



ICRC

ICRC publication 1996 ref. 0513

The Fundamental Principles of the Red Cross and Red Crescent

Complete text

Introduction

Humanity

Impartiality

Neutrality

Independence

Voluntary service

Unity

Universality

Introduction

In 1859, on the battlefield at Solferino, human suffering was met with care and compassion and without distinction of nationality. The work of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement has expanded steadily ever since and now takes the form of a wide range of activities, many of them the fruit of long experience, others improvised on the spot to meet emergencies of all kinds, but all grounded in certain humanitarian values.

In the early years of the Movement's existence, unity of thought was essentially maintained by the unity of common endeavour. Without being set out in any written agreement, specific humanitarian values rapidly came to light as constituent elements of the Movement. As early as 1875 Gustave Moynier spoke of four basic working principles which the Movement's Societies must observe: foresight, which means that preparations should be made in advance, in peacetime, to provide assistance should war break out; solidarity, whereby the Societies undertake to establish mutual ties and to help each other; centralization, which implies that there is only one Society in each country, but whose activities extend throughout the entire national territory; and mutuality, in the sense that care is given to all the wounded and the sick irrespective of their nationality.

It was not until 1921 that the Fundamental Principles - impartiality, political, religious and economic independence, the universality of the Movement and the equality of its members - were formally put in writing. That was when they were incorporated into the revised Statutes of the International Committee of the Red Cross, the Movement's founding body.

After the Second World War, the XIXth Session of the League's Board of Governors (Oxford, 1946) adopted a Declaration confirming the four 1921 principles, supplemented by another thirteen principles and six rules of application. The 18th International Conference of the Red Cross (Toronto, 1952) reaffirmed the Oxford principles. Those principles were not, however, the subject of a systematic treatise until 1955, when Jean Pictet, in his book on the Red Cross Principles, defined and analysed all the values which guide the work of the Movement. He thus listed seventeen principles divided into two categories: on the one hand, the Fundamental Principles, which express the very reason for the Movement's existence and inspire and influence all it does; and on the other hand, the organic principles, which concern the Movement's structure and how it works.

On the basis of this in-depth study, the Movement's seven Fundamental Principles as they stand today were unanimously adopted in 1965 by the 20th International Conference of the Red Cross, which also decided that they should be solemnly read out at the opening of every International Conference.

The 25th International Conference of the Red Cross (Geneva, 1986) reaffirmed the importance of the

Principles by including them in the Preamble to the Movement's Statutes. The responsibility of the National Societies to respect and disseminate knowledge of the Principles was underscored in new statutory provisions, while the States were called upon to respect at all times the adherence by all the components of the Movement to the Fundamental Principles.

Humanity

International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, born of a desire to bring assistance without discrimination to the wounded on the battlefield, endeavours, in its international and national capacity, to prevent and alleviate human suffering wherever it may be found. Its purpose is to protect life and health and to ensure respect for the human being. It promotes mutual understanding, friendship, cooperation and lasting peace amongst all peoples.

The Principle of Humanity



The Fundamental Principles signify just that - principled action by the Movement. First and foremost, however, they are the expression of deep caring for the human being.

Of course, the world did not wait for the Red Cross to come to the rescue of suffering people. Feelings and gestures of solidarity compassion, and selflessness are to be found in all cultures. Our concern, however, is somewhat different from this fundamental observation, for we wish to consider various aspects of the specific nature of Red Cross and Red Crescent work to alleviate human suffering. This specificity is especially well illustrated in the words of the Movement's Principles, the first of which reads:

The principle of humanity is perfectly natural: it is compassion, mutual aid, a reaching out to others to help and protect them.

© ICRC/T.Gassmann,
Ref.PK-D17/2

The International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, born of a desire to bring assistance without discrimination to the wounded on the battlefield, endeavours, in its international and national capacity, to prevent and alleviate human suffering wherever it may be found. Its purpose is to protect life and health and to ensure respect for the human being, It promotes mutual understanding, friendship, cooperation and lasting peace amongst all peoples.

The universality of suffering

The universality of the Red Cross and Red Crescent has its roots in the universality of suffering, and it is thus that the principle of humanity must be understood. Indeed, the Movement has no "dogma", no special philosophy; it is attentive to human misery. Caught up in war or stricken by natural disasters, often struggling merely to survive, countless human beings suffer from man's inhumanity to man. The questions "Who is man?", and "What humanity does the principle refer to?", seen in this light, are more often a source of anguish than of joy.

The cries of distress heard throughout the modern world cannot - and must not - be met with indifference; they must instead foster activity. To hear one's fellow man, to recognize his suffering, is to feel the call to service. Therein lies the Movement's sense of purpose.

Is the principle of humanity, as some suggest, too vague, too general to serve as a basis for the Movement's work? We think not. The words used in the text - to prevent, to alleviate, to protect, to ensure respect - require very concrete efforts. Then is the undertaking not too ambitious? Not at all! There are at least two reasons why not:

- the principle of humanity implies that no service whatsoever for the benefit of a suffering human being is to be dismissed out of hand; it is also a reminder of how important it is also to seize the opportunity for humanitarian action, of how important the Red Cross and Red Crescent spirit of initiative is;

- the principle of humanity is only the first in a declaration of seven principles which must be read as a whole. The principles of impartiality, neutrality and independence in particular are indicative of how clearly the Movement has determined both the framework and the means for attaining its objectives.

The principle of humanity transcends the vagaries of war. This gesture of tenderness and comfort is not that of a mother towards her son: it has brought together, for a brief moment, an old woman and a soldier belonging to opposite sides.



© ICRC/Z.Khachikian, Ref.AM-17/16

The Red Cross and Red Crescent endeavour to prevent and alleviate human suffering. But, what kind of suffering. Throughout its existence the Movement has gradually broadened the scope of its activities to reach new categories of victims, both in time of war and in peacetime. But its components do not seek to do everything and anything. Their priority is to act in situations where no one else can or will. They work as auxiliaries to the public authorities; they do not wish to replace them, but to make their own unique and unbiased contribution in situations which are often totally unforeseen.

Protection

The principle of humanity embodies one especially important idea: to protect. This is a very tangible concern. At the root of the word lies the idea of shelter from the elements. The notion of protection suggests a screen or shield placed between a person or a thing and the danger they face. In addition to this very material sense, the word has other connotations which are of particular interest to us. To protect means:

- to help someone by sheltering him from attack, ill-treatment, etc.;
- to frustrate efforts to destroy him or make him disappear;
- to meet his need for security to help him survive, to act in his defence.

Protection may therefore take many forms, depending on the situation of the victims.

In peacetime, protection of life and health consists primarily in preventing sickness, disasters and accidents, or in reducing their effects by saving lives: a National Society first-aidler who cares for the injured and saves them from an otherwise certain death has engaged in a fundamental form of protection. Protection in this sense can also mean, as it does for some National Societies, efforts to maintain a healthy environment.

It is the function of international humanitarian law to protect the victims of armed conflict and to ensure that their lives are as normal as possible under the circumstances. The provisions of the law are not, however, always applied. It is then up to the ICRC in particular to make sure the rules of humanitarian law are applied and to assist those persons protected by the law to make sure they do not die of hunger, are not ill-treated, do not disappear and are not attacked.

