

# Humanitarian activities of the German Red Cross in the Balkans

## An evaluation

by

**WOLF-DIETER EBERWEIN AND CATHERINE GÖTZE**

The problems confronting humanitarian agencies today (Curtis, 2001)<sup>1</sup> can be traced back to at least two direct and to several indirect causes. Among the direct causes it should be mentioned that humanitarian action usually takes place in the middle of violent internal conflicts. These conflicts have not only increased in number since the 1950s but also have a tendency to last longer and longer. Second, there is a recurring need for emergency relief in major natural disasters. These events have also increased dramatically over the last fifty years. Even worse, sometimes both types of disasters coincide, especially in the poorer regions of the world.<sup>2</sup>

Among the indirect causes which explain the increase in humanitarian action, three seem to be particularly relevant. First, a considerable number of countries are engaged in a process of transition to democratic and market-oriented systems, a process generally

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WOLF-DIETER EBERWEIN is Leader of the International Politics Research Group at the Berlin Scientific Centre for Social Research, Germany, and Professor of Political Science at the University of Leipzig, Germany. CATHERINE GÖTZE is a Research Fellow at the same Centre. — This article is based on a study commissioned by the German Red Cross: Wolf-Dieter Eberwein, Catherine Götze and Roland Albert, *DRK-Studie — was tun? Optionen für eine längerfristige Handlungsstrategie*, Berlin, 2001.

accompanied with great hardship, especially for children, young people, women and the elderly. In some countries the transition process has been or is still accompanied by internal violence. Second, there are several countries where the institutionalized political, economic and social structures are either weak or non-existent. Third, there are regimes which have broken down, and the resulting disruption often goes hand in hand with violence. An extrapolation of the available data into the future indicates that both internal violence and natural disasters will remain with us and possibly increase. Nor can it be excluded that further political regimes will fall apart, that the number of weak or failed States<sup>3</sup> will also increase and that, with the added impact of natural disasters, they will then follow in the tracks of countries such as Sierra Leone.

In the Balkans, the region with which this article is concerned, the complex political, economic and social problems facing each individual country are due to different combinations of all the elements set out above. The international community of States has thus far failed to discover a satisfactory and even less a concrete operational means of resolving this whole range of issues, from violence-related emergencies to postwar recovery and longer-term development concerns. The same is true of the humanitarian community as a whole, even though its focus on such issues is much more limited. The humanitarian agencies have hitherto not found a way of successfully avoiding the many pitfalls encountered in reality; indeed, some of these seem to be inescapable. At the conceptual level they have been more defensive than actively innovative in their approach to the whole range of humanitarian problems, from emergency relief in ongoing conflicts to postwar recovery, not to mention their contribution with respect to longer-term development. They have been put under pressure by the security policy/conflict research communities, which tend to view humanitarian aid as an instrument in the tool box of conflict

<sup>1</sup> See the bibliography at the end of the article.

<sup>2</sup> For data on all these issues see Eberwein/Chojnacki (1998). A revised, up-

dated and more systematic analysis of these trends will appear shortly. Enquiries may be sent to eberwein@medea.wz-berlin.de.

<sup>3</sup> See Esty *et al.* (1998).

resolution and/or peace-building. The development policy/development research communities, on the other hand, see relief as an integral part of the overall continuum linking it with rehabilitation and development. Both approaches have rightly been heavily criticized, if not rejected, by the humanitarian agencies, which argue that such a linkage violates at least two of the fundamental humanitarian principles, namely those of impartiality and neutrality.

Generally, such criticism seems to be more than justified. Humanitarian action should by any possible means avoid becoming instrumental to any political purposes whatsoever. We contend, however, that at the conceptual level there is a need to explore in greater depth the feasibility of the foregoing continuum concept from the humanitarian point of view. For that purpose we shall use as an empirical reference the study commissioned by the German Red Cross to evaluate the feasibility of a longer-term strategy to support the National Red Cross Societies in the Balkans (Eberwein/Götze/Albert, 2001). On the basis of the experience and insights gained, we shall argue that conceptually a humanitarian continuum is a precondition for such a strategy compatible with humanitarian principles. That strategy seems to be even more urgent, given the situation of the Balkan States. To a varying extent, they all have to manage the transition to democracy and a market economy and successfully go through the painful phase of postwar reconstruction, perhaps preferably termed the peace-building phase, ultimately reaching the point of no return for sustainable development.

