

# Operational cooperation between participating National Societies and the International Committee of the Red Cross

by **Andreas Lendorff** and **Andreas Lindner**

“Closely associating the National Societies with ICRC’s operational activities (either via seconded staff contributions, or through project delegations or bilateral projects), on the one hand to increase the Movement’s operational capacity in the face of growing needs, and on the other to respond to the National Societies’ desire to intensify their international activities and make them better known.”

This is an extract from a document containing the reflections and suggestions that the ICRC submitted in March 1995 to the Policy and Planning Advisory Commission set up by the Council of Delegates. The document, entitled “The future of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement”, highlights the commitment made by the ICRC in recent years to continue and even intensify its cooperation with *participating National Societies (PNS)*. This commitment has led to many different types of cooperation with such Societies. *Delegated ICRC projects* and *bilateral projects in areas under ICRC coordination*, known as the “new” forms of cooperation between participating National Societies and the ICRC, constitute the most recent development in this process.

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The ICRC's undertaking was firmly reiterated in the new "Agreement on the organization of the international activities of the components of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement", adopted by the Council of Delegates in Seville, Spain, in December 1997.<sup>1</sup> Increased operational cooperation with other components of the Movement is also one of the cornerstones of the in-depth debate that the ICRC recently conducted on its role and activities in the years to come.<sup>2</sup>

### **Evolution of cooperation between participating National Societies and the ICRC**

#### *The early stages*

The years that followed the end of the Second World War saw varying degrees of National Society participation in ICRC coordinated programmes. If we look back on the period up to the late sixties, the National Societies were assigned a fairly active role, while the ICRC was viewed more as an overall coordinating body, with relatively few staff of its own directly involved in the management of field operations.

From the time of the Middle East, Cyprus and Bangladesh crises in the early seventies, the ICRC began to change its operational approach. Nonetheless, the participation of National Societies in ICRC programmes continued, mainly in the form of financial and material aid and, increasingly, through the secondment of specialized staff. The latter form of support reached a peak in the early eighties, when hundreds of delegates — medical personnel, nutritionists, sanitation engineers, relief administrators and logistics experts — were sent to Thailand and Cambodia.

These "traditional" forms of National Society support were increasingly used within the context of the large-scale assistance programmes launched by the ICRC in the eighties, when several thousand specialists recruited by National Societies worked alongside ICRC delegates in the Horn of Africa, Angola, Mozambique, on both sides of the Afghan border, and in Eastern Europe.

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<sup>1</sup> Published in *IRRC*, No. 322, March 1998, pp. 159-176.

<sup>2</sup> See "The ICRC looks to the future", *ibid.*, p. 126.

However, the eighties were also marked by the growing number of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) operating in the same conflict areas. It was to be expected that these newcomers to the humanitarian scene would seek financial backing, especially at the national level, from the very same donors as the National Societies. As a result, participating National Societies had more difficulty raising funds to provide support for the ICRC. The problem was compounded by the fact that the ICRC's operational procedures did not offer any real incentive for participating National Societies to seek funding for this kind of traditional support, which gave them relatively little visibility compared with the many NGOs that were more directly involved in the field and could more easily "show the flag", so to speak, in war-affected areas. The need for visibility grew as tragedies calling for humanitarian action received greater media coverage.

The ICRC became increasingly aware of the necessity for National Societies to acquire a higher profile in the field and began to examine ways of entrusting a more active role to its traditional partners. Most of the debate on the subject was conducted jointly with participating National Societies. One particularly interesting forum was the "Dialogue with the Nordic Societies", which held its final round of discussions in November 1987. Following that process, the ICRC Executive Board decided that, among other measures to enhance the PNS/ICRC relationship, new forms of operational cooperation could be introduced and that the ICRC could in future assign clearly defined areas of its operations to participating National Societies. These would primarily include activities such as the management of a blood bank, a hospital or a prosthetic/orthotic workshop. The ICRC would retain responsibility for the overall coordination of any operation.

