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## INFORMATION SUPPORT PROGRAMME

### Support for information services in developing National Societies

**Finnish Red Cross**

**by Helena Korhonen**

The strength of the Red Cross and Red Crescent resides in its structures, in its humanitarian mandate as defined in the Geneva Conventions and in the values enshrined in international humanitarian law. The Movement's Fundamental Principles further define its aims and give widely accepted guidelines for its activities. The National Societies with their local branches and volunteers provide the physical network that completes the structure and now covers the entire world.

But a formal structure, however well organized, does not guarantee smooth implementation of our primary task, which is to bring assistance to people in need. The real impact of the Movement is directly proportionate to the degree of understanding of its aims and principles on the part of governments and the public at large. To promote this understanding, facilitate action and find adequate means for that action, communication in all its forms is the key. This is an area that should be given greater attention and priority, particularly within Red Cross/Red Crescent development programmes.

#### **Image or illusion?**

Our Movement can hardly claim to be in the forefront in using research to build strategies. We have a tendency to believe what suits us rather than actively to seek knowledge. Since many National Societies, particularly in our Western world but also in developing coun-

tries, have grown and become established thanks to the valuable work of well-known and respected personalities, we tend to take a favourable image and acceptance for granted. Because we appear in the headlines in newspapers in Finland, in Zambia or in Bangladesh, we like to think that people *know* about us and our work. Although little research has been done on the subject, there are grounds for reasonable doubt as to whether this perception of our image is correct.

The situation varies greatly from country to country. The more “developed” National Societies with old, well-established organizations and greater material and professional resources quite naturally score image advantages. Particularly in our prosperous, Western countries the Red Cross is quite often THE organization enjoying all the benefits of a good image and ample support. When we go to less affluent countries with National Societies struggling to develop, we enter a different world.

In January 1990 the Finnish Red Cross (FRC) conducted a survey on its image among a sample representative of the entire population. A few findings are worth mentioning: 80% of those interviewed mentioned the Red Cross when asked to name non-governmental organizations. Out of these, 60% mentioned the Red Cross first. This shows a sound knowledge of the organization, but an even more interesting finding emerged. Using a scale of 4 to 10, people were asked to judge certain matters, among them “the importance of Red Cross work as a whole”. Here the FRC scored 9—almost the highest possible grade.

As a comparison, when working in southern Africa, moving out into rural areas in the middle of nowhere, it felt good and safer to have the emblem on the car. Passing road blocks was easier; the police and the army recognized it as a “special” sign. But it was not uncommon that people out in the villages had never heard of the organization, and they certainly had no notion of what it stood for.

## **Information services**

Using the term “information services” indirectly implies that policies and strategies, methods and networks are in place. It further conjures up visions of professional staff, with well-defined job descriptions and adequate equipment to deal with often complex channels of communication, ranging from demanding news reporters to donors

wanting feedback information on how their support is being used. It also suggests that substantial financial means are available to produce and distribute information. This picture is true of the “developed” National Societies of the North. Moreover, the need for a well-functioning information service is accepted by the leaders of these Societies, at least in broad terms. Private satellite networks for internal communication are not unheard of, and most of those Societies enjoy more modest technical means for the same purpose. An example of the latter is telefax machines, which are quite commonly used to speed up and facilitate the exchange of information as a basis for emergency action as well as in the daily routine.

Has this situation, taken for granted in “developed” Societies, influenced our attitudes and thinking? Do we tend to generalize and assume that since we as participating Societies also work in developing countries, it automatically means that the Red Cross/Red Crescent is equally well known and enjoys such facilities all over the world? Have we fallen into the trap of believing that the emergency, health and other programmes we implement as partners with our sister Societies in developing countries speak for themselves in spreading the basic message? Do we presume that since there is an Information Officer in almost every developing National Society there is necessarily an information service?

Judging from the measure of support given to the development of information strategies and systems within the general framework of development assistance, there is reason to fear that the above misconceptions are quite widespread. In addition, it indicates that certain perceptions of image, such as being universally well-known and accepted, are to a considerable degree coloured by the status enjoyed by the Western, “well-developed” Societies.

