
**Croix-Rouge
et Croissant-Rouge**

**Red Cross
and Red Crescent**

Globalization and the future of humanitarian action

New priorities for the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement?

by ALI SAID ALI

We are all aware that we are passing through a phase characterized by rapid changes involving concepts that transcend cultures and utilize mechanisms that some societies may be unable to understand. Since the end of the Cold War, which had troubled international relations for more than fifty years, the parameters of contemporary international relations have evolved within the framework of the concept of globalization.

I do not think that anyone questions the political, economic, social or cultural impact of globalization. The present differences of opinion concern assessment of the extent of the adverse consequences of this impact on human society, and especially on communities in the Third World, many of which are still living in backward conditions.

In this paper, I do not intend to discuss the political, economic, social and cultural impact of globalization. I shall merely attempt to review some of its consequences in order to determine its repercussions on the present humanitarian situation and, at the same time, assess the future of humanitarian action mechanisms, particularly the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, which is one of the oldest and most widely known of these mechanisms. It would be difficult to predict this future without a clear diagnosis of the present humanitarian situation in the age of globalization.

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Globalization and the present humanitarian situation

The world rejoiced when, after many long years, it emerged from the dark tunnel of the Cold War with great hopes that the end of conflict would enable resources to be used for the development of human societies and elimination of the various sources of human suffering. However, all these hopes were dashed when human suffering increased for various reasons, including:

- *Social marginalization* — Many human societies are living in a state of marginalization due to rising rates of unemployment and increases in the incidence of well-known social maladies (drugs, crime, etc.). One of the main expectations concerning globalization was that it would put an end to this suffering and enable States to enjoy a comfortable economic situation that would lead to an improvement in the socio-economic status of individuals. Unfortunately, this optimism was dispelled by the constantly deteriorating socio-economic situation, which has marginalized many human societies and might ultimately give rise to social conflict, with often unforeseeable consequences.
- *The increasing incidence of disasters* — The picture of the world today is even more dismal than it was during the Cold War, the termination of which left the remaining major Powers free to steer the international decision-making mechanisms towards anarchy, international conflicts and internal strife. These have caused intolerable humanitarian suffering, the dangers of which, in most cases, are difficult to predict. There has also been an alarming increase in the incidence of disasters, the majority of which occur in Third World countries afflicted with socio-economic setbacks (for further information on disasters in the world, see the *Disaster Report for the Year 2000* published by the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies in Geneva).

In many human societies globalization seems to have dissipated the optimistic hopes of receiving assistance, as a token of the international community's solidarity, with a view to eliminating the causes of disasters. The best indication of this is the acute shortage of resources available to many humanitarian organizations and, in some cases, the

refusal by major powers to fulfil their constitutional and moral obligations towards such organizations.

Since the dearth of financial resources available to many international organizations has now begun to affect the volume of assistance that they provide for the victims of disasters, questions are being raised about the future of humanitarian action and the priorities of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement in the age of globalization.

The International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and the future of humanitarian action in the age of globalization

It would be difficult to predict the future of humanitarian action and the role of the Red Cross and Red Crescent without taking into consideration the complex crises currently facing such action, which can be classified as follows:

- The *crisis of forgotten disasters*, due to the reluctance of donors to provide the funds needed to deal with some major disasters which, since they are no longer a subject capable of arousing public opinion, cause thousands of deaths every day. The best proof of this can be seen today in many Third World countries, especially on the African continent, where the deaths of thousands of AIDS victims constitute the greatest disaster that mankind has ever witnessed, while the parties most able to help remain indifferent.
- The *political crisis* resulting from the fact that victims form part of the political agenda of some parties whose hostile relations have repercussions on those victims. The principal victims of this political conflict are the children, women and civilians affected by the system of economic embargoes imposed on some States. Today, everyone is aware that the adverse effects of this system of economic embargoes have transformed some human societies into a humanitarian tragedy, the consequences of which may be difficult to remedy.
- The *crisis of the Movement's multiple priorities*, resulting from the increasingly extensive concerns of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and its attempt to undertake tasks which,

in view of the magnitude of the disasters with which some human societies are faced and the dearth of resources which has begun to affect the Movement's programmes, might not constitute an urgent humanitarian priority. It might be helpful if the Movement rapidly recognized the need to identify the requirements of the most vulnerable groups, instead of wasting efforts and resources on the programming of operations that might be implemented by other parties. The Movement might rectify this state of affairs during its statutory meetings in November 2001.

