

# Voluntary service: a pastime or a profession

by **Walter Ricardo Cotte W.**

Today, as in a dream, I look back on my life as a volunteer, on what I have learned and what it has taught me about the world. At once I am reminded of what the Red Cross meant to me as a child and young person, and what it now means to me as an adult, after twenty years' personal and professional experience. My experience as a volunteer has led me to a post in which I am both a professional and an individual working as a volunteer (National First-aid Director of the Colombian Red Cross Society). The following thoughts arise from that experience.

I feel that volunteers should be looked at in two ways; as developing inside the Red Cross, and also outside it as members of the community. Combine these two points of view and you get some idea of what can be done with the help of volunteers, and how and when, and what the National Society has to do to become more efficient every day.

## **A pastime**

Some people say that being a volunteer is a praiseworthy way of filling in free time, or a hobby, and in some very sad cases a way of rehabilitating misfits in society.

Modern education has reduced the time spent in school and gives the family greater responsibility for its children's education. It allows young people and children plenty of "free" time, with the result that many of them look for other things to do—sports, cultural pursuits, or group activities—some of which may be quite dangerous and harmful. Voluntary service is a possible alternative for these young people, and for many adults too, pensioners, for example. That is why we have to give this great mass of human potential the opportunity of spending its free time in the ranks of the Red Cross. The immediate effect is to keep the young people, children and adults concerned away from

undesirable alternatives—at the cost of much preparatory internal organization by the Red Cross. However, as a result the Movement gets some sound volunteers who go on to train as technicians or professionals to bring assistance to victims of war or natural disasters.

### **Occupation and personal development**

For most people their “occupation” is their means of livelihood; it brings economic benefits to the individual and benefits of another kind to the community. It requires personal development that begins in childhood under the joint influence of the family and school. Primary social relations continue in youth and puberty, when the child’s knowledge of life expands and a more complicated period of formal education begins; combined with physiological changes and a new relationship with society these later shape the adult and influence the part he will play in the community. Education for a profession—occupational training—comprises the following stages: primary education, secondary education, higher education, in-service and further education.

However, to look at society as a whole, a baker too has an occupation but may not have gone through these preliminary stages of education; and a lawyer, for example, could conceivably complete all the educational stages but have no work and perform no function in the community.

The ideal occupation is one in which the individual goes through the stages of education and development in such a way that he becomes a producer in this community, striking a proper balance between his own benefit and that of other people. This is what we might call professionalism, part of which is a permanent desire for progress.

When we select volunteers for the Red Cross we must look for signs of a professionalism in their lives that will colour their work as volunteers, and seek a genuine commitment to helping the community, whose auxiliaries we are to develop mechanisms to tackle its own problems.

### **The volunteer’s career**

So far we have talked about joining the Red Cross as a way of filling in free time and as a profession, and stressed that a professional attitude is necessary to a volunteer at all times. Let us now see how professionalism works in the Movement.

Perhaps the key word is *education*. To succeed in educating a volunteer we have to bear in mind how he or she normally behaves at various ages. What do we mean by "life in the Red Cross?" It is only another way of saying that there are many paths and that the Red Cross is only one of them. We must never expect the people who make up the Movement to spend all their time serving other people; they have also to progress in the various aspects of their own lives. There are at least three phases to be considered:

1. "Red Cross children", to whom the Movement means freedom, knowledge and a way of spending their free time. The Red Cross gives them guidance and training that supplement their work at school and their family life. For this purpose it runs programmes of recreation and contact with other children, projects such as the *Educational Brigades* and *The Red Cross at School*, and trains child volunteers to take part in first-aid campaigns. We could call this part of the educational process "primary education".

2. "Red Cross youth", who are looking more consciously for new alternatives: above all they seek independence and show a natural desire for contact with the others through community service. They are given education and training and, more important, are introduced to the social problems of their community in a practical humanitarian way. In-school programmes for young people continue at this stage and efforts are made to recruit them as volunteers for Red Cross youth and for disaster preparedness programmes, as promoters of health and, especially, of peace and brotherhood. We shall call this part "secondary education".

3. "Red Cross adults", for whom the Movement is a change from their daily work and responsibilities as husbands and wives and parents, one that enables them to take part in group activities to serve the community and to earn recognition by bringing help to others. They are used intelligently and trained for leadership and to have a professional attitude within and outside the Red Cross. This is the final stage, perhaps the longest as far as productivity is concerned. It covers various large groups of people in Red Cross branches: first aiders, blood donors, volunteer ladies, pensioners and leaders. The leaders must be trained to guide the Movement's activities technically and professionally. This stage of higher education should include in-service and further training, which motivates volunteers and adds to their worth as individuals. Each phase, then, has its own objectives, and each group of people is tackled differently but always in accordance with the

balanced view that “if you don’t help yourself you can’t help anybody else”.