We shall first briefly raise the evaluation issue before describing the logic of this particular venture. We shall then give an overview of the assessment of the situation before describing in broad terms what such a strategy requires, where the problems are and what this entails. We shall finally draw some conclusions concerning both the humanitarian agencies and the research community.

### **Evaluation of what?**

The war in Kosovo mobilized public and private donor generosity in the West to an unprecedented degree. What the donors did not really consider was for what purposes that money should be

spent. The German Red Cross decided to commission a study to elicit some outside suggestions on what to do. More specifically, it sought answers with regard to several interrelated issues, which can be summarized as follows:

- the disaster response, in the Kosovo conflict, of the German Red Cross;
- the disaster response of the Red Cross Societies of Albania, Bulgaria, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Macedonia and the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (including Kosovo);
- the development potential of these National Societies, including the issue of regional cooperation; and
- the feasibility of longer-term cooperation by the German Red Cross with those National Societies.

The first and second topics addressed are a more or less classic type of subject for evaluation studies. The aim, however, was not to evaluate in great detail the actual disaster response but rather to gain some insight into the capacity of the organizations involved to take action. Such studies are now increasingly gaining prominence within the humanitarian community. One of the reasons is, as MacDonald (2001) states, that “[t]oday, many humanitarian agencies are involved in some form of effort, individually and collectively, to improve their accountability and learning systems”. Another is that donors want to find out in greater detail how their money is spent. The third and fourth issues can also be accommodated under the overall evaluation umbrella, yet they do explicitly address policy issues and, implicitly, conceptual problems. These two issues are directly related to organizational learning as crucial for an envisaged longer-term commitment on the part of the German Red Cross in the Balkans. This evaluation study is thus but one type among many others (Apthorpe, 2000), in that it combines evaluation, assessment and strategy (policy) issues.

How can these interrelated topics be combined conceptually? The starting point for this exercise was first of all to identify the target group, in other words to design a strategy in favour of whom? The answer in this case is straightforward. For the Red Cross and the Red Crescent the target group are the most vulnerable people in society. These “most vulnerable” people will always exist, be it in a specific

emergency situation, in the post-emergency phase or in the development phase.

Second, what are the goals and reference points respectively for designing such a strategy? We decided to make use of the framework outlined by the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies in its *Strategy 2010*<sup>4</sup> by reformulating it. Disaster preparedness is useful as the overarching concept defined as the ability to respond to the needs and the size of the target group(s), which are both variable and not fixed. Under this roof the three building blocks disaster response, health and care in the community and dissemination of humanitarian values can easily be accommodated. Whereas these four elements relate to substantive goals, institution-building and capacity-building provide the operational framework within which the substantive goals need to be achieved. Institution-building could be identified as the national Red Cross “software” dimension (i.e. personnel), whereas capacity-building refers to the “hardware” (i.e. equipment). All these elements combined constitute the foundations of “a well-functioning Society”.

Third, we felt that consideration of the political, social and economic context was crucial for the strategy because National Red Cross Societies in the Balkans do not operate in a vacuum. The context within which they operate is extremely complex, given the need to pursue three goals more or less simultaneously: the transition to democracy; the transition to a market economy; and postwar reconstruction (for most of them), if not national reconciliation (for some of them).

When the study was undertaken, the emergency relief phase in the Balkans was already history (though not fully, as the recent events in Macedonia suggest). The National Societies of the countries concerned were all faced to varying degrees with problems of rehabilitation but also of development. This led us to rely, as a criterion, on what we call the humanitarian continuum, which is intended to iden-

<sup>4</sup> International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, *Strategy 2010: To Improve the Lives of Vulnerable People by*

*Mobilizing the Power of Humanity*, Geneva, 1999.

tify those issues that are relevant from a humanitarian point of view as defined by the Red Cross. It is almost self-imposed, given the dramatic levels of poverty due to unemployment and the repercussions of population displacements that began in the early nineties and continued throughout much of the decade. The overall increase in the level of unemployment and the proportion of the population that slipped below the minimum subsistence level was an outcome of the war and its direct consequences (such as the embargo against former Yugoslavia) reinforced by the effects of the economic transformation process. At the same time the National Societies covered by the study operate in a politically highly volatile environment owing to the fundamental restructuring of the States and their institutions. We cannot document the specifics in this article, but a closer look into the realities of the various countries would fully support this general assessment (see e.g. Forman/Patrick, 2000).

