

# Practical aspects of information and dissemination

Moroccan Red Crescent

by Ben Saoud Badreddine

What is the true impact of Red Cross and Red Crescent information in the world today?

The International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement's information policy, long a source of controversy, is considered by some to be insufficiently developed and in need of greater attention.

Since its foundation over 125 years ago, the Movement has constantly had to adapt its image to the changing times. This is no easy task for those in charge of shaping its multifaceted image and devising ways to alleviate human suffering, a source of perpetual violence.

The Red Cross and Red Crescent message sometimes fails to reach the people for whom it is intended. This is a problem both for us and for them,<sup>1</sup> since the Movement therefore does not always obtain the support it needs from those who care about victims and those who are striving to safeguard human values that have been trampled underfoot.

Henry Dunant, the founder of the Red Cross, described human suffering in terms so compelling as to convince peoples and governments of the usefulness of adopting legal instruments to protect conflict victims, an idea that was inconceivable prior to 1863.<sup>2</sup> Arguing the need to alleviate the suffering of wounded and sick soldiers and protect human dignity in situations of distress, he galvanized public opinion in support of his humanitarian ideas and inspired many of the leaders of his day to act accordingly. It behoves all those who follow in the footsteps of such a man to ask themselves whether

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<sup>1</sup> See *Seminar on information and dissemination of international humanitarian law as a contribution to peace (Leningrad, 10-14 October 1988)*, a document presented by the Commission on the Red Cross, Red Crescent and Peace to the Council of Delegates (Geneva, 26-27 October 1989) (CD/6/1a).

<sup>2</sup> Dunant, Henry, *A Memory of Solferino*, ICRC, Geneva, 1986.

they are doing all they can to ensure respect for the protective emblem and save all victims indiscriminately.

This question has been a constant concern of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement<sup>3</sup> for over a century as, guided by its principles, it has set its own course enabling it more or less to uphold its basic values, despite the many difficulties it has had to face.

Today, however, deeper self-probing is necessary if we are to avoid lagging behind in a world that has been taken over by cables and satellites bringing information designed for mass appeal and rapid consumption.

Should the Movement settle for its current information practices or should it—and is it ready to—take up the challenge of adapting its needs to the means of communication offered by modern technology?

Continuing unequal access by its members to the abundant and varied opportunities provided by the mass media threatens, we believe, to deprive the Movement of a chance to develop a hitherto untapped potential that would enable it to project a truer and clearer image of itself throughout the world. This is a solid argument in favour of turning to professional communicators.

Red Cross and Red Crescent information and communication experts are well aware of this and eager to ensure that the Movement finds its due place in the media world. They are seeking to do so by rallying the media to the Red Cross and Red Crescent cause and winning their active support for the inviolability of humanitarian values, whose respect will guarantee greater understanding among all peoples. The ultimate objective is to safeguard world peace.

We consider that the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement is best placed among non-governmental organizations to take the lead in this respect, but to do so it must be able to rely on its own resources and the enthusiasm of its members.

The 149 Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, which together represent every value system in the world, constitute a powerful force for the advancement of human welfare. Each Society has a responsibility to assume on behalf of the Movement, for helping to protect human beings everywhere and to promote world peace. But they cannot do so unless their structures conform to the norms and priorities of development and, in particular, include an information and public relations service.

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<sup>3</sup> See *Information Policy of the Movement*, a document presented by the ICRC and the League to the Council of Delegates (Rio de Janeiro, November 1987) (CD/8/2). *Ibid.*, presented to the Council of Delegates (Geneva, October 1989) (CD/7/1).

## Promoting the humanitarian ideal through the media

Morocco, an African, Muslim and Mediterranean country, adopted the modern institutions to which its people aspired on attaining independence in 1956.

One of the country's greatest humanitarian and social achievements was the creation of the Moroccan Red Crescent Society by the late King Mohammed V.<sup>4</sup> This was an event of national importance enabling Morocco to reassert its sovereignty in an area that had totally escaped its control under the protectorate.<sup>5</sup> The emergence of the National Society filled a need that had been sorely felt prior to independence.

