

SANREMO

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ROLE OF RED CROSS AND RED CRESCENT NATIONAL SOCIETIES

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The International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, commonly known as International Red Cross, is an institutional framework bringing together the following independent bodies: the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) and 186 National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, while other National Societies are about to be formally recognized.

The Movement as we know it today is the result of the visionary idea that the Swiss man Henry Dunant had back in 1859 while assisting to the battle of

Solferino, not far from here: to create teams of voluntary relief workers who guarantee assistance to the wounded during wars, regardless of their side.

The ICRC is the founding body of the Red Cross; it is managed by Swiss nationals only, selected by cooptation. It is an association governed by the Swiss Civil Code which has been entrusted by the International Community with the unique mandates to play a neutral role in case of war or other armed conflicts, to be the custodian of the Geneva Conventions, to visit both war prisoners and detained for political reasons (about 500.000 visits carried out in 2010), to promote and prepare exchanges of prisoners between the conflicting parties.

While the ICRC works in wartime in order to ensure protection and assistance to the victims, the IFRC coordinates and manages international assistance following natural and man-made disasters in non-conflict situations, helping the most vulnerable people.

Finally, the National Societies, thanks to their unparalleled and capillary network of volunteers, are able to provide relief and assistance up to the most isolated

villages. The IFRC has recently estimated that this global network of some 13.1 million volunteers worldwide contributes 6 billion US dollars in economic value through the services they deliver. Volunteers extend the organisation's paid workforce by a *ratio* of 1:20 – meaning that for every paid staff member there are 20 volunteers.

The seven Fundamental Principles

All the activities of the Red Cross (Red Crescent for the Islamic countries) are inspired by the Seven Fundamental Principles which represent a sort of “holy book” of the Movement by clarifying its values and missions. Proclaimed in the 1965 International Conference in Wien after prolonged debates, these Principles remain there unchanged; in a rapidly evolving world, where even laws and constitutions last “l’espace d’un matin”, this demonstrates the deep and strong roots which these principles can rely on.

Humanity is the first and more important Principle, without which the other ones would be useless. The Red Cross power is the power of Humanity, always used in the interest of victims and vulnerable people.

The Principle of **Neutrality** explains that the Red Cross may not take sides in hostilities or engage at any time in controversies of a political, racial, religious or ideological nature.

The Principle of **Unity**, which could be better called Unicity, means that there can be only one Red Cross or one Red Crescent Society in one country. This Society must be open to all and must carry on its activities throughout its own country.

Independence means that the Red Cross is a volunteer relief organisation (the **Voluntary service** is another Principle), quite different from other both public and private entities. Governed by both International and National laws, the Red Cross is placed in a peculiar position (that we can define as “institutional third pillar of the world”), between governments - with their international institutions,

mainly represented by the UN – system, and the civil society, expressed by hundred thousands, if not millions, of non governmental bodies called NGOs.

Peculiar to this institutional position is the **auxiliary role** played by National Societies in the humanitarian services of their governments.

The concept of auxiliaryity was born in the battlefields as auxiliaryity to the Military health services. It then evolved as auxiliaryity to Governments and Public authorities at all levels.

Universality and **Impartiality** are the other Principles of the RC/RC. The latter is a very important principle, even if often not well known which originates the proportionality corollary: according to it, the work of the Red Cross is “needs driven”, solely guided by the needs of those most vulnerable without political interferences. For example, in an hypothetical war, if victims were distributed between the two contenders by a *ratio* of 4:1, the RC/RC would have to allocate the available resources by 80 percent in favour of the first part and by 20 percent in favour of the second one. Any other solution would result in a political decision, inconsistent with the humanitarian nature of the Movement.

The role of the Red Cross in the world

During its history the work of the Red Cross has generally encountered the favour of the public opinion; some criticism has been raised by those supporting different organisations, not politically autonomous, which are apparently more effective in reporting war crimes and humanitarian emergencies at the mass media level. A former ICRC Chairman, Max Huber, used to say “it is not important what the Red Cross says, but what the Red Cross does ” for underlining the strict confidentiality, if not secrecy, which characterises the activities of the Movement and which is deemed better safeguarding the victims. What would happen, in fact, if following to criticism against a government, suspected of actions against the Geneva Conventions or of war crimes, the Red Cross was prevented from reaching prisons and victims of such a government? These victims would probably lose their only contact with the world and the sole possibility to talk with human beings other than their warders, often torturers.