### **The methodology**

Before moving on to the substantive issues, a few remarks about the methods used are necessary. Given the primary aim of fostering learning processes within the German Red Cross (GRC) on how to approach the issue of formulating a longer-term strategy, the group included two scholars and a staff member of the GRC. This was not considered as a loss of independence of the team, but rather as a better way to gain access and build confidence with the people interviewed, not only in the International Department at GRC headquarters but also in the various countries covered by the study. The terms of reference were developed jointly in a multiple-stage process. It was agreed that the study should include not only the organizational dimension but also the broader political and social context. A questionnaire was developed which included the relevant topics to be addressed in the interviews. These interviews were the primary material on which the study was based. They were conducted with members of the International Department of the GRC in Bonn, members of other Red Cross Societies, government officials and members of non-governmental organizations who were willing to talk to us about the Balkans. In addition, interviews were conducted at the headquar-

ters of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and the International Federation in Geneva, as well as with the Federation's Regional Delegation in Budapest. The purpose of interviews with the former group was to obtain information about the immediate disaster response, whereas in approaching the latter the intention was to obtain additional information not only on that subject but also on the capacity and institution-building capabilities of the Red Cross Societies in the Balkans.<sup>5</sup>

The 150 interviews were not conducted to gain a representative overview of the performance and developmental potential of each National Society, but rather to identify core problems as they are perceived by the various individuals. In that sense the results were elements of a jigsaw puzzle that we tried to fit together to produce a more or less coherent picture. This was exactly what we intended to achieve in that, as the analysis will show, the idea was not to develop a master plan but rather to identify critical issues of which the GRC needs to be aware if it takes concrete steps to formulate a longer-term strategy. The final recommendations were thus of the *how to go about it* sort rather than of the *what to do* type. The final report included roughly twenty pages of reports on each Balkan country, with an overview of the main political, social and economic conditions prevailing in each one.

### **The German Red Cross: disaster response**

The German Red Cross started its relief operation virtually within hours, making a professional and effective contribution to Red Cross action in the Balkans. Several advantages were decisive for its success. The GRC has long-standing contacts with the Red Cross Societies in the Balkans; it could also call on delegates who knew not only their counterparts in these Societies but also the terrain. Moreover, it has great experience in the deployment of its emergency response units. Lastly, the staff of the rapidly established task force were

<sup>5</sup> The interviews lasted on average 45-60 minutes, although in some cases they continued for close to two hours.

highly motivated and most of them were experienced in emergency relief actions.

Although we received confirmation of the success of the GRC response from many different sources, it became clear from the Kosovo refugee crisis that there were a number of structural problems, two of which came to light during that emergency:

- the smoothly functioning GRC crisis task force suffered from communication and coordination problems;
- the task force's operations were constrained by administrative rules that do not take into account the specific requirements of emergency operations.

The communication and coordination problems were mainly due to three factors. First, in an emergency of this order, additional staff must be hired. This means that not all the members were experienced in Red Cross work in general and crisis situations in particular, and that the experienced staff themselves had not all previously worked together in a situation of that nature. As people have to “get to know each other”, which is difficult to accomplish in such a situation, the consequence was that under stress essential information was either not passed on or not well understood.

Second, even though knowledge of past experience was available in principle, it did not get through to all concerned. Information is well understood only when it is combined with knowledge. As in many organizations, the German Red Cross task force was confronted with the problem that knowledge is only inadequately institutionalized. The choice for decision-makers when time pressure is acute and little knowledge is available is either to trust more or less blindly the knowledgeable persons, i.e. the field staff conducting the assessment, or to reinvent the wheel. In most cases they will opt for the first alternative. Whether this turns out to be a good choice or not will only be found out later.

This is especially true — this is the third point — as the said field staff themselves are under high pressure from headquarters, donors and the surrounding competition between non-governmental organizations to “find any kind of project”. Recurrent technical and psychological communication problems between headquarters and

field staff do not facilitate the work. Usually such problems essentially stem from a failure to take the time to exchange information and reconcile the individual impressions and opinions of the situation. The difficulties are therefore largely due to a shortage of human resources. This is a problem not only in emergency situations but also of the General Secretariat as a whole.

The preliminary conclusion is that an emergency of the order of what happened in Kosovo puts heavy pressure on any well-functioning Society such as the German Red Cross. If the exclusive focus is on short-term emergencies the prevailing conditions are, all in all, in order; even though some problems clearly prevail, these could be remedied without major changes. The situation is different, though, when involvement is contemplated not only in short-term emergencies but rather in the much more ambitious process of longer-term planning and action as a Participating National Society in the relief-development cycle. Under these conditions, the concept of disaster preparedness needs to be broadened and the organizational set-up reconsidered.

