

The International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement's involvement in public advocacy campaigns

A discussion paper

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At the 1997 Council of Delegates of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, a short but important debate was held on the advocacy role of the Movement, with a view to determining criteria for the launching of campaigns on humanitarian issues. The present document takes into account the different contributions made during a series of meetings and the various written papers submitted within the Movement. It has been sent as a background paper to National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies in order to seek their views on the matter. At a later stage, the results of this consultation will be taken into consideration in establishing a policy document for the Movement as a whole.

The meaning of advocacy

A new interest in advocacy

Although not new, the concept of advocacy is now receiving renewed attention. The Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement (hereinafter “the Movement”) has had a long-standing commitment to furthering and upholding humanitarian principles and action, and to defending, either privately or publicly, the cause of vulnerable people and victims of conflicts or other disasters. Likewise, it has long taken a public stand in promoting the ratification and implementation of the Geneva Conventions and their Additional Protocols. Indeed, the Movement is itself the product of one of

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the great advocacy ideas: that of Henry Dunant, who strove to introduce a measure of humanity into the inhumane chaos of war. But, unlike other organizations, the Movement has developed primarily as a service provider, “doing good” without seeking much publicity. The many and constant representations made by the Red Cross and Red Crescent institutions are generally of a private rather than a public nature, as this is often a more effective way of exerting pressure on players in political or social spheres.

The new dimension of advocacy today lies mainly in the growing interest of some of the Movement’s components in having speedier or wider recourse to public campaigns. For others in the Movement, advocacy is seen as a most delicate exercise, covering areas perceived to have potential political implications. Thus some National Societies are concerned that a public campaign might cause them to lose the confidence of their traditional partners, not least that of government authorities. But few would argue against the idea that the Red Cross and Red Crescent has an important role to play in expressing, promoting and defending the needs of the victims, thereby also contributing to the development of a society more attentive to the values of solidarity and humanity.

Advocacy is part of the Red Cross and Red Crescent mission, in addition to, or in support of, the services rendered to the community. Thus it represents a key element of National Society development, clearly highlighted, for example, in the Strategic Work Plan of the International Federation.

Advocacy does not necessarily involve public demarches, but these demarches are one of the tools that can be used to fulfil the humanitarian mission of the Movement. Generally speaking, that mission is to “prevent and alleviate human suffering (...), to protect life and health and ensure respect for the human being, (...) to work for the prevention of disease and for the promotion of health (...)”. Consequently, having the courage to take positions and conduct campaigns – if necessarily publicly – on essential issues, is an important factor in the Movement’s credibility.

Definitions

The many terms used when discussing advocacy are very diversely understood by different organizations and people, both within and outside the Movement. The word “advocacy” itself means different things to different people. For some the term immediately conjures up images of an advocate and of legal action. For others the idea that the Red Cross and Red

Crescent should be engaged in advocacy seems new – more because the word is not familiar to them than because they reject the idea that the Red Cross and Red Crescent has been, and needs to be, involved in “speaking out” on humanitarian issues.

Before proceeding any further it would be useful to establish a frame of reference by adopting common definitions for the relevant terminology.

A short, general definition of advocacy is given in the Oxford Dictionary as “...pleading in support, supporting or speaking in favour of (someone, a cause or policy)...”. This definition can be used for the present discussion.

The second part of this paper will examine the criteria for launching a humanitarian campaign, as an example of public advocacy. This approach is different from, although possibly complementary to, the other modes of action available to the Red Cross and Red Crescent, which include:

- “private advocacy”, i.e. bilateral approaches to government authorities, through meetings or letters, to promote a Red Cross/Red Crescent position;
- routine communications aimed at informing the public about Red Cross/Red Crescent policies, activities and needs;
- conferences, training seminars and publications intended to promote international humanitarian law, the Fundamental Principles and Red Cross/Red Crescent policies and practice in a wide range of areas relating to health and social welfare;
- public statements on violations of international humanitarian law or on conduct representing a serious breach of the Fundamental Principles or of essential policy within the Movement (e.g., on AIDS, refugees, non-discrimination in delivering services).

Working as they do in diverse social and political environments, the National Societies do not all have the same possibilities as regards public advocacy and are not all in a position to promote with equal vigour all the policies adopted by the General Assembly of the International Federation or the Council of Delegates. For each issue, and in every context, it is important carefully to consider and to promote the best and most appropriate means of pleading in support of war victims or the most vulnerable.

Different issues might require different levels of participation by the individual components of the Movement. The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies would naturally make representations or raise public awareness on matters of international concern, such as the protection

of the emblem, respect for international humanitarian law and assistance to victims of natural disasters. A National Society might be active on the national level in defence of the most vulnerable, such as the elderly, HIV/AIDS victims, etc., or even at branch level to deal with local issues or personal hardship in a town or region.

