

III. The role of the Federation

The challenges of human development

THE FUTURE OF THE RED CROSS IN LATIN AMERICA AND THE CARIBBEAN

by **Meneca de Mencía**

The very title of this work is thought-provoking for any member of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, but especially one from Latin America or the Caribbean.

What exactly is meant by human development? According to various experts, its basic objective is to create an environment that allows people to enjoy long, healthy, dignified and creative lives.

In my opinion, the multiple aspects of development cannot be covered adequately in a single issue of the *Review*. Indeed, whenever we pause to look closely at the work of the Red Cross (and Red Crescent), we cannot help feeling compassion for defenceless humanity and are spurred on to encourage development as a means of alleviating the problems of those we call the vulnerable.

I remember when, years ago, I first began to serve as a volunteer with a group of women, all of whom were doctors' wives. We doubtless worked hard at our task, which was to provide assistance for a group of malnourished children.

The problem seemed enormous at the time, but in the 1980s and 1990s, after I had joined the leadership of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and gained a wider perspective, the plight of a few hungry children no longer seemed quite as significant. I came to realize that although nature has endowed us with many resources we are currently threatened by a growing number of new or worsening ills, such as AIDS, wanton violence, the loss of basic human values, the breakdown of the family, a permissive attitude towards young people, the degradation of the environment, man-made and natural disasters and, over and above all this, overwhelming poverty.

Statistics compiled by experts worldwide give staggering figures for the poverty-stricken and often totally destitute people who make up vulnerable groups. In the face of this situation, the Red Cross needs to find more effective ways to meet the challenges of human development.

A recent study by the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies discusses in detail the need to redirect Red Cross efforts towards improving the situation of the world's most vulnerable people.¹ This study, which in my opinion is a highly serious one, offers us an excellent opportunity to modify the traditional Red Cross approach in such a way as to promote necessary change and remove the remaining obstacles to development. Fortunately, the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement is able, thanks to its many dedicated volunteers, to seek solutions imbued with humanity and respect for the Fundamental Principles, and to implement them for the benefit of the most vulnerable groups.

The study also provides important guidelines to help us give our activities new impetus and assess to what extent our responses meet existing needs. I firmly believe that it is essential to follow these guidelines. Various National Societies have already found appropriate ways of strengthening their activities and programmes, trading in their traditional approach for an updated one, and they deserve special recognition for this. Others are actively seeking new paths and they, too, deserve praise. All these Societies are helping to make the Movement more effective in its endeavour to assist the most vulnerable and needy groups and offer them the opportunity to play an active part in their own development.

There is moreover a growing trend within the Movement to build strategies at the international level, in cooperation with other development aid agencies, so as to achieve the most effective results and guarantee respect for human dignity.

However, the reshaping of Red Cross strategies in the area of community services is entirely dependent on the development of the Red Cross itself. The study points in particular to a tendency towards centralization among many Latin American and Caribbean National Societies. I feel that this problem reflects a traditional work pattern, possibly adopted as standard procedure in performing the tasks entrusted to our National Societies prior to the emergence of the new strategies, combined with a shortage

¹ *Los retos del desarrollo humano - El futuro de la Cruz Roja en América Latina y el Caribe*, International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, Editorial Absoluto S.A., San José, Costa Rica, 1993, Vol. I, 284 pp., and Vol. II, 856 pp.

of economic resources — a key factor which has seriously hampered internal development.

If we truly wish to change our approach and join the international consensus on development aims, we shall have to overcome some serious difficulties. Indeed, the socio-economic crisis in Latin America, and especially in the Caribbean, is hardly conducive to social well-being. However, the international community's will to tackle the problem has already stimulated greater participation in efforts to bring about a gradual improvement in the living conditions of the most vulnerable groups.

The study also strongly urges us to step up social welfare programmes and to include efforts to eradicate poverty as a basic part of all humanitarian work. We cannot turn a deaf ear to this vibrant appeal.

It is vital that we follow, in the years to come, the guidelines set forth in this study and the recommendations made in the Federation's strategic plan. *Every effort must be undertaken to make optimum use of the human and material resources available within the Movement, and to assume the responsibility of making the changes needed to remedy our shortcomings.*

To this end, each National Society must reshape its internal policies with a view to becoming more competitive and strengthening its institutional credibility. If we succeed in making the necessary changes for the future, we shall undoubtedly give greater prominence to the role of the Red Cross and be better able to fulfil our duty to provide assistance, protection and development to the most needy and ensure that they are given priority as beneficiaries and participants in the development process.

By adopting the strategies set forth in this study we shall be able to project an image that corresponds more accurately to the vast experience we have acquired in our numerous activities and is more in keeping with the Movement's aims. We shall also be better prepared to devise solutions and involve our fellow citizens in efforts to promote peace.

The study focuses specifically on 32 National Societies, including the Honduran Red Cross, of which I have the honour to be President. This provides me with the opportunity to comment on a subject which concerns me directly. Honduras is one of many countries going through a period of socio-economic crisis and beset by extreme poverty. Although the population is in need of large-scale assistance, there is unfortunately no tradition in the country of participation by vulnerable groups in their own development. Various United Nations bodies and friendly governments have promoted training programmes for senior staff of social welfare and development agencies and have helped the Honduran government launch community development programmes in various sectors with the help of such staff. These efforts, and those undertaken by the government itself,

have encouraged the most needy communities gradually to take a more active part in improving their own situation. However, such efforts remain a drop in the ocean compared with the enormous needs which remain to be met.

The Honduran Red Cross is striving to bring about the necessary changes and, although it has not yet managed to introduce a social welfare policy aimed at promoting development, it is fully aware of the importance of doing so.

The study specifically recommends that our National Society conduct activities aimed at helping the most vulnerable groups and suggests basic guidelines for doing so. Before such activities can be undertaken, however, considerable groundwork must be done within our Society itself to develop appropriate strategies based on current experience. What we require are projects for the needy in which, as was the case in the campaigns to control cholera, the beneficiaries are the main participants and are thus able to help themselves.

The Honduran Red Cross is ready to reassess and reshape its internal work plan, giving it a practical focus, in accordance with the recommendations set forth in the study. Above all it must mobilize its resources and channel its efforts towards providing services for women and children, especially among the most vulnerable groups.

These comments are offered with a view to promoting follow-up to this important study, in the preparation of which I had the privilege to take an active part, and whose title I believe accurately reflects the problems at hand.

Meneca de Mencía is a Vice-President of the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies and President of the Honduran Red Cross.