#### *Delegated projects*

The rules and principles governing this new form of cooperation were drawn up over the winter of 1988/89. Initial reference to the concept as "subcontracting" caused a certain amount of confusion, especially since the term was already being used for a type of cooperation within the programmes run by the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies. It was therefore decided to refer to such cooperation as "project delegation", for which the following precise definition was drawn up: "A delegated project falls within the objectives and budget of the ICRC, which means that the ICRC would be obliged to carry out the project if no participating National Society were prepared to do so. It comes under the overall operational coordi-

nation of the ICRC, which also assumes specific responsibility for security matters and contacts with the media and the authorities.” It was further agreed that the contract for such a project would usually consist of an agreement with two enclosures, namely the project description plus budget and the standard principles, terms and conditions governing PNS/ICRC cooperation.

The above principles define the respective responsibilities of the ICRC and the Society involved. It is understood that the ICRC shall retain, at the political level, ultimate responsibility for all decision-making, security matters and representations pertaining to the overall International Red Cross operation under which the project is carried out. The terms and conditions for the implementation of a delegated project are jointly defined in conformity with the ICRC’s current operational policies. PNS personnel involved in such projects are subject to contractual obligations similar to those applicable in the case of staff secondment and sign the pledge of confidentiality required of all ICRC staff. These principles, terms and conditions also contain clear guidelines as to the use of the emblem as a protective device, contacts with the media and financial burden-sharing.

At the time this new form of cooperation was established, it was foreseen that delegated projects should be defined within the context of the “relief-to-development continuum” — in other words, that they should cover activities to be pursued beyond the phase of direct ICRC action in aid of conflict victims. It should also be noted that one of the original objectives in introducing project delegation was that the greater visibility gained by participating National Societies should enable them to increase their fund-raising capacity. It was planned that the cost of a delegated project would be borne entirely by the participating National Society itself, and it was hoped that that increased fund-raising potential would lead to additional financial support from the Society for the ICRC’s activities in the country concerned.

The first contract for a delegated project, signed on 19 October 1989 between the ICRC and the Danish Red Cross, fulfilled all the conditions described above. The cattle vaccination programme in southern Sudan was financed entirely by that Society and covered an activity that would continue into the post-conflict phase. No conclusive evaluation of the project could be carried out, however, as after many months of fairly successful cooperation, the entire ICRC operation, including cattle vaccination, came to a halt. Political constraints and security considerations compelled the ICRC temporarily to suspend its operation in

southern Sudan. When, after many months, both parties were still unable to pursue their programmes, they agreed officially to terminate this first project delegation contract.

### *Bilateral projects*

In 1991 a second new form of cooperation was set up for activities conducted by a participating National Society which lay outside the ICRC's objectives aimed at meeting emergency needs and which tended to respond to requirements of a more socio-economic nature. The need for this type of project became particularly evident within the context of the ICRC's programmes in the Middle East and Eastern Europe. Described as a "PNS bilateral programme carried out in an area under ICRC coordination", this form of cooperation was defined as follows: "A bilateral programme carried out by a PNS in an area under ICRC coordination falls outside the objectives and budget of the ICRC, which means that the ICRC would not carry out the project if there were no PNS interested in doing so. As for project delegation, it comes under the overall operational coordination of the ICRC, which also assumes specific responsibility for security matters and contacts with the media and the authorities."

On 17 December 1991 the first contract for a bilateral project was signed between the Netherlands Red Cross and the ICRC. As with delegated projects, this contract also consisted of an agreement with two enclosures — the project description plus budget and the standard principles, terms and conditions governing such PNS/ICRC cooperation. Although very similar to project delegation, this second form of cooperation covers different needs and places different levels of responsibility on each of the two contractual partners, that is, the participating National Society and the ICRC. At the political level, the ICRC still retains the ultimate responsibility for all decision-making and matters pertaining to security. There is, however, less ICRC involvement during the planning stages and proportionally lower burden-sharing when it comes to the actual management of the project and the provision of the logistical support required.

