

Partnerships and coordination in humanitarian assistance: challenges and opportunities from an ICRC perspective

Speech by Christine Beerli, Vice President of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC)
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Ladies and gentlemen,

It is my pleasure to address this distinguished and diverse audience today, and my thanks go to the organisers of DIHAD for the invitation.

The theme of building effective and sustainable partnerships is indeed highly relevant to the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), perhaps more so than ever in today's fast-changing humanitarian environment. Partnership always has and always will be a key aspect of our activity. However, as I will highlight today, the dynamics of partnership and coordination, and the opportunities and challenges these bring, are continuing to evolve.

I would like first to briefly touch upon just a few of the most significant trends in today's humanitarian landscape that directly or indirectly impact on the ICRC's relations with other actors; trends that are testing the acceptance, perception and relevance of humanitarian aid and of those who deliver it perhaps more than ever before. I will then consider key aspects of the ICRC's strategy to broaden, and strengthen, its support base and partner network – principally within the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, but also with the United Nations, NGOs and beyond.

One key trend with far-reaching consequences in this domain is the resurgence of state-based assertion of sovereignty, with increasing numbers of host states actively blocking, restricting or controlling humanitarian response on their territory. Non-western host states increasingly want to be seen to deal with their own political and humanitarian crises – partly in line with their own responsibilities, and partly because they are sceptical about the effectiveness and intentions of the international humanitarian community. One outcome of this is that humanitarian response is becoming increasingly localised.

In parallel to this trend, there is an increasingly broad range of actors responding to humanitarian emergencies, including the private sector, new NGOs, and foreign military forces, often with ways of operating that are different to traditional approaches and not necessarily based on humanitarian principles. Overall, these changes are challenging the relevance of "traditional" humanitarian action and coordination mechanisms – particularly at the international level – and further fuelling the sometimes rampant competition between actors.

The apparent inability of many humanitarian organisations to gain access to affected populations in the emergency phase of armed conflicts is striking. Yet this is only partly due to security constraints and host government control of aid. There is another major reason, which is the *deliberate* choice of most UN agencies and many large international NGOs to effectively outsource their response to local partners. As the chain from donor to UN agency to international NGO to local partner and eventually to beneficiary becomes longer and longer – and monitoring is at best inconsistent – this raises important questions about the efficiency and effectiveness of the overall response, especially about who has final accountability for ensuring this. It also means that a credible perspective of the real needs and resilience of beneficiaries is lost.

In various emergency contexts – Somalia, Libya and Mali to name just a few recent and ongoing examples – Muslim organisations and Red Crescent societies from countries such as Turkey and Qatar were rapidly active on the ground while many international humanitarian

organisations and agencies were still talking about coordination in regional capitals. New constellations of humanitarian actors, often with Red Cross and Red Crescent societies at the centre, will increasingly fill this void.

Donors too are becoming increasingly diversified, both States and non-governmental donors. More and more "non-traditional" or "emerging" state donors are operating outside the OECD's Development Assistance Committee (DAC) and independently of the Good Humanitarian Donorship Initiative. A noticeable trend of non-DAC donor governments is to channel funds through host states rather than through humanitarian organisations, and they often tend to favour interventions in neighbouring countries. Humanitarian financing to the Syria crisis is one example. At a UN pledging conference for Syria in January, hosted by the State of Kuwait, donors within the Middle East – including Kuwait itself, the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia – outperformed the leading global economies by a huge margin in terms of actual commitments and contributions, both inside and outside the UN funding appeals.

A final point on the acceptance and perception of humanitarian aid is on the changing role and perception of the so-called "victims", those we aim to protect and assist. The ever-increasing availability of new web-based technology naturally means that "auto assessment" by beneficiaries themselves is becoming more of a reality. There are many examples of this, from major natural disasters such as the Haiti earthquake to the ongoing violence and armed conflict triggered by the Arab Spring. Beneficiaries are thus rightly empowered to identify needs and be better involved in formulating adequate responses, more as partners than passive victims. Still, we need to do much more to improve the way in which we interact with beneficiaries.

For the ICRC, it is critical to draw lessons from these trends and engage accordingly. We clearly recognise the need to better connect with other responses; to broaden our support base through engagement with more diverse stakeholders – and to make the most of the opportunities that such diversity brings. Our aim is to ensure a constant, *relevant* operational presence that remains faithful to our fundamental principles of impartiality, neutrality and independence. In practice this requires an approach that is needs-based, has proximity to the beneficiaries, and entails engagement with all stakeholders – thereby gaining the widest possible acceptance and respect, and through this, the widest possible humanitarian access to people in need of protection and assistance.

