

For whom do humanitarian organizations speak?

A few thoughts about dissemination

by Jean-Luc Chopard and Vincent Lusser

Countries at peace have a hard time understanding wars. That is why humanitarian organizations are so often asked to comment on and explain hostilities to the outside world. At a time when humanitarian operations are being carried out ever closer to the actual fighting, media coverage of the fighting — largely aimed at a far-away audience, at the West — is growing on television screens around the world. In order to stand out against the competition, to be visible to donors, to raise funds or to denounce atrocities, humanitarian organizations are increasingly joining the race for air time, and their survival may depend on how they place. Yet because they speak continually for and to the West and because they appear time and again on television, it is on the basis of this media image — which has the effect of underscoring their allegiance to the Western world — that the warring parties end up forming an opinion about these organizations' activities. The rejection being suffered ever more frequently by humanitarian organizations in the field is very likely strengthened, and sometimes even caused, by such jockeying for media exposure; for that exposure enhances the perception that they belong to an ideological camp whose political, economic and cultural interests are one of the issues at stake in today's major conflicts.

The adverse impact of media coverage is aggravated by poor communication at the scene of the action and inadequate effort to achieve a

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Original: French

dialogue with the local communities about the humanitarian operations under way. Easy as it is to speak to the West — if only because the information is being solicited — it can be very difficult indeed to speak to the victims and to the warring parties as humanitarian organizations run up against problems rooted in language and culture. It is all the harder in the rising number of conflicts where the aim is to assert group identity. To begin with, the warring parties turn inwards to protect themselves from the group branded as the enemy. Yet there is also mistrust towards outside agencies, whose very foreignness in situations viewed as “us against the world” constitutes grounds for rejection. The humanitarian organizations’ difficulty in making themselves heard is sometimes compounded by their reluctance to speak to the people they may believe responsible for disasters and by the tendency to favour forms of dialogue that treat the victim as entirely passive and ‘on the receiving end’.

Action speaks louder than words

Faced with the deficiencies of the information conveyed in the field, conscientious people argue that action itself is the best form of persuasion. While it is true that action speaks louder than words, it is wrong to believe that a just operation undertaken in accordance with humanitarian principles does not breed misunderstandings that could put relief agencies in danger. The problem is not restricted to misapprehensions that can be fairly easily put straight by means of adequate explanation. It is the very procedures according to which humanitarian operations are launched, as well as the neutrality and impartiality that lead to help for the “enemy”, which are today being challenged. This means that even operations carried out in a perfectly open manner raise opposition. Any high-profile endeavour then becomes all the more controversial, and relief workers find that in their dealings with the warring parties they must first explain and justify the “humanitarian reflex”, i.e. impartial assistance based on objective human need.

Apart from the explanations required to overcome misunderstandings nurtured by international media coverage and misgivings arising from operations that possibly appear lopsided to the adversaries of the beneficiaries, humanitarian organizations often have a message for the warring parties.

A message to promote

The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) is an organization whose purpose is not only to aid the victims of armed conflicts but

to afford them protection under humanitarian law and to promote that law. ICRC delegates therefore do not simply show up at check-points to ensure the passage of relief convoys. They are there primarily to gain access to the victims and call upon all the combatants to comply with humanitarian law. For the ICRC, endeavouring to send that message in the very midst of war (or to “disseminate”, to use the organization’s own terminology¹) is the result of a twofold objective: firstly, promote acceptance of humanitarian aid and the way it is implemented; secondly, promote acceptance of the humanitarian law on which the protection of victims is based.

This is the goal to which all the ICRC’s conflict-related activities are devoted, and it is also the specific task assigned to the “dissemination delegates”. Just as often as they give talks on the law of war to high-ranking officers of regular armies, they also have to strive to reach armed individuals unbound by any form of control. Their duties currently range from instructing and informing to devising the best approach for ICRC delegates dealing with people deaf to any kind of logical argument.

For all the above reasons, it is unthinkable for the ICRC to consider launching a field operation without first looking carefully at dissemination-related issues. The ICRC today employs 49 expatriates in this endeavour and has budgeted 36 million Swiss francs for this work in 1997. Dissemination programmes are not necessarily directly linked to operations; they are conducted in times of war and peace alike. When conflict erupts, however, dissemination is shaped by the humanitarian and operational priorities in the countries where the ICRC takes action. It then goes hand in hand with the operations. Its purpose is to help attain the ICRC’s overall objective, which is to ensure that the conduct of all parties is in keeping with international humanitarian law.