At first only a few contracts were signed for either type of project. In the months up to the end of 1992, a total of five projects had been implemented — one in Sudan and four in the Middle East. During the same period, however, attempts were also made to try out other forms of cooperative project.

*Other types of project*

Prior to the outbreak of the Gulf war, several National Societies agreed to an ICRC proposal to prepare what were called “camp modules for displaced people and/or refugees”. The idea was that one, or several Societies together, would provide the necessary relief/medical supplies, operational material, logistical means and human resources and run camp facilities capable of accommodating up to 30,000 people. As a result, the ICRC was subsequently in the fortunate position of being able to take speedy and effective action when hundreds of thousands of Kurds began to flee into the countries surrounding Iraq. Although the way of operating was somewhat similar to that adopted for delegated projects, the legal framework was not established in the same manner, and this mode of cooperation, set up to deal with that very specific context, was subsequently discontinued.

Other forms of bilateral cooperation have been arranged in the past, such as the prosthetic/orthotic projects taken over by National Societies in various countries, following the closure of the ICRC’s medical programmes, but, again, they were based on different contractual agreements.

The experience gained from these various types of cooperation finally started coming together in the course of 1993, and a definite move towards working through project delegation and bilateral projects began that year. By 1994, a real breakthrough occurred with these new forms of operational cooperation between participating National Societies and the ICRC. Meanwhile, “traditional” PNS support for the ICRC continued on a more or less equal level over those years. The assistance provided in terms of cash, kind and personnel remained very important to the ICRC and was still the preferred mode of cooperation for some of those Societies.

**Need for evaluation: the 1996 review**

From the time the contract for the first delegated project was signed in 1989 up to May 1996, a total of 108 projects were under discussion, of which 64 have actually been implemented — most of them launched in the former Yugoslavia and the African Great Lakes region over the past three years. In the light of the positive and negative experience gained, it seemed appropriate to carry out an initial evaluation of the policy and working practices regarding these projects. This was also the wish expressed by the National Societies that attended the

bi-annual PNS information meeting held in Glion, Switzerland, in January 1996.

### *Objectives*

The objectives of the review were, first, to examine the process of initiating, planning, implementing and monitoring these projects from all perspectives and to analyse the information gathered in a consistent and thorough manner. The second objective was to use that information as a basis for future management of the projects so as to be able to deal with some of the day-to-day difficulties experienced in the field and at headquarters. The final aim of the review was to give both PNS and ICRC decision-makers a better vision of prospects for future cooperation of this kind. The review did not, however, examine the traditional forms of National Society support, i.e., direct financing, material aid and staff secondment, nor did it analyse similar collaborative arrangements concluded by Societies within the framework of programmes coordinated by the International Federation.

### *Methodology and time frame*

Two months after the January 1996 information meeting, a working group was set up by the ICRC External Resources Department to carry out the review. The group included people from a wide variety of backgrounds working in various ICRC departments and also comprised some staff members from participating National Societies seconded to the ICRC at that time. The full group met until the next PNS information meeting, held in the Swiss city of Lausanne in October 1996, and after that a core drafting group worked on writing and compiling the final report.

General background information on both delegated and bilateral projects and details on the individual projects proposed and implemented up to May 1996 were compiled from files at ICRC headquarters. Additional information about some of the projects was later obtained from ICRC and PNS staff directly involved in the projects carried out in Rwanda and the former Yugoslavia. The data were used to produce a list of all delegated and bilateral projects up to that date and to provide further information on those projects.

A total of 138 interviews were carried out with a cross-section of key personnel at the ICRC in Geneva and the headquarters of 11 participating National Societies and with ICRC and PNS delegates working in the field on delegated or bilateral projects in Rwanda and the former

Yugoslavia. As the interviews were conducted by a number of different people, the most consistent approach was to use a questionnaire. Group discussions with ICRC and PNS staff were carried out in each delegation and sub-delegation visited. The narrative data obtained from the questionnaires and the group discussions served to give an overview of the experiences and perceptions of people who had been or were currently involved with the projects. The statistical results of the interviews were analysed with the EPI-info computer programme.

