

What have we learnt in the Red Cross and Red Crescent about building effective and sustainable partnerships?

By Matthias Schmale, IFRC Under Secretary General National Society and Knowledge Development

We appreciate the excellent cooperation with the UAE Red Crescent and the International Humanitarian City which has been so generously hosting our global logistics base here in Dubai already for a number of years.

Like many others, the Red Cross and Red Crescent network is increasingly appreciating that today's major humanitarian and development challenges can be tackled by no single actor alone, but require working in coalitions and partnerships. At the same time we have learnt that partnerships do not have a value in their own right: successful partnerships must have a clear purpose and there must be evident and discernible benefit for all partners. We have learnt a couple of lessons the hard way, including that expectations must be articulated up front and explicitly to avoid failure. An example of this is a partnership with a major telecom provider, which did not work out as we expected benefits in the form of equipment and training of our people, whereas the prospective partner was really looking for volunteering opportunities for their staff and for improving their image by partnering with a reputable humanitarian organisation.

Fortunately we have some contrasting very positive examples. One of these is the Global Road Safety Partnership, which brings together the private sector, governments and civil society. All partners are committed to the purpose of overcoming accidents as the biggest killer of young people aged 16 to 25 and each brings something distinctive to the table: civil society create awareness and mobilise people to act; governments regulate by for instance making seat belts mandatory,

and the automobile industry invest into safer cars safer. Another example is the partnership between the Thai Red Cross and Coca Cola on preparing and responding together to disasters such floods that happen almost every year. In describing the success of this partnership, a senior official from the Thai Red Cross said, “To create a healthy partnership, we must come together with our **heart** (a desire and commitment to work together to help), our **head** (an understanding of what we need to do) and our **hands** (taking action).”

As a large network of 187 sovereign national Red Cross and Red Crescent organisations, we have understood that demonstrating credible partnership behaviour inside our own Movement is almost as important as partnering with the outside world. We see reflected in our Movement the same fragmentation and deregulation as in the rest of the world between different regional and other groupings (for example east and west). As an example let me share what our former deputy Secretary General Ibrahim Osman told me a few years ago. He recounted how he had witnessed a discussion between a Red Crescent and a Red Cross providing aid in a remote and fragile region of an Africa country. One of them was building a state of the art hospital while the other was building community based clinics. They were both accusing each other of providing ineffective and inappropriate support.

A question we are asking ourselves is what we need to do to hold such a diverse group of partners holding such diverse views and following seemingly contradictory approaches to working together. We have understood that this is less and less about setting rigid rules and regulations and desperately trying to get everyone to adhere to them. A few years ago we agreed the Code of Good Partnership, which some describe as “not worth the paper it is written on”, as in reality few adhere to it.

An increasing view is that we need to let “a 1000 flowers bloom”, but ensure that we have a commonly owned and understood values base. As we are moving towards the 50th anniversary of our cherished Fundamental Principles, we are exploring how renewed commitment and reinterpretation of these Principles can serve to hold this unique

partnership of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies together. This requires respectful dialogue to understand each other's approaches and views. And we must always remember that at the end of the day there is a bottom line to any kind of humanitarian partnership and collaboration, which is to make a serious difference in the lives of vulnerable people.