Emergency action is indeed vital, but prevention and reconstruction are just as important.



© ICRC/T.Gassmann, Ref.AF-171/17A

There are some points of convergence between humanitarian interests, which require that prisoners be treated humanely, that the wounded be cared for and that civilians be spared, and clearly defined political interests. Compliance with humanitarian rules in war and protection for the victims can, in the medium and long term, but encourage a resumption of dialogue between adversaries, eventual reconciliation and finally the restoration of peace.

Prevention and alleviation of suffering

Protection goes hand in hand with prevention and alleviation of suffering. The Red Cross and Red Crescent are sometimes reproached for not doing enough for prevention and concentrating - albeit very effectively - on the alleviation of suffering. The reproach is not entirely well-founded.

Is it the doctor's fault if the patient has fever? Should he leave a patient's bedside to vaccinate everyone in the village? Probably not, but we are well aware that relief, which does no more than help the beneficiaries subsist, is at best a limited, short-term measure. At worst, it may even exacerbate the negative effects (passivity, dependence, etc.) of present or future disasters. We must therefore reconsider the meaning and scope of our humanitarian activities.

This opens whole new horizons to the Movement. It must, of course, always help those who suffer, but it can also act to prevent their suffering. It must provide relief in an emergency but it can also help reconstruct and indeed assist in the development process.

In this context, how do the Red Cross and Red Crescent contribute to peace ?

The Movement has always been active in two domains concerned with the prevention of cruelty and other forms of abuse which are so widespread in armed conflicts:

- the first and most essential is the development and extension of international humanitarian law: to ensure compliance with and extend the scope of the law's protective rules is an absolutely essential undertaking which helps promote respect for life and human dignity;
- then, as a corollary, the Movement promotes the dissemination of humanitarian law: spreading knowledge of the basic rules protecting victims and non-combatants is another vital task.

The overall work of the Red Cross and Red Crescent, their teaching of solidarity between men and nations, the multitude of practical and selfless acts they perform, their activities in the midst of strife, can all help bring about a spirit of peace which, as we have said, can facilitate the reconciliation of adversaries. In view of the political hazards involved, the question of the prevention of armed conflicts is, however, one that the Movement has thus far approached only with great caution.

Realistic optimism

The Red Cross and Red Crescent base their activities on behalf of suffering humanity on what Jean Pictet once called an "optimistic philosophy": the refusal to despair of mankind. But this optimism in no way detracts from the "philosophy's" realism. It is aware that humanitarian work is difficult. Its greatest enemies may well be neither weapons nor disaster, but selfishness, indifference and discouragement. It is for this reason that the Movement has not based its activities on dry principles, but on service to suffering humanity, to life, often fragile and vulnerable. This is how we understand the principle of humanity

Impartiality

It makes no discrimination as to nationality, race, religious beliefs, class or political opinions. It endeavours to relieve the suffering of individuals, being guided solely by their needs, and to give priority to the most urgent cases of distress.

The Principle of Impartiality



© ICRC/R. Bigler. Ref. AF-25/47

Medical ethics and the fundamental principle of impartiality coincide: the wounded are entitled to treatment, whatever their origin or political persuasion... or those of the staff caring for them.

While the Fundamental Principles form a whole in which each principles is interpreted in the light of the others, they also each characterize the Movement's mission differently. The principle of impartiality thus represents the very essence of Red Cross and Red Crescent thought: it inspired Henry Dunant at Solferino, it has been cited at every stage of

formulation of the principles and it is, moreover, inherent to the Geneva Conventions. The text of the principle of impartiality is worded as follows:

While the Fundamental Principles form a whole in which each principles is interpreted in the light of the others, they also each characterize the Movement's mission differently. The principle of impartiality thus

represents the very essence of Red Cross and Red Crescent thought: it inspired Henry Dunant at Solferino, it has been cited at every stage of formulation of the principles and it is, moreover, inherent to the Geneva Conventions. The text of the principle of impartiality is worded as follows:

The International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement makes no discrimination as to nationality, race, religious beliefs, class or political opinions. It endeavours to relieve the suffering of individuals, being guided solely by their needs, and to give priority to the most urgent cases of distress.

Impartiality: the preliminary condition for non-discrimination

International humanitarian law provides that the most vulnerable people must be given preferential treatment.



© ICRC/P.Boussel, Ref. SO-105/6

Non-discrimination was embodied from the outset in the Geneva Conventions. According to the initial 1864 Convention, any soldier no longer able to fight, by reason of wound or sickness, was to be collected and cared for, no matter what his nationality. That Convention, which was revised in 1906 and 1929, explicitly prohibited only discrimination based on nationality, whereas the 1949 Geneva Conventions state that adverse distinctions based on "sex, race, nationality, religion, political opinions or any other similar criteria" are forbidden. The final words indicate that all types of discrimination are prohibited and that those listed are given merely as examples. This basic prohibition is also contained in the Additional Protocols of 1977, with a more detailed, though not exhaustive, list of the criteria on which it is prohibited to base discrimination.

As one of the principles of international humanitarian law, non-discrimination is above all an imperative rule governing the work of the Movement, whose concern reaches out to all those in need, regardless of any factors that are not humanitarian.

Theoretically, non-discrimination is the refusal to apply distinctions of an adverse nature to human beings simply because they belong to a specific category. In the context of humanitarian ethics, non-discrimination requires that all objective distinctions among individuals be ignored, so that the aid given transcends the most virulent antagonisms: in time of armed conflict or internal disturbances, friend and foe will be assisted in the same way; likewise, those in need will be succoured at all times, whoever they may be.

In practice, all the components of the Movement must strictly avoid any form of discrimination when providing material assistance or giving medical treatment. For example, in a hospital run by a National Red Cross Society and treating numerous casualties, among them enemy wounded, it would be incompatible with the principle of non-discrimination to refuse to admit the latter so that the hospital could take in more wounded compatriots. The same would be true if the National Red Crescent Society in a country torn by internal strife gave food aid to the victims of only one of the parties, and made no attempt to bring relief to those whose ideas the Society did not share.

The ICRC has the additional duty of opposing discrimination in connection with its visits to persons detained as a result of a conflict or internal disturbances. It requests the detaining authorities to give the same humane treatment to all such persons and ensures that none of them is placed at any kind of disadvantage for reasons of nationality or differing political convictions. Distinctions arising from humanitarian and rational motives, however, are not incompatible with the rule of non-discrimination: for example, requesting extra blankets for those less able to tolerate cold because of their origin, age or health.

The National Societies are particularly concerned with the requirement of non-discrimination, which is in fact a condition for their recognition. They must be open to all who wish to become members and must permit all social, political and religious groups to be represented; this representativity is the guarantee of the Societies' ability to engage in exclusively humanitarian activities and to resist all partisan considerations.

National Societies must be open to all nationals of their respective countries who are willing and able to help them. Foreigners who wish to join should also be able to become members, although the Societies would not be acting contrary to the principle of impartiality by refusing to accept them, since in time of war, the National Societies can operate as auxiliaries to the armed forces' medical services and the volunteer workers assigned to this task are placed on the same footing as medical personnel in the national armed

forces; this could lead to difficulties for resident foreigners recruited as volunteers.

