

The future of development work in the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement

**Between the need for assistance
and the requirements of prevention**

by
ALI SAID ALI

AT the beginning of the past decade, the international community witnessed major, rapid developments that affected social, economic and political relations and had repercussions on individual countries.¹ Although there is little doubt that international relations are still in a transitional phase and have not yet taken final and durable shape, recent events in many regions of the world have, in one way or another, caused priorities to be set that require joint national, regional and international endeavours.² These priorities definitely differ

DR ALI SAID ALI is Secretary-General of the Libyan Red Crescent Society. He is also a member of the Faculty of Economics and Political Science, University of Qar Yunis, Benghazi, Libya. — Translated from the Arabic by the ICRC.

¹ See Zaki Laïdi (ed.), *L'ordre mondial relâché: sens et puissance après la guerre froide*, Presse de la Fondation nationale des sciences politiques, Paris, 1993.

² See e.g. Ernst-Otto Czempiel, James N. Rosenau (eds), *Global Changes and Theoretical Challenges: Approaches to World Politics for the 1990s*, Lexington Books, Lexington, 1989.

from those of the Cold War era that followed the Second World War, when the States' main concerns — security, armament, conflict, expanding zones of influence, etc. — drained the resources of many governments, especially in the Third World, and unquestionably delayed development projects in most of those States.

The present article will deal with one of the main concerns of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement in the post-Cold War era, i.e. development, by examining the relationship between the need for the assistance expected by the victims of natural and man-made disasters and the requirements of prevention, the aim of which is to promote complementary action to avert such disasters. At the same time, this article will review some of the operational priorities that could be used as guidelines by the components of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement in meeting the requirements for development in the humanitarian and social spheres.

The concept of peace and security

After the end of the Second World War, when international relations entered the tunnel of the Cold War, thinking polarized around military security and the resulting concern about the strategies, programmes and means needed to deal with armed conflict and the arms race, to achieve supremacy in one's zones of influence, etc. The material resources devoted to these activities, which continued for over 50 years, were deployed at the expense of social development. Today the world is aware of the adverse consequences of that era. These are illustrated in particular by the structural imbalance in relations between States and the increased marginalization of poverty-stricken communities in the most needy countries.

One of the main challenges for international peace and security in the past was conflict between States, which often took the form of direct aggression by one State against another.³ The international community can be said to have succeeded in developing specific mechanisms with which to respond to such conflicts and secure the adoption of preventive and other positive measures to deter aggression.

³ See Paul Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers: Economic Change and Military*

Conflict from 1500 to 2000, Random House, New York, 1987.

However, this was not the only type of conflict of primary concern to the States. The steady increase in internal conflicts prompted some States, particularly in the Third World, to allocate most of their resources to dealing with just such situations, thereby paralysing their development plans, further aggravating their social, economic and political circumstances and ultimately creating an unstable situation with which they were unable to deal on their own.

This imbalance coincided with the following series of challenges.

Challenges from a humanitarian point of view

There was a significant increase in the number of natural disasters of various types, along with an alarming increase in the number of victims and in the magnitude of material losses.⁴

Many States have been unable to meet this major challenge in spite of the international assistance that has often been provided. It has clearly become difficult to deal with the socio-economic effects of these disasters through the traditional approach which, in most of the affected countries of the Third World, relies on action by official institutions. Hence, the governments of the States concerned should be encouraged to review how they go about disaster preparedness, with a view to making use primarily of local capacities and private initiatives supplemented, if necessary, by international assistance.

Social challenges

Not all the changes that the world has witnessed during this period have been conducive to optimism, since States have begun to suffer from dangerous social phenomena such as the marginalization from the mainstream of certain groups and individuals, rising crime rates and increasing delinquency among young people. The result has been to push societies into a tunnel of social unrest and conflict. States should be encouraged to consider responding to these challenges in a carefully balanced manner based not on confrontation but rather on a meticulous

⁴ See the periodical *World Disasters Reports*, edited by the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, Geneva.

study of the social structure and its economic requirements, and greater encouragement of local private endeavours.