Looking at the Red Cross as a career, it is evident that we shall not inculcate a professional attitude in volunteers unless we plan their long-term educational development. Our aim should be to bring in lots of children who will spend their free time in the Red Cross and follow primary Red Cross education. As young people they will follow Red Cross secondary education alongside their studies and enter into some basic commitments towards society. As adults, and after a process of natural selection, they will become leaders and will apply their higher and further Red Cross education to the dissemination, assistance and health programmes that the Movement is running all over the world.

Just as everybody must go to school, so anyone who wants to become a leader in the Red Cross or who enters the Movement as an adult must complete its primary and secondary education; that is, know who makes up the Movement and the fundamental principles on which its activities are based. This will enable him or her to assess the future, the present and the past and to seek the comprehensive development essential to meet the community’s needs; for knowledge is essential to everyone, at various levels.

### **The dividing line**

The Red Cross is essentially humanitarian, impartial and neutral. Its philosophy is one of non-discrimination. Nevertheless there is a real feeling that there is a dividing line between givers and receivers. Our volunteers often behave in a patronizing way, which is bad manners. Worse still, this attitude causes great difficulties in selecting and training volunteers, who enter the Red Cross like strangers in a strange land. Indeed, some of them are in greater need than the community they want to serve.

The dividing line is perhaps necessary and we must therefore always ask ourselves:

Who are these people that volunteer? What training do they have, whom should they help, how old are they, and where are they to do work suitable to their age? If we don’t accept them, will they fall into evil ways? If we do them a good turn now, will it work out badly later on?

Lastly, we must know who is ready to serve and who is not, if we want to help communities to recover from natural or man-made disasters and save the victims from further suffering.

## **The Red Cross in theory and practice**

Is the Red Cross a philosophy or a programme of action? Undoubtedly, it is the practical spirit that most clearly shows that professionalism in community service means efficiency and credibility. On the other hand, a sound educational programme and constant efforts to disseminate the Red Cross philosophy provide for the future, make our volunteers conscientious and humanize everyone who works on Red Cross programmes or benefits from them.

Here again, there has to be a balance for the Movement to survive and achieve its aims all over the world.

For this, our leaders need to show a little eloquence and conviction, and some flair for administration and organization.

### **Taking advantage of “Red Cross experience”**

To promote progress and development we must take advantage of the experience of children, young people and adults, volunteers and beneficiaries alike. The Red Cross is rich in experience in every small town or village, in every country and in every volunteer. The important thing is to organize that experience and turn it into data that can be analysed; to keep abreast of the times, recognizing that the Movement is not all-powerful and that there are other worthy activities that chime in with ours. Our volunteers come from various sections of society. Some are well educated, others not. We must always try to recruit volunteers from all walks of life. Here too we must strike a balance.

### **Taking advantage of professional experience**

It is sometimes thought that voluntary service and professionalism are totally different things and that voluntary work cannot be professional. But, as already pointed out, volunteers follow two parallel paths—their voluntary service and their educational training as individuals. This nearly always leads them to a profession of which the Movement can and must take advantage. It makes the volunteers potent agents of change, authors of programmes and projects, and potential full-time staff who keep up to date on developments in various branches of their work and examine community problems. These they can help to solve by applying their knowledge and professionalism, combined with their experience as volunteers, in discussion groups, seminars or workshops in which, perhaps, other professionals will take part.

## Relativity

Everything is relative, even the definition of voluntary service. There is a distinct trend towards charity, practical service, altruism and generosity, but the kind of voluntary service given will depend on the volunteer and the organization of the local committee. The level of development of the beneficiary community is also an important factor in determining the type of service to be provided.

The important thing is that the assistance given should always help the victims, who should be encouraged to use initial Red Cross aid as a means of achieving self-sufficiency.

## What do we need today?

We can end by saying that today we need to strike a balance between voluntary service and professionalism, to ensure that volunteers demonstrate a professional attitude, and to make good use of their experience in and outside the Red Cross.

We need to take advantage of technology and scientific development without forgetting the human factor.

We need to combine philosophy with action, remembering that the Red Cross is an activity, not a monument.

Above all, we—meaning volunteers of all ages and the community itself—must always be open to change so that in the end voluntary work earns the honourable label of “professional”.

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