



An International  
Perspective on

# Volunteer Service

By Alexandre Hay



The following excerpts are from an address given by Alexandre Hay, president of the International Committee of the Red Cross, at the 1980 LIVE (Learn through International Volunteer Effort) Conference, sponsored by the International Association for Volunteer Education, in Cret-Berard, Vaud, Switzerland. Hay spoke on volunteer service and the Red Cross.

**A**LTHOUGH VOLUNTEER SERVICE is a Red Cross principle that was established in legal texts dating back many decades, it nonetheless continues to be a subject of constant reflexion. The volunteer service of the past has little in common with the one we know today.

In November 1979, the Henry Dunant Institute recommended that a study should be carried out on "Red Cross Voluntary Work in Today's Society." Accordingly, a working group—representatives of the Swiss Red Cross, the International Committee of the Red Cross, the League of Red Cross Societies, and the Henry Dunant Institute—met on several occasions this year to discuss the content of this study and how it should be carried through.

Almost from the start, it became obvious that consultations with National Societies were indispensable. Plans therefore were made to send a questionnaire on this matter to some fifteen Societies chosen on the basis of their geographical representativity. The drafting of the questionnaire gave rise to a multitude of questions, all of which cannot be dealt with within the framework of this study, but which nonetheless deserve thoughtful consideration.

May I therefore proceed by giving you a brief description of the issues involved in the question of volunteer service in the Red Cross, and which indeed are issues relevant to other forms of volunteer service.

## The Notion of Volunteer Service

The first question to be answered is, "What is volunteer service?" A volunteer is someone who, of his/her own free will, offers services in accomplishing a given task. Volunteer service is thus the principle by virtue of which an individual performs an activity of his/her own free will. With specific reference to the Red Cross, volunteer service implies a freely accepted commitment not prompted by any desire for gain and the acceptance of the principles that guide the movement's humanitarian activities. No doubt it is this voluntary nature of the Red Cross relief worker's action that, in times of armed conflict international disturbances, inspires confidence in a population which often might not be too willing to heed the voice of authority.

## Volunteer Service—Paid or Unpaid

As defined above, the notion of volunteer service is somewhat wide. To what extent does volunteer service signify unpaid service? At the present time, in modern French language, the term *benevole* refers to an individual who undertakes voluntary service without financial reward, and without expecting such reward. The French word *benevole* stems directly from the Latin *benevolens* meaning "benevolent" or "one who wishes well."

While it is clear that Red Cross activities are purely nonprofit in nature, the question remains as to whether the fact of remunerating some of its staff is compatible with the Institution's basic principles. In other words, is it in fact permissible to describe remunerated staff as "volunteers" simply because they have chosen, of their own free will, to devote their energies to the Red Cross? Some say it is not. In their view, the very idea of expecting financial reward, even

in the form of an allowance or indemnity, kills all the spontaneity in a gesture that should be solely altruistic. In keeping with this analysis, an individual who offers services to the Red Cross in exchange for a salary is not different from an employee in the "private for-profit" sector, since his/her motives are not exclusively humanitarian.

## The "Volunteer Profile"

The working group also discussed the "profile" of volunteers. At first sight, and with no wish to prejudge the replies to the questionnaire on volunteer work in the Red Cross, those carrying out voluntary, unpaid work within our movement most frequently are recruited from among young people, women whose time is not taken up entirely by a professional activity, and senior citizens. All in fact have a certain amount of free time which they can devote to humanitarian activities, motivated either by idealism or by a desire to fill a somewhat lonely existence with some kind of occupation.

Those who make up the working population often have no time to become involved in Red Cross activities. In Third World countries, the relatively few trained professionals work in government departments, and National Societies there sometimes have difficulty in obtaining the services of suitably qualified people. In the developed countries, specialists are not lacking, but they are often too absorbed in their family or professional life.

Without wishing to question the worthiness and noble-mindedness of the "charitable ladies" benevolently showing kindness towards the less fortunate, there is a need to make all individuals understand that, whatever their social or cultural background, they have a responsibility to bear in society and must demonstrate their solidarity with others. The relationship between those who give and those who receive,

and the difference in rank which is implicitly attributed to each party must be replaced by the idea of the citizen's active involvement in community life.

