

THE RED CROSS, THE RED CRESCENT AND COMMUNICATION

There is something extremely paradoxical about the modern world. Different societies have become increasingly interdependent, the solutions to the problems facing them impossible to separate, yet at the same time the diversity of those societies is very marked, whether it stems from their growing disparity in terms of development or from the desire of individuals and communities to affirm their identity. As the twentieth century draws to a close, the challenge is to lay the foundations of the true spirit of human fellowship required to reduce disparities and inequality while respecting differences and identities.

Every society communicates. Whether communication is seen as the relationship between individuals or as a means of informing and educating, it plays a key role not only in spreading knowledge and permitting communities to understand each other better, thereby easing tension, but also in facilitating freedom of expression between individuals and between groups, and in safeguarding the cultural identity of all.

In this respect, the components of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement have traditionally projected one unique image. Above and beyond the cultural and ideological differences inherent in any universal body, the Movement has an identity and a specific nature based on its Fundamental Principles and its humanitarian mission.

But it does not suffice simply to observe that this spirit of fellowship exists, or to take a passive pride in the Movement's special nature. Both must be upheld and brought home to the public. The Movement must learn how to present itself as a whole and develop the means of promoting its principles and action.

This is why, in October 1989, the Council of Delegates adopted an Information Policy, the aim of which is to strengthen the Movement's aptitude to communicate, internationally and nationally, a clear and coherent image of its mission and thereby develop its capacity to accomplish its tasks and increase its public support.

The International Review of the Red Cross therefore thought it would be useful to have a special issue on the origins of the Movement's Information Policy, what it means for the components, and its future prospects.

As in the past,¹ the Review wished to associate National Society, League and ICRC leaders and specialists in this feature, which does not claim to be exhaustive. We nevertheless hope that our readers, having read the articles and taken note of the examples and suggestions they contain, will be in a better position to assess what can be considered to be a true strategy for communication within the Movement.

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In Part I of the feature, on communication in the modern world, Sylvie Boiton-Malherbe, professor of communications law, examines the role of communication in terms of the distribution of knowledge. She emphasizes not only all the means available for fostering, with technological support, both greater circulation of a richer variety of information and respect for cultural identity, but also the harmful effects – factors of inequality and tension – which communication can have.

Mrs. Boiton-Malherbe comes out very strongly in favour of a true sharing of information know-how between developed and developing countries. This will need concerted efforts, an open mind, honest dialogue, and the adaptation of knowledge to different cultures, for it is true that only education and training can help change mentalities and further dialogue (see p. 177).

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Concerted efforts, co-operation and dialogue are also key elements of the Movement's Information Policy, analyzed jointly in Part II by Michèle Mercier and George Reid, respectively in charge of communication at the ICRC and the League Secretariat (see p. 191). This policy, which is based on an Identity Statement and firmly rooted in the Movement's Statutes and Fundamental Principles and in an Iden-

¹ See *IRRC*, "Tenth Anniversary of the Protocols additional to the Geneva Conventions (1977-1978), No. 258, May-June 1987, and "Development and Co-operation within the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement", No. 264, May-June 1988.

tity Programme, aims to strengthen the Movement's capacity to communicate specific and effective messages about what it is, what it does and why, while emphasizing the Movement's special nature.

As the authors underscore, words must lead to action. The Information Policy must be a true action programme, an integral part of each component's daily activities. It must enable the National Societies, the ICRC and the League to respond to circumstances each in accordance with their own specific identity, while nonetheless serving the same cause: to create the necessary conditions to reach the victims and alleviate human suffering.

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What part does communication play in the development and promotion of the humanitarian activities of the National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies? To answer this question, the Review asked several National Societies from different parts of the world to examine and assess how interpersonal relations, for example between their volunteers and the communities they serve, and the means of information available to them help to promote their humanitarian activities. In Part III of the feature, the National Societies accordingly describe what experience has taught them, the obstacles they have encountered and how they overcame them. They also tell how they intend to implement the Movement's Identity Programme in order to reinforce their own information policies.

The National Societies of Bulgaria, El Salvador, Malawi, Morocco, the Netherlands, the Philippines and the United States (see p. 201) explain how their information services or their volunteers' daily interaction with the communities can help to promote dissemination of international humanitarian law and the Movement's principles, to develop community services in rural and urban areas, and to back recruitment and fund-raising efforts. They shed some interesting light on the importance of the Identity Programme, nationally and internationally, in eliciting public support and on the beneficial effects of co-operation between the National Societies and the media in their countries.

These articles, through the many examples they give, have the merit of setting forth the problems facing the National Societies: structural weaknesses, lack of resources, the effects of the growing number of humanitarian organizations, which can sometimes be prejudicial to the coherence of the Movement's image. All the authors to varying degrees are aware that National Society activities can really be devel-

oped only if the National Societies have a strictly defined and consistent information policy.

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Part IV of the feature focuses on the future, specifically support for the information services in developing National Societies (see p. 249). Helena Korhonen, Head of Development Programmes at the Finnish Red Cross, reminds the reader that information is not an end in itself. It is above all a support service, a means of promoting Red Cross and Red Crescent principles and activities, and therefore an integral part of development. On the basis of her personal experience in Africa, the author assesses National Society development assistance and outlines an Information Support Programme for National Societies. She emphasizes aid in planning and budgeting skills, the production of suitable promotional material and above all the training of communicators. Such a programme implies a true partnership between operating and participating Societies, one based on the sharing of knowledge and know-how, on respect for cultures and traditions, and on a long-term commitment.

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