From its inception, the Moroccan Red Crescent attracted considerable media attention. It thus quickly realized the importance of communication for an institution whose humanitarian activities require constant public support and whose field work owes its success not only to the tireless devotion of its leaders but also to the unstinting efforts of its volunteers.

The interest of the media, which are prominent among the country's democratic institutions in maintaining pluralism under the auspices of the constitutional monarchy, rapidly focused on the Society's work.<sup>6</sup> This stimulated it to prepare for its information role and use all available means to develop its activities, propagate humanitarian ideals and provide continuous assistance to those in need.

## The Moroccan Red Crescent Information Service

The Moroccan Red Crescent, which enjoys widespread popularity at home, is given broad coverage by the national media, which understand that it represents a key link in a worldwide humanitarian chain. This media recognition has bolstered respect and support for the National Society.

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<sup>4</sup> Royal Decree (*Dhahir*) whereby the Moroccan Red Crescent was created on 24 December 1957. The National Society was recognized by the ICRC on 7 August 1958 and admitted to the League on 25 September 1958.

<sup>5</sup> Under the protectorate the country was divided between the French Red Cross and the Spanish Red Cross.

<sup>6</sup> The major disasters suffered by Morocco since 1959 have been the paralysis epidemic caused by the consumption of adulterated oil (1959-1961), the 1960 Agadir earthquake and flooding during the 1960s.

- **Organization**

The Information Service is part of the Division of External Relations, Information and Dissemination, whose main tasks are to handle all information questions, maintain relations with the media, apply the guidelines established by the supervisory bodies concerning information on the National Society's activities, exchange information with sister Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, contribute efficiently to developing information policies in co-operation with the League of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies and the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and, in brief, help shape the Movement's image inside the country.

The Information Service, created at the same time as the National Society, has a photo laboratory and audio-visual facilities.

- **Moroccan Red Crescent Review**

The *Moroccan Red Crescent Review* was launched in 1969. Prior to that date the National Society published only a liaison bulletin, but the rapid expansion of its activities created the need for an equally widespread means of communication.

The *Moroccan Red Crescent Review*, currently published quarterly in Arabic, has a circulation of 3,000 copies. It specializes in humanitarian issues and carries news of the activities of the National Society, the League, the ICRC, the Henry Dunant Institute and sister Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies which exchange publications with the Moroccan National Society.

This twofold national and international focus is necessary in a country that is used to broad news coverage. The publication's director is an eminent Moroccan information specialist of national and international repute.<sup>7</sup>

The *Moroccan Red Crescent Review*, financed through subscriptions and advertising, is an excellent and independent source of national and international news and information about humanitarian issues. Its large readership includes people from all walks of life, who represent a wide range of opinions.

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<sup>7</sup> Mr. Mehdi Bennouna, director of the *Moroccan Red Crescent Review* and founder and director of *Agence Maghreb Presse (MAP)* from 1957 to 1974. He has also been the director of several Arabic and French-language newspapers and periodicals.

Such publications are becoming increasingly rare among the National Societies of developing countries. This is particularly true in North Africa and the Middle East, where some of those launched in the past have been short-lived.<sup>8</sup> However, each National Society in this region could and hopefully soon will publish its own periodical.

The information services of the ICRC and the League contribute to the *Moroccan Red Crescent Review* by providing material for its international news section.

Why is there such an interest in news of the Movement? The answer lies in the principles of unity and universality that bind all members of the great Red Cross and Red Crescent family. These principles create a sense of solidarity among all the National Societies, each of which is an invaluable source of information about its own country. The exchange of information also enables volunteers to expand their knowledge of Red Cross and Red Crescent activities and draw inspiration from the day-to-day work of others. The Red Cross and Red Crescent image is thereby strengthened and spread beyond national borders.

