

The ICRC looks to the future

If what people say is true and the future rarely turns out as we expect, all the more reason to prepare for it with a clear head. At a time when uncertainty is becoming increasingly widespread, it is essential for us to try and understand what is happening and, above all, to learn from today so that we can function better tomorrow.

Eighteen months ago, the ICRC launched its *Avenir* project, which aims to analyse contemporary humanitarian action and to gain a fresh perspective for its future. In so doing, the ICRC committed itself to a process of change rendered necessary by the many challenges which arose from the extraordinarily turbulent period of history that started in 1989. Operational difficulties related to these upheavals and the tragedies that befell the ICRC in Burundi and Chechnya in June and December 1996, respectively, made it all the more urgent to set that process in motion.

In order to define the organization's future over the coming five to ten years the ICRC embarked on an extensive exercise, mobilizing more than 200 staff members at headquarters and in the field, the Group of International Advisers, various independent experts, and representatives of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement. By mandate of the Assembly, which is the ICRC's supreme decision-making body, a steering committee was set up to oversee the first part of the exercise which, to ensure progressive consolidation, was carried out in three separate stages. The first step was to create a number of working groups, each covering a specific subject, at headquarters and in the field. These groups produced more than 1,200 pages of text containing some 300 different proposals. As a next step, all their suggestions were examined and developed more in depth. The final stage involved selecting proposals and preparing a general summary, the principal elements of which were discussed, weighed up and elaborated at length by the management before being submitted to the ICRC Assembly. After two marathon debates the Assembly approved the *Avenir* project on 12 December 1997. The report adopted by the Assembly sets out a series of key trends and strategic

decisions. It constitutes the reference framework for the project, which recently entered its *implementation phase*. An implementation plan is currently being drawn up and will be adopted in the next three months, after which it will gradually be put into effect.

The document below consists of three main parts: an outline of the challenges facing humanitarian agencies today, in particular the ICRC, the fundamental mission of the ICRC, which forms the basis for all its activities, and, lastly, the strategic options for the years ahead.

International Committee of the Red Cross

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“Avenir” Study: Strategic content

Geneva, 12 December 1997

1. The new challenges

Ever since the upheavals of 1989, the environment in which humanitarian action takes place has been undergoing constant change; however, the shape that will be assumed by the international system of the future is not yet clear. New types of problems are appearing which call for an appropriate response.

1.1 An uncertain future

In the post-Cold War era, the world's communities have in many senses lost their bearings and much of their capacity to give meaning to the future. The vision of continuous progress has been shattered, and there is a widespread feeling of uncertainty as to what the future holds in store. This feeling is gaining ground as a result of two simultaneous but contradictory forces, namely globalization and the assertion of individual identity.

1.2 The tension between globalization and insularity

Globalization is a cultural as well as an economic phenomenon: it is increasingly affecting the very core of national sovereignty and identity. There is a strong tendency to look back to an often idealized past, and sectarian interests and the assertion of various types of identity are invading territorial, cultural and religious entities. In the absence of any realistic prospects of progress, the tension between the two processes persists and fuels many conflicts, most of which are internal. Inequalities between regions and social groupings also contribute to sustaining tension. Although it is perhaps unwise to make predictions in this sphere, everything suggests that armed violence and conflicts arising from the trend towards the fragmentation of societies will continue in the years to come, with an increasing impact on the civilian population. This at least is the conclusion that may be drawn from an analysis of the potential for conflict on the regional level.

1.3 The emergence of new players and the weakening of the State

New protagonists and new elements in the equation of power are emerging and asserting themselves on the local and international scene. Specifically, these are associations and NGOs belonging to civil society, economic players, and new perpetrators of violence who are increasingly beyond State control.

Weakened States, for their part, are attempting to transform themselves by ceding some of their prerogatives to civil society and economic forces. Nevertheless, States remain the key players in the international system and the most influential among them wish to play a role in resolving crises. Against this background, and for want of sufficient political will or influence, some States are more inclined to turn to emergency humanitarian action, which they perceive as a valuable means of gaining legitimacy.

1.4 The growing complexity of the humanitarian environment

Among many professionals working in the humanitarian sector, uncertainty is giving way to confusion, caused by a combination of factors that affect the credibility and overall functioning of the humanitarian sphere.

