

# IN THE RED CROSS WORLD

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## SCOPE FOR THE RED CROSS IN AFRICA

*In June 1965 the International Review published an article by Mr. Marc Gazay, Director of the Information Bureau of the League of Red Cross Societies, in which, after reviewing the enormous problems confronting the new National Societies in a number of African countries, he showed that this Continent today offers a wide field of action for the Red Cross.*

*In this connection we believe our readers will be interested in an article by Mr. A. Mamboulou, Secretary General of the Red Cross of the Congo. His study, which was published on the occasion of the Red Cross Seminar in Abidjan and which was mentioned by Mr. Gazay, is entitled "What Scope is there for the Red Cross in Africa?" It was published in the Nouvelles de la Croix-Rouge du Congo (Léopoldville, May 1965) and the main passages are quoted below.*

... It is incumbent on every National Society to formulate a programme sufficiently dynamic and flexible to enable it to be adapted to local conditions. Such a programme should be adapted gradually, based on an order of priorities, particularly through contacts, active voluntary co-operation and the training of technical personnel.

However, we must ask ourselves whether the fundamental principles of the Red Cross—Humanity, Equality, Impartiality, Neutrality, Independence and Universality—are acceptable in Africa.

In this connection we have come to the conclusion, based on repeated experience, that these principles are either unknown to

or not understood by the population. Accustomed from their earliest childhood to the ancestral rules of reprisals, handed down from generation to generation, and having lived through grievous events, Africans are hardly inclined to tender sentiments and are often prone to pay back in kind any harm they have suffered. Their environment generates an urge to self-defence against hostile nature.

This state of affairs calls for active remedial measures before there is any chance that these principles will be freely accepted by African states.

Let us examine the main problems which hinder progress of the Red Cross ideal among our populations.

It must be admitted that the African leaders of the National Red Cross Societies, like the population, have not been prepared for the work of the Red Cross.

On the one hand, following accession by several countries to independence we have been struck by such disasters as floods, earthquakes, civil war, famine, etc.

In addition, the already numerous difficulties were aggravated by such factors as:

- political upheaval in the new States;
- the misconception by a number of politicians concerning the Red Cross, due to their never having been previously interested in it and to their being confronted with problems beyond their understanding;
- the population's lack of preparation for voluntary work;
- the low standard of living of the average African.

Apart from these problems, others arise due to:

- primitive housing conditions;
- wide-spread undernourishment owing to the subsistence economy in which the African farms for himself and his family, instead of a market economy with production for sale;
- difficulties of communication caused by great distances, deficiency of roads, vehicles and telegraphic communications which thereby impede distribution;

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— the incomplete transformation of the countries' infrastructure which would provide employment for thousands of people and incomes which would contribute to the improvement of living conditions.

The change of the traditional way of life to a new or urban pattern involves the entire African Continent in a transition which cannot be completed from one day to another and in which the Red Cross has a part to play.

What gives stability to man is the family, in the wider sense of the word, by the union and solidarity which forms it, as well as the force of habit. There is a hierarchy in the family in which each member knows his place. This hierarchy is based on the equality of the members of the family.

As a result of economic changes and of migrations, this concept of unity and stability has been breached in several quarters. The Red Cross must therefore endeavour to compensate for this lack of stability which engenders fear and encourages belief in evil spirits and other superstitions. The African desires to live in peace with his neighbours ; we must therefore revive the community spirit, the patriotic spirit, for all men. This is the primary function of the Red Cross.

For the African the family is the basis of his existence ; from it he learns to hunt, fish, build his home, etc. The family is his apprenticeship and training school. Several families together constitute a village, and a number of villages a tribe. Most of the work is carried out by the members of the family and if any of the members should be in need the whole family shares that need.

The family and the tribe make up the African's life. Social activities involve the same people and contacts outside the tribe have been, and in many cases still are, few and far between.

Personal connections are the foundation of all social life. In urban communities personal connections are less important and relations with neighbours even less so. The city dweller spends his leisure time away from home ; this is an automatic reflex. This leads me to say that it will be easier to integrate the Red Cross in the villages than in the towns, leisure and communal events being devised by the village for the village.

As the means of communication are different in society based on traditional customs, it will be necessary to have individual contacts, that is to say human contacts in the family.

Red Cross workers and people concerned with community development can take advantage of this spirit of mutual aid within the family to inculcate that spirit of fellowship which should unite men for the building of a better world.

All too often in a society based on traditional customs the Red Cross is an abstract idea, the name of an institution associated with memories of the difficult times of the past and which, for that very reason, many hasten to forget in time of peace, when there seem to be no longer any grounds for its existence. That is why the leaders of the Red Cross must strive untiringly to make known the work accomplished in the most varied fields by its technical personnel and innumerable volunteers whose activities are for the most part little known or misunderstood.

In the towns where society has discarded traditional customs such means of persuasion as publicity are necessary. Individual faculties also enable each man to make his own choice. Men will try to form groups to see and understand the sense of the publicity to which they are subjected, hence the formation here and there of Red Cross Committees. But these groups sometimes withdraw within themselves and it is difficult to join them. One looks at them without understanding and the distinction becomes apparent between those who offer cultural activity and those who seek it.

We cannot hope to arouse and retain public interest unless the public is kept informed by all available means (press, radio, television) of what is going on within the movement in favour of which we ask people to devote some of their time and money. The better the public is kept informed, the more interest will it take in Red Cross achievements and realize the difficulties of all sorts with which the Red Cross contends and the needs which it must meet and which unfortunately are far in excess of its resources.

It cannot too often be said that Red Cross activity whether international, national or merely in the towns and villages, is only possible thanks to the combined efforts of selfless people and to the funds provided by a generous public.

The Red Cross must therefore take example from the lessons to be learned from the tribal system in order to introduce in peacetime the spirit of fellowship, assistance and humanism which should guide everybody in relations with one's neighbour.

Modern times demand the use of new techniques and it is up to the Red Cross to do just this. In order for a technique to be worth-while and effect favourable changes in our institutions, it must be appropriate to the needs of the population and its stage of development.

New methods based on purely African concepts must be found to magnify the extent of the Red Cross and to interest a greater number of Africans in its work.

We need:

- to conduct an intense campaign of information and publicity;
- to intensify first-aid teaching and the training of first-aiders;
- to interest African womanhood in courses of home nursing and maternal and child nursing, thereby preparing African girls for their future task as mothers;
- to increase medico-social activities,
  - a) in the villages (hygiene education, courses with practical demonstrations);
  - b) in towns (nurseries, milk distribution centres, distribution of gifts to children, meals to the sick, assistance to the handicapped, charitable institutions, assistance to refugees, blood transfusion, paediatric centres, etc.).

Consequently, the National Society officials must themselves be better prepared for these various tasks. It would in addition be highly desirable to have permanent members to draw up programmes of activities and to see to their implementation.

Indeed it is only with the co-operation of the public that we can hope to achieve our aims. We must therefore take every opportunity (tribal meetings or other associations) to recruit and seek co-operation from all in order that, in one way or another, everybody contributes in some degree to this work calling for all-out effort. We should all make some contribution, no matter how small, in response to the appeals launched by the committees...