Because of this concern, the Movement tends not to openly judge nor condemn, nor call for, nor report facts or acts, risking to be sometimes perceived as an “old” institution. “*La Croix Rouge est vieille!*”, as Mr Bernard Kouchner, founder

of Medecins sans Frontieres and then French Minister of Foreign Affairs, told me during an UNGASS session devoted to HIV/AIDS. “*Ils sont vieux, mais ils font un grand boulot*”, told me again Mr Kouchner at the Eliseum, in occasion of the 90th anniversary of the League, former denomination of the IFRC.

For sure, NGOs supposed as modern actors get into messes more often than the Movement which, in spite of always working on the boundaries between life and death, is able to keep a balanced attitude, avoiding attacks and retaliations, even if that sometimes implies withdrawals from territories hostile to humanitarian activities.

In such cases it is difficult to judge: the difference between heroism and recklessness, realism and cowardliness is always drawn *a posteriori* and you will never know what would be happened with different decisions.

It is true that things change so rapidly and we are not anymore in the battle of Solferino's age. Somebody might say that “wars are not as beauty as in the past”, when conflicts were opened by formal declarations and it was clear, since the beginning, who was fighting who while the worst aspects of the conflicts were often hided to the public opinions. Today, instead, in our globalised world,

everything happens under the attention of the media and conflicts can see several contenders (often with irregular status and then not parties of the Geneva's Conventions).

A new power is born in the world: the public opinion, which all sees or believes to see or to know, making it more and more difficult to develop governance actions at any level. In these so rapidly changing scenarios, can the Red Cross keep on reporting breaches to both the Geneva's Conventions and the Human Fundamental Rights without fully involving the public opinion? And what are the limits of this involvement ?

In last years the publicity *versus* secrecy dilemma has progressively widened in connection with operational approaches which pay special attention to abuses reporting towards authorities and public opinion. The numerous contexts of institutional debate (the IFRC and the NSs General Assembly, the Council of Delegates, where all the Movement's components are represented, and the International Conferences, where the Movement's components are joined by the representatives of the signing Parties of the Geneva Conventions) have set out a theory according to which the RC activities present two aspects: the first one

linked to the well known and traditional operational assistance; the second one, less known even if gaining growing importance, linked to the so called “humanitarian diplomacy”.

For long time the terms “diplomacy” and “humanitarian” have been seen as incompatible terms; even today many diplomats do not like this expression. The apparent incompatibility is probably based on beliefs according to which diplomacy is too linked to politics for depicting humanitarian activities. However such beliefs do not take into account that humanitarian actors work almost every day in political contexts. For playing the above mentioned auxiliary role, senior officers of the Movement are necessarily in contact with governments and authorities at any level in an effort to help the most vulnerable people.

Therefore, the term “diplomacy” is well weighted, meaning a specific willingness of the Movement.

The humanitarian diplomacy activities

Humanitarian diplomacy is persuading decision makers and opinion leaders to act, at all times, in the interests of vulnerable people, with full respect for human

rights as well as RC/RC fundamental principles.

In the Humanitarian context, diplomacy is a wide concept covering any activity carried out in the interest of vulnerable people; it includes advocacy, negotiation, communication, formal agreements and other measures.

Advocacy, in particular, is an English term which has no corresponding terms in other languages (if not archaic ones, such as “*perorare*” in Italian and “*pledoyer*” in French); in the humanitarian diplomacy context it proofs the importance given to the most vulnerable and emarginated people, often ignored by the mass media system.

Humanitarian diplomacy and advocacy are gradually becoming key factors in the work of the Movement which appears to be widely appreciated everywhere: this is happening in a discrete way without clamours, according to the RC/RC style which always prioritizes the victims’ interests.

