

Dissemination in Bosnia and Herzegovina Lessons learned

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The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) has been assisting the victims of the conflict in the former Yugoslavia since June 1991. Six years on, its delegates are still active in the region, addressing the lasting consequences of the conflict, but as the situation has evolved so has the nature of their work. This is particularly true of dissemination, which began as a concerted effort to promote greater understanding of international humanitarian law and the ICRC's role and mandate, but which has now been redirected towards meeting the needs of the post-conflict environment. This paper sets out to describe and analyse the development of dissemination in the present context. Though the ICRC's activities during the conflict were predominantly in Croatia and in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and there are similar dissemination initiatives in both these areas, this paper focuses on Bosnia and Herzegovina. Where relevant, reference may be made to dissemination activities in other parts of the former Yugoslavia.

The Dayton Agreement and the subsequent signing of the General Framework Agreement for Peace in Bosnia and Herzegovina on 14 December 1995 in Paris signalled the end to the fighting. It also heralded, though unforeseen at the time, new opportunities for dissemination in Bosnia and Herzegovina. During the conflict, the priority for dissemination delegates was to spread awareness of the ICRC's humanitarian mandate and to ensure the security of its staff working in the field. With the signing of the Agreement and the arrival of Implementation Force (IFOR) troops, the delegates' security and access to victims significantly improved. This paved the way for the ICRC to expand and adapt its dissemination activities.

In the autumn of 1995 there was one dissemination delegate in Bosnia and Herzegovina. By January 1996, there were two dissemination delegates, one of them based in the Republika Srpska. Within three months of the signing of the Paris Accord, the ICRC delegations in Bosnia and Herzegovina were engaged in a country-wide landmine awareness campaign, contacts had been made with the commanders of the three former warring parties, and ICRC delegates had conducted four courses on the law of war for the armed and security forces. An advisor for the landmine awareness campaign took up post in Sarajevo. By the end of April, new dissemination delegates had arrived to develop a programme with the local Red Cross promoting human values.

But was all this the result of design or circumstance? What obstacles had to be recognized, if not overcome, in order to pursue these programmes? Was it significant that these programmes were being developed in a post-conflict environment?

The emergence of new dissemination possibilities

Dissemination in Bosnia and Herzegovina in the post-conflict phase reflected the general shift away from an emergency response to a long term approach. There was less need to focus on the security of delegates and access to victims; instead the ICRC had to address other important concerns: dissemination to the armed forces in case the conflict broke out again; increasing knowledge among the general public of the ICRC's role, especially with regard to emerging activities, such as establishing the fate of missing persons; and programmes to assist the population and the local Red Cross, such as landmine awareness and promoting human values.

This required a whole new dissemination strategy. The landmine awareness campaign and dissemination to the armed forces were proactive attempts to prevent landmine injuries and future violations of international humanitarian law respectively. Both were an extension of the ICRC's experience and expertise gained from its work worldwide. In other respects, dissemination still had to be reactive or responsive to the needs of ongoing ICRC activities, such as the search for the missing.

It also called for a different approach with the local Red Cross. During the conflict, the local Red Cross was in many ways a conduit for ICRC activities, such as relief distributions and handling Red Cross messages. These were not specific activities of local Red Cross organizations before the war, but gave them some prominence in their community. As these activities wound down, the local Red Cross began to turn its attention to new needs in the community, as did the ICRC. In some cases, the needs could be addressed through dissemination, and for this the local Red Cross was an obvious partner for the ICRC. Similarly, the ICRC's local staff had a vital role to play.

The development of a network of local colleagues

In the year that followed the end of hostilities, a key element of the dissemination strategy was to establish decentralized teams of qualified local field officers who could respond to dissemination needs in each of the ICRC's sub-delegations. The commitment and length of service of the field officers were clear assets, as there were many occasions when they were better placed as disseminators than the ICRC's delegates. Dissemination staff were hired and trained in each sub-delegation and then brought together to work as a team. In addition, an in-house graphic designer was hired to create materials as needed and to deal with outside graphic artists and printers. Whether it was devising the initial concept of the landmine awareness campaign or presenting a dissemination programme at youth summer camps, the work was done as a team.

