

## *2. COMMUNICATION AND COMMUNITY SERVICES*

# Communication to promote community services

**Malawi Red Cross Society**

**by Grace Paliani**

### **Introduction**

The topic “Communication to promote community services” sounds simple, but it is vital because it points to the contribution that any health-oriented institution should make towards the general success of its undertakings.

On closer examination it will be seen that one basic communication task, which, however, involves a number of sub-tasks all geared towards achieving the same objectives, is the promotion of community services through publicity.

The main function of information in Malawi (to be specific) is to keep the public—in towns, cities and rural areas—well informed about the aims and activities of the Malawi Red Cross Society. These activities include primary health care, blood donor recruitment and disaster relief. Another important aspect of promotion is that the public should have an adequate and favourable image or impression of the Society; it is therefore of critical importance that they should be encouraged to follow it as something that belongs to them and is part of the Malawi community.

How does the Society go about trying to attain its objectives in communication to promote community services?

The Society does so by the following means: regular press releases concerning all relevant activities of the Red Cross are issued to the printed media and the radio to familiarize the public with the activities run by the Society for the community. In this way, as soon as possible after Red Cross volunteers have been involved in any community service, the Malawi public is made aware of what the Movement is doing to alleviate human suffering wherever it may occur.

The National Society on its own does not have the necessary information resources to reach the public (there is only one person in the section). But by maintaining close working contacts with the news media, the Information Section has been able to reach practically everybody in the country.

Feedback from the public is essential. To this end, in Malawi we have trained volunteers as liaison information officers, whose duties include writing about Red Cross activities in their areas and sending these news items to headquarters for further publication via the media. In this way a healthy sense of competition has been developed among the divisions so that ordinary people in different areas become self-motivated to promote Red Cross activities and those of the community.

Apart from the news media, the Society also publishes its own magazine, which contains more detailed news items about events pertaining to the Red Cross. This publication, which is also a major channel of communication in the promotion of community services, is published quarterly and there are plans to introduce a newsletter to publicize community activities to a much wider audience.

The Society has also used the radio as a means of promoting community services. Everything that Red Cross volunteers have done in their respective areas is aired during our weekly programmes and this gives an overview of the Society's activities in the field.

To promote further our services to the community, the Red Cross in Malawi has conducted country-wide dissemination campaigns in schools and among the armed forces. At all these places, films depicting the work of the Red Cross in Malawi and overseas have been shown to the public. Volunteers are also featured in the films.

Press gatherings have also been organized to brief newsmen on our current activities to bring assistance to the needy.

If the Information Section is to reach a point of relative self-sustained growth, then it has to play a very important role indeed.

## **Other modes of communication**

Communication to promote community services can be carried out by Red Cross volunteers in their respective areas both orally and by practical demonstration.

The Malawi Red Cross has trained 850 volunteers in simple skills, which they pass on to other volunteers and families, as well as other people in the various communities concerned in any way with the improvement of health.

This programme is called the Malawi Red Cross primary health care programme and is run in conjunction with the Ministry of Health. The Danish Red Cross is the sole donor for the programme.

The Society relies on these volunteers to assist in the promotion of community services by their teaching and actions—a word of praise to the volunteers means a hundred of words of praise to the Society. The primary health care volunteers work three days a week and their workload includes health education, immunization and welfare activities. They work without any remuneration, and their voluntary spirit means a lot to the community.

### **Communication by displaying the emblem**

Volunteers are involved not only in primary health care activities, but also in the construction of boreholes (protected wells), springs and offices. They also care for the aged and orphans. For every building erected by them, a Red Cross emblem is put up, thus conveying the message to the community. Red Cross volunteers wearing tabards bearing the emblem are always seen where refugees from Mozambique are sheltered.

Malawi Red Cross staff and volunteers help to distribute food and non-food items to the Mozambican refugees. There are 130 distribution centres. A lot of appeals have been made for this programme and a number of publicity campaigns have also been launched by the media, helping to promote community services. The relief section also cares for victims of natural disasters such as floods and carries out tracing work for refugees and missing people.

### **Blood donor recruitment programme**

The Malawi Red Cross Society runs a blood donor recruitment programme whose main aim is to recruit and retain sufficient numbers of voluntary blood donors. Talks and lectures are given in schools, colleges and private organizations to attract such donors. This is being done mostly in Blantyre, the Society's pilot area for the voluntary blood donor recruitment programme. Media coverage of such events also serves to educate the public and promote donor recruitment.

Continuing co-operation by the public and support by voluntary blood donors are vital for the successful operation of the Red Cross voluntary blood donor recruitment programme. Communication is also an essential feature of it.

## **Malawi Red Cross divisions**

Since 1989, the Malawi Red Cross divisions (branches) have changed their approach from routine traditional first-aid activities to development activities. Most activities help to make the divisions known to the public. To be actively recognized the divisions have set up self-help projects such as the following: Mzimba Red Cross Division has a fully operational tailoring project with an income of K1,500 a month; Nkhata Bay Red Cross Division has also launched a tailoring project; Rumphu Red Cross Division has a maize mill, generating K1,200 a month, assisting the drought-affected areas where the Red Cross is distributing maize to supplement the staple food cassava; and Machinga Division will very soon have four water wells for communities with water problems.

## **Youth**

The Youth Section of the Society in Malawi does a lot to promote community services in Malawi. They help in first-aid activities. Young people in Malawi have also assisted in promoting international relationships, e.g. with young people in Denmark and Bavaria, West Germany.

From 19 February to 30 March 1990 the Information and Fund-raising Officer, accompanied by the Youth Officer, toured 30 secondary schools and colleges throughout Malawi, and met 120,000 students, who were given talks on the work of the Red Cross worldwide. During the talks much emphasis was placed on the role of youth in development.

After the tour we discovered the following: young people would like to continue being active after school, to be fully involved in fund-raising activities and to have a say especially in decision-making.

All this helps to establish contact with young people and makes for successful communication.

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