The support of the national media is just as important to the information work of the National Societies as international co-operation.

The *Moroccan Red Crescent Review* has, in addition to its editorial staff, a network of correspondents at the provincial and prefectural levels. Selected among the National Society's volunteers, especially the young ones, they are responsible for keeping abreast of and informing the editors of the *Review* about the National Society's activities. Some of these correspondents are professional journalists working for other periodicals, a fact that further heightens the interest and credibility of their reports and makes Red Cross and Red Crescent information everyone's concern.

## **Radio and television service**

The Moroccan Red Crescent has its own radio and television service, which maintains relations with the country's media. The National Society is viewed as a reliable partner by the latter, which have given it considerable support and provided responsible coverage of its news and activities throughout its 33 years in existence.

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<sup>8</sup> The *Reviews* of the Algerian Red Crescent, the Tunisian Red Crescent, the Egyptian Red Crescent and the Secretariat of the Arab National Societies in Jeddah.

The role played by the Moroccan Red Crescent, known as a staunch defender of humanitarian principles, in major events within the country is highlighted by radio and television. National and local radio and television networks broadcast news about large-scale humanitarian operations and social welfare campaigns. They also frequently produce special and highly useful programmes on specific Red Cross and Red Crescent events.

While relief associations are naturally primarily concerned with assistance in the event of natural disaster and conflict, other major events affecting society may have a considerable impact on their work in peacetime. Two such events are considered as milestones in the history of the Moroccan Red Crescent.

The first event was of an historical nature. It took place in 1987, when 350,000 men and women rallied together from all over the kingdom to take part in the "Green March" launched by H.M. King Hassan II,<sup>9</sup> during which the National Society provided humanitarian assistance by organizing relief workers, volunteers, doctors and nurses to take care of the marchers. The quality of this assistance and the humanitarian gesture made by H.R.H. Princess Lalla Malika, President of the Moroccan Red Crescent, in providing it were underscored by the media and helped strengthen popular support for the National Society by demonstrating its efficiency and reliability.

The second event was the signing in 1979 of an agreement for co-operation between the Moroccan Red Crescent and the Spanish Red Cross,<sup>10</sup> stipulating that the two National Societies would jointly provide medical and social assistance to Moroccan workers residing in Europe who return to their country every summer by way of Spain and the Straits of Gibraltar. This seasonal migration, which occurs annually in June, July and August, makes headlines and is widely commented on in news bulletins and editorials. During this period, the Moroccan and Spanish National Societies are the focus of national and international media attention, which in turn has an impact on the entire Red Cross and Red Crescent family.

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<sup>9</sup> This peace march decreed by King Hassan II was to mark the end of Spanish colonization in the Western Sahara and symbolize Morocco's recovery of its territorial integrity (*Editor's note*: the ICRC declines all responsibility for this comment, which is entirely the author's). See also *Hassan II présente la Marche verte*, Plon, Paris, 1989.

<sup>10</sup> Co-operation agreement signed by H.R.H. Princess Lalla Malika, President of the Moroccan Red Crescent, and the late Mr. Enrique de la Mata, President of the Spanish Red Cross (July 1979).

Although the media are particularly attracted by this type of event, they are nevertheless also interested in more traditional programmes dealing with prevention and the dissemination of the Movement's principles and ideals.

- ***World Red Cross and Red Crescent Day (8 May)***

Each year World Red Cross and Red Crescent Day also attracts the national media and provides an opportunity to centre attention on troubled areas of the world where the ICRC and the League are active either in carrying out relief operations for the victims of natural disaster or conflict, or in denouncing violations of international humanitarian law (IHL).<sup>11</sup>

- ***Audio-visual means***

The Moroccan Red Crescent has various audio-visual aids to organize information campaigns for both its members and the public at large. These include video equipment, television sets, film and slide projectors and a collection of videotapes, all of which are frequently used in training courses, seminars and for other purposes.

The provincial and prefectural Committees turn to professional filmmakers for the production of videotapes about their activities, which are used in fund-raising drives and information campaigns.