First and foremost, it is the ICRC's objective to further strengthen and develop partnerships within the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, which is the largest humanitarian network in the world, supported by millions of volunteers. This is particularly important at the local level in order to acquire a thorough understanding of the situation on the ground and the needs of various communities. In all, the ICRC has active partnerships with over 100 National Red Cross and Red Crescent societies, each with their own legal identity and role, but all sharing the same fundamental principles. These partnerships take different forms: some are primarily operational and concentrate on emergency response, while others focus on capacity building in specific areas such as conflict-preparedness. In challenging operational contexts such as Syria, Mali, Afghanistan, Somalia, Sudan, South Sudan and the DRC, the National Society is already a vital partner.

One specific example of partnership and cooperation between the ICRC, National Societies and other relevant stakeholders over the past year – both on a policy and practical level – is on the issue of the vulnerability of health care workers to violence. The "Health Care in Danger" initiative is a multi-year project aiming to ensure protection and better access to health care for the wounded and sick in armed conflict and other emergencies. Following the adoption of a far-reaching resolution on "health care in danger" at the 31st International Conference in December 2011, the ICRC began consultations with experts from States, the

Movement and other actors in the health care sector. Some concrete steps have already been taken. A series of experts' workshops in 2012, which will continue into 2014, has mobilised health authorities, medical associations, National Societies and NGOs from around the world. They have helped to raise awareness and understanding of the issue, and put forward practical recommendations for safe practices. Overall though, we need to do more to further strengthen and develop our partnerships with key National Societies.

With regard to the United Nations and its various components, there is fruitful cooperation and collaboration with the ICRC in numerous spheres and at different levels, albeit outside the confines of any formal coordination mechanisms. To give one example: UN peacekeeping missions, nearly all with a mandate to protect civilians, are operating in various contexts where the ICRC has had a longstanding presence, and more and more military and police forces are being deployed in post-conflict and conflict settings. While it is no secret that this raises certain concerns and challenges – essentially with regard to the blurring of military, political and humanitarian mandates and the risks this entails to impartial humanitarian access – it is important to find ways for the different approaches to protection to co-exist and even complement each other.

In recent years the ICRC has had increasing dialogue and interaction with UN peacekeeping missions in the field and with the Department of Peacekeeping in New York. Pre-deployment briefings of UN peacekeepers by the ICRC is one example. Joint workshops on topics related to training and the applicability of international humanitarian law to UN peacekeeping and protection of civilians is another. The ICRC also regularly addresses the Security Council in its annual debate on protection of civilians, which has in recent years prioritised the issue in the context of peacekeeping and in terms of ensuring respect for international humanitarian law.

The ICRC's approach to partnership and coordination is pragmatic as well as principled. We strive to work closely with those who share our vision of field-based action and relevance, and who have close proximity to people affected by armed conflict or other situations of violence. With this in mind, one international NGO with whom we work closely in various challenging contexts is Médecins sans Frontières.

The minimum common ground between the ICRC and other humanitarian actors, regardless of their particular mandate or approach, must be the principles of humanity and impartiality, with aid prioritised and allocated strictly on the basis of humanitarian needs only. There must be a genuine commitment to match the rhetoric of "principled humanitarian action" with a meaningful response on the ground. This requires transparency and clarity on such fundamental issues as beneficiary numbers, access and capacities. Increasingly, flexible local coordination arrangements tailored to a specific context are becoming the norm.

At the other end of the spectrum, the ICRC is also working to develop strong relationships with an increasing number of States around the world, aimed at gaining a greater understanding of their perspectives and views on humanitarian action, and then to integrate this insight in the way it conducts its activities and operations. At the same time, the institution stands to gain increased legal, operational and in some cases financial support.

Failure to reach out effectively on all these levels could have serious consequences. Beyond being marginalised by emerging actors, lack of acceptance could endanger the security of staff in the field. Indeed, the ICRC's 13,000 staff members are its key asset. Investing more in our workforce - striking the right balance of diversity, developing leadership and striving for the highest professional standards – is essential to secure acceptance and support, and ultimately to be able to make a real difference for people affected by war or disaster.

Thank you.