*Main findings, conclusions and recommendations of the Final Report*<sup>3</sup>

Both delegated and bilateral projects were generally viewed as an interesting and mostly positive experience by those directly involved in them. It was considered that in areas where such projects formed part of an operation, they enhanced the capacity of the Red Cross to respond to a broader variety of needs and that in many cases participating National Societies added valuable professional expertise and cross-cultural experience through their skilled staff.

The few sceptical views expressed were based either on specific negative experiences or on a lack of direct involvement in projects. Some doubts were also raised as to the ability of the ICRC to make the necessary managerial and operational changes and the willingness of participating National Societies to become fully integrated in the hierarchy and discipline of an ICRC delegation.

The Final Report revealed four main weaknesses:

1. Lack of coherence between the definitions of delegated and bilateral projects in theory and actual practice in the field

While both definitions were clear in theory, the projects themselves were often implemented on the basis of expediency, while management decisions were prompted by reasons of convenience rather than policy, thereby blurring the differences between the two types of project. There were projects clearly outside the ICRC's objectives that should have been, by definition, bilateral projects but were defined as delegated projects. This often happened because of an erroneous assumption on the ICRC's part that a bilateral project might not be feasible in a conflict

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<sup>3</sup> "Review of delegated ICRC projects and participating National Society (PNS) bilateral projects carried out in areas under ICRC coordination — Final Report", May 1997, unpublished ICRC document.



area with a volatile security situation, whereas the favourable experience in Bosnia-Herzegovina had given proof to the contrary. Conversely, there were projects very close to the ICRC's core activities that were given the status of bilateral programmes although their management was much more similar to that of delegated projects.

To ensure a more coherent approach, one of the Final Report's basic recommendations was that the ICRC should always clearly define its own operational role and objectives in a given operational context before taking an informed decision on the types of project to suggest to interested participating National Societies.

## 2. Poorly defined management procedures

The interviews revealed a fairly widespread lack of knowledge on how delegated and bilateral projects were actually supposed to function, on who should initiate the project proposals, and on how delegated projects should be implemented and completed.

To remedy the problem, a "User's Manual for Delegated Projects" was drafted and introduced in the field from August 1997. Since then all ICRC delegations and sub-delegations with delegated projects in their areas of operation, the headquarters of the participating National Societies concerned and most of the project managers have received copies of the Manual. Its wide distribution has largely helped to bring ICRC and PNS players to the same level of knowledge and expectation when it comes to project delegation. The Manual, which is based on "best practice experiences", is still a working draft. The final version will be produced this year, once all ICRC and PNS staff involved have sent in their comments.

Another conclusion of the Final Report was that project delegation should be added to the curriculum of ICRC training for field delegates. Since 1997 the two-week training course for heads of delegation/sub-delegation and coordinators has included half a day reserved exclusively for briefing on the handling of delegated projects. The main purpose is to see that leading ICRC field staff are better prepared to achieve unity and cohesion within their delegations. Special emphasis is placed on addressing the difficult question that the management of delegated projects, in which responsibilities are different from those to which the ICRC is accustomed, does not automatically fit into the ICRC's hierarchical management structure. ICRC and PNS staff have to be made aware of the situation and of the absolute need for flexibility and understanding on both sides. The ICRC has to find a way of

accommodating PNS projects and their staff without losing control of the overall operation, while at the same time preserving the identity of participating National Societies. To walk this thin line is probably the biggest challenge facing ICRC heads of delegation and sub-delegation who deal with delegated projects.