This brings us to the relationship between dissemination and information and the impact that information has had on the National Society's dissemination programmes over the past four years.

## **Relationship between dissemination and information**

From 1987 to 1989 the Moroccan Red Crescent organized a series of courses and seminars on IHL and human rights, as part of an effort to implement the Action Programme of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement with respect to the dissemination of international humanitarian law and the principles and ideals of the

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<sup>11</sup> In conformity with the 1949 Geneva Conventions and their 1977 Additional Protocols.

Movement.<sup>12</sup> It was a very enlightening experience for the National Society, not only in the information area but also in other fields of activity.

The approximately 500 participants were officials from different ministries, members of the Royal Armed Forces, youth leaders and professional journalists. The ten courses and seminars covered every major aspect of IHL and human rights.<sup>13</sup>

The parallel study of these two disciplines is important both for the acquisition of knowledge and for pedagogical reasons, since a heterogeneous public<sup>14</sup> can hardly be expected to be interested in only those humanitarian problems that are directly linked with conventional armed conflict. In this connection, a Red Cross delegate at the Leningrad seminar<sup>15</sup> commented that in her country, which had long been at peace, the National Society could arouse public interest only if it dealt with the highly topical subject of human rights. This Red Cross Society, which is working actively towards peace, has learned that it must adapt its activities to the situation in its own country.

The Moroccan Red Crescent also has understood that it must deal in a comprehensive manner with the subject of human protection. This approach, which has facilitated the dissemination of its humanitarian message through the media, is reflected in the following titles of articles that have appeared in the national press: "Series of seminars on international humanitarian law and human rights",<sup>16</sup> "Committed to the preservation of human dignity",<sup>17</sup> "Medical personnel assured of special protection in the event of armed conflict",<sup>18</sup> "Humanity before military necessity".<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Action Programmes of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement with respect to the dissemination of international humanitarian law and the principles and ideals of the Movement (1982-1985 and 1986-1990).

<sup>13</sup> Programme financed jointly by AMIDEAST and the Moroccan Red Crescent, with League and ICRC participation.

<sup>14</sup> See Gillioz, François, "Seven courses, seven audiences", in *Dissemination*, No. 10, September 1988, p. 10.

<sup>15</sup> See note 1.

<sup>16</sup> Interview with Professor El Kadiri of the Faculty of Law of the University of Rabat, co-ordinator of the series of seminars, published in the newspaper *Rissalat Al Umma* (in Arabic) of 12 December 1987 (No. 1456).

<sup>17</sup> Interview with Mr. Ainina Ould Abjejalil, Secretary General of the Mauritanian Red Crescent, published in the French-language newspaper *L'Opinion* of 7 December 1987 (No. 8158).

<sup>18</sup> Interview with Mr. Maurice Torrelli, of the Institute for Peace and Development in Nice, published in *L'Opinion* of 16 December 1987 (No. 8161 - "La Protection du médecin dans les conflits armés").

<sup>19</sup> *L'Opinion*, 15 December 1987.

One article about the dissemination of humanitarian law, especially among members of the armed forces, asks the following question: "Does (information) reach the soldier or does it remain at the decision-making level?". It goes on as follows: "Professor El Kadiri, the moderator of the meeting, said that the humanitarian National Societies were very active in spreading knowledge of humanitarian law in their own countries and the Moroccan Red Crescent was among those that had done the most in that respect".<sup>20</sup>

Other articles on the subject include the following: "The thirtieth anniversary of the Moroccan Red Crescent marked by seminars on humanitarian law and human rights",<sup>21</sup> "Knowledge of human rights can alleviate human suffering",<sup>22</sup> "The press and international humanitarian law",<sup>23</sup> "Rendering wars less inhuman",<sup>24</sup> "The status of journalists in armed conflict",<sup>25</sup> "The League of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies welcomes the Moroccan Red Crescent's initiative to promote the dissemination of international humanitarian law",<sup>26</sup> "Measures to protect journalists during dangerous assignments"<sup>27</sup> and "Resistance and humanitarian law".<sup>28</sup>

These titles reflect the main themes taken up by the press in connection with the courses and seminars on IHL and human rights. The press showed a keen understanding of the importance of the subject and, by giving extensive coverage, stimulated debate on a much wider scale. This shows the importance of media support if dissemination is to benefit victims and draw attention to the breaches of humanitarian law, which are too often ignored.