Impartiality: help proportionate to the degree of suffering

Non-discrimination means that all those in need shall be helped, yet to treat everyone in the same way without taking into account how much they are suffering, or how urgent their needs are, would not be equitable. This means that, for the Movement, the only priority that can be set in dealing with those who require help must be based on need, and the order in which available aid is shared out must correspond to the urgency of the distress it is intended to relieve.

International humanitarian law stipulates that preferential treatment must be given to certain specially vulnerable categories of protected persons, such as children and the elderly. It requires that the sick and wounded be treated with complete equality as regards care and protection and that only urgent medical reasons may justify an order of priority in the care provided. Therefore, when medical personnel are dealing with an influx of casualties, they must exercise a choice based on proportionality and treat first of all those whose condition requires immediate care.

The same holds true for all the components of the Movement: they must ensure that the distribution of food or medicines corresponds to the most pressing needs. In other words, for equal suffering, the aid will be the same, while for unequal suffering, aid will be proportionate to the intensity of distress.

In practice, the rule that relief must be proportionate to need is not easy to follow. For example, it is sometimes difficult for a National Society to collect funds for victims in countries other than its own since everyone gives according to his affinities, and national self-centredness wants aid to improve the well-being of the local population before that of foreigners. Even when this kind of nationalism is surmounted, there is a greater willingness to help neighbouring countries, whose distress is more familiar and can be sympathized with more readily. The magnificent wave of solidarity with Romania among European countries at the beginning of 1990 was such that at one point restraint had to be called for, since the gifts received far exceeded the immediate needs. Yet at the same time, in Africa and the Far East, hundreds of thousands of displaced people were barely surviving. The ICRC, for its part, has great difficulty in getting the parties to a conflict to understand that the only thing it must grant equally to each is its willingness to serve, and that in other respects its activities are proportional to the needs, and consequently unequal when distress is greater on one side than on the other.

These few examples demonstrate how difficult it is to apply the principle of proportionality in its strictest sense. But the Movement observes the principle as closely as possible by taking the most urgent suffering as the sole criterion for priority in its work.

Impartiality: the exclusion of personal bias

We have already seen that non-discrimination means disregarding objective differences between individuals. Impartiality in its true sense requires that subjective distinctions be set aside as well. To illustrate the difference between the two notions: a National Society that refuses to provide its services to a specific group of people, because of their ethnic origin, fails to observe the rule of non-discrimination; whereas a National Society staff member who, in the exercise of his functions, favours a friend by giving him better treatment than that given to others, contravenes the principle of impartiality.

As shown above, impartiality is expected of those called on to care for the less fortunate. It demands that an effort be made to overcome all prejudices, to reject the influence of personal factors, whether conscious or unconscious, and to make decisions on the basis of facts alone, in order to act without bias towards or against anyone.

In other words, impartiality implies the objective scrutiny of problems and the "depersonalization" of humanitarian work. Thus, while it is natural and human for volunteer workers of a National Society to side emotionally with one of the parties to the conflict, they are nevertheless expected to disregard their feelings in the matter when giving aid, by relieving the suffering of all victims, or when distributing relief supplies, by making no adverse distinction regarding one of the parties to the conflict.

It appears, indeed, that the principle of impartiality thus defined is an ideal to be attained, an inner quality that is rarely inborn but that most often requires one to overcome one's instincts. It demands from members of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies an arduous and prolonged effort to overcome their own prejudices and preferences in order to be able to perform the purest act of impartiality which is to give more help to the adversary who is the victim of great misfortune than to the friend whose suffering is less severe, or to care for the more severely wounded, even if guilty, before the innocent whose injuries are slight.

When confronted with distress...

... the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement responds by giving aid without distinction. Mindful of human suffering, it has established an ethical foundation which is embodied in the Fundamental Principles and acts as a guideline for its work in the midst of conflicts and disasters for the victims it is pledged to assist. Each of the Movement's components, in its own area of activity and every one of its millions of members, are committed to implementing these Fundamental Principles and manifesting them in their work, so that the ideals of human solidarity and love upheld by the Movement shall not be merely empty words.

Neutrality

In order to continue to enjoy the confidence of all, the Movement may not take sides in hostilities or engage at any time in controversies of a political,, racial, religious or ideological nature.

The Principle of Neutrality

The ultimate objective of the principle of neutrality is action. It is often neutrality that opens prison doors to delegates of the International Committee of the Red Cross, allows relief convoys displaying one of the Movement's emblems to enter conflict areas and spares National Society volunteers from attack in a country torn by internal disturbances.

Paradoxically, however, neutrality is not a well-loved principle. There are those who express indignation at the neutrality of the Red Cross and Red Crescent, in the mistaken belief that neutrality betokens lack of commitment and courage. Others point out that while the ICRC can remain neutral with relative ease, National Societies may find it an impossible task: for the parties to many modern internal conflicts, not to be with them is to be against them.

In the following lines we look at the meaning of the principle of neutrality and its relation to the other principles, to give some examples of the problems implicit in its application, and to show what ends it can serve.

The meaning of the principle of neutrality

The principle of neutrality reads as follows:

In order to continue to enjoy the confidence of all, the Movement may not take sides in hostilities or engage at any time in controversies of a political, racial, religious or ideological nature.

There are therefore two facets to neutrality:

- *Military neutrality*

In a situation of conflict or unrest, neutrality implies not acting in a way that could facilitate the conduct of hostilities by any of the parties involved. Thus, in an international armed conflict, National Society volunteers working alongside official military or civilian medical services must not support or hinder military operations in any way. This neutrality is the necessary counterpart of the respect due to the enemy's medical personnel, units and establishments.

There are many examples of violations of this neutrality - surrounding a military objective with medical units so that it will not be targeted, hiding weapons in a hospital, transporting able-bodied combatants in an ambulance, using an aircraft displaying the emblem for reconnaissance missions - and they all have three things in common: they seriously weaken the system of protection embodied in international humanitarian law, they divert people and objects displaying the red cross or red crescent from their humanitarian purpose, and they put lives in danger by fostering mistrust.

- *Ideological neutrality*

Neutrality implies standing apart at all times from political, religious or any other controversies in which the Red Cross or Red Crescent, were it to take a position, would lose the trust of one segment of the population and thus be unable to continue its activities. If a National Society branch expresses sympathy for a movement, a cause or a political figure, for example by permitting the latter to take advantage of Red Cross or Red Crescent membership for electoral purposes, many volunteers may cancel their membership. If a dispensary run by a National Society also displays a religious affiliation in a country in which there is tension between the members of different faiths, many patients will no longer wish or dare to come for treatment.

In other words, neutrality is a state of mind, an attitude which must guide every step taken by the Movement's components.

The specific neutrality of the ICRC

For the ICRC, neutrality has a specific meaning, as indicated in the Movement's Statutes. To discharge the mandate conferred on it by the States party to the Geneva Conventions and to take the humanitarian initiatives which are part of its role as a neutral intermediary, the ICRC must remain independent. With this in view it has adopted a special structure which allows it to resist political, economic and other pressure and to maintain its credibility in the eyes of the governments and the public which provide support for its activities. The ICRC's members are co-opted and are all nationals of the same country. The institution's headquarters are in Switzerland, itself a country whose permanent neutrality is internationally recognized.