### 3. Problem of coordination between the field and ICRC and PNS headquarters

The Final Report came to the conclusion that the additional workload created by delegated and bilateral projects, particularly at ICRC headquarters, was too heavy. One of the principal reasons was that responsibility for project management was not yet clearly allocated, which led to a duplication of efforts and poor coordination. Often PNS desk officers and project managers as well as ICRC field staff did not know who to deal with in Geneva when issues pertaining to delegated projects had to be resolved. This was mainly because many departments have a role to play in the project management process: the External Resources Department as the ICRC liaison unit with participating National Societies, the Operations Department as the unit responsible for policy matters and the main contact for field delegations, but also the technical units (mainly relief and health), the Finance and Administration Department, the Human Resources Department and the Division for Policy and Cooperation within the Movement whose delegates very often serve as coordinators for PNS projects in the field. The Final Report recommended the appointment of a project facilitator or even a facilitation unit at ICRC headquarters to follow the process from beginning to end.

The role of focal point for delegated projects was entrusted to the ICRC's External Resources Department, which now has a coordinator whose main task is to organize the process of offering projects to participating National Societies and to make sure that all questions about delegated projects raised by partner National Societies and the ICRC's field delegations are answered as quickly as possible. In the Human Resources Department a person has been appointed to deal exclusively with staff involved in delegated projects, which has also proved to be very useful.

### 4. Project delegation not sufficiently geared to real needs

As regards the process of initiating delegated projects the Final Report underlined that very often the trigger was interest on the part of participating National Societies. Such interest was expressed during

field visits or via Geneva and/or because the Societies in question had funds available for the purpose. The result was sometimes a more or less artificially created, excessively donor-driven, project — even difficult to define as a delegated or a bilateral project. Moreover, with this way of proceeding the ICRC always found itself in a reactive position. To make better use of all the advantages that cooperation with participating National Societies offered for field operations (expertise, personnel, funds, and so forth) and to direct those Societies towards real needs, the ICRC had to adopt a more pro-active approach. As stated by many interviewees, the idea and the original proposal for a delegated project should preferably come from the ICRC's field delegations.

In 1996 all delegations were asked for the first time to think about potential delegated projects — based on real needs — already during the annual budget meetings. The result proved rather disappointing, as no more than nine projects were put forward — only four of which were actual proposals that could be submitted to interested Societies. In 1997, following completion of the *Final Report*, it was made quite clear that delegations should start by determining the ICRC's objectives for the coming year, and then use those objectives as a basis for identifying projects suitable for submission to participating National Societies. This time the feedback was much more encouraging, with 26 delegated project and two bilateral project proposals forwarded to Geneva (see below for details on implementation).

Initiating delegated projects through the ICRC's general planning process seems to have emerged as the prevailing trend since 1997. But the approach that consists in launching delegated projects on an ad hoc basis later in the year, whenever a need for action arises and the ICRC delegation involved feels that a project is suitable for submission to interested Societies, will also be maintained. The ICRC does not want to rule out projects initiated by participating National Societies themselves. According to the definition given above, however, this should in most cases lead to bilateral projects, which do not form part of the ICRC's objectives.

### **New forms of cooperation between participating National Societies and the ICRC: developments in 1997 and 1998**

The ICRC's cooperation with National Red Cross Societies in the areas of project delegation and bilateral projects has undergone an impressive increase over the past two years. Whereas from 1989 to May

1996 a total of 64 delegated and bilateral projects had been implemented, by 31 March 1998 the number had risen to 105, including 58 delegated and 47 bilateral projects, of which 23 delegated and 12 bilateral projects are currently under way.

The overall figures for the past two years are as follows:

	Delegated projects	Bilateral projects	Total
1996	30	22	52
1997	28	26	54
Ongoing at 31.3.1998	23	12	35

There are two main reasons for this very favourable development.

(a) On the part of the National Societies there is a growing interest in this form of cooperation with the ICRC — though it does vary from one Society to another. The spectrum of participating National Societies has broadened as well. While the Final Report listed 14 such Societies in May 1996 (eleven European Societies, plus the American, Canadian and Australian Red Cross Societies), since then newcomers like the Japanese, Spanish and Finnish National Societies have joined in — partly on their own initiative and partly at the prompting of the ICRC.

