of the local National Society's structure. Cutler notes that host National Societies are being assisted by donor Societies largely on the basis of *project aid*—by definition short-term and limited in scope. He sees this as a matter of great concern. As a result of an overdependence on short-term projects, particularly following well-publicized disasters, host National Societies can undergo a rapid but short-lived phase of expansion. The lack of solid foundation for sustained growth—which requires a sound administrative structure with a firm financial base—prejudices future operational capacity when the donors cease supporting projects, writes Cutler.

He calls for increased levels of *programme aid* with a much broader and longer-term perspective, and aiming at self-sufficiency of the recipient National Societies. He recommends a greater role for the League Secretariat and the host National Societies in drawing up development programmes, or, as was stressed by the “Strategy for the Eighties”, comprehensive *development plans*. These should encourage the participation of donor Societies on the understanding that their assistance should be tailored to meet the needs of overall development of people as well as the National Society, and should promote self-sufficiency in both.

6. Conclusions

For a long time disaster response has been considered a Red Cross and Red Crescent speciality but, for at least a century, the Movement saw this as a short-term activity which could be disconnected from development. Few, if

¹² Kassaye, Elisabeth, “The Experience of the Ethiopian Red Cross”, *HDI Working Paper No. 12*, Henry Dunant Institute, Geneva, 1987.

any, regarded the Red Cross/Red Crescent as a development agency. In Red Cross parlance “development” was usually understood as the advancement of the organization itself.

Only in the present decade have new perceptions of disasters and their causes begun to lead the Movement towards the apprehension that the predominant disasters, those appearing in the developing countries, cannot be adequately dealt with without regard to development. Obviously, it is only development—the process of constant improvement of the vulnerable populations’ well-being—that can ameliorate the basic conditions and give lasting effects among the vast majority of disaster victims in the world. In most cases a meaningful disaster intervention must therefore have the character of a development intervention and be of a longer-term nature.

To insist that disaster response should remain the Red Cross/Red Crescent speciality, and at the same time accept that adjustments must be made according to contemporary needs and perceptions, may not necessarily cause a paradox.

To keep the main emphasis on disaster response would mean that the Movement should continue to bind itself to the plight of the most vulnerable and needy people. But it would also mean that Red Cross/Red Crescent interventions to assist these people should be sensitive to their particular development needs. Such needs may not be merely physical. There may also be important organizational needs as well as psychological/motivational needs—difficult to determine without close contact and respectful dialogue directly with the people concerned. It would seem that the agency best suited to maintain such contact and dialogue is a local organization. It would seem that National Red Cross or Red Crescent Societies would have the unique potential of meeting this requirement at the same time as being part of the international support system provided by the Movement.

We have seen earlier in this text that disaster interventions can become entry points for development assistance, and it has been demonstrated that development eventually may be boosted as a result. We have also seen that an integrated, longer-term programme approach to development appears to be more suitable than a sectorial, short-term project approach. It has also been argued that, within the Movement, a programme approach must include organizational development along with the evolution of services. All these points seem to be indisputable, although they may not reflect common practice.

There are, however, two major points which seem to require further examination. One is whether the integrated approach to disasters and development necessarily means the merging of a great number of technical sectors, each requiring its particular expertise, seemingly far from affordable to the Red Cross and Red Crescent. There may, in fact, be too much emphasis on physical needs and technical implementation at present, while the Movement and its

National Societies may indeed be much better suited to play the role as facilitator vis-à-vis the vulnerable communities, focusing on the community-based development process and the “enabling environment” referred to earlier in this article. This is probably the most interesting new field to explore.

Another point for further investigation concerns the usefulness of Red Cross or Red Crescent volunteers in longer-term community services. Perhaps too much has been built just on the assumption that these volunteers would be as dependable in development interventions as they have proved to be in emergency relief and other temporary activities. It would seem particularly important to establish the right balance and clarify roles with respect to volunteers and professional staff when National Societies decide to adopt the concept “From Disaster Relief to Development”.

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