First, victims' needs are changing with the changing nature of crises. These needs have become more difficult to define, particularly in view of the intermittent character of many conflicts and the economic

implications of humanitarian bounty. Ranging as they do from the occasional to the chronic, and whether they arise in an emergency situation or a development phase, needs have to be defined using a new and relevant approach.

Another factor is the growth and proliferation of humanitarian agencies providing resources on both a small and a large scale. Though a welcome development in itself, this phenomenon and the competition and confusion to which it obviously gives rise cause problems in both ethical and operational terms. Within the Movement, the difficulties relating to the distribution of tasks between the various components illustrate this kind of problem.

Humanitarian action itself is also changing, in terms of both its working methods and the way it is perceived. In this perspective the growing involvement of political players in the “humanitarian market” — and especially the action taken by forces mobilized by the United Nations and by various regional organizations in quest of new roles — may be seen as a strong trend for the years to come.

Then there is the erosion of moral and humanitarian values, which has an adverse effect on respect for human dignity. In many contexts, this means greater difficulty in persuading parties to conflict to accept humanitarian action and to allow access to the victims, and greater danger for humanitarian workers.

1.5 The internal challenge for the ICRC

Last but not least, the spotlight must be focused on the internal workings of the ICRC, its strengths and its weaknesses. This means taking the full measure of areas where there are shortcomings and those that show potential before embarking on the changes that have to be made on the operational level and in terms of structural organization, always bearing in mind that the motivation and commitment of all its staff members is the ICRC’s most precious asset.

In this unstable context, the ICRC must strive to enhance the overall coherence of humanitarian thinking and action and must adapt to the circumstances without losing its identity.

The response to these new challenges will require strategic choices guided by the mission which the ICRC has defined for itself and which is broadly recognized.

2. The ICRC's mission

The ICRC acts on a purely humanitarian basis. Its protection and assistance work is designed to promote implementation of humanitarian law and the universal humanitarian principles, taking into account the legal standards and the specific cultural, ethical and religious features of the environment in which it operates. The ICRC maintains relations with all States and with all parties actually or potentially involved in violence, in order to make them aware of their responsibilities in the humanitarian sphere. As a member of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement — of which it is the founder — the ICRC works to ensure respect for the Fundamental Principles and cooperates primarily with the National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies and their Federation. It also acts in consultation with all the other humanitarian agencies.

The exclusively humanitarian mission of the ICRC is to protect the lives and dignity of victims of war and internal violence and to forestall the suffering engendered by such situations

- by taking direct action at the level of the victims
- by assuming its role as a neutral and independent institution and intermediary
- by influencing the conduct of all actual and potential perpetrators of such violence through dialogue, the establishment of standards of conduct and the dissemination of humanitarian law and of the principles of the Movement.

3. Strategy

In order to meet the new challenges and fulfil this mission in the environment of the future, a major change of strategy is required. This will have to be achieved on the basis of four main priorities, while maintaining the complementary relationship between humanitarian reflection and humanitarian action:

- restoring independent humanitarian action and knowledge of and respect for humanitarian law and principles to their proper status;
- bringing humanitarian action close to the victims, looking to the long term and establishing priorities;
- strengthening dialogue with all players;
- increasing the ICRC's efficiency.

3.1 Restoring independent humanitarian action and knowledge of and respect for humanitarian law and principles to their proper status

The ICRC intends to remain the promoter of humanitarian action based on the demands of humanity, maintaining an impartial, neutral and independent approach. The challenge it faces is to reach and influence, by means of dialogue, all actual or potential perpetrators of violence, placing emphasis on the moral dimension and putting persuasion before condemnation.

The ICRC is the only organization which is expressly entrusted with a specific mandate by international humanitarian law. In this capacity, it reaffirms its resolve to assume the role of guardian of humanitarian law. Faced with the serious and large-scale violations which attack the very foundations of this law, the ICRC must redouble efforts to achieve, in peacetime, better knowledge, understanding and respect for its principles and scope. The ICRC must also maintain its commitment to the development of humanitarian law, but without launching into a full-scale revision of the law of Geneva, which might prove to be a risky undertaking. This means opting for a selective approach aimed at clarifying and developing humanitarian law in areas where the lack of legal prescriptions penalizes the victims, and promoting use of the available implementation mechanisms. The relationship between humanitarian law and human rights law must be strengthened, as this would be conducive to the production of instruments geared to realities in the field.