Moving from North to South, analysing the concept of “information service”, a totally different picture emerges. In order to highlight the differences—bearing in mind that this is not necessarily true of all developing Societies, even though many elements can be found at least in the Societies of which I have personal experience—with extreme simplification the situation could be described as follows.

There are Information Officers in developing National Red Cross/Red Crescent Societies, and as a rule they are also in charge of fund-raising. The incumbent occupies an office at headquarters but cannot fall back on a policy, strategy, a proper plan of action or a budget. If there is a budget, the Information Officer has seldom had any part in its planning and rarely has any control over it. Information,

too, often means work in isolation; internal communication and co-ordination even at headquarters level leaves much to be desired. There are pressures to “produce” but no clear guidelines as to what and for whom. Transport within the country is problematic because any vehicles are “earmarked” for various other programmes. Furthermore, the Information Officer sometimes plays the role of Public Relations Officer for the Society’s leaders rather than for the Society itself. As for fund-raising, he or she has to raise funds without actually using any funds and, quite often, without any clearly defined plans or targets.

The basic role of the information service has not been defined. What are its aims? What are the main target groups? What is the message to be communicated to those target groups? What channels are available? All these are questions that ideally should find answers in defined policies and strategies, but these are sadly lacking.

Information is not an end in itself. Having an Information Officer among the staff does not necessarily mean that there is an information service. Information is a support service, a way of promoting the Red Cross principles and ideals alongside the regular activities of a Society, and should be seen as a management tool. This in turn requires management to define policies and strategies, the role and position of the information service in the existing structures, and the service’s duties and responsibilities.

At a time when some developed Societies are building their own satellite communications network, many Red Cross/Red Crescent Information Officers in developing countries lack even the most basic tools: typewriters (not to speak of word processors or desk-top production facilities!), cameras, tape-recorders, etc. Access to radio is still rare, although that is the most powerful medium for communication in Third World countries. Information Officers often find it difficult even to obtain paper for newsletters and film for documenting the Society’s work.

Professional competence is vital to building an information service. Basic training in journalism or mass communication is only a starting point. A Red Cross/Red Crescent Information Officer frequently has to be a jack-of-all-trades who knows how to raise funds as well as how to produce radio programmes, press releases and newsletters. Additional training and the possibility of sharing experience is urgently required. However, few developing National Societies have the financial resources to provide for this—a fact restricting the employment of experienced and professional staff in the first place.

## Development assistance

Development assistance, channelled through and co-ordinated by the League, is fairly new within the Movement. It was not until 1973 that the Development Commission was established to discuss and set guidelines for this type of assistance. And only in October 1989 were the draft Principles and Rules for Development Co-operation adopted by the League General Assembly. The best-known example of League development co-operation is the Southern Africa Programme (SAP), initiated in 1978. It is not within my competence to discuss the overall success or failure of the SAP, but a few remarks from the viewpoint of information development might be of use in making an evaluation.

The SAP set as one of its main goals *self-reliance* for the National Red Cross Societies of the region. This term itself can be interpreted in different ways depending on one's viewpoint.

Much of the support channelled to the Societies via the SAP was intended to strengthen infrastructure and develop programmes and activities. Indeed, during the first years of the programme, many Societies took on their core staff and built up a management structure. With slight variations from country to country, what could be called headquarters functions were established, regional and branch development was initiated and certain basic programmes such as first-aid training and health activities started. During this period the Societies also employed Information Officers.

The League sent technical delegates to many Societies and co-ordinated substantial funds for development. In those years the ICRC also implemented a massive dissemination campaign aimed at making the Red Cross and its principles better known in that conflict-torn region. A variety of methods was used in the campaign, ranging from cartoons to work books for children and young people in school.

The League organized some workshops in the early 80s with the aim of improving Information Officers' skills in both information and fundraising.

However, in retrospect, long-term support for development of effective information services was not integrated into the overall development strategy. Whereas many programmes benefited from outside advisers, Information Officers were largely left to work on their own. Some *ad-hoc* training and support for specific projects was provided, but that cannot be described as long-term support based on continually available and coherent assistance.