- The *legal crisis*, resulting from the existence of a vacuum in international law with regard to the regulation of humanitarian assistance activities. During the last decade, this vacuum led to differing definitions of some concepts, such as the right to assistance and the right of intervention, thereby not only blurring the parameters of humanitarian assistance programmes but also delaying the timely receipt of assistance by the victims in many locations. Moreover, the linkage of intervention to the right to assistance has been exploited by some parties in order to use unconventional mechanisms, and particularly armed forces, to provide humanitarian assistance. Hence, there is a need to fill this legal vacuum by giving consideration to the establishment of an international legal mechanism regulating humanitarian assistance. It might be appropriate for the Movement to take an initiative to this end, since it is the most able and the most widely experienced in the field of humanitarian action.

Awareness of the complex crises currently facing humanitarian action might help the statutory bodies of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement to be more prepared to take measures commensurate with the present circumstances of globalization, particularly since the Standing Commission has begun to discuss the formulation of a strategy for the Movement's components so that it can be presented at the next statutory meetings in November 2001. However, the question being asked at the present time is whether it is possible to diagnose the weaknesses from which our Movement, one of the main humanitarian action mechanisms, is suffering.

By any standards, the present situation of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement differs from that in which it found itself fifty years ago. Everyone realizes that the changes that have taken place in its external environment have not been offset by corresponding changes in its internal environment that could enable it to respond to requirements in accordance with its time-honoured humanitarian procedures. I regard this shortcoming as one of the weaknesses currently affecting the Movement. As a result, it has begun to act in accordance with the circumstances of external changes without being able to determine its course of action within the framework of those circumstances. The best indication of this is the hasty manner in which the Movement addressed the complex question of the emblem, which could have repercussions on its unity and solidarity.

The Movement's priorities

Today, the Movement has undeniably reached a turning point at which it needs to review some of the concepts and mechanisms of its activities. It might be helpful to consider this challenge in the light of the following priorities:

- *The concept of solidarity* needs to be boosted and put into practice by replacing the concept of participation with the *concept of responsible partnership*. This implies abandonment of considerations dictated by donors and other players, and abandonment of the concept of solidarity solely within the framework of the Movement in favour of the concept of solidarity in the interests of the ultimate beneficiaries, namely the most vulnerable groups.
- The *voluntary service aspect* needs to be accentuated so that voluntary endeavours can be used to reduce dependence on reciprocal benefits when providing humanitarian assistance. This would promote a closer mutual relationship between victims and the Movement, a relationship that could add a further dimension to voluntary work by encouraging voluntary endeavours on the part of the target groups themselves. To this end, the Movement might have to review the question of voluntary service and the related mechanisms that are currently in operation.

- There is a need to boost *credibility*, which ensured greater praise and support for the Movement in past decades, in order to enable it to fulfil its obligations towards victims and vulnerable groups by safeguarding the mainstays of this credibility, namely the Movement's identity, fundamental principles, emblem and universality, without diminishing the trust that has always motivated our Movement's sincere endeavours.

Conclusion

There is an increasingly widespread feeling that humanitarian action under the present circumstances of globalization is suffering from shortcomings that have caused the situation of the most vulnerable groups to deteriorate. In many regions they have also led to an increase in the number of victims due to the inability of humanitarian organizations to respond to humanitarian requirements and the reluctance of donors to provide the support needed to enable these organizations to fulfil their obligations towards victims.

These repercussions seem to have had a direct effect on the components of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, which are complaining in general of difficulties in dealing with these changes and, in particular, of a shortage of the resources needed to discharge their humanitarian tasks.

This challenge implies an urgent need for in-depth discussion and dialogue concerning the priorities of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and the future of humanitarian action in general in the age of globalization.