

IFRC Speech - Lama Srour, Youth Commission Vice Chair

Panel Session on Breaking the Spiral of Violence

DIHAD – 14<sup>th</sup> edition, 22<sup>nd</sup> March 2017

Good afternoon ladies and gentlemen,

While many thought after World War I that this will never repeat itself, some 20 years later arose World War II, making the 20<sup>th</sup> century one of the most violent and deadliest periods in human history with an estimated 191 million lives lost because of conflict, of which, well, over half were civilians. And while we then swore to ourselves “this will never happen again”, today sometimes feels like we have stumbled in World War III. In 2015 only, we have witnessed the highest number of global battle deaths for 25 years, persistently high levels of terrorism, and the highest number of refugees and displaced people since World War II, among whom nearly 60% are children, adolescents and young people.

While the global economic cost of violence is estimated at \$13.6 trillion in 2015, the value spent on peace building that same year was less than 1% the losses.<sup>1</sup> With one of every three persons in today’s world being below the age of 30 and more than 80% of these living in developing countries, it is clear that children, adolescents and young adults are paying the highest price for decisions taken by a few individuals on which they don’t have a say, and held hostages of events or circumstances that are way beyond their control.

As highlighted by our Secretary General this morning, it is our collective responsibility to protect them from violence, especially in times of emergencies when vulnerabilities are heightened, and to help them (re)gain hope in the possibility of a better and safer future.

Doing so, starts with genuinely engaging them in decision-making processes that affect their lives and that of their communities, trusting them and considering them at a level of equality.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2017/01/how-much-does-violence-really-cost-our-global-economy/>

And this requires a global shift in the way youth and adults think, perceive each other and interact. It implies moving away from seeing youth as pure recipients of aid and leaders of tomorrow to believing in their power and ability to take action and bring about positive social changes, as leaders of today. Only when we will drop our respective prejudices and mistrust towards each other, and acknowledge, value and make the most out of our diverse talents, knowledge and experiences, we will be able to constructively engage in intergenerational dialogue and join forces to build a brighter world.

The fact that our Movement was created by a young man called Henry Dunant more than 150 years ago, after witnessing the suffering of helpless wounded soldiers and civilians on the battlefields of Solferino, and that young people make up more than half of its 16 million volunteers today clearly speak to their energy and dedication to contribute to such goal.

Since its creation, the IFRC and its 190 member national Red Cross and Red Crescent societies are committed to “saving lives and changing minds”, promoting solidarity, preventing and reducing human suffering, protecting life and health, and upholding human dignity, with the ultimate goal of “contributing to the maintenance and promotion of peace in the world”, as worded in our Constitution.

Young people, in particular, committed to doing more, doing better and reaching further, especially through embodying and promoting the practical application of our seven fundamental principles in their communities, renouncing violence and promoting respect for diversity and a culture of peace in the world.

We strongly believe in education, volunteering and youth engagement as antidotes to the culture of anger, mistrust, fear and intolerance that prevails nowadays. We are convinced that together, we can make it - we can bring about the change of mindsets, attitudes and behaviours that is required for breaking the spiral of violence.

This is evidenced by a number of programmes in which Red Cross Red Crescent youth are already actively engaged, such as the IFRC flagship initiative on the promotion of a culture of

non-violence and peace called Youth as Agents of Behavioural Change (or YABC). Through peer education and experiential, affective learning, YABC gets youth to undertake a personal transformation process, develop (self-)awareness and an understanding of societal issues as well as learn and practise important skills to interact constructively and live peacefully with others. Created in 2008, it now counts with 2,100 trained peer educators from 128 Red Cross Red Crescent Societies implementing it in the field, in schools or integrated into other programmatic areas. It is estimated that over 250,000 people directly benefited from it and brought positive changes in their lives and communities as a result.

Khaled, an 18-year-old refugee and volunteer with the Palestine Red Crescent shares *“As a youth, I can have an influence on other young people. If we can reduce the percentage of people who resort to violence, even by a few percentage points, it will be a start that we can build on to make people safer in our community.”*

Volunteers of the Senegalese Red Cross developed a range of educational materials to tackle misgivings and prejudices about refugees and other vulnerable migrants which have been adapted by colleagues from the German, British and Mexican Red Cross societies for use in their own contexts.