Why was this so? How could self-reliance and sustainable development be envisioned without emphasizing information as part of the approach?

There are no obvious answers to these questions. One explanation might be the overriding preoccupation with action at that time and in those circumstances; and also the donor-oriented outlook of those early, learning years. It was far more popular among donors to provide funds for direct assistance programmes—always a good incentive for raising additional funds—than it was to support something as abstract as information. Having been myself in charge of information and fund-raising in a major donor Society at that time, I can only plead guilty to this attitude.

In the recent “Ten Years of SAP” evaluation we see the results. A great deal has been achieved, but fund-raising (or financial development, as I would prefer to call it) and information activities leave much to be desired.

Although I have used the example of the SAP here, there is reason to believe that the situation is not very different elsewhere in the Red Cross/Red Crescent world. Indeed, the region covered by SAP, has, in spite of the above, received more support in recent years than any other region in the developing world.

## **Current assistance**

The adoption of the *Information Policy of the Movement* by the Council of Delegates in October 1989 is a very significant and welcome step forward. The policy rightly gives priority to promoting the Movement and its ideals rather than the various institutions operating under the emblem. This is of the utmost importance in developing follow-up assistance strategies and in co-ordinating action and the use of available resources—human, material and financial. The aim should now be to consolidate an approach promoting humanitarian goals and the specific, unique task of the organization worldwide, without losing sight of the special characteristics of different National Societies, the League and the ICRC in this context.

Being new to development co-operation, the Red Cross/Red Crescent must continuously reassess its work and ask itself the question: “on whose terms are we developing?”

During my three years as Public Affairs Delegate in southern Africa, I learned a few important lessons. We do not necessarily promote information in a developing Society with press kits, posters and films *produced in Europe*. The best training for an Information Officer might not be a period spent as a trainee with the League or ICRC information services in Geneva or study visits to the Nordic countries. The most profitable exchanges of experience need not go in the North-South direction; they should rather concentrate on *South-South co-operation*. Likewise, our Western fund-raising campaigns with their modern, harsh and aggressive marketing methods are useless in a developing country where a football tournament can prove far more effective and where much more emphasis should be laid on income-generating ventures, preferably combined with the idea of service to the community.

From a participating-Society/donor point of view, being partners in development should mean planning from the centre out rather than from the top down. We should not work *for* but *with* our partner Societies. Promoting the Movement rather than its parts implies close co-ordination, particularly between the League and the ICRC. Both can mobilize funds for information support but if one institution does not know what the other is planning or already supporting, the result can only be damaging to an integrated approach.

Continuity is a key concept in any development assistance. If our true intention is to achieve sustainable development, we must commit ourselves for several years. One-year programmes must become a thing of the past. Apart from anything else, it is unfair to sister Societies in developing countries to demand commitments on their part while the assisting party reserves the unilateral right to decide on contributions on a year-to-year or case-by-case basis. Nowhere in the “developed” Red Cross Societies has a deeply rooted and widespread understanding of the Movement and its activities been achieved without years of patient work, continuously redefined strategies and the adoption of new approaches following failures. It requires years to build a base and develop ways and means—and even once all this is in place, the network still needs continuous effort to keep it viable.

Well-planned and well-implemented programmes and activities do carry the Red Cross/Red Crescent message. In fact, they provide the “product” that any good information service needs to “market” and “sell”. You cannot sell a product that does not exist—but a good product alone is of no use to anyone unless it is made known to those who can benefit from it. This simple analogy serves to show that information development must be an integral part of any development

process that aims to promote the Red Cross/Red Crescent's work and goals, with the ultimate aim of creating better understanding and respect for humanitarian values and human life.

## Priorities for the future

The adoption of an Information Policy is an important first step on the road towards creating real information services in developing Red Cross/Red Crescent Societies. The next steps should be to transform the policy into a plan of action and to secure resources for long-term assistance. This inevitably means drawing on commitment and sharing experiences and resources which are largely available in the "developed" National Societies.

