

Cooperation between National Societies and the International Committee of the Red Cross: an essential and demanding partnership

by **Jean-Luc Blondel**

The ICRC has always maintained contacts, often close ones, with the National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies. According to Article 3 of the Statutes of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, “the National Societies form the basic units and constitute a vital force of the Movement”. In this sense, the ICRC regards them as special partners in the conduct of its humanitarian activities, as it recently re-emphasized in its strategic study on the organization’s future, which it shared with all the National Societies in a letter dated 16 December 1997: “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” (emphasis added).

This issue of the *Review* focuses largely on *cooperation* between the National Societies and the ICRC. In this article, we shall try to clarify the reasons for and the requirements of such cooperation, dealing only indirectly with the specific topic of the ICRC’s contribution to the *development* of National Societies, to which the *Review* devoted its issue of

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May-June 1988 and many aspects of which remain valid today. As responsibility in terms of outside support for the development of National Societies rests primarily with the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies — which has adopted many important decisions and published numerous documents on the subject — the ICRC, which here plays an auxiliary role, has not developed any policy of its own in the matter but seeks to follow the directives outlined by the International Federation. On the other hand, the manner in which it regards its working relations with National Societies in areas that fall within its mandate requires some clarification, and that is the aim of the considerations set out below.

Cooperation: the very basis of the Movement

When it was founded, the Movement gave priority to emergency humanitarian action and an immediate and effective response to the plight of victims of armed conflict, and later extended its terms of reference to other destructive events. Over the years, the National Societies and their Federation have developed new activities capable of dealing with different forms of suffering and threats affecting individuals and entire populations — even outside the context of conflicts and other emergency situations. The ICRC for its part has retained its “specialization” in the following two main fields, each of which has a number of significant ramifications:

- planning and conduct of impartial and independent international humanitarian operations for victims of armed conflict and violence;
- formulation, implementation and dissemination of international humanitarian law, and constructive participation in the development of legal instruments and mechanisms capable of enhancing protection of the individual and human dignity.

The Statutes of the Movement and a number of resolutions adopted by International Conferences of the Red Cross and Red Crescent and even by bodies outside the Movement emphasize the dual role that the ICRC is called upon to play. The *Agreement on the organization of the international activities of the components of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement*, adopted on 26 November 1997 by the Council of Delegates in Seville, Spain, further confirmed the above tasks.

The specific responsibilities of the ICRC in no way preclude association with the National Societies, whether the latter are affected by an armed conflict requiring ICRC action or, more generally, whether they

wish to help promote greater respect for international humanitarian law or to share in activities for conflict victims. On the contrary, since its inception the ICRC has sought to ensure that, with the creation of new National Societies, provision was made for observance of the Fundamental Principles, particularly those of humanity, impartiality and independence, and for the development of activities aimed at assisting victims of armed conflict. The ICRC's desire to cooperate with the National Societies thus goes back to the very origins of the Red Cross. This is aptly illustrated by the fact that the ICRC is responsible for the recognition of National Societies and for consistently monitoring respect for the Fundamental Principles and for the emblem of the red cross or red crescent, which is the distinctive sign identifying the Movement. Although the ICRC has not always pursued that original objective with equal vigour and constancy, the latter has nevertheless gained strength and coherence over time.

The steps that the ICRC takes to protect the integrity of National Societies (for example against possible outside political interference) and to enhance respect for the Fundamental Principles are an essential component of its strategy for strengthening these Societies. They also contribute to making the Movement an essential and autonomous force for humanitarian action worldwide. In the efforts it deploys within the Movement to promote observance of the Fundamental Principles, which is also a way of demonstrating its desire to cooperate, the ICRC lays special emphasis on dialogue and persuasion, when giving advice on the drafting or implementation of National Society statutes or when commenting on the way in which a Society's statutory bodies function. Indeed, sanctions — although these cannot be ruled out in exceptional cases — are not usually the best means for the ICRC or the International Federation to help a National Society beset by difficulties; the most effective course of action in the medium or long term is to boost the Society's operational capacity and to promote its institutional development. The fact nevertheless remains that each National Society has a permanent duty to know, apply and spread awareness of the Fundamental Principles, both within its own organization and in the activities it undertakes.

Operational cooperation: a constantly developing process

Beginning with National Societies with which the ICRC conducts activities in aid of conflict victims, the overall objective of joint efforts may be defined as follows: bringing the victims the aid they need, impartially, efficiently and rapidly. The degree of association between the

ICRC and the National Society working with it will vary depending on two main factors:

- the Society's own initial capacity (prior to the conflict) and its willingness to commit resources to its development;
- the political and material constraints peculiar to any conflict situation, which may, to varying degrees, restrict the National Society's scope of action.

The ICRC's role as a neutral and independent intermediary, established in the Geneva Conventions and the Statutes of the Movement, may sometimes compel the organization to act alone in certain circumstances, and a National Society's mandate is not limited to the activities it carries out together with the ICRC. National Societies have their own specific tasks, some of which will continue in times of conflict or violence. The areas where joint action is taken are therefore those in which the ICRC and the National Societies will seek to establish and consolidate their partnership.

The spheres of operational cooperation are well known, and a simple reminder will suffice here:

- preparing and carrying out plans or activities aimed at raising awareness of international humanitarian law and the Fundamental Principles, at promoting the implementation of humanitarian law and at enhancing protection of the emblem;
- ensuring the efficient organization and operation of tracing services (to gather information on missing persons, to arrange for the exchange of messages between separated relatives and to bring dispersed family members together again);
- making preparations for a relief operation in the event of armed conflict or violence and, where necessary, conducting a joint operation in aid of the victims.