Intruding into troubled situations

While humanitarian action to help the victims of conflict can in no way be considered as interference² in a country’s affairs, any

¹ At the ICRC such communication goes under the name “dissemination”, a term derived from the Geneva Conventions of 12 August 1949, the States party to which undertake to respect and ensure respect for the law but also to make it as widely known as possible. The ICRC has been given the particular mandate of helping the States promote compliance with international humanitarian law.

² We are naturally referring to humanitarian work conducted in accordance with strict principles, in particular those laid down in the “Principles of conduct for the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and NGOs in disaster response programmes” (*IRRC* No. 310, Jan.-Feb. 1996, pp. 120-123).

outside humanitarian programme constitutes an intrusion into an already troubled state of affairs. The resulting encounter between the beneficiaries and Western humanitarian endeavour creates misunderstandings and tensions that can both result in a failure to recognize the victims' actual needs and put the lives of relief workers in danger. While there is nothing new in this, certain features of recent conflicts have so exacerbated the underlying culture clash that humanitarian assistance has at times become impossible. The most alarming trends are the collapse of State institutions and of the chain of military command. To this should be added the growing incidence of common crime during conflicts, the influence of drugs on the behaviour of combatants, the formation of splinter groups and their withdrawal into self-assertive factions, the proliferation of humanitarian organizations and the resulting competition between them, and the use of some relief agencies for political ends. Finally, conflicts of a genocidal nature pose a major challenge for all forms of humanitarian action.

These factors raise fundamental questions for the ICRC regarding both its operational procedures and its dissemination work. Whom should it speak to when military and political authority has become invisible or fragmented? Above all, what can it say to the people with whom it must deal, and how should it say it? Though the ICRC is going to great lengths to tailor the form of its message to different countries and cultures and to devise new approaches, the message itself sometimes lacks "local currency" and the person sending it is all too often an outsider. Whether real or advanced as a pretext, the rejection of the West and its use as a scapegoat for the misery of nations at war makes this task more onerous and complicates the search for appropriate language.

Consulting the target group and including it in the process of shaping and spreading the message is one solution to this problem in peacetime. In time of war, however, this becomes very difficult, and in conflicts with an ethnic or religious aspect the radical determination to assert group identity precludes any exchange based on the willingness to compromise and negotiate. The result is that while outsiders are unable to offer a solution to the conflict, neither are spokesmen for the warring parties in a position to act alone or provide ready-made solutions that can be applied by the ICRC unamended. Thus, the only answer can come from an entity which, though outside the conflict, enjoys a comprehensive view, and a second entity willing to serve as a local contact — as if each held a piece of the puzzle.

Turning to an agency recognized as neutral and impartial in relation to clashing cultures and tribal identities is therefore vital. It is already difficult enough to explain and gain acceptance for such a role in pure relief work, where the benefits provided by aid to one group quells to some extent their opposition to aid for the enemy. This is even more difficult when it comes to dissemination since this activity requires asking rather than giving. In conflicts involving the assertion of group identity or actual genocide, the ICRC must call for observance of principles demanding protection for victims whose elimination is the stated purpose (and not the involuntary consequence) of the combatants. Those intended to receive the humanitarian message are so caught up in their us-versus-them mentality that it becomes extremely difficult to introduce this third, humanitarian factor. In periods of crisis any appeal to curb violence and spare victims falls on deaf ears.

Finally, the mind-set that results from dealing with emergencies and almost invariably frames humanitarian action in wartime poses an additional hurdle for a task that, by definition, demands time and much patience.

Tracking wars, heeding victims

The ICRC strives to get round these difficulties by basing dissemination on a willingness to listen. It is essential to gather knowledge about the people whom the organization wishes to reach, and to do this before actually formulating its message. This first step in the process cannot be omitted even if the information thus garnered merely provides a starting point. In this respect, the contact work performed by the ICRC's 21 regional delegations, covering areas unaffected by conflicts and thus themselves not involved in emergencies, provides an indispensable network.

In all countries where ICRC dissemination delegates perform this listening task successfully, invaluable contacts are forged with the warring parties and their victims. The ICRC knows how its activities and its presence are perceived and is thus aware of rumours, criticisms, expectations, misunderstandings and suggestions, which helps it assess and adjust its operations. But if these factors go unheeded, they can result in violent backlashes.