Its internationally recognized neutrality enables the ICRC to assist prisoners of war. This mandate is set out in the Third Geneva Convention of 1949.



©ICRC/T.Gassmann, Ref.IR/IQ-5/24

The ICRC may have a neutrality all its own, but every National Society, while acting as an auxiliary to the public authorities in the humanitarian field, must be ready to do relief work in the event of a conflict and must therefore fully comply with the principle of neutrality even in peacetime. In addition, as a member of the Movement, the National Society must ensure that nothing it says or does could be detrimental to the activities of the Movement's other components.

Links with the other Fundamental Principles

Neutrality is closely related to the other Fundamental Principles. Thus, a National Society which limits some of its services to a specific ethnic or other group, and thereby violates the principle of impartiality would soon be perceived to be lacking in neutrality

A National Society whose leaders are for the most part designated by the government, and which has thus lost its independence, would find it very difficult to observe the principle of neutrality. On the other hand, a National Society open to all, with members from all walks of life, all ethnic groups, all ideological tendencies one which therefore adheres to the principle of unity - will be better able to resist pressure, to take initiatives and to preserve some freedom of judgment and behaviour in order to conduct its activities in accordance with the Principles.

Application - easier said than done

It is admittedly not always an easy task to apply the principle of neutrality, not least because everyone has personal convictions. When tension mounts and passions are aroused, every member of the Red Cross or Red Crescent is called upon to exercise great self-control and refrain from expressing his opinions in the discharge of his duties. Volunteers are not asked to "be" neutral - everyone is entitled to an opinion - but to behave neutrally. That is an important distinction.

The next difficulty is the fact that the parties to the conflict often take a dim view of neutral behaviour. In countries where an internal conflict is taking place, the armed forces fail to understand why the National Society does not condemn the activities of those they regard as "bandits", much less why it wants to provide assistance to any of their number no longer able to fight. As for the opposition, they are critical of the Society's connections with the authorities.

Anyone trying to work on both sides to help non-combatants is considered at best naive, at worst a traitor. The extremely polarized nature of many struggles is such that not taking a stand is a hostile act in itself. This is why the Red Cross and Red Crescent's neutrality and impartiality must be explained. As one National Society first-aider put it: "The best argument I have is to tell one of the parties to the conflict that if I take its side and ignore the victims on the other side, I will never again be able to bring help to its own wounded members."

In any conflict situation, by definition highly politicized, another problem is that the National Society is judged not only by its public statements but also by its every act, the underlying humanitarian motivation of which is not always understood. Thus, bringing food to displaced, destitute people assembled by the government in camps can be construed as support for a policy of emptying a territory of its civilians the better to crush the combatants. Giving cooking utensils to peasants whose dwellings have been burned down by a guerrilla movement is sometimes considered by that movement as tantamount to supporting people who, to its way of thinking, received the punishment they deserved for collaborating with the authorities. Treating wounded individuals who come to the National Society in the mistaken belief that they will benefit from some form of immunity can give rise to mistrust on the part of those looking for them, who will feel that the National Society, in agreeing to care for them, has demonstrated where its sympathies lie.

Another problem is determining which controversies the Red Cross and Red Crescent must avoid. Can a National Society lobby for ratification of the Protocols additional to the 1949 Geneva Conventions if those Protocols are a bone of contention? Can it take a stand against capital punishment if the death penalty is a topic of heated debate in the country? What should be the attitude of its first-aiders towards hunger strikers trying to force the authorities to give ground? The questions are countless and bear testimony to the wide variety of ethical problems to which the application of the principle of neutrality can give rise. Everyone must find ways of applying the principle that are in keeping with the dictates of his own conscience.

The importance and usefulness of neutrality

It is only by consistently applying the principle of neutrality in spite of all the difficulties involved, that the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement will continue to enjoy widespread confidence. Standing apart from the issues at stake so as to be able to conduct relief activities is not easy in conflict situations, where suspicions run rife on all sides. It is not much easier in peacetime, in countries where freedom of opinion and general security permit every individual to defend his ideas, or even to put pressure on the National Society to support a current of opinion with all the weight of its moral authority. To make matters more difficult, the spokesmen of other charities do not hesitate to take militant positions or to denounce publicly those responsible for injustices or inhumane acts.

As for the ICRC, it rarely waives its policy of discretion. Only when it observes grave and repeated breaches of international humanitarian law when its confidential representations have been in vain and it considers that the only means of helping the victims is to ask for the support of the international community, does it make public representations. This sometimes takes the form of an appeal to the States party to the Geneva Conventions, whose responsibility it is to respect and ensure respect for international humanitarian law. Such initiatives are nevertheless the exception rather than the rule.

The Red Cross and Red Crescent have only one cause - that of people who are suffering today or will be suffering tomorrow - and only one means of defending it: persuasion. Red Cross and Red Crescent leaders must be willing to talk even to corrupt officials who are responsible for violations of human rights and of international humanitarian law. They cannot pass judgment on them publicly, but must speak to them on behalf of those to whom speech is denied, and who have no one else to turn to. They often do so at considerable risk to their own personal safety and their words may fall on deaf ears, but if this policy of refraining from public denunciation makes it possible to alleviate the suffering of just one man, woman or child, that is ample recompense.

Independence

The Principle of Independence

The Movement is independent. The National Societies, while auxiliaries in the humanitarian services of their governments and subject to the laws of their respective countries, must always maintain their autonomy so that they may be able at all times to act in accordance with the principles of the Movement.

In its present wording the principle of independence, which dates back to the very foundation of the Movement, comprises three elements which we will examine here: a general statement of independence as one of the Movement's principles, the role of National Societies as auxiliaries to the public authorities in humanitarian matters and, finally, the need for National Societies to remain autonomous in order to be able to take action at all times in accordance with the Fundamental Principles of the Movement.

The general meaning of the principle of independence

Providing care and assistance and doing so in complete independence - that is the Movement's line of conduct. To act accordingly, it must rely on its own assessment made on the basis of objective criteria. It must not give in to political pressure or let itself be swayed by public opinion.



© ICRC/T. Gassmann
Ref. VS - D29/14

In its broadest sense, the principle of independence means that the Red Cross and Red Crescent institutions must resist any interference, whether political, ideological or economic, capable of diverting them from the course of action laid down by the requirements of humanity, impartiality and neutrality. No National Red Cross or Red Crescent Society could, for example, accept financial contributions from any source that are granted only on condition that they be used for a specific category of persons chosen according to political, ethnic or religious criteria, to the exclusion of any other group of people whose needs might be more imperative. Similarly, in order to merit the trust of all and to enjoy the credibility essential to carrying out their mission, Red Cross and Red Crescent institutions must on no account appear to be instruments of government policy.

In addition to resisting pressure of a political or economic nature, the Movement must also demonstrate its independence vis-à-vis public opinion. In a world increasingly influenced by the media, and where competition between humanitarian organizations grows steadily keener, the speed and visibility of Red Cross and Red Crescent action may indeed have considerable impact not only on the image and credibility of the Movement but also in financial terms. Nevertheless, it is indispensable for the Movement to know how to stay aloof from media pressure, since the scale or duration of the needs are not measured solely by the volume of newspaper articles or the of popular reaction.