The values underlying humanitarian law provide an essential reference point in the current diversity of cultures and operational contexts. These values, of which the ICRC is a guardian, must be incorporated in a message that is systematically propagated and constantly adapted to the cultural environment for which it is intended.

In an increasingly comprehensive approach to crises in which political responsibility, military operations and humanitarian action are interdependent, the ICRC must preserve a space for humanitarian action, which may be defined both as the complementary relationships among all the players working simultaneously in a conflict situation and as the autonomy required for independent, neutral, impartial and non-coercive humanitarian action.

The development of a code of professional ethics for humanitarian players must be encouraged. In particular, this means ensuring knowledge of and respect for the Fundamental Principles within the Movement and, in conjunction with the Federation, setting up mechanisms to strengthen the integrity of the National Societies and to enhance the unity and overall coherence of the Movement. The drafting and promotion of codes of conduct with other humanitarian agencies will also be pursued.

3.2 *Bringing humanitarian action close to the victims, looking to the long term and establishing priorities*

Working in closer proximity to the victims is the objective for the future. This idea of proximity, which was very much in the forefront of everyone's mind during the meeting of heads of delegation in Glion in January 1997 following the tragic events of Novye Atagi, is one of the key concepts of the *Avenir* project. It is based on the premise that staying close to the victims is the best way of ensuring their protection.

The ICRC must give more weight to its delegations and allow them greater autonomy. It considers it vitally important to deploy greater efforts in the field to enhance its acceptability by all those involved in violence. To this end, it must take even more care to include the local dimension in every operation. In this connection, the ICRC intends to rely more on its national staff members and on the expertise and material resources available locally. Similarly, relations with the operating National Societies will be consolidated. Improved consistency in operations is bound to lead ultimately to improved security.

The ICRC also intends to pay more attention to the overall context in which it operates and to examine carefully the pattern of local socio-economic interests of which the needs of the victims form a part. The aim here is to avoid isolating specific categories of victims and to give more prominence in projects to qualitative aspects relating to the dignity of the protected persons.

The proximity referred to above also encompasses familiarity with the local culture, which makes it possible to gain a better understanding and to anticipate the thinking of the different players, and also helps them to understand the objectives of the ICRC. Indeed, comprehension of the ICRC's humanitarian message often depends on the existence of corresponding tenets in local custom. A more receptive approach must therefore be encouraged by strengthening direct cooperation with the operating National Societies, while involving them as far as possible in project delegations and bilateral projects.

Looking to the long term, conflicts develop in a chaotic and above all an intermittent manner. Their heterogeneity in time and space causes the ICRC to overstep the strict limits of emergency action in favour of continuity. The ICRC's role and responsibilities within the time-frame of situations of internal disturbances or tension, conflict and "stalled" conflict must therefore be adapted and specified at every stage, particularly with regard to the other players involved. Within the Movement, the ICRC's

general leadership in situations of internal disturbances, conflict and “stalled” conflict must be fully effective, in accordance with the letter and spirit of the Agreement on the organization of the international activities of the components of the Movement, and must rely on closer cooperation with the National Societies and their Federation.

Turning now to interaction with other humanitarian players in conflict situations, the ICRC would like to enhance the overall coherence of humanitarian activities by being available to ensure the coordination of emergency assistance operations, under conditions that guarantee the independence of its action.

In the sphere of preventive action, the ICRC invites States to take the necessary national measures in peacetime, in particular with regard to the dissemination of international humanitarian law and the adoption of penal sanctions for violations. It also promotes the teaching of international humanitarian law and reflection on its underlying principles, among interested circles. In addition it endeavours, but on a more targeted basis, to contribute to the easing of tension through its operations and to draw emergency situations to the attention of the international community in the framework of humanitarian diplomacy.

Proceeding gradually, the ICRC first of all tries to persuade the State authorities to take direct action. If they are unable to do so, it initiates its own operations, taking care to give priority to supportive activities designed to help local services become self-sufficient rather than substituting for them.

This increased emphasis on proximity and on the long term means that the ICRC must set clear priorities for its action, taking into account the responsibilities incumbent on it by virtue of international humanitarian law and the Statutes of the Movement. It does so on the basis of the following parameters:

- the urgency of the victims’ needs and of preventive activities to avoid any recurrence of their suffering;
- the extent to which the local authorities are able and willing to cooperate, and their reliability;
- the ICRC’s capacity for supervision;
- the activities of other humanitarian players.