### **The Red Cross Societies in the Balkans: capacity to act**

The Balkans do not constitute a typical development environment. Ten years ago, most countries there enjoyed a relatively high standard of living and a high degree of industrialization. Over the past decade the situation deteriorated without reducing the region to a true developing area. Today it is going through a phase of rehabilitation and development. Nonetheless, economic, political and social development is hardly feasible unless outside assistance is provided for a prolonged period of time. Furthermore, the region still is in a very volatile state of non-war, in which the danger of a renewed outbreak of violence is ever-present. In addition to these general conditions every country has its own specific problems to resolve: the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia is struggling to make headway with its political reforms (and the future of Kosovo is yet not clear), Bosnia and Herzegovina still have a long way to go towards ethnic reconciliation and political and social integration, Bulgaria's economic distress con-

tinues, Macedonia was set back several years in its development by the community violence of recent months, and Albania's political, social and economic problems are still overwhelming. None of the countries is able to get a grip on their social problems, and even less to create a viable basis on their own for sustainable development.

The National Red Cross Societies in the various Balkan countries have a long tradition of helping the most vulnerable, and a more or less good performance record with regard to their activities. However, in contrast to the mounting challenges their financial and human resources are extremely limited. Furthermore, they are caught in a process of modernization and transition which demands high commitments of resources as well as initiative and courage on the part of the persons involved. One core issue is that the Societies are bureaucratized and centralized. Transparency is low, in a number of cases dialogue is still missing and information is controlled from the top. All these problems are legacies of the past. There are noticeable differences across the countries studied, though, in terms of the headquarters, the regional and the local branches. There are also differences in terms of the "legacy of the past", as well as the commitment to "Western standards" that are usually associated with the role of a civil society organization. Finally, there are differences in terms of the political environment in which these National Societies must reform themselves from within.

All Societies in the Balkans have severe resource problems. Given the needs that vary along the continuum from high to immense, this limits their scope for both capacity-building and institutional development. The most visible sign of the difficulties besetting these organizations is the widespread lack of skills, particularly in the local branches, as regards accounting rules, reporting, budgeting, discussion and decision-making procedures and communication tools and habits. Technically oriented capacity-building measures, e.g. the provision of vehicles, computers etc., are not enough to foster better practices in these areas. They may even be counter-productive, for most of the problems involved in modernizing these Societies are not related to equipment but to the creation of a culture of dialogue, decentralized decision-making, delegation of responsibilities and entrepreneurship.

### Long-term strategy: a conceptual framework

Conceptually we have already outlined our basic ideas concerning the strategy issue. We have argued that such a strategy can be based upon the humanitarian *continuum* which includes relief, rehabilitation and development. We will quickly elaborate on this issue. First of all, the notion of a continuum is definitely misleading in that reality cannot be encapsulated in such a linear view. Second, the spatial aspect needs to be included as well, in that a given territory needs to be separated into its various parts on the basis of a systematic assessment of needs and context (political, social, economic). This will reveal the degree of fragmentation existing within it. Third, in order to make such a strategy work, the organization needs to be present in the whole territory and should therefore not be limited to just a small local presence. Fourth, institution- and capacity-building refer to both activities within the National Societies as well as in terms of their involvement within their respective organization.

The first conclusion is that not all the humanitarian organizations are capable of implementing such a longer-term strategy. The Red Cross certainly is. A second conclusion is that none of these issues is revolutionary, yet taken as a whole their interrelation seems to be overlooked again and again. Each of the Balkan States is fragmented to a varying extent in that relief, rehabilitation and development issues can, and indeed do, arise simultaneously. Thus, the continuum notion is misleading simply because of the fragmentation within the countries themselves. Since for various reasons (restructuring the economy, lack of external funds and support, a natural disaster etc.) the transition process affects particular areas to differing degrees, it is necessary to find out just how far along the continuum each one is situated and what the chances are that it might fall back, say, from the rehabilitation to the relief phase. In addition, the postwar stabilization process may take longer in some parts of a country than in others, meaning that in some areas the risk of violence erupting again may be high for a longer period of time than in others. This has recently been the case in Macedonia. Whatever the political implications are, it is obvious that during the whole process of transition and postwar reconstruction the demand for humanitarian support will be great. This must be the start-

ing point for the Red Cross as a humanitarian organization to satisfy the varying humanitarian needs over time and space. It requires both the Red Cross Societies of the respective countries and others from outside to set priorities for action. Setting priorities under these conditions means, on the one hand, identifying the needs themselves and the resources required. It also means simultaneously identifying the requirements for institution- and capacity-building of the National Societies in general and of the local and regional branches in particular.<sup>6</sup> Such a continuous assessment calls for external support from members of the Red Cross family at large.