(b) At the ICRC the number of advocates for cooperation with participating National Societies has been growing slowly but steadily, as reflected in the higher number of project proposals forwarded from the field to headquarters and also in the extension of this form of cooperation to operational zones that have been rather reluctant towards project delegation in the past.

This growth process has been actively supported by a more systematic and efficient procedure for offering projects to National Societies, developed by the ICRC External Resources Department. In 1997 the Department began drawing up an inventory of all potential projects received from the field. The 28 proposals that emerged from the budget meetings that year were discussed in Geneva by the relevant departments. Of the 28 project proposals sent in by the field:

- seven were considered not suitable as delegated or as bilateral projects,
- two had to be cancelled owing to a change in circumstances in the field,
- six were at a very early stage of conception and will be considered later in 1998,
- 13 were well drafted and ready for submission to interested National Societies.

It should be mentioned that the consultation process between Operations and the External Resources Department also involves dealing with the occasionally sensitive issue of which Societies cannot be considered for projects in a given operational context because of their nationality.

Alongside these ICRC in-house preparations, the External Resources Department requested all major participating National Societies to inform it of their geographical interests regarding project delegations for 1998.

At the beginning of November 1997 all preparatory steps had been completed to start the actual process of offering projects to prospective Societies. The list of available ICRC project proposals was matched with the list of geographical interests expressed by participating National Societies. The projects were offered on that basis, and for the first time a certain competitive approach was adopted. The same project proposal was submitted to two, three or even four Societies, which were asked to reply by early December as to their funding and personnel possibilities and what date they could envisage for launching the project. It was made clear that in most cases the ICRC would give preference to the "best offer" (i.e., where funds had been secured, experienced staff was available and an early starting date could be envisaged). It should be mentioned that exceptions may be made to this rule, mainly to give a chance to newcomers among participating National Societies which have not yet gained experience in terms of field cooperation with the ICRC and mostly also need more time to raise the necessary funds. The process was conducted in full transparency, and all the Societies were informed of who their "competitors" were, to give them the opportunity to establish direct contact with each other and discuss who might be in a better position to implement a given project.

On the basis of the replies received, by early December the External Resources Department was already able to decide on the official allocation of projects for 1998. In many cases the decision was easy because there was only one Society interested or one that offered such clear advantages that the decision was evident from the outset. In a few instances, however, a choice had to be made between equally strong contenders. The basis for the decision then became concern to maintain a worldwide balance between the various participating National Societies. In one case a seemingly better offer was not taken up because the ICRC wished to broaden the range of Societies involved in this kind of cooperation.

At the end of March 1998, four out of 13 projects had already started, agreement had been reached on starting dates for two more, for another the final decision by the interested Society was still pending, for two the surveys were under way, for one a survey was scheduled and for another the funding had just been granted. The remaining two had to be cancelled owing to a change in circumstances in the field.

### **Lessons to be learned and prospects for the future**

Initiating project proposals as early as possible, i.e., during the ICRC's budget meetings, offers several advantages to both sides.

It gives participating National Societies the possibility of approaching donors and searching for experienced personnel at an earlier stage than in the past and facilitates the operational and financial planning process for them.

For the ICRC the greatest advantage obviously lies in the speedier and better coordinated implementation process described above. Unlike in the past when there were often long delays before a delegated project actually got off the ground, in 1998 the projects are at an unprecedentedly advanced stage, making this form of cooperation with participating National Societies more reliable for the ICRC than in former years. The whole process of identifying the right Society for a given project has also been accelerated by the tendering procedure leading to final allocation. Another positive aspect for the ICRC is that funds from participating National Societies are channelled to a greater extent into the core activities of an operation — that is, into projects that are absolutely needed rather than those that would be merely “nice to have”.