Initially, this way of working was developed in the Republika Srpska, and became the model for dissemination throughout Bosnia and Herzegovina. Local dissemination staff, including those taking part in the mine awareness campaign, created radio and television spots, theatre shows and magazine advertisements. With the involvement of expatriate delegates when necessary, the local dissemination teams also carried out programmes for ICRC staff, as well as for youth, teachers, municipal authorities, the International Police Task Force (IPTF) and the local police in the Republika Srpska.

As ICRC operations followed the same lines as the territorial and political division between the two entities, i.e. the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina and the Republika Srpska, so initially were the dissemination teams. In some respects this was valuable, for example, in gaining awareness of local sensitivities, responding to criticism of past actions, the use of correct expressions and language, and developing a common bond among the staff. In other respects it reinforced a sense of separation from those in the other entity and in the other delegation. Dissemination programmes perceived as being developed "on our side" or done differently "on the other side", detracted from the ability to develop a common approach.

To rectify this, an effort was made to ensure that the objectives remained uniform and the field officers from the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina and from the Republika Srpska were brought together to discuss the programmes as a country-wide effort. A joint dissemination meeting at the end of July 1996 was the first time local staff from each delegation or sub-delegation throughout the country had come face to face since the beginning of the war. Despite some initial suspicions and doubts, it was the first step in developing a common approach and forging links between colleagues on both sides. At the end of the first workshop, one participant said that he was "glad to see that the local staff on the other side" abided by and disseminated the Red Cross principles in the same way as they did.

Landmine awareness campaign

The most immediate dissemination response at the end of the hostilities was the landmine awareness campaign. In many ways the campaign represented a collective effort by the ICRC throughout the former Yugoslavia. It was initially proposed and started in Bosnia and Herzegovina at the beginning of March 1996, with the distribution of posters, brochures and the broadcasting of radio and television spots. In Croatia the first phase was implemented in April 1996. As of 1997, landmine awareness was also being undertaken in specific locations in the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, namely along its border with Croatia.

The campaign in Bosnia and Herzegovina has grown into a comprehensive country-wide effort with a mass media component, community-based activities, data gathering and a schools programme. At present it is the only one of its kind and the only one which systematically gathers statistics regarding mine incidents throughout the country. The programme is run by one mine-awareness advisor, 11 mine-awareness field officers trained by the mine-awareness advisor, and over one hundred trained local Red Cross mine-awareness instructors. An external mine-awareness advisor to train local staff and Red Cross volunteers was hired both in Bosnia and Herzegovina and in Croatia. As the region affected by mines is considerably smaller in the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, one of the mine-awareness officers from Republika Srpska has assisted in the programme's development there.

Landmine awareness is a valuable example of a community-based dissemination programme. It has also helped to identify certain issues that are at stake when developing such a programme. The first of these was to recognize the need to seek out and integrate outside expertise. Though the emergency information campaign was successfully undertaken by the dissemination delegates, the development of a professional, comprehensive programme required expertise and experience they did not have.

The second issue was to draw the distinction between an awareness campaign and an information campaign. Dissemination often takes the form of information, that is, the passing of a given message through the media, presentations or written materials. But since the intention of dissemination is ultimately to influence behaviour, methods beyond the simple presentation of information needed to be employed where possible. In this sense, creating awareness should be understood as more than informing people of the existence of mines in the country.

In Bosnia and Herzegovina most of the people who remained throughout the conflict know about landmines. An information campaign, though useful in reminding people, especially returnees, of the dangers they face, may not be enough to influence behaviour. Mine awareness is about responding to the needs of a mine-afflicted community. It is about assessing the behaviour of individuals, determining why risks are being taken and adapting the message accordingly. Who are the mine casualties and what were the activities they were engaged in at the time of the incident are questions which will influence the approach and message. If, for example, children are injured because they are carelessly playing in mined areas, the message and approach would be different from that relayed to children injured because, out of necessity, they enter a mined area to gather wood. Again, the approach varies if the casualties are middle-aged men attempting to farm.

In order to build up a picture of the landmine problem and its impact on individual communities, a data-gathering programme was initiated. The programme consists of two components: general research on the human, social and economic impact of mines, and mine incident statistics. Through analysis of the data gathered, the mine-awareness programme can be developed and adapted to meet the real needs of the community. The data also assist in indicating those areas where people are most at risk. This helps organizations planning humanitarian mine-clearance operations to identify which are the communities most affected. At present, the ICRC's is the only systematic data-gathering programme in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The statistics collected are widely distributed and are used and relied upon by the United Nations Mine Action Center.