To illustrate this point, let us imagine a programme perceived by neither the belligerents nor the victims as impartial. If misunderstandings have arisen in the minds of either group over the conditions set for the operation, those engaged in dissemination soon become aware of them and

can prompt a reassessment within the organization and launch an information campaign to limit those misunderstandings. If the operation is indeed insufficiently impartial, this will be immediately noticed by the groups involved, but this will be picked up in the course of dissemination work and will have alarm bells ringing over the deviation from the guiding principles which could, eventually, jeopardize security in the field. However modest the contribution made by dissemination programmes may seem in this respect, it should not be underestimated. A good network of contacts built up by dissemination delegates is different from, and above all complementary to, the one available to those actually directing the operations.

From listening to dialogue

While a willingness to listen forms part of the basis on which humanitarian work reposes — making it possible to establish a relationship and effect necessary adjustments to operations — it does not solve all the problems facing dissemination; it narrows the gap between humanitarian workers and their contacts in countries at war, but it does not bridge that gap altogether. Coexistence between the humanitarian “intruder”, the aid recipients and the warring parties must await a second phase, that of dialogue. In the aid sector, this is precisely what the ICRC and other humanitarian organizations have striven for. For example, wherever possible, relief based on imported finished goods is replaced by assistance that enlists the support of recipients in identifying and providing the aid they require.

The aim of such dialogue is to complete the puzzle, assembling these scattered pieces and identifying the areas in greatest need of dissemination work, selecting the form most appropriate and determining which concepts will be able to serve as a link for the ICRC itself, its message in terms of the law and the corresponding cultural principles in the countries racked by conflict.

In an unbiased exchange, everything must be open to challenge based on the validity of the principles of humanitarian law. That is because the scope for humanitarian action granted by countries at war is not necessarily the same as that sought by the ICRC. For instance, the belligerents do not always agree to spare enemy civilians. The greater the divergence between these two conceptions of the scope needed, the greater the risk of friction and mutual rejection between humanitarian organizations and the warring parties. For those engaged in dissemination, the nature and scale of this divergence help identify points that are likely to give rise to

the greatest problems and thus identify what the organization's priorities should be. Its role in such cases is to try and broaden this scope, this space for humanitarian action, i.e. to convince the warring parties of the need to spare those protected by the law.

The legitimacy of international humanitarian law

Though the validity of international humanitarian law is not negotiable with representatives of the warring parties, if this body of law is to be promoted then the issue of its legitimacy must be addressed. Pointing out that nearly every State in the world is party to the Geneva Conventions and their Additional Protocols no longer ensures universal acceptance of their legitimacy. Beneath the official consensus between the States lurk the real misgivings — specific to culture and social stratum — of those who have never joined in this consensus except through the signature of the plenipotentiaries who were supposed to be representing them and whose authority is challenged in many present-day conflicts, not least by the combatants with whom the humanitarian organizations have to deal in the field. The legitimacy crisis undermining the authority of certain States, especially those torn by internal conflict, also weakens the validity of the international commitments made by the rulers of those States.

As a result, in some situations it may prove necessary for those conducting dissemination to seek a measure of common ground in terms of respect for humanitarian norms, i.e. rules to which all the parties, whether regular combatants or not, feel themselves bound. One way to do this is to search for humanitarian principles in customary law and local practices. It has never been proved that any culture has devised a code of conduct at odds with humanitarian principles, and the research carried out by the ICRC into the cultural heritage of widely differing communities would seem to confirm that the basic principles of international humanitarian law are universal. Several examples of this approach have been documented and Édith Baeriswyl's text is of great relevance here.³

Of particular interest in this approach is the fact that the ICRC and the authorities with whom they deal in war-torn countries both contribute in an equal measure to a joint project. That is no mean feat, for it affords fresh dignity to those who find themselves in what they sometimes

³ See pp. 357-371 in this issue.

perceive as the humiliating situation of receiving paternalistic aid from humanitarian organizations without having anything to offer in return. It is especially important to reverse roles in this manner as much as possible when it comes to dissemination, for such mutual support is practically impossible when it comes to material aid.

The message — when the time has finally come to speak!

If we have highlighted the backlash resulting from certain forms of communication and if we have proposed as preventive measures a willingness to listen and engage in dialogue, this is not to refute the need for a message but to lay down a path to be followed, one that is vital to the success of operational dissemination.

Even so, while a willingness to listen and engage in dialogue is intended merely as a means of identifying the best way to promote compliance with humanitarian law, this very dialogue has enabled the ICRC to convey its message. The act of paving the way for the message has itself become the means of conveying it. Those involved in it have followed a path to participation, inclusion in the process. They have become allies rather than a target audience.

