

OPEN LECTURE

Importance and Relevance of the Fundamental Principles of the International Movement of the Red Cross and Red Crescent

People's Friendship University of Russia – Lumumba

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The Fundamental Principles are the result of over a century of humanitarian experience, and are recognized in international humanitarian law. Proclaimed in Vienna in 1965, they bond together the National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, the International Committee of the Red Cross and the International Federation, and guarantee the continuity of the Movement and its humanitarian work. They represent the “Holy Book” and the milestone of Red Cross and Red Crescent, since the RC and RC are the same thing.

The first systematic presentation of the principles of the Red Cross, dates from 1955 and served as the basis for the official Proclamation which today has the force of law. States that have signed the four Geneva Conventions of 1949, for example, have officially agreed that National Societies “shall be able to pursue their activities in accordance with Red Cross principles.”

The doctrine of the Red Cross is permanent. It is the expression of long-term wisdom, indifferent to the up and down of popular opinions and ideologies of the moment. In a fast changing world the F. P. remain the same. The man who systematized the F.P. was Jean Pictet who said that: *“the doctrine of the Red Cross therefore is the real link between the Societies, the cement which holds the stones together to make of them a solid and well built edifice. It is this doctrine which creates the unity and the universality of the structure, which, indeed, makes the Red Cross a reality. Without principles, the Red Cross would simply not exist.”*

Furthermore, we must avoid confusion of the principles of the Red Cross with the principles of international humanitarian law, mainly embodied in the four Geneva Conventions for the protection of the victims of war.

There is however a link between these two fields, for humanitarian law had its origin in the ideal of the Red Cross, which continues to stimulate its development. Thus there are certain principles, such as those of humanity and of non-discrimination, which in a sense are common to both.

Starting to talk about the 7 principles they have an internal logic, so each one is strictly connected with the others.

The core of our mission is well described in the Federation Strategy 2020 “Saving lives, changing minds” , our role is *“to improve the lives of vulnerable people by mobilizing the power of humanity”*. Not only action but also advocacy.

Advocacy, in concrete, means to speak on behalf of the vulnerable people, on behalf of those who have nothing because they have no access to the basic goods and neither have access to the media to rise their voice and defend their interests and reduce their vulnerability. But we have to keep in mind that advocacy is on safer ground when supported by activities, as it is written in the Federation Strategy 2010.

“Recently, the International Movement is expanding the concept of advocacy and discussing a new, broader strategy of influence that we call "humanitarian diplomacy": the set of all the actions that the Red Cross has made to public authorities, to all levels, to remind them of their obligation to respect human rights, denouncing the violations that are from time to time perpetrated. The only limitation of this action is the respect of the Fundamental Principles, in particular those of humanity, neutrality and independence.” (M. BARRA)

The morality of the Red Cross is valid to the extent that it expresses itself in concrete realities. As Henri-Louis Bergson said: *‘We must always act as men of thought and think as men of action’*.

HUMANITY

In the doctrine of the Red Cross, the principle of humanity, from which all the other principles flow, we can say that it stand in first place. As the basis of the institution, it provides at the same time its ideal, its motivation and its objective. It is indeed the prime mover for the whole movement.

The preamble explanation of the Principles gives a reminder of the necessity, recognized from the very beginning, of providing assistance “without discrimination” in a spirit of equity so that the Red Cross extends its action to everyone. Thus, as was written long ago by the Chinese philosopher Meh-ti, *“Only a love which makes no distinction will save the world”*.

Let’s start to say that Humanity is about human connection, relating to the other. It is a two way flow of energy, thoughts, feelings. And I thought, what we really need to live humanity, is empathy, and empathy is something one can develop.

We are not able to save every human being life, but somehow our biggest challenge and maybe biggest power is not to act like heroes but is to educate human being to bring out the spirit of humanity, to promote a culture of nonviolence and peace, and to do so, it is essential to pursue peace and harmony inside, within ourselves. Having empathy for others is great but not so easy.

So our big job is to educate each other and help each other to find the spirit of Humanity we already have inside.

“That’s why I firmly think that all together, within the Movement, in our daily work, we represent the Power of Humanity. This expression may seem redundant or even rhetoric. In reality the Fundamental Principle of Humanity and the Power of Humanity are the result of the action of 17 millions of people (according to last figures) who adhere to the Red Cross, serving the Red Cross and Red Crescent, which speak the same language and use the same terms

throughout the world: the seven Principles, the vulnerable people, the protection, assistance, Henry Dunant, the women of Castiglione, "Tutti fratelli".