A third issue to be addressed was the need to reconcile the ICRC's emergency approach with the development approach of the landmine awareness campaign. Unlike many dissemination projects the campaign has a long-term objective, as mines will continue to wreak havoc for years to come. It aims to develop local capacity to respond to the problem. Every region in the country has a mine-awareness officer and locally based Red Cross instructors. It may be partly because of this development approach or because this is the first time the ICRC has been so extensively involved in mine awareness, that the campaign met with initial hesitation within the institution. In addition, the ICRC's structure and emergency response approach were less conducive to a programme that took months to become fully operational.

Despite the initial reluctance, the landmine awareness campaign must be seen as a logical extension of the ICRC's work in times of conflict and of its position regarding a global ban on anti-personnel landmines. For years the ICRC has assisted mine victims after the fact, first through its surgical teams and then through limb-fitting centres. The ICRC's expertise and knowledge in the field have given it the credibility to move from a purely medical response to advocacy. It is not a big step from making political decision-makers and the public aware of the horrendous effects of landmines as part of an advocacy campaign, to making people aware of how to protect themselves from landmines. Both are preventive acts. The dissemination response, like the medical response, is an effort to alleviate the suffering of the victims of armed conflict. They are an integral part of the broader effort to deal with the devastating impact of conflict, both during and immediately after hostilities.

A fourth issue, not dissimilar to the obstacle encountered by the ICRC in its detention-related and tracing activities in Bosnia and Herzegovina, was the attempt by the parties to politicize the issue of landmines. This was especially true immediately after the cessation of hostilities when, according to the Dayton Agreement, territory under the control of one party was to be transferred to the other. As a result large numbers of people crossed the former confrontation lines and could go into previously inaccessible areas. Those engaged in the campaign had to be careful that warning civilians of the danger of landmines did not become an acknowledgement of the intention of one of the parties to kill civilians by leaving landmines and booby traps behind them. The ICRC had to preserve the perception of its impartiality and neutrality, while at the same time being visible and vocal about the danger of landmines. Furthermore, the campaign was challenged, as it has been at the international level, by those who see it as being critical of a party defending itself through the use of landmines.

Another aspect of the politicization of the campaign was the constant demand that materials be produced in the "correct" language or alphabet. This affected all written materials and media spots, not just those concerned with mine awareness or dissemination. Since the conflict in Bosnia and Herzegovina was, in many ways, a war of ethnic identity, whether individuals wanted it or not, their name, religion or cultural heritage identified them with one of the warring parties. Cultural differences, real or imagined, played an important role in the assertion of identity. Certain words, the manner of pronunciation and the use of a particular alphabet immediately created an association with a particular group.

The politicization of language became so central to creating a distinct identity that at times dissemination materials were rendered unusable; not because the message was invalid or because it could not be understood, but because a single word was unacceptable to one of the parties. Objectively, the production of different versions of a publication would appear unnecessary since the language used prior to the conflict was essentially uniform and most people could read both the Cyrillic and Latin alphabets. But from a dissemination point of view, a flexible approach was required. In order to be acceptable to the authorities, all materials, especially those designed for

the school curriculum, had to be published in each language version. As an extra safety measure, it was decided that all dissemination publications, scripts, images and voice-overs would be field-tested with the local Red Cross and authorities in each region before they were finalized and distributed.

The landmine awareness campaign was designed with the potential to create local capacity and to be handed over to the local Red Cross as a viable, long-term programme. The establishment and training of local Red Cross volunteers and instructors and the production of school materials creates responsibility in local structures to continue with the programme. The ICRC does not act as a substitute for non-existent structures; instead, it operates in partnership with existing ones such as the local Red Cross, which can then carry on the programme after the ICRC has departed.

Dissemination to the armed forces

Dissemination to the armed forces is one of the traditional activities of the ICRC and is carried out both in times of conflict and peace. It can take many forms, from handing out a booklet on the basic rules for combatants at a checkpoint to conducting courses on the law of war. The objective in each case is the same: to encourage respect for international humanitarian law during conflict.

