

*Michael Meyer's article entitled "Public Advocacy" places the question of neutrality at the heart of the debate. Neutrality is one of the Fundamental Red Cross and Red Crescent Principles and is defined as follows:*

**Neutrality:** In order to continue to enjoy the confidence of all, the Movement may not take sides in hostilities or engage at any time in controversies of a political, racial, religious or ideological nature.

*To give further food for thought on the issue of whether the components of the Movement should become involved in defending or promoting a cause, the Review is reproducing a few pages which Hans Haug, in his book *Humanity for All*, devoted to neutrality as a Fundamental Principle.*

## **Neutrality as a Fundamental Principle of the Red Cross**

**by Hans Haug<sup>1</sup>**

The word "neutral" comes from the Latin *ne-uter* and means: neither one thing nor the other. An institution or a movement is neutral when it *refrains from* participating in a conflict or altercation and *abstains*

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<sup>1</sup> Hans Haug, *Humanity for All: The International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement*, Henry Dunant Institute/Paul Haupt Publishers, Berne/Stuttgart/Vienna, 1993, pp. 461-464. Footnotes omitted.

from any interference. Refraining from participation and abstaining from interference can be for various reasons: it may be a question of self-preservation and self-assertion, of the judgement that good and bad, true and false are to be found on both sides, of holding back in the interests of a higher purpose or a special task. Neutrality may however have its origin in indifference, fear and cowardice. Neutrality in itself is therefore not a virtue.

The *motivation* of the principle of Neutrality is the Movement abstaining from any participation in hostilities and at all times in controversies of a political, racial, religious or ideological nature in order to continue to enjoy the *confidence of all*. This motivation is clearly well founded: those who take sides or interfere may estrange or deceive one side or the other, push them away and lose their confidence. States or economic powers may stand losses of confidence but for the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, which lacks the resource of power, retaining the confidence of all is essential for the fulfilment of its humanitarian mission. Only where there is general confidence, confidence of the authorities and the population, can the institutions of the Movement have unimpeded access to conflict and disaster victims and obtain the necessary support for their protection and assistance activities. In respect of the ICRC the confidence of the governments of States bound by the Geneva Conventions is probably the most important requirement for its work in the event of armed conflict, disorders and situations of tension. However, confidence is also needed by the Federation for its international disaster relief actions and its development aid to National Societies. And the National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies can only constructively operate with the authorities of their countries and be active in the whole territory for all inhabitants, if they enjoy the confidence of many people in all sections of the community. Confidence is the spiritual power through which the Movement lives, grows and works.

Adherence to neutrality is meant to create and maintain confidence. It is however also a means of ensuring the *unity* and *universality of the Movement*. Every disregard of neutrality, every taking of sides in hostilities or participation in controversies of a political, racial, religious or ideological nature, leads to tension, contradictions, fissures and divisions within National Societies and within the whole Movement. Like general confidence, the unity and universality of the Movement are also the basic condition for world-wide impartial and efficient humanitarian activities. If the Movement is to be a *world community*, which comes to the assistance of suffering people everywhere and at all times and

which — as is mentioned in the principle of Humanity — “promotes mutual understanding, friendship, cooperation and lasting peace amongst all peoples”, it must strictly follow the precept of neutrality in the event of armed conflict and observe it loyally also in the case of controversies in peacetime.

(...)

The second major aspect of neutrality is the rule to abstain at all times from participation in *controversies of a political, racial, religious or ideological nature*. These four concepts cover spheres which in principle lie outside the mission of the Movement. Above all the Movement has an apolitical character — it has not been created and is not called upon to have an influence on the establishment of the system of law and society and to participate in the struggle for power within States and in the world of States. The Movement is not tied to religions or churches, although its idea of humanity is also rooted in religious doctrines. The emblems of the red cross and red crescent are not religious symbols. By no means does the Movement have a racial orientation. It keeps away from racial hatred or racialism as its thinking and action are centered on respect for the human being and assistance to those who suffer, without any discrimination. Finally the Movement does not subscribe to any ideology, that means to say that it is not tied to any philosophical or ideological system but to its own ideal of efficient and selfless humanitarian commitment.

In an individual case it is not always easy to define where abstention is called for and where participation is permitted and perhaps even a duty. The difficulty stems from the fact that the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement is based on the idea of humanity and has a humanitarian mission to fulfil. Adherence to the idea of humanity and the constructive fulfilment of the humanitarian mission may call for taking a stand on *humanitarian questions*, even though these are controversial and also have political or ideological aspects. Through their neutrality the components of the Movement are *not neutralized* in respect of *humanitarian* issues. They are not condemned to just “sitting still”. Taking a stand is legitimate if it is effected on questions linked to the Movement’s sphere of action and responsibility, such as the application and implementation of international humanitarian law, the ratification of the Protocols additional to the Geneva Conventions, asylum and refugee policy or respect for fundamental human rights, involving for instance the prohibition of torture and inhumane treatment of persons deprived of their freedom.

Whether the components of the Movement, by taking a stand on controversial humanitarian questions, run the risk of losing general confidence and internal unity depends to a considerable extent on the *form of action* selected. A direct and for the most part discreet approach to the authorities responsible is most likely to be in line with the special position of the ICRC and also that of National Societies. The public taking of a stand or an appeal to the population only comes into consideration when direct intervention has failed. Participation in demonstrations — which are arranged by other organizations or groups, above all those with political or ideological goals — is to be excluded. The components of the Movement must remain independent and make their own voice heard.

There is a relationship between the principle of Neutrality and other principles of the Movement, namely — as already indicated — the principles of Unity and Universality and above all the principles of *Independence and Impartiality*. The independence or autonomy of Red Cross and Red Crescent organizations vis-à-vis States, international organizations, political parties, churches and economic powers is a basic condition of neutrality. The more independence is definite and strong, the greater are the possibilities and guarantees for a neutral approach. The relationship between neutrality and impartiality is evident. A neutral movement, which refrains from participating in conflicts and controversies, is ready and in a position to give its whole attention to suffering individuals and help them in proportion to their suffering, without a secondary purpose and without discrimination. Active, all round and impartial readiness to help, taking true needs into account, stems from renunciation and abstention.

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