

International Round Table on Red Cross and Red Crescent Voluntary Service

An International Round Table on Red Cross and Red Crescent Voluntary Service, organized by the Henry Dunant Institute in close co-operation with the ICRC and the League, was held in Geneva from 28 to 30 April 1986.

Seventeen National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (7 in Africa, 2 in the Americas, 1 in Asia and 7 in Europe) sent twenty-two delegates chosen from the heads of voluntary services or volunteers with broad field experience. Several staff members from the ICRC, the League and the Henry Dunant Institute also attended.

The opening ceremony, presided over by Mr. Jean-Paul Buensod, President of the Henry Dunant Institute, took place in the presence of Mr. Maurice Aubert, Vice-President of the ICRC and Mr. William Gunn, Special Adviser for International Relations representing Mr. Hans Hoegh, Secretary General of the League.

The aim of this round table was to study, in preparation for the Twenty-fifth International Conference of the Red Cross (Geneva, October 1986), certain aspects of Red Cross and Red Crescent voluntary service in the light of socio-economic changes of our time and emergency situations. Another objective was to follow up resolutions adopted by the Twenty-fourth International Conference of the Red Cross (Manila, 1981) and the VIth Session of the League General Assembly (Geneva, 1985) relating to the status, rights and duties of volunteers; relations between volunteers and salaried staff; the training and motivation of volunteers, as well as their integration and participation in all stages of the planning and implementation of activities.

Finally, this round table provided the opportunity to update the conclusions of a study carried out from 1980 to 1984 by the Henry Dunant Institute.*

Divided into two working groups chaired respectively by Mrs. Véronique Ahouanmenou, President of the Red Cross of Benin and Mrs. Jackie David, former National Chairman of the American Red Cross Volunteers, the participants discussed the following three topics consecutively: "Rights, Duties and Legal Status of Red Cross and Red Crescent Volunteers"; "The Practice of Red Cross and Red Crescent Voluntary Service" and "Informal Groups" and traditional voluntary service.

While studying the first subject, "Rights, Duties and Legal Status of Red Cross and Red Crescent Volunteers" introduced by Mr. Jean Pascalis, Deputy Secretary General of the Swiss Red Cross, the participants stressed volunteers' responsibilities in situations of conflict and in the event of natural disasters.

They thus recommended that in agreement with the military authorities, the National Societies outline what contributions they make or could make to the armed forces' health services, in accordance with Articles 24 and 26 of the First Geneva Convention of 1949.

Likewise, the National Societies should in time of peace establish contact with the armed forces' health services to determine the contribution of volunteer workers not placed on the same footing as military medical personnel to tasks which are not specifically provided for in Article 26.1 (for example, blood donation campaigns, medical and social assistance to refugees, displaced persons, the homeless, etc.).

The National Societies were also asked to define with the civil authorities the terms of their co-operation in order to determine in advance which civilian medical service personnel and installations are entitled to use the emblem in situations of conflict.

On all these points, the round table advised the National Societies to refer to the *Guide for National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies to Activities in the Event of Conflict* drawn up by the ICRC.

In general, the round table recommended that the National Societies issue a national charter specifying the rights and duties of volunteers and take adequate measures to ensure their protection through group and individual insurance schemes covering them in their daily work, as well as in emergency situations.

Mr. Jacques Meurant, Director of the Henry Dunant Institute, presented the topic, "The Practice of Red Cross and Red Crescent Voluntary Service", which covers several points: the recruitment, selection, training and supervision of volunteers; their participation in the life of the National Society and the evaluation of their service.

* The Henry Dunant Institute study entitled "Red Cross Voluntary Service in Today's Society" was published in French in 1984 and in English in 1985. Spanish and German versions are under way. A summary was published in the *International Review of the Red Cross* (No. 240, May-June 1984, pp. 179-180).

The participants emphasized the difficulties encountered by the National Societies in their volunteer-recruitment efforts and therefore recognized the imperative need to *instill the humanitarian reflex in the innermost depths of the human being* by disseminating knowledge of international humanitarian law and the fundamental principles of the Red Cross at as early an age as possible.

After having exchanged views on recruiting and training methods, the participants focused on the effects of natural disasters, as well as the impacts of underemployment and joblessness on volunteer recruitment and the appropriate means for keeping them motivated and interesting them in their National Society's development.

After having reaffirmed the National Societies' obligation to ensure adequate training adapted to the various tasks the volunteers may be called upon to carry out, the round table recommended in particular that specific training (first aid, rights and duties of medical personnel in time of armed conflict, etc.) be given to medical personnel likely to be placed at the disposal of the armed forces' medical services.

The delegates paid special attention to the *participation* of volunteers, now called upon to work *with* communities and no longer *for* them in identifying their needs and setting up programmes and services. Recognizing that the integrated approach to community needs requiring *multidisciplinary team* action (Red Cross action teams) favours the integration of volunteers in the life of the National Society and develops their efficiency, the participants recommended the formation of such teams, especially on the local level, and their training for multipurpose assignments.

Broaching the topic of the structure and organization of voluntary service within the National Societies, the round table felt that an effective system is one which gives volunteers maximum possibilities of integration in the life of the National Society, i.e. adequate supervision, guidance and training, and taking part in activity programming. It recommended, therefore, that the National Societies encourage volunteer participation in programme planning and evaluation, and that they make provisions for a personalized volunteer development plan allowing them to improve their knowledge and take on greater responsibilities.

Finally, the National Societies were invited to set up communication and information systems, even consultative bodies, on national, regional and local levels to ensure smooth relations among management, salaried staff and volunteers.

The third topic, "informal groups and traditional voluntary service" introduced by Mrs. Jackie David, allowed participants to compare two notions of participation in community life: one, the traditional notion in which the Red Cross takes pride; the other, a more recent one whereby individuals and groups join together to enhance the quality of life, to protect themselves against obstacles, shortcomings and abuse or to solve their problems themselves.

The round table encouraged co-operation between the National Societies and such groups (particularly with regard to identifying community needs, volunteer recruitment and the dissemination of knowledge of Red Cross ideals) as long as their objectives are compatible with the fundamental principles of the Red Cross.

At the end of the meeting, the participants adopted the conclusions and recommendations of the two working groups presented by their rapporteurs, Mrs. Hélène Delpon de Vaux, head of volunteers for emergency missions at the French Red Cross and Mr. Andrew Okoth, training programme director of the Kenya Red Cross Society. These texts will be presented at the Twenty-fifth International Conference of the Red Cross.

In conclusion, the Director of the Henry Dunant Institute expressed his pleasure at the round table findings, which shed new light on certain aspects of Red Cross voluntary service and showed that voluntary service within the National Red Cross Societies, like contemporary society, is highly varied, but that the principles which inspire it remain immutable.