For instance, a National Society that undertakes a relief operation under press from public opinion and in so doing ignores of its own criteria for taking action, such as the preliminary assessment of needs, would run the risk of supplying aid that was completely inappropriate, or even harmful. To plunge blindly into the race to provide humanitarian aid may moreover result in subsequent criticism from that same public which might reproach the Red Cross and Red Crescent institutions for lack of responsibility and consistency in their work.

Auxiliaries to the public authorities

The principle of independence likewise requires affirmation of the special nature of the National Societies, which are simultaneously private institutions and public service bodies.

Officially recognized by their governments as auxiliary to the public authorities in humanitarian matters, in particular in the event of armed conflict (Article 26, First Geneva Convention of 1949), the National Societies must nevertheless enjoy an autonomy that enables them at all times to observe the Fundamental Principles. The requirement of government recognition is also one of the ten conditions which all National Societies must fulfil in order to be admitted within the Movement and to continue to be as a valid part of it (Article 4, para. 3, of the Movement's Statutes).

A decree granting official recognition to the National Society is essential, since the Society is thereby distinguished from other charitable organizations in the country and entitled, in the event of armed conflict, to the protection of the Geneva Conventions and, if relevant, the Additional Protocols, as well as to the use of the red cross or red crescent emblem.

Although the content of the decree of recognition may vary from one country to another it must at least include the characteristic of voluntary service, cooperation with the authorities in humanitarian matters, and a reference to the Geneva Conventions.

To provide the National Society with a sound legal basis for its subsequent development and activities, the

decree of recognition or the equivalent text should explicitly specify:

- that the National Society is the country's only Red Cross or Red Crescent organization;
- that it is autonomous in relation to the State;
- that it performs its activities in conformity with the Fundamental Principles.
- the conditions governing the use of the emblem.

Initially conceived as officially recognized auxiliaries to the armed forces' medical services, the National Societies have progressively diversified their peacetime activities and are today responsible for numerous medical and social welfare programmes (health education, blood banks, hospital management, aid to refugees, etc.). In carrying out these functions, the National Societies act as auxiliaries to the public authorities, either by reason of an express mandate and sometimes even a national monopoly, or by having spontaneously undertaken work that relieves the official bodies of duties that they themselves would otherwise have to assume.

Although National Societies are auxiliaries to the public authorities in the humanitarian field and step in where social services are lacking, they must nevertheless have an autonomous status enabling them to respect the Movement's Fundamental Principles.



© ICRC/C. Fedele, Ref. PE - D1/19

In view of the extent and importance of the National Societies' activities, these should evidently be incorporated into the overall framework of existing national programmes.

However, this does not mean that the authorities are able to do as they like with National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, which must enjoy genuine autonomy in relation to their governments.

Autonomy

The National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies must play their part as auxiliaries to the public authorities without in any way abandoning their freedom of decision, which alone enables them to remain faithful to their ideals of humanity, impartiality and neutrality. This condition is moreover laid down in Article 4, para. 4, of the Movement's Statutes.

The degree of autonomy necessary to a National Society cannot be defined uniformly and absolutely, since it depends partly on the political, economic and social conditions in the country. In time of civil war, for example, it is obviously essential for the National Society not to appear to be a tool of the government, since it will be unable to carry out all its duties if it does not possess the trust of all parties. This requirement is of a different kind in peacetime, when what matters above all is for the National Society to be free to decide which areas of activity to engage in and the form its activities should take. Thus, the National Society must show itself sufficiently willing to support the public authorities, yet without the State being able to compel it to accept a mandate that the Society might consider as inappropriate to actual needs, or incompatible with the Fundamental Principles. At the same time, it must be free to relinquish certain tasks or to change its priorities in accordance with the material and human resources at its disposal. Its role as auxiliary to the public authorities does not in the least prevent a National Society from freely choosing the activities it carries out completely independently of the State.

Child-care courses, family planning, AIDS prevention, blood banks: a National Society must be able to choose, freely and in conformity with the Fundamental Principles, the activities it will carry out and the groups of people it will assist.



For example, a National Society may decide to undertake social welfare activities in favour of especially vulnerable groups among the population (refugees, released prisoners, drug addicts, etc.), even if the State has not requested it to take action in these areas.

Although the State undertakes to respect the principle of independence, it is sometimes greatly tempted to interfere in the life of a National Society for instance

by assuming a certain right to monitor its activities in return for State subsidies and other facilities.

© ICRC/T. Gassmann, Ref. AF-180/9

Often the State is represented in the governing bodies of the National Society. This can be useful in itself: the need for proper coordination with the public authorities can, in fact, justify representatives of the ministries concerned with Red Cross or Red Crescent activities (e.g. the ministries of health, education, defence) taking part in decision-making within the Society but on condition that the freely elected representatives of the Society's active members remain in a large majority in the Society's governing bodies.

The National Societies can offer effective resistance to interference or attempts at control only if they adopt specific structural and operational rules.

In this context the importance of government recognition, which lays the basis for cooperation between the State and the National Society, must be re-emphasized: a "good" declaration of recognition is in fact the first guarantee of independence.

Another equally important guarantee is for the National Society to be run democratically. It will safeguard its independence still further by recruiting volunteer workers from all social, cultural and economic sectors of the population, and by giving them the opportunity to take part in important decisions and to be elected to leading positions.

This, incidentally, is why the League Board of Governors [1], meeting in Oxford in 1946 and Stockholm in 1948, requested that each Society "should be organized on a truly democratic basis". This directive was confirmed by the 18th International Conference of the Red Cross and remains wholly valid.

Other measures, which cannot all be enumerated, likewise contribute to the National Society's independence. It must, for example, provide its own financing from regular and other sources and take care not to depend totally on income from the public services it performs.

It must also diversify its activities, so that if it relinquishes certain duties it will not cease to exist. In addition it must maintain its image and credibility in the eyes of the general public, so that if ever its independence is threatened it will be able to count on public support.

Finally there is a close link between development and respect for the Fundamental Principles: a National Society whose administrative and financial structure is inadequate is less well-equipped to uphold its independence *vis-à-vis* the authorities than if its structure is sound and can rally the support of well-trained and motivated volunteers.

It is therefore essential that solidarity within the Movement be expressed by strengthening the least developed National Societies. This undoubtedly helps to increase knowledge of and respect for the Fundamental Principles in the National Society concerned.

Voluntary service

The International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement is a voluntary relief movement not prompted in any manner by desire for gain.

The Principle of Voluntary service

The International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement is one of selfless voluntary service.

Whether it is done without pay or with some form of acknowledgement or even modest remuneration, the main thing is that it is not inspired by the desire for financial gain but by individual commitment and devotion to humanitarian purpose, freely chosen or accepted as part of the service that the Red Cross and Red Crescent render to the community. The quintessence of voluntary service is unpaid service to others, the most direct expression of the humanity which is the first of the Movement's principles.

