

The Red Cross, the Red Crescent and vulnerable communities

GREATER SOLIDARITY FOR A MORE HUMANE APPROACH TO DEVELOPMENT

“To unite Red Cross Societies throughout the world in a concerted effort to prevent, mitigate and alleviate the suffering caused by disease and major disasters”. This was the primary aim of the League of Red Cross Societies (now the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies) whose seventy-fifth anniversary we have just celebrated. The League, it will be recalled, was founded in response to the wishes of National Red Cross Society leaders and eminent representatives of the medical world — inspired by President Woodrow Wilson’s ideals — to submit to Societies programmes of action in the general interest of humanity and coordinate their efforts in dealing with the scourges of that time.

By promoting solidarity among National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, the intention was to help establish a climate conducive to peace through greater international understanding.

Unfortunately it took a world war and the loss of millions of human lives to instil the concept of solidarity in people’s minds, to create a universal sense of responsibility for combating all sources of suffering, and to make the Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies aware of the extent to which they were united in their dedication to people in distress.

Although the peoples of the world were not united, the National Societies joined together in a common cause: to combat disease and work for general well-being in every country. From 1919 onwards, there were numerous displays of international solidarity in which the National Societies, the League and the ICRC took part, particularly in the campaigns to control typhus in Central Europe, overcome the famine in Soviet Russia and assist the countless emigrants and displaced people uprooted by the cataclysmic events of the Great War of 1914-1918.

Red Cross solidarity gradually became a constant feature of the Federation’s activities; it found expression in the relief provided in times of natural disaster and in medical and welfare programmes, first remedial and then preventive; it came to typify the pioneering efforts of National

Societies in protecting mothers and children, training nurses, teaching first aid, etc.

In setting up the League as a kind of meeting place for the entire world, destined to unite the peoples of the earth, Henry P. Davison and his followers — who considered themselves as “citizens of the world” — also wanted to break down national barriers and to eliminate economic and social inequalities. Of course this intention was ambitious, even unrealistic, but it had a profound impact in that it prompted the Federation to promote development strategies for National Societies so as to help them set up community service programmes for an ever-increasing number of vulnerable social groups.

*By dedicating this issue of the **Review** to “The Red Cross, the Red Crescent and vulnerable communities” the ICRC wishes to pay tribute to the Federation for the work it has accomplished and contribute to examination of vulnerability as an issue which concerns the entire Movement.*

“Improving the situation of the most vulnerable” is the priority which the Federation has set itself for the nineties. We have pleasure in providing Federation and National Society leaders with an opportunity to describe and comment on this challenge and its implications.

Similarly, experts, theoreticians, practitioners and researchers — belonging not only to the Movement but also to the United Nations system, non-governmental organizations and other research institutes — kindly consented to help define more clearly in this issue the concept of vulnerability. Taking into account radical changes in society and new forms of violence, they show by means of case studies how humanitarian agencies, and the Movement in particular, can help more effectively to improve the situation of vulnerable groups. Indeed, the ultimate goal is to achieve what is now often called “humane development”, namely to ensure that full scope is provided for the development of each individual person’s talents and abilities and that his or her dignity is respected.

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The concept of vulnerability is all the more difficult to grasp since it is constantly changing along with political, economic and social changes. Vulnerability involves more than poverty; it includes dangers which have increased in recent years with the upsurge in all forms of violence, the world economic crisis and environmental degradation. The “traditional” vulnerable groups such as women, children, refugees and displaced

persons affected by an armed conflict or a natural disaster, or the victims of infectious diseases and famine have now been joined by new categories of vulnerable people — youngsters thrust into homelessness and drug dependence and other social outcasts marginalized by the very inadequacies of our societies.

Measures to address the causes of vulnerability are a natural part of development activities to bring about a higher standard of living, a greater equality of opportunity and the enjoyment of fundamental human rights.

In the present exceptionally unstable international context, with its serious disparity between needs and resources and its contradictory tendencies towards ever-speedier world-wide integration and yet ever-greater fragmentation, the development concepts of the years 1970 to 1980 no longer enjoy the same credence.

It had long been held that economic growth and technological development could bring about harmonious development, forgetting that rapid modernization, just like periods of economic stagnation, could cause poverty and other forms of social exclusion and lead to environmental degradation. There has likewise all too often been a failure — or refusal — to realize that direct assistance, in many cases uncontrolled and media-hyped, is no panacea and can even be counter-productive by creating a state of dependence that seriously undermines the recipients' dignity. Examples of this abound in refugee camps.

It is now recognized — and the following articles are a convincing illustration — that the condition of vulnerable groups cannot be improved unless they themselves join in efforts to do so. They must rediscover and make the most of their own capacities in order to overcome their problems, with humanitarian agencies intervening only to help them take an active part in their development. In this respect noteworthy success has been achieved in several countries by groups of refugees who themselves took the initiative of planning their return home and organizing their own social integration, with the support of non-governmental organizations and in close consultation with the local communities concerned.

Similarly, health programmes launched to combat infectious diseases, in Africa for example, must be geared to local conditions; foreign technical aid must promote a balanced partnership with the communities concerned and hence encourage their own active participation in setting up both therapeutic and prophylactic measures.

With regard to medical aid in conflict situations, the approach adopted by the ICRC is to stress the paramount role which local insti-

tutions and communities can play in handling such situations; it thus intervenes only to give a helping hand and not to act as a substitute for them.

*The examples given here in the **Review**, whether of children in distress, drug victims and the poorest of the poor, show how much the family — especially the mother — and relatives, neighbours and peer groups can do to create a sense of solidarity amongst these especially vulnerable groups and help them to improve their situation. At times, it is enough simply to establish dialogue, to listen attentively to the most destitute and help them to express themselves. Albert Camus likened poverty to a fortress without a drawbridge: bridges must therefore be built so that the have-nots of society can become full citizens again and exercise their rights.*

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To reduce the number of vulnerable people and remedy their plight calls for a more humane notion of development in which political and economic factors will have to be restored to their true perspective by making due allowance for the social dimension. The responsibility for doing so lies primarily with the governments and international organizations concerned.

The International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement is well placed to act as a catalyst and coordinator. Its many volunteers are particularly qualified to reach out to vulnerable groups, to involve them in assessing needs and priorities and to devise and carry out plans of action. Moreover, by developing a greater sense of responsibility among others, the message of solidarity which they convey at all levels is in itself an affirmation of human dignity.

Cornelio Sommaruga
President
International Committee
of the Red Cross