In all the above spheres, *training* is one of the keys to success, and the ICRC endeavours — if need be in cooperation with the International Federation — to increase its support for National Society staff members and volunteers. It must also step up its efforts to induce its own staff to work in a spirit of cooperation with the other components of the Movement.

In June 1997, during an ICRC seminar for all field staff (many of them from National Societies) involved in programmes conducted jointly by the

ICRC and National Societies, the pros and cons of cooperation between the Movement's components were weighed up. Among the negative experiences, we may mention:

- excessive dependence of certain National Societies on outside aid, or a programme orientation governed by the interests of the donor (the ICRC or the "participating" National Society) rather than by concern for the long-term development of the "operating" Society;
- lack of continuity among the senior staff of National Societies, or excessive fluctuations in the determination to pursue objectives fixed in cooperation with their predecessors (to some extent, this difficulty also arises with the succession of heads of ICRC delegations or some of their staff);
- launching of limited programmes of action without any orientation towards the future, for lack of a proper development plan or even a simple assessment of needs and planning of activities;
- lack of training among ICRC delegates, or reluctance of some senior staff members to intensify their working relations with National Societies;
- insufficient coordination among the various components of the Movement, including National Societies taking part in a relief or development operation.

Among the factors which have led to successful cooperation, we should emphasize in particular:

- the assessment of needs and the amount of outside aid required, as defined by the community itself (external assistance to be provided in support of an already existing activity, rather than to initiate a new one);
- priority action to strengthen the branches of a National Society (and not only its central infrastructure), and development of the capacities of volunteers through well-defined and consistent training;
- long-term commitment of the persons involved, whether the action taken begins before or after the outbreak of a conflict or in any other circumstance;
- mutual respect between the various partners and the search for synergies between the "operating" National Society, the ICRC and the "participating" National Societies, within or outside the context of a programme run by the International Federation.

The above points do not reflect all the negative and positive features of the programmes conducted by the ICRC together with National Societies, but they may provide useful guidance for future work.

As regards cooperation with “participating” National Societies, which lend practical support for ICRC operations by sending delegates, giving financial assistance or assuming responsibility for certain programmes, the search for synergies should continue on the strength of recent experience acquired in particular through “project delegations” and, albeit to a lesser extent, “bilateral projects”.

Recognizing the motive role of the International Federation in the development of National Societies, the ICRC sees its own responsibility as follows:

- to contribute actively to the harmonization of steps taken by the various players within the Movement in order to consolidate the operational capacities of National Societies;
- to provide consistent and efficient support towards the development of National Societies, through effective coordination with the International Federation — particularly in establishing regional priorities.

The provisions of the *Agreement on the organization of the international activities of the components of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement* of 26 November 1997 and the spirit in which this Agreement was received and endorsed would seem to augur better consultation and new mechanisms for cooperation within the Movement. The ICRC intends to contribute actively to the process.

“To cooperate is to know how to listen”

This motto, which is that of Helvetas, the Swiss association for development cooperation, could be given a prominent place among the policies of the Movement. Indeed, dialogue is crucial in the search for common strategies and in achieving a balance between everyone’s legitimate interests. We have already referred to the concept of *partnership*, and the time has now come to define it with a greater degree of precision.

To be a partner in the simple sense of the term means that every one must play their part and feel solidarity with the other participants in a joint undertaking. This is indeed how partnership should be understood within the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, where each component has its own mandate, capacities and activities. The specific

nature of the respective responsibilities, rather than constituting an obstacle to cooperation, is in fact a condition for the various components to work together successfully, because although their responsibilities are distinct their roles can — and indeed must — be complementary. Diversity is a strength. Certain tasks are so broad in scope that they naturally require joint action, while others — depending on the time and place — have to be carried out by a single organization, but all must bear witness to the fact that the Movement is a united entity. We might add that the Movement's components are united precisely because they are different, or, to quote Astrid Heiberg, President of the International Federation, that they are “separate — but inseparable”.

The dimensions of the partnership between the National Societies and the ICRC could be described in the following terms:

- achieving a balance of interests, seeking *complementarity* and pooling resources;
- being prepared to work together *on a long-term basis*, in the pursuit of mutually agreed objectives;
- placing the above commitment on a formal footing, by establishing well-defined consultation mechanisms, *agreements* and work contracts, which are the practical manifestations of joint responsibility in fulfilling the humanitarian mission;
- duly acknowledging and *emphasizing the importance of each other's role* as a partner in relations with contacts external to the Movement (other organizations, authorities) and in communication with the outside;
- *training* both staff and leaders of the respective organizations to develop a spirit of true cooperation and solidarity, marked by openness and mutual sharing.

Cooperation is a demanding process, during which mutual understanding and trust are built up — in some instances quickly and in others with difficulty. In the strategy it has developed for its own future, the ICRC wishes to draw even closer to the victims, in the belief that its presence by their side is the best way of ensuring their protection. To this end, it intends to pay more attention to the overall environment in which it operates, and to gain a clearer understanding of and thus better anticipate the reasoning of the different players with whom it must enter into contact in order to fulfil its mission. Cooperation with the National Societies is becoming one of the main thrusts of the ICRC's humanitarian strategy and

an essential factor in ensuring the efficiency and coherence of its action, which can only contribute towards a lasting consolidation of the Movement as a whole. The ICRC also plans to work with these special partners in developing consultation and exchange mechanisms aimed at facilitating joint approaches and activities and at promoting the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement on the international scene as a major force for impartial and independent humanitarian action.