The origin of voluntary service

It was on the battlefield of Solferino that Henry Dunant, struck by the insufficiency of medical services, the

great number of soldiers who died for lack of care and the vast suffering that could have been avoided, conceived the great project of forming "relief societies for the purpose of having care given to the wounded in wartime by zealous, devoted and thoroughly qualified volunteers".

Henry Dunant's idea made headway. To overcome the misgivings voiced by various senior military officers, who were concerned about civilians being given access to the battlefield, it was decided that voluntary medical personnel would be "placed under military command" (Resolution 6 of the 1863 Geneva International Conference). As they were then acting under military discipline and were placed on the same footing as the army medical services, it was secondary whether or not they kept their status as civilians; being officially authorized, they were entitled to the same protection as military medical personnel.

Although the first Red Cross volunteers worked on or close to the battlefields, they are now also present at the scene of natural disasters and in everyday life, performing a host of medical and social welfare tasks. This was a natural development, stemming from the history of the Movement and its tradition of pioneering in the humanitarian field.

The raison d'être of voluntary service

Why is the International Red Cross "a voluntary relief movement not prompted in any manner by desire for gain", as stated in the principle of voluntary service? There are three factors which explain the importance attached to this Principle:

- *The human dimension of voluntary service*

It is thanks to the many volunteers who have offered their help that the Movement has been able to undertake its task, as defined in the principle of humanity, "to prevent and alleviate human suffering wherever it may be found".

Let us take an example to illustrate the link between the two principles. Some people may doubt the usefulness of volunteers, either in countries where the health and well-being of the public are largely or entirely provided for by the State, or in countries whose National Societies are prosperous and have large, well-trained and competent salaried staffs. Would it be possible under these circumstances to get along without volunteers? We think not.

First of all, however competent and devoted public health workers may be, there is always suffering that public authorities overlook, that only volunteers familiar with local conditions can detect.

In addition, the very fact that Red Cross and Red Crescent volunteers are not public employees working under orders, that they do not represent authorities who may be feared or perhaps even contested, is likely to gain for them the confidence of the men and women they seek to help. Especially in the case of unpaid volunteers, the selflessness of this gesture without any thought of recompense gives it a particularly human dimension.

Finally, the National Society itself, if it fails to recognize the value of voluntary service, is in danger of becoming bureaucratic, thus losing touch with a vital source of motivation, inspiration and initiative, and of cutting off the roots which maintain its contact with human needs and enable it to meet them, with the authorities' agreement and often with their active support.

- *Voluntary service, token and testimony of the independence of the National Societies*

Another reason why voluntary service is and must remain one of the pillars of the Movement derives from the other Fundamental Principles of the Red Cross and Red Crescent. What better security do National Societies have against the many pressures to which they are exposed than their nature as private institutions, based on voluntary service without any desire for gain? A National Society's independence is especially important in the event of civil war and internal disturbances and tension, when a country is divided between rival factions. The National Society could not gain the confidence of all parties, indispensable for access to all the victims, if it did not remain free to act in accordance with the principles it has adopted and if it did not have the support of volunteers from every quarter: political, religious and social.

- *Voluntary service, a source of economy*

To consider more prosaic matters, let us just imagine how much suffering would have to be neglected for lack of means if all the work done by volunteers had to be paid for. It is sometimes sufficient to have a relatively small but motivated support staff, with the necessary minimum of financial resources, to enable volunteers to render community services whose cost could never be borne either by the National Society or by the State.

Challenges posed by the principle of voluntary service

"Voluntary service within the Movement is going through a period of crisis", according to some people who are concerned about the difficulty of recruiting volunteers and ensuring that their motivation does not flag. Other people argue that "the humanitarian involvement of young volunteer workers in countries in the throes of political transformation may give new life to National Societies, which are at times themselves disconcerted by the rapidity of change, or seeking to gain greater credibility with the general public". Although everyone agrees that voluntary service is one of the mainstays of Red Cross and Red Crescent work, the problems encountered by National Societies vary considerably depending on their level of development, and the political situation within their country. What are the challenges which this principle poses?

- *Voluntary service during armed conflicts*

Red Cross and Red Crescent volunteers may act as auxiliaries to official military and civilian medical services. Many have given their lives courageously evacuating the injured, bandaging the wounded, tending the sick or retrieving mortal remains in places no one else dared to approach. In countries ravaged by conflict, Henry Dunant's humanitarian ideas have more than proved their merit.

Despite this, many National Societies, beset by other problems, do not realize the need to prepare themselves for situations of conflict, to define the activities incumbent upon them in such a case, in cooperation with the civilian and military authorities, and to train volunteers to undertake such activities. In other countries, the official medical services are so fully developed that the authorities see no need for volunteer help should a conflict arise.

Admittedly, assistance for the victims is primarily the duty of the State. But experience has shown that forward-looking National Societies which, for example, have stockpiled emergency supplies, trained motivated volunteers in first-aid and established the necessary contacts, can do invaluable work once a volatile political situation flares up into violent clashes. Furthermore, it should not be over-optimistically assumed that the official medical services are capable of handling every contingency.

- *The recruitment of volunteers*

Competition among humanitarian, sporting, cultural and political organizations to attract volunteers has become more and more intense in certain countries. People looking for something to do, be they members of the working population with limited free time, or young or retired people, are spoilt for choice. There are now countless institutions for voluntary welfare work, even in the humanitarian sphere.

In this connection, the very qualities from which the Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies derive their strength can play against them: they are generally well structured, to such an extent that some - particularly young people - could perceive them as being too rigidly bureaucratic, and they are governed by principles, such as neutrality whose justification is not always understood.

Motivating and training the next generation is essential for the future of a National Society.



© ICRC/L.de Toledo, Ref.UG-

In today's world, where the perpetrators and the victims of violence, as well as those who alleviate the suffering it causes, are very frequently adolescents, the Movement must pay heed to the aspirations of young people, because the hope for a more peaceful and more united society depends on their energy, their enthusiasm and their vitality. It is therefore of paramount importance that they should be fully integrated in the National Society, that they should participate in decision making and be able to benefit from the experience of their elders. Their supervision and guidance should be flexible enough not to discourage spontaneous initiative, but close enough to ensure efficiency. Needless to say, all volunteers

have to be given a clear understanding of the significance of the Fundamental Principles in their day-to-day work.

- *The motivation of volunteers*

To sustain their motivation, the National Society must endeavour to entrust volunteers with tasks in line with their abilities, to ensure from the start that they understand their rights and duties - which, in some Societies, are laid down in a working agreement - and to give them satisfactory working conditions. For example, in certain countries this can mean providing appropriate accident insurance.

Properly trained volunteers, whose work is appreciated and who are aware of this fact, and whose relations at the professional level are facilitated by having clearly defined responsibilities, should be able to find personal fulfilment in the tasks assigned to them. Irrespective of how long they work for the Movement, for the rest of their lives they will help to enhance the reputation of the Red Cross and Red Crescent.

Voluntary work, an expression of solidarity

Many individuals are imbued with a desire to help others. Whether it is within the family, the clan, the village, the local club, the religious community or the National Society, every time suffering is alleviated by a selfless gesture, the spirit of humanity triumphs over poverty, illness, the violence of man or the forces of nature. Whenever such a gesture is performed somewhere in the world within the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, it is yet another expression of the universal solidarity that bonds the Movement together.