Similarly, the British Red Cross’ *“Positive Images Project”* that promotes positive attitudes among young people towards vulnerable migrants, expanded to a number of other National Societies, including Denmark, Greece, Cyprus, Portugal and Sweden.

In Yemen, the Red Crescent Society is working with teachers, parents and students to establish child friendly spaces in schools so that students have a place to be physically safe and to learn to cope with the psychological burdens of the fear and anxiety caused by the conflict. As a result, and despite initial reluctance, the number of returnees to schools is increasing, and more children are engaging with the programme.

After the South Kordofan violence, the Sudan Red Crescent provided a safe space for children to come to address the trauma they had witnessed through recreation, education and

awareness activities. They also worked on identifying and responding to cases of separated and unaccompanied minors, to help reunite them with their families or to find alternative care solutions where reunification was not possible.

In Central America, the Honduran Red Cross, with the support of the ICRC, the IFRC, the Netherlands Red Cross, the Italian Red Cross and the Swiss Red Cross, implements since 2003 a project to reduce the incidence of violence and exclusion among youth and their families by creating or facilitating opportunities for their individual development, and ultimately that of their communities. It offers alternative education targeted at youth and adults interested in starting or completing their basic education from the first to the ninth grade, and includes a wide range of topics such as health promotion, environmental protection and recreational activities, first aid training, life skills' education, psychosocial support, vocational instruction and employment offered in formal and non-formal education settings as well as professional training centres.

While I could go on and on, kindly allow me to end with a few other examples from my humble volunteering experience with the Lebanese Red Cross (LRC). LRC engages with children and young people all over the country through youth-led initiatives using a wide range of non-cognitive, educational methodologies and tools it developed, like the contextualised role-play "Our villages treasure" or taken from sister National Societies such as the simulation exercises "On the Run" (Norwegian RC) or "Raid Cross" (French RC), the board game "Limito" (Belgian RC) and learning modules from the YABC toolkit or others like "Facing fear" (Canadian RC). Via these many programs and activities run in schools, community centers, refugee camps and child-friendly spaces, the LRC seeks to develop their knowledge of humanitarian norms, nurture values such as tolerance and respect, foster social inclusion, and provide psychosocial support to improve their well-being and accompany them individually along their life journey towards personal fulfillment.

Convinced of the impact of community engagement and social mobilisation, the LRC also organises annually a Peace Festival, which engages celebrities, singers, painters, basketball

players and journalists to raise awareness on peace in their own ways among the Lebanese population, especially their fans (whom they have a higher influence on). Similarly, LRC's annual Child Festival brings together more than 8,000 children with their parents, sensitizing children about their rights and humanitarian values, as well as encouraging parents to pay further attention to their own behaviors. A key success story during my past sixteen years of volunteering remains the Guinness world record the LRC youth broke for having made the largest handprinted canvas ever by bringing together for Humanity young and old people from different religious, ethnic and political backgrounds under the slogan "put your hands with us", whereby each handprint represented someone's commitment to respect the values of Humanity in their daily life.

Today, more than half of the 190 National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies deliver child protection and educational activities in formal, non-formal and informal settings, very often in partnership with public authorities, UN agencies, international and local NGOs, collectively reaching over a million children and young people every year. Despite these intensified efforts, much more needs to be done to break the spiral of violence, especially with regards to further addressing social determinants and underlying causes of vulnerabilities.

The IFRC and its membership are committed to scaling up investments in protection and psychosocial support for girls, boys and families, as well as to striving for improving access to education and further enabling young people to take a leading role in shaping their own future. We are also committed to developing and strengthening partnerships with all at global and local levels to increase the impact and effectiveness of our collective work to put an end to violence against children.

Ladies and Gentlemen, I'm personally convinced that if we would have spent as much money on peace than we had on war in the past decades, our prospects of achieving the sustainable development goals would be very promising – if not already reached. I'd like to seize this opportunity to particularly call for the systematic incorporation of skills- and values-based education into formal and informal curricula, as a key strategy to stop the cycle of violence.

Thank you.