

PERSPECTIVES ON THE ICRC



Reflections on the ICRC's present and future role in addressing humanitarian crises

Matthias Schmale, Under Secretary General of National Society and Knowledge Development at the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies

Matthias Schmale is Under Secretary General of National Society and Knowledge Development at the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC). During his career with the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, Mr Schmale has also served as IFRC Under Secretary General for Programme Services and as IFRC Under Secretary General for Development, and International Director at the British Red Cross from 2005 to 2009.

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While writing this opinion note about the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) on the occasion of its 150th anniversary, I fondly remembered many encounters with ICRC colleagues over almost twenty years. During numerous field visits to hugely challenging environments, such as Darfur or Afghanistan under the Taliban regime, I have been privileged to witness the ICRC as an action-oriented agency that delivers humanitarian aid. Around the globe there are countless people who will tell you with deeply felt gratitude how the ICRC has saved their lives and helped them cope with immeasurable suffering caused by armed conflicts and violence.

An important factor making the ICRC a credible, neutral, and independent actor is its competent and dedicated staff members. Like for so many humanitarian agencies, perhaps the biggest asset for the ICRC – apart from international humanitarian law providing the legal basis for its action, and the protective power of the emblem – is its people. Having got to know a considerable number of ICRC staff over the years, I can testify that, for many of them, working for the ICRC is more than a job: in an almost religious sense, they are committed and totally passionate about what they are doing for the cause of humanity. I remember vividly a cooperation delegate explaining with conviction and credibility many years ago to several Federation colleagues, on a hot evening somewhere in the field in Africa, how the ICRC is ‘an organization I would die for’.

The ICRC has come a long way from being a very Swiss, male-dominated organization to being multinational and more gender balanced in its staff composition. Even some years ago, the ICRC’s Director of Operations stated with pride in talks with British government representatives and the British Red Cross in London that among the 200 or so expatriate staff working in the then Sudan, the ICRC had almost fifty different nationalities represented.

For the ICRC, access to the most vulnerable people – often in places that others cannot reach – is based on NIIHA, neutral, impartial, and independent humanitarian action. It was particularly during a visit to Darfur that I understood how much effort the ICRC puts into maintaining dialogue with all parties to a conflict in order to ensure access to people in need. If I remember correctly, at one point there were – apart from the Sudanese national army – at least eighteen armed factions on the ground in Darfur, with all of whom the ICRC maintained regular and professional dialogue.

The NIIHA approach is often misunderstood as the ICRC not caring about and closing its eyes to injustices. In this regard one of my lasting memories is of a panel discussion in Nairobi in the mid-90s looking at how to deal with alleged perpetrators of the Rwandan genocide living amongst the numerous refugees housed in camps in north-western Tanzania. The event was organized to discuss the implications of a Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) report suggesting that ‘humanitarian relief organizations may well be forced to halt their humanitarian relief activities’ due to the deteriorating security situation in the camps. During the panel discussion the ICRC’s regional head of delegation eloquently outlined that neutrality does not mean sitting on the fence, and that in fact the ICRC always takes the side of the most vulnerable. He went on to explain that as long as the Red Cross and Red Crescent could reach the majority of people in desperate need of support it would and should stay and carry out its humanitarian work. He acknowledged the presence of people in the camps who had allegedly committed horrendous crimes against humanity, but insisted that it is not the job of humanitarians but of the police, the military, and governments to hunt down criminals and those violating international humanitarian law (IHL).

At the beginning of my own humanitarian journey, another ICRC colleague explained to me that working for Red Cross or Red Crescent ‘you need to be prepared to do business with devils’. When visiting Taliban-ruled Afghanistan

I experienced what this meant in practice: without any doubt the leadership of the Afghan Red Crescent at the time was closely linked to the Taliban regime, and this was hard to stomach for even the most seasoned Red Cross or Red Crescent workers. At the same time, maintaining dialogue and relations with the Taliban and the leadership of the Afghan Red Crescent allowed the ICRC and its Movement partners to reach hundreds of thousands of Afghan people – including very vulnerable women and children – and deliver life-saving and dignified humanitarian aid.

Staying focused on action does not mean that the ICRC shies away from controversy and from trying to influence opinion leaders and decision-makers. In 2007, the ICRC stopped its humanitarian work in Myanmar and publicly criticized the authorities for not giving it the humanitarian access it needed to be effective (the ICRC has since resumed its activities there). Much of its influencing or advocacy work happens away from the public limelight and is thus insufficiently appreciated. An example of this is the work the ICRC has been carrying out behind the scenes to work towards more acceptable conditions in prisons for those detained as a result of armed conflict and political disagreement. The ICRC's detention delegates are unsung heroes. When they were released from their long captivity under the apartheid regime, Nelson Mandela and other anti-apartheid activists acknowledged that receiving visits from ICRC detention delegates were a lifeline to the outside world and an important part of surviving with their sanity intact.