Unity

The Principle of Unity

The principle of unity is one of the oldest of the seven Fundamental Principles. As early as 1875 Gustave Moynier spoke of the principle of what he called 'centralization', whose content was essentially the same as that of the current principle of unity:

There can be only one Red Cross or one Red Crescent Society in any one country. It must be open to all. It must carry on its humanitarian work throughout its territory.

The principle of unity specifically relates to the institutional structure of the National Societies. Indeed, the three elements which are mentioned in the principle correspond to three conditions National Societies must meet in order to be recognized: the Society must be the sole institution with that status, it must show non-discrimination in recruitment of members and it must cover the whole national territory.

Being the sole National Society in the country

The governmental decree constituting State recognition of a National Society usually stipulates that it is the only National Red Cross or Red Crescent Society that can carry out its activities on the national territory. This uniqueness of the National Society is also one of the conditions for its recognition by the ICRC, under Article 4, para. 2, of the Movement's Statutes. It is important for the Society's credibility that there should not be within one country several rival organizations, all claiming to belong to the same body pursuing similar objectives and carrying out the same activities independently of each other. Apart from the risk of confusion in the public mind, there is a not inconsiderable risk that each of these associations would come to represent different communities within the country.

Uniqueness necessarily implies unity of administration. From the internal viewpoint, only a central body can have an overall view, ensure harmonious coordination of the human and material resources available and evaluate the priorities for action. As far as external relations are concerned, if the National Society is to participate in international conferences and meetings it must obviously have a central body qualified to represent it among the other members of the Movement.

In practice, it sometimes happens that another society is set up in a country where there is already a National Society without the latter having the means to prevent it. Such a second society obviously cannot

be recognized and admitted to the Movement, even though contact may be established on a pragmatic basis in the interest of persons needing help.

Non-discrimination in the recruitment of members

The strength of a National Society comes from a broad-based membership and it is therefore essential that it be open to all. This requirement appears in the conditions for recognition set out in Article 4, para. 8, of the Movement's Statutes: the National Society must "recruit its voluntary members and its staff without consideration of race, sex, class, religion or political opinions".

A National Society must enjoy a broad base in the population as a whole and recruit its members from all the ethnic, social and other groups in the country if it is to enjoy universal confidence, without which it would be impossible for it to fulfil its mission effectively. This requirement that all social circles be represented entails openness to both rural and urban communities and must be reflected in the composition of the governing bodies of the Society. The conduct of its activities must not remain the preserve of the most privileged classes. It is by enjoying the full support of people of good will, working together for the benefit of all, that the National Society acquires both the means and the necessary authority to resist pressure of every kind and keep its autonomy.

This openness to all does not, however, mean that the National Society has to accept all candidates without exception. It is under no obligation, for example, to accept the services of foreigners residing in its country - as has been mentioned in the commentary on the principle of impartiality; such matters are up to each Society to decide. It naturally also has the right to refuse members on moral grounds and may exclude people who hinder its work, since in these cases the reputation and smooth running of the institution are at stake.

In practice, non-discrimination in recruitment assumes special importance, for example for the National Society of a country affected by internal disturbances or tension or where there are various communities opposed to one another on political, racial or religious grounds. The National Society must not allow itself to acquire any political or ideological hue, and its publicity and recruitment drives for volunteers must be directed to all sides. In this way not only will the principle be respected but also the National Society will help reconcile opposing factions of the population by the harmony it creates through common action.

Covering the whole territory

There is a corollary to the unique status of a National Society in its own country: the Society must extend its activity to the entire territory of the State. It must demonstrate that it is able to do so before being admitted as a full member of the Movement, in accordance with Article 4, para. 7, of the Statutes.

In principle, the operational capacity of a National Society should enable it both to carry out all the tasks specified in its statutes and to cover the whole of the national territory; particularly by setting up local branches which will carry out their activities in accordance with the guidelines defined by the central bodies.

This requirement may prove to be a temporary barrier to recognition of a National Society by the ICRC. In a country torn apart by internal conflict, for instance, a large part of the national territory may not be under government control and may remain inaccessible to the Society that has been created in that country and wishes to become a member of the Movement. In such circumstances, recognition will have to be postponed until the status of the territory in question has been the subject of a political settlement enabling the National Society to extend its activities to the entire population throughout the national territory. In the meantime, the absence of formal recognition does not prevent the institutions of the Movement from establishing practical working relations with the "Society" concerned and helping it in its humanitarian work, in the overriding interest of the victims.

The interrelation between the Fundamental Principles

The Fundamental Principles as a whole give the Movement its identity and its specific nature. They do not all have the same importance, but they have a logical relationship and each one sheds light on the others.

In this connection it should be stressed that the principle of unity is closely related to the principles of universality, impartiality and independence. It is reflected in universality because the example set at the national level by extending the Society's activities throughout the country has a multiplier effect at the international level. It relates directly to impartiality since membership of the National Society cannot be refused to anyone on the grounds that he or she belongs to any particular race, social class, religion or political party. It implies independence, because it is by representing the widest possible range in its membership that the National Society is best able to earn the national community's respect for its integrity and its purely humanitarian role.

As the common denominator for all the components of the Movement, the Fundamental Principles constitute the keystone of its doctrine, respect for which is the basis of the Movement's constancy and universality. Whereas compliance with international humanitarian law is the responsibility of States, implementation of the Fundamental Principles is the responsibility of all the members of the Movement. Since their application depends to a considerable degree on a sound understanding of their meaning, the need to disseminate the Principles is part of the obligation to respect them, which all the components of the Movement have freely undertaken.

Universality

The International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, in which all Societies have equal status and share equal responsibilities and duties in helping each other, is worldwide.

The Principle of Universality

For the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, universality is both a reality (the National Societies that exist in almost all countries of the world are living proof of this) and a requirement (some countries do not yet have a National Red Cross or Red Crescent Society, and some National Societies have not been or cannot yet be recognized as full members of the Movement). Through their international work, the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies and the ICRC also demonstrate the commitment of the Red Cross and Red Crescent to the service of people in distress on every continent.

The Red Cross and Red Crescent came into being as a result of the horrors of war, torture and the ravages of earthquakes, to mention but a few of the evils that befall humankind. To the universality of suffering, the response is the universality of humanitarian action.

Another aspect of universality should be mentioned here, namely international humanitarian law and especially the four Geneva Conventions of 1949. These legal rules were created at the same time as the Red Cross and were inspired by it. Prompted by the same humanitarian spirit, the Geneva Conventions are intended, like the Red Cross and Red Crescent, to prevent and mitigate human suffering. They have been signed by practically all the States and are universal in scope, transcending national particularities and ideological differences. For this reason it is indispensable that the National Societies and especially the ICRC, to which humanitarian law explicitly entrusts certain responsibilities, should help the States to spread universal knowledge of and respect for these important instruments protecting the victims of war.

The values underlying the Movement's Fundamental Principles are simple: they are all founded on respect for the human being. That is why they can be universally recognized and accepted.