A few other matters need to be thought through again and improved in the future. Whereas in the past project delegation was very often the option chosen for new activities, an increasing number of ongoing ICRC activities have recently been selected for implementation as delegated projects. While this tallies entirely with the philosophy of project delegation, it does require even better coordination in order not to disrupt work that is already under way. As a few recent examples have shown, the Human Resources Department needs to be involved early on in the planning process so that the replacement of an ICRC delegate with a PNS project manager can be properly coordinated. This calls for a high degree of flexibility on both sides, as was the case in one instance where a National Society agreed to do no more than fund a delegated project

for a period of time, and to send in its own project manager only once the ICRC delegate in charge had completed his assignment.

Another problem is to ensure a continuing flow of information on projects from the field to headquarters before participating National Society teams finally arrive in the areas of operation. There is still a fairly long time lapse of several months between the forwarding of a project proposal from the field and the arrival of the PNS team. During this period circumstances in the field may change, with possibly far-reaching consequences for the project itself. The field therefore needs to keep ICRC headquarters up to date on developments to avoid any unfortunate surprises for incoming participating National Society staff. ICRC headquarters must in turn inform the delegations of all the phases of the project allocation process.

A new trend is that participating National Societies want to start projects without being able to commit themselves to covering the entire budget. A Society will begin a project with its own funds — which is of interest to the ICRC because it guarantees a quick start — and apply simultaneously for funds from its government or other donors for the continuation of the project. This has on several occasions proved very efficient as a means of getting a project off the ground and guaranteeing its continued financing. On the other hand, what happens if the donor later on refuses to provide the funds and the Society is unable to finance the whole project with its own resources? According to the definition of project delegation, the ICRC then has to take over. But should a project contract be signed if the participating National Society cannot cover the full budget from the outset? There is no general rule in this regard, and decisions can be taken only on a case-by-case basis. Societies have to be aware, however, that discontinuance in the middle of a project may create enormous operational and funding difficulties for the ICRC.

While in some regions delegated and bilateral projects already form an integral part of ICRC operations, the concept as such is not yet systematically integrated into the ICRC's overall operational thinking and planning. The support given to the concept still differs from one ICRC operational zone to another, and from one delegation to another. The weakest point on the ICRC's side seems to be that, although a general policy decision has been taken in favour of closer cooperation with participating National Societies, implementation still depends to a large extent on the attitudes of the people in charge. These are naturally conditioned by personal experience, which introduces a certain element of unpredictability for the Societies.

Moreover, there is still a certain lack of understanding among a few decision-makers at the ICRC that delegated projects may also include an element of transition to a more development-oriented approach, meaning that a participating National Society might take its project a step further than the ICRC, on the basis of its mandate, is prepared to go.

A few ICRC delegations still have a tendency to streamline the handling of delegated projects and their managers to an extent that may seriously jeopardize the individuality of participating National Societies and the sense of project ownership they should feel. On the other hand, some Societies tend to see their projects as an isolated undertaking to which the ICRC's customary working procedures and rules do not fully apply. Finding the middle line between these two positions by showing a high degree of flexibility on both sides is the real challenge for ICRC delegations and National Society project staff. The strengthening of operational cooperation between the ICRC and participating National Societies is the only way to ensure that the concept of delegated and bilateral projects will truly work in practice.

Both types of project can pave the way towards a more creative response to the challenges in today's humanitarian environment. By associating the respective local Red Cross or Red Crescent Societies in the undertaking, such projects will at the same time enhance the Societies' capacity to accomplish their traditional tasks for the victims of war and violence. If the ICRC and National Societies choose to continue with these forms of cooperation, delegated and bilateral projects could become an effective means of achieving a more comprehensive approach to solving problems of a humanitarian nature, while also launching into new forms of activity in the cycle from pre-conflict to active conflict, and possibly deadlocked conflict situations, through to the post-conflict phase and the gradual move towards stable peace. However, these new forms of cooperation should in no way adversely affect the National Societies' traditional support for the ICRC, such as the direct financing of ICRC programmes, donations in kind of relief and medical supplies, and the secondment of experienced specialist staff.