

*At the Congress on the Future of the German Red Cross (Cologne, 3-5 May 1996), Eric Roethlisberger, Vice-President of the ICRC, gave an address in German on the theme:*

## **Faced with today's and tomorrow's challenges, should the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement rethink its code of ethics?**

*The Review is publishing an English version of that statement, which reflects the personal views of the author.*

In line with the general theme of this Congress, which is looking to the future, I should like to share with you some personal thoughts about an issue that I would formulate as follows: "Faced with today's and tomorrow's challenges, should the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement rethink its code of ethics?"

It is not my intention to indulge in philosophical reflections. The Red Cross — now the Red Cross and Red Crescent — lives through its *action*, which expresses the concepts for which it stands. I therefore propose to confine my comments to operational considerations.

### **The challenges**

To begin with, I should like to review some of the challenges facing humanitarian institutions in general and the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement in particular.

The *first* of these is constant and absolutely essential: to succeed in reaching, protecting and assisting the victims of natural and man-made disasters, in accordance with the dual humanitarian principle of impartiality and giving priority to the most vulnerable — in many cases children, women, the elderly and the disabled.

That is what our Movement is about and why it exists.

It is essential for the ICRC, whose relief work is carried out in situations of conflict dominated by violence, to be absolutely independent and apolitical. The success of its work depends on its ability to avoid any

political involvement whatsoever in disputes between the parties; in other words, on its ability to remain, and be seen to remain, truly and entirely neutral.

The difficulty of this task should not be underestimated: in the field, delegates find themselves in the position of having to convince the authorities of one warring party of their humanitarian obligations vis-à-vis persons belonging to the other.

*The second challenge arises from underdevelopment. Outside the OECD area,<sup>1</sup> basic structures are often rudimentary and inadequate, and public authorities may be only partially in control of the situation. The Movement's humanitarian activities have to be conducted against a background of inequality or even social injustice, of demographic pressure, and sometimes of great poverty, famine and ecological devastation. In such conditions, the absence of an adequate support infrastructure is obviously a major problem.*

Are our Movement's Fundamental Principles really universal and perceived as such? This is a *third* challenge — a recurring question which has to be addressed. There is every reason to believe that it will arise again in the future, in an international context marked by the following forms of violence:

- ethnic conflicts involving phenomena such as genocide or "ethnic cleansing", in which the civilian population is the target rather than the incidental victim;
- unstructured conflicts, in which the combatants, often minors or armed gangs, are left to their own devices rather than being part of a regularly constituted military or paramilitary organization;
- unrestrained conflicts, in which the public authorities no longer enjoy a monopoly over the use of force and cannot control it. The result amounts to a "privatization" of violence, and hence of humanitarian action. This is a relatively new phenomenon which merits closer examination.

The *fourth* challenge, still in relation to humanitarian action in conflict situations, is this: how can the basic principles of humanitarian behaviour be respected in time of conflict, when passions prevail, if those same

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<sup>1</sup> OECD: Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development.

principles are not respected in what passes for peacetime in a society increasingly prone to violence?

Lastly, and just as a reminder (for the phenomenon dates back some months or even years now), I would mention the politicization of humanitarian action. Without going into too much detail, I wish to emphasize the fact that the ICRC's position has not changed in this respect: political/military action and humanitarian action are and must remain quite separate. Whatever complementarity does and indeed should exist between them must be founded on that clear division, which derives less, in my view, from an abstract principle than from the dual operational objective of bringing both peace and assistance. Events such as those seen recently in Somalia, Bosnia-Herzegovina and Liberia show that this insistence on separation is amply justified.

### **Action**

Secondly, I should like to say a few words about the way our Movement's activities are organized. We must obviously go on trying to do better, for the sake of both effectiveness (doing the right thing) and efficiency (doing things right). This, too, we owe to the victims, since our failure is their loss.

