

## Responding to global change

by **George B. Weber**

The closing years of this century will be challenging ones indeed for all Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies. Vulnerability is increasing for much of the world's population as political and economic changes accelerate. Constraints on the resources that may be applied to meet the needs of the vulnerable are also becoming more numerous.

### **Responding to global change**

The International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies is now responding to increased migration worldwide, growing numbers of refugees and displaced people, the appearance and escalation of AIDS, increasing socio-economic collapse in some parts of the world and an upward trend in disasters affecting people. In addition, the Federation is expanding its relief role to include displaced victims of war in places such as the former Yugoslavia. We have witnessed the misery of thousands of people who have been forced from their homes in the course of "ethnic cleansing" — a term unheard of before the Nineties began. These people, and others like them, will continue to need our help long after the fighting ceases.

In 1993, for example, it was estimated that there were almost 100 million international migrants, over 18 million refugees and approximately 24 million people displaced in their own countries. The gap between the world's richest and the world's poorest has doubled during the last 30 years. The number of people affected by disasters may reach 500 million by the year 2000, and the main groups affected by disasters are the vulnerable, living in poverty in crowded areas, subject to discrimination, in poor health and receiving little support.

The Federation is also focusing its attention and resources on the health services area, particularly AIDS and first-aid programmes. An estimated minimum of 38 million people will be infected with HIV by the year 2000. Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies are world leaders in attempts to educate about the virus. The Federation's Secretariat and National Societies also seek to update current first-aid programmes. First aid is a key part of the Federation's image and mission. It is vital that the Federation continue to update our life-saving programmes, make them attractive and develop training materials that take the emergencies of vulnerable people into account.

### **The right focus for the Nineties**

The Federation's Strategic Work Plan for the Nineties\* is the right focus for today, one that will unite our constituent parts and make them stronger. There is no National Society so rich or accomplished that it cannot improve. There is no National Society so poor or underdeveloped that it does not have valuable assets and experience to share.

As the Federation's Secretary General, I am wholly committed to the Strategic Work Plan and what it stands for. It will work for an enhanced spirit of cooperation among National Societies, for strong, independent, self-reliant National Societies and for change — since change has become a constant in the world we live in.

### **The decade's achievements**

We have achieved significant results through the Strategic Work Plan. Some regions are using the concepts of vulnerability and capacity to improve preparedness and disaster management training. Others have programmes in place to improve the health and social conditions of the most vulnerable. The community-based approach is becoming more widely used in many National Society programmes, and new activities are beginning to address some of the underlying causes of ill-health and

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\* *Improving the situation of the most vulnerable — Strategic Work Plan for the Nineties*, revised by the General Assembly at its IXth Session, Birmingham, 25-28 October 1993.

poverty. Disaster preparedness is becoming a normal part of branch development. The Federation's Resource Development Programme was introduced to improve the financial capacity of National Societies in several regions. An information management system and a consolidated plan and budget have been established.

Results show that planning is reaping rewards. The combined effects of the Emergency Disaster Appeal 1994 and greater use of the Disaster Relief Emergency Fund have resulted in fewer appeals being launched. Above all, there has been a substantial expansion in the number and scale of operations and an increased capacity within the Federation to manage these operations. However, resources are still unevenly distributed, and much remains to be done in addressing the growing problems of vulnerable people worldwide.

### **A need for resources**

The amounts sought by the Federation in aid of those it serves increased from 22.8 million Swiss francs in 1987 to 387 million Swiss francs to help 15 million people in 1993.

In this time of endless competition and of wide recession, the world waits for our help but does not necessarily think of us when bombarded with advertising campaigns from competing agencies. For the past four years the Federation Secretariat has seen development contributions remain unchanged.

### **A call for unity and progress**

I therefore call on all National Societies to join together to achieve tomorrow's goals, avoiding the tendency to justify their credibility today by pointing to past accomplishments. Either the services the Federation offers are relevant to the real needs of people today, or those services will wither and die.

There are numerous ways we can attain our objectives. First, we need to identify who the vulnerable are in the community. Then we must decide where we will get the resources to help them and what we are going to do. Develop a methodology for the community. Involve other organizations in our efforts. As we create our community vision, we must work on our own attitudes and perceptions. Assumptions need to be questioned, asking community organizations and other parts of the Federation for their insight and assistance.

## Goals for the future

As we face tomorrow, we continue to have much to accomplish. Many of the world's most vulnerable communities do not benefit from a Red Cross or Red Crescent presence. The Federation's Development and Youth Funds, although established, are still very modest. If information databases are to be truly useful, Societies will need to forward relevant information on a regular basis. National Societies must identify vulnerable people within their own communities, even when it may seem that the most vulnerable are only in other countries. Most importantly, these challenges cannot be met without partnership between all parts of a unified Federation and vulnerable people themselves.

The Strategic Work Plan for the Nineties is very much a working document — a work in progress — designed for updating and evolution. It will change in response to the world's changing needs, to make tomorrow's world a better place for the poor, the suffering, the hungry... the vulnerable.

Change is never easy. But the vulnerable and suffering cannot wait. They cannot wait for lengthy negotiations to wind to a close or for answers to wend their way through layers of structure and form. The Federation must act and act quickly — together, today.

**George Weber**

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Confirmed as Secretary General of the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies in 1993, **George Weber** guides the coordination of the Federation's global relief and development effort. Weber, who began his association with the Red Cross 30 years ago, gives executive leadership to a team of 600 staff members in Geneva and around the world.

Born in Montreal in 1946, he graduated from McGill University, Montreal, Canada, and studied advanced management at Harvard University, Massachusetts, USA, in 1989. His first overseas assignment for the Red Cross was in Vietnam, in 1973. He has served as a delegate or head of a major relief operation, development project or survey mission, for periods ranging from a few days to seven months, in more than 60 countries.

He was Secretary General of the Canadian Red Cross Society from 1983 to 1993.