Health-care challenges

Most States are facing a threat that is just as dangerous as the threat posed by war: the alarming spread of infectious diseases such as AIDS and the ongoing pollution of the environment. It seems evident that individual States and even the international community as a whole are unable to deal with these problems, which they regard as being beyond their control. Since these health-care challenges, by their very nature, do not recognize borders it is impossible to predict where they will be encountered in the future. Therefore, countermeasures should be reprogrammed to include preventive action among their priorities. In addition, private action should be expanded and direct participation by local communities and individuals promoted.

Economic challenges

The rapid changes discussed above and the increasingly serious challenges that result have caused an acute feeling of insecurity — mounting fear of material loss, ongoing marginalization of those who fall behind and the looming, and very dark, tunnel of unemployment.⁵ All this constitutes an economic crisis which has had a grievous impact on the countries of the Third World. It has become necessary to devise new ways to meet the challenge that human society is facing.⁶

It appears evident that States may not be able individually to meet and overcome these challenges, which in some instances transcend their geographical borders and their human and material capacities. Although international assistance is often required in such cases, there seems to be an even more pressing need to mobilize the indigenous capacities of these States and especially private, non-governmental organizations. Non-governmental organizations, and in particular the National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies with their wealth of accumulated know-how and efficient structures, could make an effective contribution in support of government endeavour to alleviate such crises, by setting pri-

⁵ Robert Gilpin, *The Political Economy of International Relations*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1987.

⁶ Muhammad Hassanein Heikal, *Egypt and the Twenty-first Century: A Discussion Paper*, Dar al-Shuruq, Cairo, 1994 (in Arabic).

orities to guide the formulation of programmes to meet local community needs and by increasing the scope of the contributions made by the Movement's components in the realm of development, with particular emphasis on particularly vulnerable individuals and groups.

The National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies

The crises affecting many States as a result of the changes that have swept through their societies have highlighted the weakness of the official mechanisms adopted in numerous countries to counter them. In view of the increasing interest in non-governmental endeavour, and particularly the humanitarian, social and health-related role of the National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, advantage should be taken of this favourable climate in which the National Societies could obviously play a more dynamic role in enhancing local community capacities especially as regards the particularly vulnerable.

The National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies enjoy a special status. This is the case not only by virtue of their functions in wartime, when the ICRC takes humanitarian initiatives to protect the victims, but also in peacetime, when the International Federation and the National Societies themselves provide services for local communities with a view to promoting human dignity and meeting local humanitarian, social and health-care needs. The various components of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement have benefited from the increasing respect accorded to them by the international community and have worked diligently to alleviate human suffering regardless of its cause. However, the changing nature of the root causes of disaster means that new situations might force the Movement to abandon some of its traditional operating methods as inconsistent with the nature of contemporary challenges. This necessarily implies that the Movement's future programmes should be formulated not only according to its customary procedures but also in the light of the lessons that it has learnt, particularly the need to avoid expanding the range of Red Cross and Red Crescent activities since, if the Movement attempted to do everything, it might find itself unable to respond effectively to the increasing demands of humanitarian action.

When development work in the Movement is reprogrammed, therefore, a careful balance should be struck between the need to help disaster victims and the requirements of preventive action to limit

the impact of disasters and strengthen the infrastructure required to deal with them. Future development programmes could therefore address the following issues.

Prevention

The circumstances of the Cold War imposed a programming pattern that focused on assistance and protection in the event of any type of disaster, the aim being to deal with the consequences of disasters. However, striving to deal with disasters as soon as they occur could be said to have delayed the effective provision of assistance by the Movement's components, particularly given the increasing magnitude and multiple causes of disasters.⁷ The ICRC's work in the field of protection has remained an important factor in strengthening the presence of the Movement and has increased the respect that it enjoys.

In view of future challenges, the Movement must stop regarding disasters as unexpected occurrences and must take steps to prevent them by standing ready to deal with their causes and not solely their consequences. To this end, the Movement might need to compile a detailed index of its human and material resources and clearly define its mechanisms of operational coordination, especially when there is a need for the joint presence of and action by the Movement's components (the ICRC, the International Federation and the National Societies).