What does the future hold for the ICRC?

Having expressed all these fully meant compliments about what the ICRC does and what it represents, the question is whether it will likely stay this way. We have to acknowledge that neutral, impartial, and independent humanitarian action is increasingly under threat, and not just in very recent times. In June 1996 I was working with the Federation's regional delegation in Nairobi – home to a big ICRC base – when the tragic news of ICRC delegates being targeted and murdered in Burundi came through. This profoundly shook friends and colleagues in the ICRC, not least as this was followed a couple of months later – in December 1996 – by the similarly murderous attacks on ICRC delegates in Chechnya. The ICRC's privileged access to vulnerable people in armed conflict and situations of violence suddenly seemed threatened by the proliferation of armed groups that did not understand or accept international humanitarian law, that were driven by a profound disrespect and disregard for humanity as well as a sense that an organization that has its roots in the West could not be truly neutral.

The ICRC leadership has understood that the world is changing rapidly and that the ICRC needs to adapt – potentially quite radically – if it wants to stay relevant. One of the reasons why the ICRC has increasingly focused on its operational partnerships with National Societies is the realization that access to sensitive conflict situations could no longer be guaranteed by relying on its own expatriate staff and its own relations with the respective national and local authorities. For a number

of years now, the ICRC has been investing considerable resources into what it calls 'cooperation with National Societies'. There are many examples in places like Afghanistan or Palestine where successful delivery of the ICRC's humanitarian services is made possible through the network of National Society volunteers and staff.

A legitimate question is whether the ICRC is instrumentalizing National Societies for operational survival reasons. I share the perception that there is some 'institutional arrogance' in the ICRC – deriving from its size and impressive track record – and that it will take time to fully weave into its DNA how to evolve its relationships from that of a donor with National Societies as its delivery organizations to equal and fully transparent partnerships.

There are also inherent limitations to what an organization with an international global mandate can operationally transfer to national organizations. As local actors, National Societies will continue to face conflict and war situations where they – with the best intentions – will not be able to provide fully neutral and independent humanitarian services to affected people. In such situations the responsibility for humanitarian action will likely continue to be with the internationally recognized neutral actor, namely the ICRC.

As it prepares itself for the future, the ICRC appears to be struggling to redefine its role and added value in the context of being part of a larger Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement. The ICRC's President and Director General have publicly stated that we have to acknowledge that in the outside world we – that is ICRC, National Societies, and the International Federation – are seen as one and that we have no choice but to work together. Some in the ICRC see it as essential to fully embrace the Movement, as well as to further diversify its portfolio in order to, for instance, include and/or broaden the scope of its operational work to other situations of violence and to diversify its developmental action (e.g. in livelihood protection and agriculture), organizational development, and capacity-building. Others advocate for remaining focused on preserving and strengthening the ICRC – almost irrespective of what goes on in the rest of the Movement – and staying as close as possible to its original mandate. Former President Kellenberger clearly expressed this view when I heard him state a number of times that his job was to be President of the ICRC and not of the Movement. He saw National Societies and the Federation as privileged, but not exclusive, partners of the ICRC.

From my perspective, the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement will stay strong and relevant if all three – ICRC, National Societies, and the Secretariat of the International Federation – have a constructive dialogue about what the future might bring and what adjustments or changes will have to happen. A conventional view is that we have to keep all three components as healthy organizations, each delivering distinct services and value. And, not least of all given the tightening of financial resources, we will have to, at a minimum, avoid duplication as much as possible, provide our services in the most (cost-) effective manner and ensure that we each offer something unique and complementary. From this perspective, there are grounds to caution the ICRC not to give in to what is called 'mission creep' by

further diversifying its activities. While modernizing and adapting, the ICRC would be well advised to stick to its roots by remaining the international humanitarian organization of choice for neutral, impartial, and independent response in times of conflict and violence, giving a lifeline to humanity for prisoners and remaining the guardian of international humanitarian law.

A more 'out of the box' view would suggest that what is described in the previous paragraph amounts to 'fiddling while Rome is burning', and that we need to be more brave and daring in jointly designing a future architecture for the Movement. This approach could entail anything from merging the two international components of the Movement (especially if they were to end up doing more or less the same) to redefining what each one should be doing. It would come with a zero tolerance for duplication by, for instance, having only one of the international organizations carry out operational work and the other – standard-setting and maintaining the joint values and principles base.

Regardless of which one of these scenarios turns out to be more feasible and appropriate, the ICRC should not rest on its well-deserved laurels. If it wants the Movement as a whole to be strong and relevant, it will have to move beyond defending its own institutional interests and agreements outlining roles and responsibilities, such as the one reached at the Council of Delegates in 1997 in Seville. The ICRC should continue to identify and implement the mindset and organizational culture changes that will ensure that at its next major anniversary, it will receive similarly positive feedback on its role and performance as can be found in this edition of the *International Review of the Red Cross*.