©ICRC/G.Pichler, Ref.YU - 45/13

Another reason for the universality of the Red Cross and Red Crescent has undoubtedly been, ever since the Movement's inception, the simplicity of its message, the essence of which is conveyed by the principle of humanity. This simplicity enables the Movement's institutions to be accepted in the contexts of varied cultures, to take action in the midst of conflict, and to bring humanitarian viewpoints to bear on political and military leaders whose ideologies are often of a totally different nature.

The ability to do so derives, in particular, from the principles of neutrality and impartiality, with which the principle of universality is closely linked and which enable the Red Cross and Red Crescent to retain their freedom to serve human beings wherever and whoever they may be.

These general considerations go beyond the wording of the principle of universality which we must now examine more closely. This principle states that:

The International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, in which all Societies have equal status and share equal responsibilities and duties in helping each other, is worldwide.

Respect for the principles: an imperative requirement

First, to state what ought to be self-evident: the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement must be universal. If there were National Societies in only a few countries, the work proposed by Henry Dunant would have little meaning, since it is based on solidarity, reciprocity and international cooperation. It follows that the Movement neither can nor must be content to remain passive in the face of suffering, inactive in disaster, self-centred individually or nationally. By its dynamic response and by its efficient and selfless commitment it must show, on the spot, that it is devoted in visible and practical endeavour to helping people in distress, whether victims of epidemics, malnutrition, poverty, natural or man-made disasters.

Here arises a question that sometimes causes difficulties for the Movement: should it tolerate lack of respect for the Fundamental Principles by one of its components, so as to remain internationally as open as possible to all, or should it on the contrary punish such a component by excluding it if it does not perfectly adhere to the principles, even if to do so might jeopardize the Movement's ability to take action in some countries?

It should be said at once that the Fundamental Principles, while expressing the vocation of the Red Cross and Red Crescent and appealing for human kindness and altruism, are applied to a living and changing world, to societies made up of people who are far from perfect. As well as being a source of humanitarian motivation, the principles are also an ideal towards which to strive.

The causes of failure to observe the Fundamental Principles are diverse, and cannot all be imputed to the existing Red Cross and Red Crescent organizations. An analysis of the principle of independence, to take the most striking example, shows that a National Society which is auxiliary to the public authorities in humanitarian matters, is not always in a position to resist pressures upon it. But it is nonetheless expected to remain vigilant and make every attempt to promote better understanding of the underlying significance of its ideals. In so doing, it can count on the support of the Federation and the ICRC, which assume special responsibility for observance of the Fundamental Principles by the National Societies.

Suffering knows no frontiers, nor does humanitarian commitment, which must rise above the barriers of politics, race and religion. Every National Society is duty bound to support sister Societies and to come to their aid in case of need.



© ICRC/C.Pelissier, Ref.SO-D7/13

While a certain degree of flexibility, patience and reciprocal understanding are the price to be paid for maintaining the Movement's universality, some compromises are unacceptable: any National Society that persistently violated the principle of humanity, or whose activities were deliberately biased, would by its own actions cut itself off from the Movement.

Shared responsibility

The Movement, whose vocation is to relieve human suffering, cannot remain indifferent to difficulties experienced by one of its components. The principle of universality therefore, calls for collective responsibility within the International Movement, whose wealth and strength lie in its very diversity. In this respect, too, the Movement demonstrates its unique nature, its independence and its solidarity.

Indeed, in a world in which national, ethnic and religious diversities are often a cause of tension and conflict, the Red Cross and Red Crescent are shown to be impartial and independent institutions, at the service of all without discrimination or favouritism. Moreover, by its work and by spreading knowledge of its ideals, the Movement can encourage peace, reconciliation and dialogue.

Likewise, in a world where diversity also means inequality, injustice, abuses and exploitation, the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement desires relations between its components to be completely equal, each one enjoying the same rights and duties. Among the duties is that of mutual help.

The Movement thus gains by its diversity, which stems from both the cultural origins of its components

throughout the world and the complementarity of the responsibilities assumed, each according to its mandate, by the National Societies, the Federation and the ICRC.

The principle of universality does not explicitly mention either the Federation or the ICRC, but it is self-evident that the two international institutions are simultaneously the instrument and the expression of the solidarity of the Red Cross and Red Crescent. The Federation is by its nature the most apt to facilitate and encourage cooperation between the Societies. The ICRC likewise demonstrates the universality of the Movement's humanitarian vocation by its work in a large number of countries, with which it seeks to associate the National Societies as much as possible.

Cooperation for development

The solidarity of the Red Cross and Red Crescent is particularly evident during sudden large-scale disasters or in time of war. This solidarity should be shown even more in cooperation for development. The gaps between large sections of the population in many countries, and between "North" and "South", are not merely differences in the standard of living but a gulf between abundance, even superabundance, and extreme poverty. This gulf must be narrowed - if not entirely overcome - not only for humanitarian reasons but also for the sake of justice and peace.

It is certainly one of the foremost tasks of the Red Cross and Red Crescent to fight poverty, in whatever form it exists. Every National Society has the duty to join in this struggle in its own country. However, in poor countries, the National Societies themselves lack resources. It is then up to the more affluent or more experienced Societies to give them support, sharing with them a responsibility that knows no frontiers. This is the meaning of the principle of universality when it reminds us that within the Movement the National Societies enjoy equal rights.

Equality of rights

The equality of rights of the National Societies is reflected by the fact that in the Federation's General Assembly, in the Council of Delegates and at International Conferences of the Red Cross and Red Crescent, each Society has one vote. This equality is based on the principle of independence which, in this context, forbids granting certain Societies privileged voting rights or permanent seats in the Movement's governing bodies.

But the requirement of equality is even more profoundly rooted in the humanitarian vocation of the Movement: the principle of equality of rights among the National Societies stems from the equality of human beings among themselves, and especially their equality in the midst of suffering.

In order to retain their unique, distinct nature *vis-à-vis* economic and political powers, the Red Cross and Red Crescent must make sure that this *de jure* equality is not distorted by *de facto* inequality. Obviously the Movement cannot escape completely from the hard facts of reality but within its own confines at least, it is vital that the "strong", whether individuals or Societies, do not exert their power and influence to destroy an ideal of equality based on elementary justice.

The Fundamental Principles of the Red Cross and Red Crescent form a coherent whole. While the scope of each must be specified, it is essential to read them - and to respect them! - as a whole, since it is from this whole that the unique nature of the International Movement is derived and continues to prevail. Born of one man's initiative, on one specific battlefield, the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement today has spread its activities to millions of people throughout the world. In this sense, the principle of universality is an extension of, and complementary to, the principle of humanity: the profound sense of humanitarian motivation is expressed in the accomplishment of a demanding mission reaching across and beyond all national borders.

The principle of universality indicates that each of the Movement's components is responsible for the others: the failings or omissions of one of them affect the whole of the "family". The very integrity of the Red Cross and Red Crescent and their loyalty to the ideals and goals of the Movement are at stake. Such universality is difficult to achieve and maintain. It calls for strength of purpose, courage and vigilance from each and every component of the Movement.



© ICRC/Ref.CER-292/27

Human suffering is universal, and so is humanitarian commitment. All the National Societies have the same rights, and in the Movement's statutory meetings each one of them has one vote. The Societies also have the same duties and the same obligations to meet in alleviating human suffering.

Note

1. Now known as the General Assembly of the Federation.