Complementarity

Various circumstances have prompted some National Societies to select programmes of action without careful study and adequate planning that would meet the requirements of and the priorities dictated by the local environment. This gives the impression that those Societies' programmes are being implemented in isolation from environmental factors and without regard for their social impact and their economic cost. Now that there is an increasing need for complementarity in terms not only of endeavours but also of the nature of the programmes undertaken, these Societies are facing a test of their ability to enhance their capacity to remedy shortcomings that might cause human suffering or impede development in the social sphere. Hence, they should take care to

⁷ See further: Michael Edwards, David Hulme, *Making a Difference: NGOs and Development in a Changing World*, Earthscan, London, 1992.

ensure that their programmes of action clearly define their contribution within the context of the priorities dictated by local conditions. In so doing, the efforts, capacities and resources of the National Societies will complement, instead of being isolated from, the endeavours made by others in the same environment.

Self-reliance

In the past, the Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies won increasing praise for their sustained action in connection with problems of humanitarian and social concern in a number of States. To make that action possible, the Societies had to rely on their own resources and on unconditional support from their respective governments. However, owing to the expanded scope of their activities, growing needs and the shortage of funds in many States, many Societies have faced severe financial crises.⁸ Consequently, it has been necessary to review funding programmes and promote greater self-reliance by increasing the role of fixed sources of income and gradually reducing reliance on support from others. The self-development programmes, which are a basic aspect of the role that the National Societies are playing in social development, therefore require a definition of production-related sources of funding for the benefit of humanitarian and social activities. However, the concept of entrepreneurial profit should not be misconstrued; there is a need for an economic evaluation of projects that serve the local community and, at the same time, generate profits for the Society which can be used to meet the requirements of humanitarian action.

Support

During the 1990s, the Movement decided that providing support should be one of its obligations towards particularly vulnerable members of society. Although the limits to such action are still being debated within the Movement because of its sensitive nature and the difficulties that it might create, especially vis-à-vis the governments concerned, the fact that a clear statement was made about the need to make greater efforts to protect and defend vulnerable categories of the population showed the seriousness with which the Movement takes the matter.

⁸ Amir Salim, *Human Rights: Ongoing Battles between the North and the South*, Centre for

Legal Studies and Information on Human Rights, Cairo, 1994 (in Arabic).

There appears to be a need to expand the scope of the practical programmes designed to protect and safeguard the particularly vulnerable. At this stage, it might be helpful if the Movement's components could work to strengthen the essential programmes of the ICRC, under which humanitarian initiatives are taken in support of these people, while the organization remains careful to maintain its status as a neutral party.

Summary

The adverse effects of the Cold War era and the human suffering and social upheaval that they entailed have placed the international community before a difficult task; this calls for a concerted effort to address the resulting problems and challenges by viewing social development, including its humanitarian dimension, in the light of priorities to be set for the future and by taking into consideration the important contribution that can be made by non-governmental organizations. In the coming years the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement will have to shoulder an enormous responsibility, which will require broader participation, within the context of development work to meet the needs of local communities, and which will strengthen the vital role of the Movement's components.



Résumé

L'avenir des activités de développement dans le Mouvement international de la Croix-Rouge et du Croissant-Rouge : répondre à la fois aux besoins de l'assistance et aux exigences de la prévention

par SAID ALI SAID

La fin de la guerre froide a notamment modifié l'environnement dans lequel travaillent les Sociétés nationales de la Croix-Rouge et du Croissant-Rouge. Si la communauté internationale semble avoir trouvé les moyens de résoudre les conflits traditionnels entre États sans recourir aux armes, il en est autrement sur le plan interne, où des facteurs liés à un développement insuffisant continuent d'engendrer la violence. L'auteur s'intéresse, entre autres, à la question de savoir de quelle manière les Sociétés nationales peuvent faire face aux deux tâches principales qui leur incombent : l'assistance d'urgence aux victimes de catastrophes naturelles ou de conflits, d'une part, et la prévention des situations d'urgence, d'autre part. Même si elles sont accaparées par l'urgence, les Sociétés nationales ne doivent pas négliger les activités liées au développement, car seules ces activités permettront de prévenir d'autres urgences. Enfin, l'auteur plaide pour une Croix-Rouge et un Croissant-Rouge forts et innovateurs.