3.3 Strengthening dialogue with all concerned

The multiplicity of entities involved and the diversity of their roles and interests adds to the complexity of the humanitarian environment, and must be taken into account in a coordinated manner at the institutional level.

To this end, the ICRC intends to adapt and strengthen its humanitarian diplomacy, which may be defined as its overall policy of external relations aimed at spreading knowledge of international humanitarian law, applying and ensuring the application of its provisions, facilitating the accomplishment of the institution's mission and promoting independent humanitarian action.

This means that the ICRC must direct its energy to a systematic effort to maintain contact with all the entities concerned, in particular States, the various centres of power in civil society — including economic circles and special interest and pressure groups — and new non-State players such as guerrilla forces, paramilitary groups, private armies, and even groups that might be connected with organized crime. In this context, it intends to establish a humanitarian platform, that is, a mechanism for identifying and updating the institution's agenda of priority issues and of the problems and challenges to be anticipated and solved by mobilizing the international community in a targeted manner.

As far as humanitarian players are concerned, the first strategic priority must be the Movement, which originated with the ICRC. Relations with the Movement's various components must be intensified and enhanced, so that it can become the essential independent force for humanitarian action throughout the world. The links forged with the National Societies must be strengthened by engaging in dialogue at several levels.

The ICRC intends to develop its relations with other humanitarian players. In particular, it wants to establish alliances with NGOs and intergovernmental agencies that share its ethical standards and humanitarian principles.

In all its relations, the ICRC will move towards greater openness and complementarity.

3.4 Enhancing the ICRC's efficiency

For the ICRC, operating more efficiently in a complex and uncertain environment while preserving its identity is a challenge calling for improvements in the way the institution functions. This touches on various priority areas such as training and properly planned internationalization

of staff, reflection on operational and policy matters, evaluation and monitoring, communication, funding, interaction between headquarters and the field, and decision-making structures.

The ICRC must strengthen its capacity for deliberation and analysis, so as to guarantee the overall coherence of its activities while devising different responses tailored to various contexts. Thinking on operational and policy matters must be better coordinated and encompass all the realities of conflict situations, in particular through a multidisciplinary approach that takes due account of the economic dimension of conflicts. This intensified reflection on operational and policy matters must continue to demonstrate the ICRC's willingness to learn lessons from its activities. Externally, the institution's ideas and expertise are factors of persuasion and credibility which should be used to greater advantage in the context of humanitarian diplomacy and in the public debate on humanitarian action.

The ICRC's capacity for devising strategies must also be strengthened by developing new methods and tools for analysis, so as to ensure that constantly reassessed planning is effective and that impact evaluation and monitoring are an integral part of project implementation.

The balance between the respective roles of headquarters and the field needs to be readjusted, for two purposes: on the one hand to remedy the unduly cumbersome and compartmentalized headquarters structure by concentrating its activities on the strategic level in order to develop guidelines for action, to provide the required expertise and to plan, monitor and supply the necessary support for the field; and on the other hand to allow the field greater autonomy by strengthening its capacity for adapting action to the environment. This decentralization must be achieved in a gradual and functional manner, using organizational and management tools that remain to be defined. In any event, it is important to bear in mind the primary aim of the exercise, namely maintaining proximity to the victims as a means of protecting them.

As regards the ICRC's structure, there is a need for a move towards greater clarity in terms of competence and responsibilities. This process must begin at the top, in order to achieve a more precise distinction between the Assembly and the executive level. Such an approach entails some essential changes: restoration of the Assembly to its original *raison d'être*, abolition of the Executive Board, and the establishment of a governing body. At the functional level, the effort to clarify competence and responsibilities must be pursued and must create the synergy that is indispensable for improved institutional functioning.

The maintenance of single-nationality membership of the Assembly, which is necessary to preserve the ICRC's independence, must be accompanied by a more receptive attitude to cultural diversity, taking the concrete form of closer consultations with the Group of International Advisers and the leaders of the National Societies.

Functioning more effectively in a complex and uncertain environment will ultimately enhance the security, mobility and motivation of ICRC staff members.