Depending on the urgency of an issue and on its own resources, a single Society might decide to launch a national campaign to promote Red Cross/Red Crescent interests or to combat a health or social problem (e.g., street children, alcoholism). The Society concerned must certainly take into account the possible consequences of its commitment outside its own country, perhaps for sister Societies, but this should not hinder it in its endeavour as long as its campaign is compatible with accepted Red Cross/Red Crescent policy.

All the different means of communicating with and influencing others, mainly at the national level, are important. The following paragraphs will not explore them in depth, but will focus rather on the pros and cons of worldwide campaigns conducted by the Movement and of its association with such campaigns.

Launching public advocacy campaigns

Definition of a campaign

A campaign is an organized course of action aimed at achieving, within a determined time frame, the acceptance of an idea or the implementation of a certain measure. For the purposes of this paper, a Red Cross/Red Crescent campaign is a coordinated worldwide mobilization in which all the components follow similar patterns of communication for promotion of an essential issue.

The “special relationship” of the Red Cross/Red Crescent institutions with governments

A Red Cross/Red Crescent campaign is not solely aimed at promoting humanitarian values, but also securing the modification of a policy or a form of behaviour. The objective being to change public opinion, a campaign seeks to exert a certain amount of pressure upon political decision-makers in situations where traditional discreet diplomacy would be unsatisfactory or too remote to achieve effective results. Such campaigns are frequently directed at governments and/or legislative bodies; but other organizations and to some

extent the Red Cross/Red Crescent have also launched or participated in campaigns aimed at private sector companies on issues including the environment, appropriate marketing practices for health products, etc.

For some National Societies, finding themselves at odds with their governments may be seen as the main risk, for reasons related to the status of a National Society as auxiliary to the public authorities in health, social welfare and other activities. The negative impact of a public confrontation could have lasting consequences in terms of government support (financial and moral), cooperation in the many fields of common concern and common activities (including programmes unrelated to the campaign in question), and the ability of the National Society to “lobby” successfully on other humanitarian matters. Governments themselves differ considerably in terms of their respective approaches and the resources devoted to humanitarian issues, and different National Societies will need to find different ways of communicating with their governments.

Whilst the ICRC and the International Federation are not themselves auxiliaries to governments, both depend, for the effectiveness of their action, on preserving the good will and support of governments, and thus share some of the concerns of National Societies, although to a lesser degree.

In launching a public campaign at the international level (but the same applies to national activities and advocacy), care should be taken to maintain positive working relations with the authorities and even strengthen the dialogue between the components of the Movement and political authorities. “Positive relations” does not mean silence, fear or the abandonment of humanitarian values, but the establishment of a constructive, although partly critical, dialogue that takes due account of the different responsibilities, means and strengths of the partners concerned. The end result of a campaign must be to promote Red Cross/Red Crescent action in the long term, including through healthy relations with governments.

In their relations with non-governmental organizations (NGOs) on advocacy issues, the individual components of the Movement also need to coordinate carefully. Relations between the ICRC or the International Federation and the international arm of an NGO should not contradict positions taken by National Societies with the national arm of the same NGO.

Working together with other organizations

The Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement needs to cooperate with many other bodies to achieve its goal. It also recognizes that it does not have any exclusive interest in humanitarian concerns and action. As shown by the mobilization of NGOs and governmental support for the Code of Conduct for the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) in Disaster Relief and for the campaigns to ban anti-personnel landmines and to protect and assist children affected by armed conflict, working in association – or at least following some common guidelines – with NGOs can increase the impact of the Movement's efforts and thus favour the success of the enterprise.

NGOs can also benefit from their association with the Red Cross/Red Crescent, and at times actively seek such association. Understandably, this often prompts them to solicit backing for their causes or request cooperation from other agencies as corroboration of the validity of their campaigns or operations. For the Red Cross/Red Crescent, such an association can be constructive, but it may also backfire. There is a risk of confusion on the part of the public or governments, which may not clearly distinguish between the motivations and the public statements and action of different organizations.

NGOs enjoy greater independence in their advocacy of some humanitarian issues. The Red Cross/Red Crescent Movement can nevertheless share with them common concerns and seek coordination and cooperation in the promotion of certain values. Humanitarian agencies working on a complementary basis can represent a much stronger force than a "fusion" of identities in an excessively close coalition. In other words, it will often be important to adopt common or similar positions, but to engage in advocacy in one's own name.

The role of the different components of the Movement

Humanitarian mobilization being a sensitive topic, the components of the Movement must, in this respect, pay greater attention to "working together". Because of national statutory relations and traditions, the relationships of National Societies with their governments, NGOs and the mass media vary from country to country. Although not hampered by local constraints, worldwide campaigns conducted by the Movement must nevertheless pay due attention to each of its components. On the other hand, the international institutions of the Movement, which are less dependent on local

circumstances, can be of great help to the National Societies, advocating on their behalf on potentially sensitive issues and thus enabling them to avoid direct involvement with their countries' authorities (any such contacts should, of course, take place with the knowledge of the Societies concerned, which must be kept informed by the ICRC or the International Federation about their nature and results).