Assuming that these arguments make sense, they definitely have far-reaching consequences both for National Societies that plan to support the Red Cross Societies in the Balkans and for the latter themselves. Resources need to be allocated to assess the requirements of the most vulnerable. Resources are needed as well to meet the disaster-preparedness requirements of the various parts of the nationwide organizational units. And finally resources are also needed to analyse the political and social dynamics (to use this shorthand term) of the environment in which the National Societies operate.

### **The Balkan Red Cross Societies: the need for a long-term strategy**

What are the problems to be addressed in a longer-term strategy? It should be clear from the start that owing to the transition process the relatively poor Red Cross Societies in the Balkans not only have to emancipate themselves from their role as a State or quasi-State organization, which is a legacy of the Communist approach to the Red Cross. They also have to look for new funding, as governments no longer support them as they initially did (nor are they now in a position to do so). Consequently, they do all have great needs in terms of “hardware”, i.e. the material resources needed for capacity-building. At the same time they also have great needs in terms of what we may call

<sup>6</sup>What is usually overlooked by many small NGOs, for example, is that because they are extremely efficient and effective locally they

may be helping thereby to increase overall fragmentation of the nation.

“software”, i.e. a normative understanding of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and the collective (humanitarian) identity this entails, together with an understanding of being or becoming part of the emerging civil society in their own country. The term also refers to managerial skills such as planning, accounting and the like, all activities related to the overarching theme of disaster preparedness. The core issue, if our assessment is correct, is the need to strike a balance in improving both types of resources. In some cases there is a clear tendency to give top priority to “hardware”, a tendency which has been reinforced in the past by one or other of the region’s Societies. In addition, as the Kosovo war showed, some organizations tend to become overstretched in emergency situations by accepting almost any project. The main problems lie, though to varying degrees, in the non-material domain.

First of all, compulsory membership is no longer effective or has been abolished, given the prevailing social and economic conditions. Recruitment of a large membership is therefore unlikely in the near future. Nonetheless, voluntary service is a concept that needs to be institutionalized. Doing something for free is all too often considered as doing something useless. And if younger volunteers can be recruited, as in Bulgaria, the Red Cross can be a transition phase either for emigration or for recruitment by international companies that pay well.

The Youth Red Cross itself might at the same time be another obstacle to further recruitment of young volunteers. In most of the countries visited, Red Cross youth work is still strongly oriented towards technical training such as first aid, rescue work and so forth. Educational programmes for children and young people which inculcate responsibility, initiative, autonomous thinking and social skills through play and creative work are still largely unknown. Sometimes we have even encountered openly expressed opposition to such ideas.

For the Youth Red Cross to survive in the long run, youth programmes would therefore constitute the second point of access for a longer-term strategy. The impact of attractive youth programmes would be twofold. Not only could the Red Cross Societies thereby

enlarge their membership base, but such programmes could also have an indirect impact on social stabilization in the countries themselves. It seems plausible that youth work offers an alternative to the rather dreary prospects of younger people in those countries. It can either take the form of professional training or be integrated into existing disaster preparedness programmes, community health care and also dissemination activities. In this way the Red Cross can help to open up new prospects and reduce aggression, drug consumption or simply “deadly boredom” — as a social worker in Albania put it. Conversely, to expect youth work to play an essential part in ethnic reconciliation in the region seems unrealistic. Unfortunately youth programmes are among the first items to feel the pinch when it comes to budget cuts or ceilings, indicating that their importance seems to be underestimated.

As already mentioned above, donations are low, State subsidies are rare despite the legal entitlement to them, and fund-raising and income-generating activities are not well developed. The chances of success are furthermore uncertain, since the general situation provides little scope for commercial activities. Assistance in this area, which definitely seems to be in need of development, is the third point of access for a joint long-term strategy with the National Societies. Improvements are, however, required in the fundamentals of accountancy, budgeting and management. Whether large-scale fund-raising programmes make sense at all is questionable, at least within the national boundaries, as the countries are poor. More promising seems to be the development of smaller decentralized income-generating programmes. We have seen quite astounding accomplishments at the local level in several of the countries visited.