Our added value is our network, be everywhere as Movement and in each of our countries as N.S. Each of us is nothing when alone, but together we are a humanitarian and human power that has no equal in the world. Here's why our offices and premises must be open to all, that's why our action must be comprehensive action." (M. BARRA)

IMPARTIALITY

The principle of Impartiality, which is recognized in International Humanitarian Law, encompasses three sub-principles:

- **Non-discrimination:** aid should be delivered based on needs only, regardless of the nationality, religion, or political affiliation.

- **Proportionality:** recognizing that humanitarian actors cannot meet all needs, the principle of proportionality enable humanitarian actors to distribute aid equitably, based in proportion to the priority of needs. With this principle, we are entering in the area of practical means. This also justifies that particularly vulnerable categories of people (e.g. children, drug users, migrants etc.) might require specific assistance and protection.

- **Exclusion of personal prejudice:** at an individual level, subjectivity and personal preferences must be put aside.

All communities have groups of people , often hidden, who are unable to enjoy the general benefits that are accessible to society. Such people may be neglected, marginalized or excluded for many reasons such as social or economic disadvantage, their employment status, a lack of access to information, knowledge or modern communication tools, or perhaps due to public attitudes that stigmatize and discriminate against them.

That's why it's so important the education of our humanitarian values which encourage respect for other human beings and which "*shape humanitarian action*". As I said before, the purpose of our action is to "influence behaviour",

not simply to increase knowledge and understanding. Changing minds and reduce discriminations it's already in itself a humanitarian achievement. Only through the empathy we can provide a quality work and live in our daily life the Principles. It's our interest to provide an environment in which people who are marginalized and stigmatized feel welcome and safe, and where they are given an effective role in participating in our work.

NEUTRALITY

Neutrality is perhaps one of the most misunderstood, and also one of the most essential, of the Fundamental Principles. Neutrality is often confused to a mean of passivity or "indifference". But not taking sides in a conflict does not mean being indifferent. Neutrality in fact enables the Movement to put the Principles of humanity and impartiality in action. This is a key reason why people on all sides of a conflict feel they can trust the Movement. This principle is a key one because it opens doors. It is often neutrality that enables ICRC delegates to visit prisoners, allows relief convoys displaying and reach conflict zones and helps ensure that National Society volunteers are not attacked thanks to the Movement's emblems they wear.

Volunteers resist enormous pressure on them to take sides. In countries where an internal conflict is taking place, from one side armed forces could not understand why the National Society does not condemn the activities of armed groups that they consider as criminals. And from the other side the armed groups can be critical of what they see as the National Society's connections with the authorities. It's all a matter of trust!

Sadly, sometimes volunteers are attacked, injured and even killed while trying to help people in need despite wearing the protective red cross or red crescent emblem. Volunteers in the Syrian Arab Red Crescent offer an impressive example how the Principles of neutrality and impartiality in a country divided along partisan lines. *"Are not sufficient. In the last years we've lost more than fifty of them which have sacrificed their life in the line of duty. We have lost colleagues in other countries too, but nowhere else, in recent decades,*

happened such a dramatic attack to our Movement's volunteers and staff members. It almost seems that Henry Dunant was not born and that Geneva Conventions were not even signed." (M. Barra)

Neutrality also means never getting involved in controversy, so as not to lose the confidence of any part of the population.

"But the Red Cross Red Crescent Movement is not neutral in front of human suffering and discrimination, and has the moral duty to speak loudly on behalf of those who can be considered as the most vulnerable ones. Many times I said in our Movement that stigma kills. We have the proves that discrimination and indifference kill even more for example than drugs. Moreover, stigmatisation and lack of care for drug addicts are unwise and destructive not only for the users themselves, but also for the communities in which they live. A drug user is already dangerous to himself. But a drug user who is not known and helped by the health care system with human sympathy is twice more dangerous.

Spreading the light of science and the warmth of human sympathy' were the words used in Paris in 1919 by the founders of the League of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies. "Spreading the light of Science" is now the title of the document on harm reduction related to injecting drug use published in 2003 by the Federation of the Red Cross/Red Crescent Societies, in which the Red Cross calls on the international community to be "guided by the light of science and not by the darkness of ignorance and fear". Health-based interventions and fight against stigma represent the first, most effective approach for vulnerable people. As in this case, caring for drug users – regardless of their conditions and their type of addiction – is the best option not only for them, but also for the society in which they live." (M. BARRA)

So this example can be helpful to understand that to be neutral is fundamental in case of conflicts, but the duty of a volunteer in front of a human being is suffering , is to deliver care and help regardless of the public opinion or even public authorities prejudice and ignorance.

