

British Red Cross cooperation with the International Committee of the Red Cross: delegated water project in Bosnia-Herzegovina

by **Teresa Hanley and John Mitchell**

Cooperation between the International Committee of the Red Cross and the British Red Cross has traditionally been limited to the National Society providing cash, delegates and contributions in kind for ICRC programmes. At most, actual Society involvement in ICRC operations has extended to earmarking contributions for a particular country or programme; the Society has not been involved in planning, implementing or reviewing ICRC work. However, it has consistently contributed at least 25% of its budget for international activities to the ICRC and provided it with field delegates. The proportion is growing and, over the past three years, British Red Cross contributions to the ICRC have increased to over 50% of its international budget, more than £15 million in 1996. In addition, the Society currently provides 12% of the ICRC's delegates.

Perhaps the most notable shift regarding cooperation between the ICRC and National Societies is the increasing tendency for the ICRC to delegate some of its operational responsibility to National Societies to run parts of its programmes. In a delegated project, a National Society directly manages and implements most aspects of a project but remains under the umbrella of the ICRC. Usually, the ICRC selects the programme involved and undertakes initial assessment and planning. The National Society will then take over the funding and management of the project under overall

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ICRC supervision. The British Red Cross carried out one of the earliest such projects by taking operational responsibility for a vehicle workshop in Afghanistan. In 1995, it implemented a delegated water and sanitation project in Bosnia. This second experience is outlined below.

Delegated water project in Bosnia

Bihac district in north-west Bosnia was under siege, isolated from the rest of the former Yugoslavia for three years until 1995. All the basic utilities (electricity, gas and water) were badly disrupted. Water systems were particularly affected owing to the lack of maintenance and spare parts.

The ICRC identified the need to provide materials, equipment and some technical assistance to municipal water boards in Bihac for repair of water systems. The operational management of this six-month project was delegated to the British Red Cross.

This was a relatively new form of cooperation between the two organizations. Roles and responsibilities were divided between them as follows.

The ICRC provided

- logistical support (warehousing, storage, transport and radio maintenance);
- responsibility for security of the British delegates;
- office accommodation, equipment, insurance;
- access to areas to which the National Society would not be able to go;
- assistance in dealings with customs, regional and national authorities;
- help in identifying and planning the work to be carried out;
- technical advice and supervision;
- ongoing information regarding the political and military situation;
- hand-over arrangements if the project had to be closed unexpectedly.

The British Red Cross provided

- money and supplies;
- delegates;

- project management (detailed assessment, planning, monitoring and evaluation).

An assessment of the project found that the ICRC as well as the direct beneficiaries gained from it. In particular, it increased Red Cross visibility in the area, which may have helped in negotiations for access to prisoners and full implementation of the Red Cross mandate. In addition, the involvement of the British Red Cross at this stage meant that there could be some continuity if the political situation were to stabilize, enabling the ICRC to withdraw and the focus of work to be placed on rebuilding the capacity of the local Red Cross organization.

The British Red Cross found that it gained in a number of ways through this form of cooperation. Mutual understanding of each other's working conditions, constraints and procedures grew considerably. Relationships became closer between National Society staff in the field and in London on one side, and ICRC staff in the field and in Geneva. Also, job satisfaction increased for National Society staff through direct involvement in the implementation and management of the projects.

However, whilst the British Society was very supportive of such cooperation, constraints were encountered and issues emerged. For example, administrative and management procedures need to be very clear and the various roles and responsibilities must be precisely set out. The ICRC has now drawn up a manual of working guidelines and procedures. The project calls for detailed planning but also flexibility as an unstable situation requires the ability to change direction quickly. Trust and confidence in the other organization is vital as both are staking their reputation on the performance of the other. Decision-making can be slow, especially when outside funding is needed and another stage of appraisal, this time by institutional/governmental donors, is added.

However, despite some initial problems in dealing with these constraints and obstacles, it was agreed by those involved from both the ICRC and the British Red Cross that this close cooperation resulted in greater trust and greater understanding of the other, which can only foster a close and fruitful working relationship for the future.

Conclusion

There is much support for close cooperation with the ICRC as a general principle. There seems to be a real desire on both sides to work

more closely and an increasing perception that National Societies such as ours offer skills and experience useful for the running of development programmes in unstable situations. Nevertheless, in practice real challenges remain. The British Red Cross has found that a great deal of time is needed to work out clear procedures regarding roles and responsibilities and dealings with the authorities. Only such procedures can ensure good working relations and avoid wasting time on unnecessary misunderstandings in the future. Where time has not been devoted to working these out, even more time has been taken up in the resulting search for information and in talking through misunderstandings and negotiating roles. To an extent, closer cooperation means that each organization inevitably concedes a degree of autonomy, but with the common goal of building a more effective world-wide organization, whose component parts work together and complement each other.