In the case of the former Yugoslavia, extensive efforts were made during the conflict to promote international humanitarian law to the warring parties throughout the region. Despite the difficulties, delegates were able to conduct dissemination sessions on the spot for officers, unit commanders and non-commissioned officers of the Yugoslav Army, the Croatian Army, the Macedonian Army, the Army of Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Bosnian Croat Army, the Bosnian Serb Army, and also for Serb military forces in the United Nations Protected Areas.

The ICRC's programme of dissemination to the former warring parties in Bosnia and Herzegovina has benefited significantly from the introduction, since March 1996, of a specialized delegate to the armed and security forces (FAS). Through its FAS delegates, the ICRC offers its experience and knowledge to assist military authorities in setting up programmes with the aim of making instruction in international humanitarian law an integral part of military training. To be most effective, promoting knowledge of the basic rules of war requires a comprehensive approach integrated into the different levels and functions in the military chain of command. To assist in this development, the FAS delegates working in Bosnia and Herzegovina have given courses to military commanders and have offered training for instructors in the law of war.

The courses include a practical component as well. In addition to instruction on basic rules of international humanitarian law, battalion exercises and examples of military operations are used as teaching tools. This is important when giving instruction to participants with real war experience, as opposed to armies who have only engaged in peacetime training.

Since January 1996, there have been twelve courses on the law of war for officers of the three former warring parties. Each basic law of war course is three days in length and includes instruction on topics such as principles of the law of war, command responsibility, precautions in attack and defence, protected persons and objects, and the role of the ICRC in conflict. In addition, there have been trainers' workshops conducted with the Bosnian Croat Army and the Army of Bosnia and Herzegovina. As a trainers' workshop is scheduled with the Bosnian Serb Army in July 1997, by that time all three former warring parties should have officers trained by the ICRC to conduct courses on the law of war for their own soldiers. A total of over 300 officers of the three former warring parties have received law of war instruction and 35 officers have been trained as instructors in the law of war.

The increased acceptance of the ICRC is partly attributable to the background of the FAS delegates as professional military officers. In a context where there is a certain scepticism regarding the application of international humanitarian law, the presentation by an experienced former military officer lends credibility to law of war training. This is evident not only from the courses themselves, but from the evaluations and comments made by the officers who participated.

An added benefit of having a specialized FAS delegate on staff is that ICRC delegates can gain a greater understanding of military culture and concerns, and the delegation can see how it is viewed from the perspective of a military officer.

Courses for members of the armed forces have helped to redress misconceptions of the ICRC's role during conflict. By stressing that its action is not incompatible with a party's pursuit of lawful military objectives and that a military commander can in fact gain practical benefits from cooperating with and using the institution's services, the ICRC is seen in a different light. Of the various presentations given for military commanders, it appears that the most useful, in this context, are those that explain why the ICRC follows particular procedures or abides by certain principles. The type of issues thus addressed are those relating to ICRC procedure at checkpoints, radio contacts, non-use of cameras or binoculars, the application of the principle of confidentiality, declining to accept armed escorts, and the policy of no weapons or military personnel in ICRC vehicles.

Though it is difficult to assess the impact of such a programme, the simple fact that the ICRC has been granted access to the commanders and headquarters of all three former warring parties in Bosnia and Herzegovina is an encouraging sign. Relations developed as a result of this programme have enhanced the image of the ICRC. As in other conflicts, such courses also provide the opportunity for officers who have benefited from ICRC assistance, such as through visits to detainees or the facilitating and monitoring of prisoner releases, to share their positive experiences.

Promotion of human values

In Bosnia and Herzegovina, the programme to disseminate the principles and values of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement was introduced in April 1996. The general objectives of the programme were to increase awareness in Red Cross branches of these principles and human values and encourage compliance with them in their work. A further objective was to promote human values among the general population, especially young people, fostering tolerance and mutual respect. The intention was to encourage and assist the Red Cross in becoming the focal point for acts of humanity within their community based on the fundamental principles of the Movement.