The adoption of the policy also indirectly signals a preparedness and a commitment within the Movement to give active support to development along the lines defined by the policy. Otherwise we shall have created false expectations and simply added another document to the archives.

Development is a two-way street; in Red Cross/Red Crescent terms, it involves a partnership between operating and participating National Societies. Partnership in turn means *equality* and genuine *sharing* and *commitment*. Those who possess the means must be prepared to support and share; those in need of assistance must define their aims and objectives as well as the type of assistance needed.

Experience in southern Africa and surveys carried out in other parts of the world highlight the need for assistance in planning, in financing, in providing basic equipment and in training.

Information should not be seen as a fire brigade which is called upon in emergencies or a service intended simply to prepare the ground for specific events. It should be seen as continuous communication, using all available means, building awareness of the Red Cross/Red Crescent bit by bit in every country. Like all other activities, information requires plans and strategies based on the message we want to convey. It must be emphasized that the goals and policies must be set by the National Society leadership and management. The Information Officer's role is to implement, but, as a professional, he or she is also an initiator, a co-ordinator and an evaluator. He or she represents the voice and the opinion of the outside world in the Society.

Planning and budgeting skills are not usually included in the training of journalists. They require additional training and normally develop only with experience. Support for the acquisition of these skills should be a top priority in any assistance scheme, and should include training, follow-up and evaluation and provision of expert advice when needed.

Nothing can be achieved without funds. Promotional material, newsletters, radio programmes, basic investments in income-generation and marketing—all require appropriate funding. However, operating Societies should also be prepared to invest in information. External assistance should be matched to internal commitment. Production of the material needed should be planned and scheduled according to local circumstances. A good information service knows how to reach the different target groups in the country. Promotional material cannot be created without sufficient knowledge of the local culture and tradition. Again, support can and should be available, for the actual production costs as well as for developing creative skills in transmitting the message by various means—from radio programmes and drama to pamphlets and posters.

If we have solid plans and have secured financial assistance, we still need equipment. The basic need is not high technology. Typewriters, cameras and film (and the ability to use them!), together with tape recorders with rechargeable batteries and sturdy enough to survive dust and bumpy roads, already stand us in good stead. We must take care, however, not to encourage attitudes whereby developing National Societies are left to work with primitive and sub-standard equipment. If we are serious about development and want real progress along with greater cost-effectiveness, we must be prepared to invest in modern facilities with increased production capacity, which in the long run will improve output and create savings. By co-ordinating purchases of equipment, the League and the ICRC, in co-operation, could make substantial savings and at the same time ensure more equitable access to, and distribution of, the technical facilities and services needed in information work. Participating Societies should commit themselves to co-financing these initial investments, often beyond the reach of a developing National Society.

The basis for all development is training—continuous training and retraining. All the above-mentioned ways of improving information services require training. Isolated, *ad-hoc* courses and workshops are not the solution. Training in itself requires a long-term strategy in which each new step rests firmly on previous experience. Training

should be accompanied by follow-up and evaluation to make sure that all needs and skills are adequately covered.

This is the most demanding aspect of development assistance. It requires ample financial and human resources—starting, once real needs have been defined, with the training of those who are going to train. In the initial phase, the participating Societies with established information services and broad experience should be prepared to share their knowledge. At the same time, local and regional resources should be identified and mobilized. Co-operation and joint training programmes with existing research and development centres in different parts of the world should be encouraged and actively sought.

Exchange programmes to promote sharing of experience as well as pilot projects in some National Societies could supplement formal training as a means of developing human resources.

## **In conclusion**

Results such as those quoted earlier from Finnish Red Cross image research cannot be achieved overnight. At the same time, such findings prove that they *can* be achieved. It is basically a question of commitment to a goal and being prepared to invest on a long-term basis. Neither activities alone—however efficient they may be—nor an information service alone can create awareness and understanding of the Movement's basic role and principles. But a combined approach, where we ensure equal support for development of the “product” and for “marketing methods”, will in the long run help achieve the Movement's primary aim: to bring assistance to those in need.

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