These three areas — membership, youth, finances — are critical for successful long-term action. Yet the problem is that they need to be interrelated, an objective which can possibly be achieved through training. This seems to be absolutely vital in that equipment donations need to be directly related to systematic training projects. Until now Western Red Cross Societies have all too often concentrated on donating equipment; training has been a secondary consideration. It has to be the other way round. Efforts should be centred on training, and equipment should be an accessory to it.

That leads to the final point, planning. As we have already said, disaster preparedness should be the point of reference for the future. Disaster-preparedness programmes almost exclusively focused on material capacity-building have been implemented in the region. Training was given for technical matters only. The strengths and weaknesses of the decision-making processes and the improvement of human resources were largely neglected, as was the monitoring of ongoing programmes. As a result, a misperception of the Societies' capacities prevailed: they were very often overestimated.

Naturally the Red Cross Societies in the Balkans are also active in other areas. Yet it seems meaningful to concentrate external support efforts in these three core areas. Conceptually, the problems referred to need to be embedded in a broader disaster-preparedness framework taking into account the "humanitarian continuum" ranging from relief to development. As social distress is growing and the third sector — finance — is as yet underdeveloped, all the National Societies in the Balkans are tempted to "spread wider and thinner", as the International Federation has rightly criticized. It therefore seems more than necessary to concentrate efforts. This is not, however, just a problem of the Societies themselves but of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement in general.

We shall now turn our attention to the role of National Societies from outside, with specific reference to the German Red Cross. We shall also briefly make a few suggestions as to the role of the Federation and the ICRC, even though a detailed analysis cannot be given of it here. It should not be forgotten, however, that the pride and self-confidence of the Red Cross Societies must always be taken into account. Both the willingness of outside organizations to cooperate and the willingness of those inside to accept such cooperation on the basis of jointly agreed terms are essential.

### **Requirements for implementing a long-term strategy**

Assuming that the German Red Cross will decide to implement a specific regional longer-term strategy of this kind, what are the implications? As emergencies will arise again and again in the future, it should be decided to establish a task force as part of the orga-

nization's contingency planning before disasters occur. Such a task force has special needs for as much flexibility as possible and for a minimum of administrative red tape. The group (or groups) may hold workshops in which crisis situations are simulated. This may improve their ability to cope with the stress factors, the fatigue and the pressure experienced in real-life situations. In addition the staff members would get to know each other better and trust would be created, thereby speeding up decision-making and coordination in an emergency. This also applies to cooperation with the ICRC and the International Federation. The new lead-agency concept agreed by the ICRC and the Federation and adopted by the Council of Delegates in the Seville Agreement of 1997<sup>7</sup> was operative for the first time during the Kosovo war. The agreement was considered to be an innovative first step, but it has been argued that this new institutional mechanism needs to be further improved.

This improvement in terms of disaster response is but one element of a longer-term strategy, which certainly requires the experience accumulated during emergencies to be linked with the knowledge accumulated through the daily interactions between the National Societies so that personal knowledge and insight can be converted into institutional knowledge. This might be helpful for coordinating emergency activities with others related to rehabilitation and development. Thus, the establishment of a special intelligence and "coherence" unit is strongly advisable, a unit which should combine both functional skills (water and sanitation, medical treatment, etc.) with those of area specialists. Its role would be to evaluate and monitor past experience, but also to identify priorities in terms of longer-term strategies covering relief, rehabilitation and developmental activities. It should also take over the needs assessment for, and the evaluation of, projects. It would therefore have the task of visiting delegates in the field, serving as a liaison between headquarters and field staff, and evaluating ongoing projects. This would mean moving from a "lessons learned" approach to that of implementing lessons learned, an approach which

<sup>7</sup> *Agreement on the Organization of the International Activities of the Components of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent*

*Movement*, adopted by the Council of Delegates, Seville, 26 November 1997, published in IRRC, No. 322, March 1998, p. 159.

is very often disregarded. The unit should report directly to the Society's international affairs officer, as well as to the desk officers. The expectation is that it would contribute to the institutional learning process and thereby enhance the Society's capacity to take into account the simultaneity of relief, rehabilitation and development aspects.

Naturally, all this depends on the Society's ability and willingness to become involved in such longer-term strategies. If that is considered politically desirable and necessary from the humanitarian point of view it would certainly make sense, for reasons of overall coherence, lean management and administrative efficiency, to give greater independence to the department concerned so that it has its own resources and its own recruitment and training structures. It should also be freed from the rigid understanding of working time and employment which prevails in German public services in general and is also found in the General Secretariat of the German Red Cross.