The international institutions of the Movement should not bypass National Societies and pursue a campaign in the latter's countries without their consent or at least their knowledge. As a general rule, humanitarian campaigns have to be based on a consensus, as they represent a high-quality means of propagating a message. Naturally, National Societies can follow guidelines and implement measures at different "speeds". They can also show different levels of commitment in carrying out a campaign. It may even happen that a National Society remains passive vis-à-vis some issue, leaving it up to the international institutions of the Movement to assume responsibility for certain demarches and publicity in its own country.

Criteria for launching international campaigns

It was noted earlier that an individual National Society or a small group of Societies should not make a policy decision having possible worldwide implications without consulting the other partners within the Movement. Similarly, the International Federation and the ICRC must constantly maintain effective coordination on issues which could give rise to a campaign, and also on projects which may call for major commitment on the part of National Societies in terms of communication and mobilization of resources.

As the anti-personnel landmines campaign has shown, international humanitarian mobilization can lead to unexpected developments and yield better results than was first expected. The campaign has also demonstrated, however, that this kind of mobilization is a costly business. The components of the Movement must therefore be ready to commit themselves on a long-term basis to making the necessary human and financial resources available to see such campaigns through to the end.

Before launching a campaign, or a worldwide advocacy action, the Movement or its individual components must take the following criteria into account:

- The issue for which public advocacy or a campaign is planned must be based on the mandates of the components of the Movement, as defined

by its Statutes, the Fundamental Principles, international humanitarian law, or Movement policy.

- The components of the Movement must, through their operations and programmes, have sufficient knowledge and experience to be credible in their advocacy role (the capacity to “make the difference”).
- An official agreement must be reached officially within the Movement (General Assembly or Executive Council of the International Federation, Council of Delegates or another statutory meeting), and close consultation maintained with the other partners of the Movement.
- The desired outcome of the campaign must be precisely defined and the long-term allocation of resources for running the campaign must be clearly identified.
- The action to be taken must not be expected to have severe adverse effects on any other components of the Movement and thus risk jeopardizing its image or operational capacity (including the security of humanitarian action); mechanisms for evaluating the impact of advocacy initiatives, particularly campaigns, on each component should also be identified.
- The issue addressed must tend to promote wider respect for international humanitarian law or more effective assistance to victims of conflicts and disasters or the most vulnerable members of society.

Conclusion

Any campaign carried out by one or more components of the Movement inevitably has repercussions on the other components. Globalization of the media and the image of the “Red Cross/Red Crescent” as a single concept are both factors which accentuate this phenomenon and which should be taken fully into account in the organization of a campaign. Regular dialogue is necessary to manage such repercussions, which may be favourable (indeed, a campaign may offer a National Society the opportunity to establish contacts with its government) or unfavourable.

Launching a public advocacy campaign is only one of the means available to the Movement for promoting humanitarian principles. Advocacy, as an imperative for the various components, must take place at different levels and in a meaningful and effective way. Most probably, the majority of approaches made by Red Cross/Red Crescent representatives will and must remain of a confidential, private nature. However, faced as it is with worldwide phenomena causing excessive suffering and undermining human

dignity, the Movement might decide that coordinated public mobilization at the international level is the best means of achieving its humanitarian objective. Individual and collective capacities within the Movement certainly do not allow for many similar simultaneous enterprises of that kind. It is therefore essential to maintain a constant and open dialogue between the components, in accordance with agreed criteria, for the sake of credibility, efficiency and, ultimately, greater humanity for all.

Résumé

**La participation du Mouvement international
de la Croix-Rouge et du Croissant-Rouge à des campagnes
de sensibilisation – un document de travail**
par Steven Davey et Jean-Luc Blondel

Prenant pour point de départ le bref débat sur l'attitude du Mouvement à l'égard des campagnes de sensibilisation qui a eu lieu lors du Conseil des Délégués de 1997, les auteurs passent en revue toutes les questions que soulève la participation de composantes du Mouvement à des campagnes qui impliquent des prises de position publiques. Ils rappellent que l'approche fondée sur la confidentialité reste souvent la meilleure méthode pour atteindre un but à caractère humanitaire. Reste que la mobilisation de l'opinion publique, sur le plan national ou international, produit parfois des résultats qui ne peuvent pas l'être autrement. Les auteurs proposent l'esquisse d'une ligne de conduite qui est compatible, à la fois, avec les objectifs de la Croix-Rouge et avec les intérêts de toutes les composantes du Mouvement.

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