

**5. THE RED CROSS, THE RED CRESCENT
AND THE MEDIA**

**Information services and the media:
an ongoing dialogue**

Salvadorean Red Cross Society

Origin and development of information services

The Salvadorean Red Cross Society was founded on 13 March 1985. It has been in existence for 105 years, and so has a long record of service in the emergency situations that have arisen in El Salvador. These range from everyday emergencies in which it gives first aid, provides an ambulance service for sick and injured persons and processes and distributes blood, to major national disasters, especially earthquakes, and the internal conflict that has now been raging for more than ten years.

We can therefore say that the Salvadorean Red Cross Society's relations with the information media have developed almost naturally; the media look upon the Society as an important source of information, since it deals with emergencies every day.

Until 1974 the Society did very little to promote public relations and information through the media, and had no definite structure for that purpose. Since then however, the Salvadorean Red Cross Society has had to cope with many events of a social, and even political and military nature.

In 1976, the Society's headquarters were occupied by groups representing organizations which attempted to make use of the Society's enviable reputation to make demands incompatible with our Fundamental Principles.

These incidents led to talks between the organizations concerned and the Salvadorean Red Cross Society. The Society started by explaining what it and the International Red Cross and Red Crescent

Movement stood for, and went on to indicate how it was called upon to behave in order to comply with the Fundamental Principles.

It had such difficulty in getting its point of view accepted that it decided to abandon its headquarters and move into temporary premises in order to maintain its normal services to the general public.

The consequent reactions of various social groups and trade unions did not prevent the National Society from doing all it could to distance itself from anything that could endanger its impartiality and neutrality. It took part in activities that varied from acting as moderator to responding to appeals from the armed forces and the church, and even from organized dissident groups, so as to avoid making dangerous situations worse. There were moments of great tension in which all the personnel under the Red Cross banner showed outstanding courage, loyalty and public spirit.

Information policy

As a result of these events the Salvadorean Red Cross Society formed a permanent Public Relations Department to make the Red Cross image better known in the community and update information policies inside and outside the National Society.

Once the Society's aims and rules of conduct had been stated, programmes for public relations, information and dissemination were drawn up.

To get the new organization going it was essential to engage a professional public relations expert, assisted by an information officer and a secretary, to keep in permanent contact with the information media.

Dissemination

- ***The target groups:*** In 1980 the Society began to give talks to the government armed forces about the Red Cross, focusing on the rudiments of international humanitarian law.

This led to the setting up of a permanent programme, and for this purpose the ICRC and the Salvadorean Red Cross Society each appointed a dissemination delegate, so as to form a team.

A dissemination programme has to be tailored to its audience. Accordingly, model lectures were prepared for delivery to recruits, soldiers, NCOs and officers. Large-scale dissemination activities were started and printed matter was prepared for distribution—even to the insurgents, with the consent of the government high command.

As time went on the range of target groups was extended to include university students, lawyers, doctors, judges, secondary school students and primary school pupils. In the last few months the Society's teaching methods have included informal theatre directed by a local artiste who relies on volunteers from the public. Together they stage episodes that illustrate the basic rules of international humanitarian law. This method has aroused general interest in the armed forces as well as in the sector for which it was intended.

● ***Dissemination within the Society:*** Dissemination programmes inside the Salvadorean Red Cross Society have been designed to lend greater coherence to the reforms now taking place in it. This is especially the case in conflict areas, where many members have met with difficulties and misunderstanding from the very sectors served by the Society. Internal dissemination encourages the will to serve, improves members' efficiency, helps the Society to grow, and prevents the frustrations that may be caused by the conflict situation and the conditions under which members have to work.

Relations with the media

The Salvadorean Red Cross Society has always enjoyed good relations with the information media, because its wide range of activities generates interesting news. The Public Relations Department is constantly in touch with the media and official sources, giving them information bulletins to support and promote the routine activities of all the National Society's departments and services, as well as special fund-raising events and disaster relief operations.

As a result knowledge of the Fundamental Principles and of international humanitarian law has been fairly widely disseminated throughout the entire population. However, the events of November 1989, when fighting flared up again in and around the capital city, San Salvador, were a new experience demonstrating that more intensive dissemination was necessary using every possible communications medium open to us.

The characteristics of modern armed conflict, particularly its shift from rural to urban areas, have given rise in recent months to various incidents in which the Salvadorean Red Cross Society's ambulances were attacked, its first-aiders injured and many restrictions imposed on it in its work of caring for victims.

Stricter security measures were introduced and these, together with the public spirit of all its members, have kept alive the humanitarian activities that are the Society's primary purpose.

This experience, and the experiences casting doubt or suspicion in political and military circles and even among the civilian population on our conduct in applying the Fundamental Principles, prompted us to resume broadcasting jointly with the ICRC. Our broadcasts now reach the entire country.

Staff training

Following the setting up of the National Training Centre, which is under the responsibility of the National Voluntary Service Directorate, various projects are being launched to provide all the skills needed for improved administrative and operational development. The Nordic countries are funding these activities. We consider that many of the goals of the training programmes will be reached by 1992.

The Identity Programme

El Salvador has many organizations resembling the Red Cross, using similar emblems to identify themselves and composed mainly of dissident members of the Salvadorean Red Cross Society. Most of their activities imitate those of the National Society, so much so that occasionally they try to “steal” victims from it. Worse still, some people think these organizations belong to the Red Cross. Some members of our National Society even think there is rivalry between these organizations and our Society, and have begun to “compete”.

Information and dissemination have finally convinced people that belonging to the Red Cross means belonging to a unique organization whose very uniqueness gives a hallmark to its members’ conduct.

This indicates the lines to be followed by the Movement’s Information Policy (the “Identity Programme”). Naturally, if we are to succeed in having this “image” accepted as the standard throughout the National Society, all its members have to make a special effort and show good will.

Training programmes for instructors

We have always maintained that although we may have the best technicians for relief, rescue, first aid and so on, if they do not believe in the Red Cross doctrine, and especially in applying it, they will not have the “Red Cross spirit”. We must all be first-class disseminators who know what we are, what we are doing and why we are doing it.

We have launched a nationwide programme in all our 52 branches to train communication instructors. Their first target will be the 6,000 members of the Salvadorean Red Cross Society. With the help of the Public Relations Department, each instructor will use information to familiarize the public with the Society's aims, first of all by making known what we do (our daily tasks and more exceptional ones). We are sure that "selling" our news will always be a challenge, but we also know that this is the only way we can win the understanding, trust and support of the public it is our job to serve.

Programmes to foster contacts with the media

In recent months we have held seminars for the communications media which have been attended by representatives of the press, radio and television, and government information services. These seminars have given satisfactory results. We have been invited to take part in special programmes, and documents have been published describing the activities of the Salvadorean Red Cross Society and of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement.

Prospects for the future

We are aware that much remains to be done, particularly as outstanding events of interest to the press do not happen every day, and although our activities are to be seen all the time they may not always be regarded as newsworthy. However, we are convinced that we must go on applying the Movement Identity Programme as the best way of raising awareness among all the members of our National Society, we will be the best communicators of all.

We shall continue to "saturate" all the media with our news and use this means, together with our dissemination programmes, as an additional way of attaining our objectives.

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