### **What can or should be done?**

The main idea behind the conceptual approach chosen and the specific issues identified as crucial for a longer-term strategy is that, in our opinion, a "charitable humanitarianism" (i.e. short-term food aid projects) needs to be replaced by what can be called a "proactive humanitarianism". This proactive humanitarianism is a political concept in the sense that it places the emphasis first and foremost on the humanitarian dimension as its top priority. A national Red Cross organization such as the German Red Cross can play an important role in a region like the Balkans. By pursuing such a strategy it would indirectly contribute both to shorter-term peace-building efforts and to the longer-term construction of civil society. Unlike the various organizations or groups outside the humanitarian policy field, it has the advantage of not being linked to specific political interests or ideologies, but is instead associated with non-political concerns and with fundamental humanitarian values and needs.

But humanitarian action should not simply be restricted to emergency relief; it should also take into account the specific needs of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies in transition situations. As

was pointed out at the beginning, the Societies in the Balkans are faced with at least two if not three issues simultaneously: the transition to democracy, the transition to market economies, and the transition from the postwar phase to peace. Hence these National Societies must be supported to enable them to accomplish as quickly as possible the transition to civil society organizations. In the meantime, they should play a decisive role in the relief-rehabilitation-development process. They can do so only as efficient and credible *humanitarian* organizations in their own society. The humanitarian norms are fundamental in that the individual in need is perceived as being an expression of the entitlement of the most vulnerable and as an obligation on the part of the citizens in democratic societies.

A longer-term disaster preparedness concept which incorporates a careful vulnerability assessment and a programme of by and large systematically interrelated projects aimed at reducing vulnerability may contribute, if implemented successfully, to demonstrating the value of humanitarianism. This can be done only by means of custom-designed strategies for each country, as all countries differ with regard both to the existing organizations themselves and to the general political context. Such individual strategies are even more important in that the concept of vulnerability, which has given rise to heated debates about its content, is ultimately a social and cultural category; in other words, it is defined by standards of normality in a given society. Thus universal indicators are useless. The same would apply to the definition of the specific role a National Society should play: it must not be identical everywhere, at least not as a general goal. The Red Cross is one of the very rare institutions that can evaluate what ought to be normal in a given context because of its widespread network of local branches, local volunteers and long-standing experience of social work.

The following recommendations can be drawn from all that has been said above:

- from the Red Cross perspective humanitarian action needs to be based on a long-term strategy empowering the National Societies in the Balkans to play a central role as subsidiaries in the humanitarian domain in their emerging democratic and market-oriented societies;

- for that purpose external support, on a longer-term basis, of the countries in transition in the Balkans is evidently necessary. Isolated, short-term relief projects may have a short-term effect, but nothing more;
- a long-term strategy always needs to be based on a project programme, not on isolated or stand-alone projects; that programme must focus on the interrelation between relief, rehabilitation and development and take into account both the capacity- and institution-building potential and needs of the specific National Society;
- such a long-term strategy requires adaptation of the internal structure of the Red Cross Society willing to commit itself for a prolonged period of time. A coherence and intelligence unit in charge of the strategy and responsible for needs assessment and project evaluation is necessary;
- programme planning must be undertaken in close cooperation between the National Society concerned and the external Red Cross Society, in our case the German Red Cross;
- both the programme's time frame and that of each project should be limited, monitoring must be continuous and exit strategies for the projects in particular should be clearly formulated from the outset;
- close cooperation within the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement as a whole is essential in order to avoid duplication if not national competition.

These ideas may seem as self-evident as the daily sunrise, but unfortunately practice in the Balkans appears to be quite different. Red Cross activities are often influenced by competition among National Societies as well as between a Society and the International Federation. To avoid such situations clear communication and decision-making procedures are necessary, but are all too often lacking, as although the National Societies of the countries concerned experienced a rapid expansion of their international activities in recent years, they did not enlarge their organizational and human resources infrastructure to keep pace. Routine work does not pose any problems for most of the time, but major crises such as the Kosovo refugee crisis do. Projects are all too often decided on an ad hoc basis, with expenditure

deadlines dictated by donor agencies lurking in the background. Although the Societies of the countries concerned are asked for their consent to the projects, these are rarely fully negotiated to settle all terms and obligations, with the result that misunderstandings, false expectations and misperceptions occur frequently. Every type of assistance has to be understood as part of a disaster-preparedness strategy.