The courses and seminars have thus enabled the press to explore an area hitherto veiled by lack of information and thereby rekindle interest in humanitarian issues that appeared to have been cast aside for partisan politics.

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<sup>20</sup> *L'Opinion*, 14 December 1987.

<sup>21</sup> *Le Matin du Sahara*, 14 December 1987.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 6 December 1987.

<sup>23</sup> *Al Anbaa* (in Arabic), 10 December 1987.

<sup>24</sup> *L'Opinion*, 6 December 1987.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 8 December 1987.

<sup>26</sup> *Le Journal de Tanger*, 2 December 1988.

<sup>27</sup> *Al-Alam* (in Arabic), 13 December 1987.

<sup>28</sup> Mohammed Ma'azouzi, Moulay Hachem El Alaoui, "Résistance marocaine armée (1900-1935)", *L'Opinion*, 16 February 1988.

It should be acknowledged, however, that the Movement has not always been enterprising and transparent in its relations with the media. This can be explained by the fact that it had no plan of action combining dissemination and information, nor goals and methods conducive to promoting a better understanding of its ideals and activities on the threshold of the twenty-first century.

## **New perspectives and redefinition of identity**

The Council of Delegates conferred a mandate on the League and the ICRC to create an information policy for the Movement because an urgent need was felt to correct an unsatisfactory situation due not to any failure to carry out existing information programmes, but rather to the increasing speed of world events and the ensuing risk that the Movement's image might be obscured or distorted.

In other words, adaptation was seen as necessary to survival in a highly competitive world ruled by technological change.

The creation of an International Communications Group by the Council of Delegates in 1987<sup>29</sup> was a step in this direction. The Moroccan Red Crescent, a National Society that represents a unique value system and a vast geographic region, is directly concerned with information problems. As we have seen, the current practices in this area are somewhat deficient owing not only to the lack of a uniform policy or even of adequate means, but also to external influences inherent in each country's system.

We also know that information and dissemination activities are still neglected by a number of National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, as compared with their other activities. This does not mean that the leaders of these Societies are unaware of this shortcoming, but rather that the Movement itself does not have a keen enough overall perception of its problems.

The Identity Programme of the Movement and the Information Policy established by the first and second Varna Workshops<sup>30</sup> seem to have set in motion a process tending to integrate the Red Cross and Red Crescent information system into the new international information order. This is crucial for the Movement, whose historical heritage places it at the forefront of the struggle against underdevelopment,

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<sup>29</sup> Council of Delegates (Rio de Janeiro, November 1987, Resolution 8, "Information Policy of the Movement").

<sup>30</sup> Meetings of heads of information departments, 1987 and 1988.

poverty and violence and for disarmament and greater understanding between peoples of every cultural background. To defend humanity is everyone's task or, as Henry Dunant said: "The cause for which we labour must be international, for it is universal. It is the cause of every man on behalf of every other: it must be the concern of all human beings".<sup>31</sup>

Let us therefore restructure the Red Cross and Red Crescent information system and redefine its role in such a way as to enable the National Societies to use it more correctly and efficiently wherever it stands to serve those who need our protection. Not until this has been achieved will we be able to say that Red Cross and Red Crescent information not only exists, but has a true impact on the welfare of humanity.

### **Ben Saoud Badreddine**

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<sup>31</sup> *Information Policy of the Movement*, a document presented by the ICRC and the League to the Council of Delegates (Geneva, October 1989) (CD/7/1).