At first, the concept, though promising, suffered from the aftermath of the conflict and the lack of a central Red Cross structure throughout the country. Delegates and local staff initially encountered resistance to a programme advocating tolerance and humanity just after the conflict had ended, but found that by adapting it, it could be implemented. Since community events and activities for young people were non-existent after the conflict, the idea emerged of disseminating Red Cross principles and human values among young people through after-school activities. A proposal to conduct workshops for teachers who would then become volunteers to conduct Red Cross activities after school was accepted by the local branches. Introductory sessions and planning took place with the local Red Cross, and teachers were chosen with the authorization of the Ministry of Education. Workshops were conducted in all regions of the Republika Srpska, and over two hundred teachers were trained. In the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, over one hundred teachers attended the two-day workshops, while the training of teachers in the rest of the Federation was scheduled for later in the year. Meetings were organized to follow up on the teachers' Red Cross activities, and the training of local Red Cross volunteers who would also become involved in the programme was planned.

As the concept for the Red Cross principles and human values programme and the initiative behind its implementation were developed out of context, it required a lengthy gestation period before it could be adapted to meet the realities in the field. The programme did not originate with the local Red Cross and, as they were the ICRC's main partners, it took time to get them involved. The working relationship between the local Red Cross and the ICRC delegates and local field staff was central to the programme's development. Encouraging the input of the local Red Cross and teachers not only ensured its acceptance, but highlighted the importance of learning from

local people about their own values. One of the achievements of this programme is that, in many areas of the country, local Red Cross organizations now refer to the programme as their own.

Despite the proliferation of international organizations, the Red Cross remains the only local humanitarian network operating in communities throughout Bosnia and Herzegovina. The human values programme attempted not only to work through this structure, but to develop a programme that was sustainable after the ICRC was no longer involved. To create the best conditions for this, the ICRC and the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies worked in coordination so that the dissemination programme fitted within the structure the International Federation is developing with the local Red Cross.

Conclusion

There are a number of lessons that can be learned from the experience gained in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Certain programmes, such as landmine awareness, have demonstrated the ICRC's ability to engage in longer-term dissemination in the transition period following an emergency operation. They also highlighted the need to incorporate external expertise into an ICRC delegation to develop the appropriate response to needs, such as mine awareness or dissemination to the armed forces. Now that a comprehensive landmine awareness campaign has been developed in the former Yugoslavia, uniformity can be achieved with similar campaigns in other contexts. Though requiring a certain amount of sensitivity, advocacy in relation to banning anti-personnel landmines can go hand in hand with the landmine awareness campaign. The delegation has also shown that it can absorb and adapt programmes introduced externally, such as the Red Cross principles and human values programme.

One final point which must be stressed is the role of dissemination in a post-conflict environment. After the conflict erupted in Bosnia and Herzegovina, dissemination's first priority was to respond to the immediate needs of the delegation, so that the ICRC could fulfil its mandate to protect and assist the victims of the conflict. Television and radio spots pointed out basic humanitarian rules and the principles of the ICRC, as a response to the ever-present security concerns and continuous violations of international humanitarian law. The focus was on identifiable target groups and the method was that of direct dissemination by the ICRC. Though the message was clear, it was difficult to transmit.

Once the conflict was over, though the message was now easier to pass, it was not as clear what it should be. This uncertainty related partially to the change in the ICRC's role after the conflict had ended. The ICRC's identity in a post-conflict environment and what it is trying to achieve affect the dissemination message. Often the ICRC's identity is associated with its most visible or prominent activities, or with those activities in which it is the only organization involved, such as visiting detainees, determining the fate of missing persons and exchanging Red Cross messages. These activities, specific to the ICRC, distinguish it from the United Nations and other organizations in the field. Dissemination reflects, in that it supports, the accomplishment of this mandate.

The ICRC's identity, from a dissemination point of view, becomes less well defined when there is less need for its traditional activities. And does the perception of the ICRC's impartiality and independence diminish in consequence? Does it become harder to disseminate the principles when the main activities carried out after a conflict is over, other than tracing, may be different from those demonstrating the principles during the conflict?

Whatever the ICRC's activities in Bosnia and Herzegovina, either during or after the conflict, including dissemination, they still reflect those of an organization responding to the needs of the most vulnerable arising out of the conflict, and the response is always based on the fundamental principles. Though certain activities diminish in the post-conflict environment and new ones are introduced, the manner in which they are performed sets them apart from those of many other organizations. Support for specific programmes, such as training of the armed forces or the landmine awareness campaign, is not tied to political objectives and is not dependent on the fulfilment of specific conditions prior to implementation. The challenge for dissemination is to continue to define the ICRC's activities in terms of the post-conflict environment while ensuring that the institution's identity remains firmly linked to the concept of the fundamental principles in action.