We can derive some encouragement from the recent meetings of the Council of Delegates and from the International Conference<sup>2</sup> of December 1995: functional cooperation between the Federation<sup>3</sup> and the ICRC is to be improved, and the agreement between the international components of the Movement is to encompass the National Societies as well. On behalf of the ICRC, I welcome these developments.

There is no reason to believe that competition between the different humanitarian players — whether international or non-governmental organizations — will be any less keen in the future. Competition is looked upon, and in my view quite rightly so, as a positive and healthy aspect of economic behaviour. I think the same can hold true for humanitarian action, but only insofar as two essential preconditions are fulfilled: first, a concern for the more efficient use of resources in the service of the victims, rather than for institutional posturing or personal prestige; and

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<sup>2</sup> 26th International Conference of the Red Cross and Red Crescent, Geneva.

<sup>3</sup> International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies.

secondly, respect for the different agencies' respective mandates and their capacity for effective action, together with their accumulated experience.

Because of failure to respect these principles, much of the action taken by governments and humanitarian institutions nowadays leads to situations of muddle and confusion. This type of "humanitarian hotchpotch" is costly in terms of preventing and alleviating suffering. Anything goes, as long as it is conspicuous. This is "bad humanitarianism", just as all too often in the past we had "bad development", which took insufficient account of real needs and the local environment. Inevitably, the price has to be paid sooner or later, and in this case the human cost is considerable.

Here I would add a word on modern management. Efficient management, increasingly geared to requirements, is essential in the field of humanitarian action. In this area as well, human knowledge is not stationary. Adaptability is vital in a world which is changing rapidly. Standing still may mean being left behind. Change, certainly! Not "change for the sake of change", but change to keep our sights on our objectives, which must be clearly defined beforehand.

As far as humanitarian action is concerned, the real challenge, I feel, resides in the *motivation* for change. Simply "doing the same as others" is hardly convincing. "Doing better *for* others", namely the victims, on the other hand, rings true. For lasting credibility, solidarity must come before visibility, and compassion before a media image.

### **A new code of ethics for the Red Cross?**

My third and last general query relates to a central point: should our Movement rethink its code of ethics?

By code of ethics, I mean of course, in the first place, the seven Fundamental Principles which we share: *humanity, impartiality, neutrality, independence, universality, voluntary service, and unity*. But I should like to add, in relation to humanitarian relief provided in situations of conflict, a few considerations which I feel are equally fundamental:

- first, the *permanent availability of relief*, which, incidentally, was the real innovation brought by Henry Dunant, the founder of our Movement;
- secondly, the *protection of relief of activities*, meaning the protection both of those who receive assistance (wounded, detained or displaced persons) and of those who give it, namely the delegates;
- thirdly, the *inseparability of assistance*, which must be protected, and *protection*, which must cover that assistance.

It is worth recalling that the indissociable nature of this relationship first became evident to the National Societies, some of which were chiefly responsible for the earliest international relief operations of the Red Cross. Examples include the 1870-1871 Franco-Prussian war, the 1876-1878 war between Russia and the Ottoman Empire, and the Cuban civil war of 1895, by which time the ICRC had taken over the supervision of operations and control of distributions.

Thus, early on in the Movement's history, a threefold objective took shape. It may be summarized as follows:

- relief (assistance and protection), thanks to international solidarity;
- effectiveness, thanks to proper preparation and control of distributions;
- impartiality, thanks to our neutrality and independence.

#### **Final comments**

The conclusion I draw should come as no surprise:

- Should we critically and self-critically review the impact of our action and the relevance of the guiding principles on which it is based? Yes! without any doubt.
- Should we rethink — in the sense of attenuating or even replacing them — our ethics of solidarity and compassion? Certainly not! Quite to the contrary: what the Movement needs is to strengthen and reaffirm its code of ethics.

My conviction in this respect is not shaken but rather confirmed by the challenges, serious though they are, which our Movement is facing today, and no doubt will still be facing tomorrow.

**Eric Roethlisberger**  
Vice-President of the ICRC

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