### Outlook

At the end of the day, the question to be raised is whether the concept outlined is worth pursuing further. It could be argued that it is either too idealistic or too political. One of the two may turn out to be true. But we maintain that it is worth trying. Past experience in the Balkans, but not only there, has shown that all too often the problem of external efforts in countries in transition and/or in the peace-building phase is not necessarily one of funding but is more likely to be due *inter alia* to a lack of coordination and clear conceptual orientation.<sup>8</sup>

The longer-term strategy we have outlined obviates this problem to some extent because it primarily includes only two organizations, the respective National Red Cross Society and the German Red Cross. But this presupposes that if the latter actually intends to go along with such a concept, it definitely has to adjust its internal structure along the lines suggested. A partial revision of its own strategy of action may also be required in that the longer-term commitment of some of its resources for a specific region is implied, i.e. for the Balkans. While this definitely means a strengthening of, if not greater autonomy for, the International Department of the German Red Cross, it does not necessarily mean huge additional resources. Naturally, the Balkan Red Cross Societies need material support. But the core problem in the Balkans is largely to improve management, organization, and planning skills. Consequently the recruitment and training of — especially younger — volunteers and personnel, project and programme development are core areas. As our investigation

<sup>8</sup> For the Balkans see the informative general overview see Boyce, 2000. analysis by Hurtic et al., 2000; and for a

revealed, there is a lot of innovative potential in these Societies, but very often it goes hand in hand with a lack of adequate know-how. The contribution which can be expected from the overall political or societal perspective is certainly limited. But it might, if successful, pay off in the longer run by helping to implant humanitarian principles in the newly emerging civil societies.

The situation is slightly different from the researchers' point of view. There are two major areas which are still blank on the research map: the building and functioning of civil society, on the one hand, and the role of humanitarian norms in terms of their role in international order. Even though the building and functioning of civil society is certainly a topical issue which gained enormously in prominence as a research topic with the breakdown of communism, the role of humanitarian organizations in these countries has hitherto hardly attracted any attention from the scholarly community. We therefore do not know to what extent humanitarian organizations in general and the National Red Cross Societies in particular do actually have an impact on building civil societies. We believe that they do, but our arguments are based primarily on conjecture, not on empirically well established propositions.

Indirectly, the strengthening of National Red Cross Societies is related to the issue of international order (see Eberwein, 2001), of which the norms embodied in international humanitarian law are at least theoretically a part. But so far we lack specific insights as to how the humanitarian norms can be made more effective. In international relations research, in particular into the role of international norms, has become a growth industry. As yet, however, international relations specialists have failed to study the humanitarian norms and their impact in greater detail. International norms, as we now know from that research, are usually established as a consequence of societal pressures from within societies. They also need to be supported by national if not transnational or international advocacy groups. We have seen this process working fairly well for human rights, for example, as well as for environmental issues. At present it is hard to detect any strong popular support for humanitarian principles that should be binding for conflicting parties or the international commu-

nity of states. Humanitarian aid is obviously still conceived as an act of charity by the public and, as shown again by recent events in Afghanistan, as an instrument of foreign policy. Indeed, the policy field of humanitarian aid, as we have called it, has hitherto attracted relatively few social science scholars, in contrast to conflict research, the environment or human rights. For that reason the evolution of humanitarian agencies in general and of National Red Cross Societies in particular needs to be studied in combination with international politics. In this regard, too, a longer-term strategy seems to be required.



## *Résumé*

### **Les activités humanitaires de la Croix-Rouge allemande dans les Balkans — une évaluation**

par WOLF-DIETER EBERWEIN AND CATHERINE GÖTZE

*Le présent article se fonde sur une étude que la Croix-Rouge allemande a commandée sur son action dans les Balkans. Après quelques considérations d'ordre méthodologique, les auteurs analysent le contexte dans lequel la Croix-Rouge allemande a déployé ses activités en faveur des populations des différents pays de la région. La collaboration avec les autres Sociétés nationales fait l'objet d'un examen approfondi, suivi de propositions concrètes en vue d'un renforcement des liens entre une Société nationale de l'extérieur et les Croix-Rouges de la région. Les auteurs insistent tout particulièrement sur la nécessité d'améliorer les capacités en matière de planification et de gestion des actions humanitaires, tant du côté des Sociétés nationales des pays bénéficiaires que de celui des Sociétés nationales participantes.*

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