INDEPENDENCE

When the Red Cross and the first National Societies were founded, their founders recognized how important it was to be independent. National Societies should be in a position to make their own decisions to give assistance based purely on need and not be subordinate to political, military or other powers. National Societies serve as auxiliaries to their governments in the humanitarian field, but they are independent organizations that make their own decisions about when and where help is needed.

They must not give in to political pressure or let themselves be swayed by public opinion that can be influenced by media. In its broadest sense, independence means that Movement members must resist interference – whether political, ideological or economic – that would stop them from acting in accordance with the Fundamental Principles of humanity, impartiality and neutrality!

No National Society may, for example, accept financial contributions that are given to help people only on the basis of political, ethnic or religious criteria and to the exclusion of those whose needs might be greater.

The difference between us and the NGOs is that our National Societies have the role of “auxiliaries” to public authorities in the humanitarian field. The auxiliary role of National Societies has its origins in the earliest days of the Red Cross, when volunteer medical workers were recognized as auxiliaries to military medical services. Over time, this concept has changed and come to cover a wide range of humanitarian activities that support public authorities in peacetime and in crisis period. This does not mean that National Societies are subordinate to their governments, but we can say it is complementing role to the government activities or public services that the government is not able to provide.

VOLUNTARY SERVICE

Every day, all around the world, people give their time and energy to help others for free. They visit elderly people, help people give blood, support migrants or bring warm blankets to homeless. In emergencies, volunteers provide first aid and basic support to people injured and in need of assistance. They spend days, weeks and months to building shelters or to protect communities from infectious diseases. We have around 17 million volunteers in the Movement, especially young people. One recent study by the Federation placed the economic value of their services at over 6 billion US dollars a year. But volunteering is not only about money.

Our work must be driven by individual devotion and commitment to humanitarian goals and not moved by a desire for financial gain or personal ambition.

One of the strengths of the Movement is the capillarity of our network of volunteers who are active in their local branches, strictly connected with their communities. Their knowledge of the local context and the well recognized role they have within their community gives them a crucial role as first responders and facilitators in the event of a crisis.

UNITY

The Principle of unity is essential to ensuring that the Fundamental Principles of neutrality, impartiality, universality and independence can be effective. The basic legal requirement is that there is only one National Society that covers all the territory of a State, this means that it must support all branches in all parts of the country as a whole unic society under the same statute and rules. The requirement that it is open to all means that its workforce should represent all the groups that make up the population. The strength of a National Society comes from embracing diversity and a plural membership. It is also essential that it is open to all and that this is reflected in its governing body.

The fact that we are an open-door and inclusive organisation, is well represented in our Movement's Statutes, in which every National Society

“recruit its voluntary members and its staff without consideration of race, sex, class, religion or political opinions.”

These factors greatly increase and help the probability that the National Society will be able to remain neutral in national disputes and controversies, and that it will be able to bring effective and impartial assistance to all parts of the country and to all the people when needed.

UNIVERSALITY

The Principle of universality requires the entire Movement to work together to help the most vulnerable people. The universality is most clearly visible through our National Societies, which exist in almost every country in the world. Currently we are present in 190 countries.

Movement solidarity is particularly evident after sudden large-scale disasters or in times of war when we mobilize support for people and National Societies in the countries affected. But global solidarity is not limited to times of armed conflicts. In times of peace, the Movement also works to develop and strengthen National Societies, particularly younger ones or those in low-income countries with fewer resources.

The Principle of universality requires that National Societies offer their solidarity and support in a way that does not undermine other components of the Movement – particularly National Societies in countries in crisis.

Finally to reaffirm the ideals of the Red Cross with the general public or in places like schools and university, is in the interest of all of us in all the countries.

The challenge we face is to be effective and present in the Solferino's of today: which could mean to be present in the suburban area of our city and fight against the poverty; to be supportive in prisons in which the people are mistreated and abused; to check the streets where the drug users are daily

injecting drugs and help them; to not accept in any way the criminal use of torture. It is not important to be necessarily all of us in the trenches or on the battlefield as in Solferino times. It is not important to be necessarily in Syria or Lampedusa or Sierra Leone. It is essential not to forget all the vulnerabilities that can turn into new bloody Solferino, and act as good guardians of the Principles. The figures of last year's work in every corner of the world until the very last mile, shows how the principles of the RC/RC have been transformed in action.