Many times I have observed the impact of such an attitude on the international community: for example, while many NGOs are able to organise bold protests

for supporting stances to be taken at the UN level or in other political contexts, that does not impress very much governments, because they know that many NGOs are used to acting this way. If the same stances are explicitly supported by the RC/RC, politically speaking this has a bigger impact, probably because the RC/RC is used to speaking more by facts than by words (as actually recalled in the IFRC 2010 Strategy, “*Advocacy is on safer ground when supported by activities*”).

A striking example of successful diplomatic action of the Red Cross is represented by the humanitarian policy on drugs which calls for a balanced approach to drug issues, paying more attention to public health aspects (with effective treatments for drug addicts) and lessening the repressive measures.

After a period of more or less explicit resistance, this policy has been adopted by the UN bodies working in this sector (UNAIDS – OMS – UNODC) and by the Global Fund, a new attitude probably and partially induced by the specific advocacy action (with training and informative campaigns, public stances, scientific papers) carried out by the RC/RC Movement. Millions of vulnerable persons will benefit from such a new policy.

The RC terminology is also changing for emphasising the right and duty of the Movement to speak louder on any humanitarian issue without passively assisting to crimes against humanity perpetrated in any part of the world. It is not by chance that the IFRC 2020 Strategy is titled “*Saving lives, changing minds*”.

Changing minds by staying neutral could appear as another contradiction in terms. But the fundamental principle of Neutrality has to be correctly interpreted: the Movement may not engage at any time in controversies of a political, racial, religious or ideological nature. It cannot then discriminate on the basis of nationality, race, religion, political and ideological beliefs, but the RC/RC is not neutral towards human suffering; it should be even considered as enemy of anything can provoke or worsen the human sufferance, having the right and the duty to act anytime the human evil produce situations conflicting with the Humanity principle.

A recent stance on Gaza is an example of this new deal of the Movement which is aware that things have changed since Solferino’s battle.

One ICRC news release on Gaza states: *«The hardship faced by Gaza's 1.5 million people cannot be addressed by providing humanitarian aid. The only sustainable solution is to lift the closure. As the ICRC has stressed repeatedly, the dire situation in Gaza cannot be resolved by providing humanitarian aid. The closure imposed on the Gaza Strip is about to enter its fourth year, choking off any real possibility of economic development. The whole of Gaza's civilian population is being punished for acts for which they bear no responsibility. The closure therefore constitutes a collective punishment imposed in clear violation of Israel's obligations under international humanitarian law. "The closure is having a devastating impact on the 1.5 million people living in Gaza" , said Béatrice Mégevand-Roggo, the ICRC's head of operations for the Middle East. "That is why we are urging Israel to put an end to this closure" »*

Just in this region of the Middle – East the Movement has carried out an important initiative of humanitarian diplomacy by promoting forms of cooperation between the National Societies of Israel and the Palestinian Authority. A memorandum of understanding was signed in 2005 in order to regulate the operational interaction between the two Societies which work in territories particularly problematic, at least at the sovereignty level.

Conclusions

The RC/RC is not a denouncing authority (such as Amnesty International or Human Rights Watch), but a relief one and development. Concrete support and assistance to victims are its priorities; all is aimed at improving the life of suffering people and reducing their vulnerabilities.

Denouncing a breach to the fundamental human rights can contribute, with an adequate follow-up (which is not always the case), to improve the life of a population or a group of persons; on the other hand, keeping quiet in connection with serious crimes against humanity can correspond to a sort of “complicity by omission” or, at least, be seen as such.

The dilemma on the strategy to follow resides between the two extremes of silence and denounce, always bearing in mind the real interest of the victims as a priority.

It is not an easy choice and, time by time, the decision can be different, it being understood that RC/RC has to help the suffering persons. Taking as granted the

expertise and motivation of those in charge of enforcing the RC principles and policies, it can also happen that there are or there have been some mistakes...as it was probably the case in World War 2 with a too soft approach towards war crimes.

An old Japanese proverb said *“To think without acting leads to nothing, but to act without thinking leads to disaster”*. This proverb has to be borne in mind by any component of the Movement which daily faces the human suffering all over the world with the imperative to act in favour of victims, anticipating or removing the factors which can make it difficult – or even unbearable – for the latter to live.

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of the Red Cross and Red Crescent