Should ICRC delegates then no longer play a direct role in dissemination? To answer this question, we must come back to the concept of a neutral agency in the realm of dissemination. The ICRC has a special position as a humanitarian organization with access to victims; its technical and financial resources must be used for their benefit, so as to give them a face and a voice, and not to promote the organization itself. For wounded soldiers, for civilians run out of their homes and off their land, and for prisoners in their cells, it is the one chance to convey their suffering in words more effective than even carefully crafted utterances by an outsider. The ICRC wants to make this voice increasingly available to the victims of conflict.

Is there still room for the epitome of conventional dissemination: an address to a group of military men or political officials? Such presentations are an option when hostilities are under way, but their primary usefulness lies in the opportunity they present to hear questions and to touch on misunderstandings or underlying problems. They are a means of establishing contact in a relaxed atmosphere between combatants and humanitarian workers who encounter one another in the field. Such talks, when held during hostilities, are unreliable when the intention is to make a point and prompt a change in conduct. In a

peaceful situation, the address can have its merits as a means of establishing a working relationship with a target group and promoting the longer-term project of systematically teaching humanitarian law at a university, for example. But when the idea is to create the greatest possible awareness regarding the basic rules of that law or to arouse concern about humanitarian issues, emphasis is placed on seeking a working relationship with those who possess the means of mass communication. Finally, the ICRC by and large strives to promote the “knock-on effect” by training others and making it easier for them to convey its message, rather than encouraging an endless succession of talks by its own delegates.

Whatever form it takes, therefore, dissemination is for the ICRC a full-fledged humanitarian activity in its own right, a form of communication conducted in the very midst of war and the resulting ICRC operations. It is meant to achieve contact with different peoples for the benefit of the victims of conflict and of humanitarian endeavour, bringing that work closer to its recipients.

When peace returns ...

While a neutral agency is necessary in situations of conflict, its presence is no longer so indispensable when hostilities come to an end and peace returns. Then the ICRC serves as a mere catalyst, with the aim of raising awareness among the greatest possible number of groups within the country and fostering reflection and debate about the plight of war victims and ways of limiting their hardship.

The ICRC still takes this role of catalyst very seriously indeed since there can be no denying that nations at peace have not provided ground fertile enough to ensure compliance with the law in wartime. Though it is not the only reason for violations, the predicament for those engaged in dissemination is that humanitarian law cannot arouse wide interest in times of peace, while when conflict breaks out — and therefore just as that law is becoming highly relevant — those who should hear the message are being deafened by the passions of war. That is why, to make humanitarian law appear closer to the immediate concerns of a society at peace, there is a tendency to misrepresent it as a bill of human rights or a statement of moral concepts such as tolerance, civility and peace. This is harmful for humanitarian law as it finds itself dragged as a result into a moral debate which is not universally accepted on the battlefield. While promoting knowledge and acceptance of humanitarian law is vital in peacetime as a means of

bringing about compliance should war break out, it must not be distorted to make it interesting. Instead, one must find an analogical application in civilian life.⁴

Conclusion

Despite all the good will that lies behind humanitarian action, such work constitutes an intrusion into a situation of trauma. It unfailingly raises questions that humanitarian agencies have to answer. For the ICRC, replies must be furnished to those questions in addition to the message that the organization is required to convey to the combatants under the mandate assigned to it by the States party to the Geneva Conventions to promote respect for humanitarian law.

However, various obstacles hinder dialogue with local people. Firstly, the information conveyed to the international media (press, radio and television) is meant to satisfy the organization's need for visibility. Far from addressing the concerns of the residents of countries at war, this requirement underscores the fact that humanitarian organizations belong to a Western system from which the afflicted countries often seek to protect themselves. Secondly, dissemination at the local level, i.e. that engaged in by ICRC field delegations, encounters two major hurdles: the culture gap — of which the inward-looking focus of certain groups is the most extreme expression — and the rejection of neutrality in a situation viewed as featuring a split between saints and villains, between good and evil.

ICRC delegations have moved dissemination up in their scale of priorities as a key activity for the establishment of a genuine dialogue with local peoples. Notwithstanding the tremendous progress achieved as a by-product of new thinking about humanitarian endeavour and modern forms of conflict, dissemination has not completed the metamorphosis that should lead to its new role as a "sounding board" for humanitarian operations of every kind, but also as an integral part of those operations. It can and must progress further in order to better serve the objectives of aiding victims and changing the conduct of those who have taken up arms as the means to assert their ideas. This must occur through the listening and dialogue stages described in this article.

⁴ See article by Édith Baeriswyl, pp. 357-371

At the same time, further efforts are required to recruit personnel capable of performing this work and to train supervisory staff, including heads of delegation. For the success of dissemination depends on a shared vision rather than on solitary work by experts, however brilliant they may be.