### **Volunteer Service and Amateurism**

"It is not enough to do good, that good must be done well." This quotation from Diderot sums up another problem that confronts National Societies which make use of voluntary, unpaid workers, and that is the amateurism of some of the latter. While many unpaid workers make it a point of honor to accomplish the task assigned to them with the greatest degree of professional competence, there are others who, on the contrary, feel free to act totally in their own manner. Keeping to regular working hours and persevering with an activity once it is begun require a degree of self-discipline which is not given to all. The very fact that they are unpaid leads some voluntary workers to feel so independent that they see no need to comply with such requirements.

"That's all very well," certain committed volunteers will say, "but by dint of rationalizing, organizing, elaborating and administrating volunteer work, there is a great risk you might extinguish its flame." So we should avoid going to the opposite extreme, or we may see the enthusiasm behind their gesture melt away like snow in the sun.

Perhaps it is up to those organizations that benefit from volunteer support to adjust and organize themselves so that persons of good will are not excluded simply because they cannot fit into a too rigid and organizational structure.

### **Volunteer Service: Remedying the Shortcomings of the State?**

Another topic for reflexion, which is as old as the Red Cross movement itself, should be mentioned at this point: Should not activities carried out by unpaid volunteers be taken over by the State? In other words, isn't volunteer service in fact a substitute for the State's shortcomings?

The fact is that the State cannot do everything, even in the most centralized societies. Besides, should it do so? The question remains unanswered. The unpaid voluntary worker is often a pioneer who embarks on activities to meet needs that society has not yet identified as such. Once these needs become fully apparent, the State sometimes

decides to deal with them and to take over the task from the voluntary workers.

An illustration of pioneer voluntary work is the remarkable initiative launched by the Junior Red Cross in a Latin American country. These young people go out at night to look for children who roam around the shantytowns, often in gangs. They approach the children, provide them with the care and food they might in many cases require, and talk over their problems with them. Contact often is established more easily between young people, especially when initial mistrust is overcome. To what extent could State-employed social workers carry out this task? Would they be available after night-fall? Would they inspire the same degree of confidence? I am anything but sure.

Sometimes, even the best-organized State services can become overwhelmed. This is especially so when natural disasters occur or when conflicts break out. At such times, voluntary work may be found necessary to supplement State action.

### **Volunteers and the Labor Market**

Another subject tackled by the working group on volunteer service in the Red Cross is that of the volunteer's situation on the labor market. Relationships between voluntary unpaid workers and professional workers are not always free of tension. Thus, in a hospital for example, a nurse who is overloaded with work may sometimes resent a volunteer who has time to talk with the patients. Similarly, an unemployed social worker is liable to accuse a volunteer of filling a job that s/he needs in order to provide for him/her self and family. Hence, the sometimes hostile attitude towards volunteer unpaid service adopted by trade unions and professional associations.

If they are to become accepted as part of a professional team, voluntary workers must display tact and perseverance. It is essential that their arrival should be announced beforehand and accepted by everyone who is to collaborate with them. They must also avoid all unprofessional conduct; otherwise, they will be rejected by the group.

In addition, it may be necessary to combat the attitude adopted sometimes by unpaid Red Cross workers that, ethically, their work is of greater value

than that of professionals.

There is a great danger here, since this creates a negative attitude and may sometimes even have serious consequences for the work of those who feel they are looked upon as second class citizens simply because they are obliged to accept a remuneration. Yet they too, in a certain sense, are volunteers when they devote their enthusiasm, energy and time, beyond the strict call of duty, to the work for which they are paid. (H. Beer, secretary general of the League).

### **Humanitarian Volunteer Service: One of Many**

We should also take care not to consider humanitarian volunteer service as "more pure" than other forms. Does not the political party worker who spends free time putting up posters and distributing leaflets make a contribution to what s/he feels is the common good? The same applies to a member of a community association or the organizer of a Sunday sports club for many people. They are all involved in their own way in the life of the community.

You may have already heard it said that volunteer service is a Judeo-Christian concept. Personally, I find this statement rather puzzling. One need look no further than the wise advice of Buddha: "Do not forget that love and charity are the great strengths of this world," or the words of the Persian philosopher Saadi who, no less than seven centuries ago, wrote this remarkable poem:

The children of man are the members of one and the same family  
Who, in creation, are of one sole essence.  
If nature should afflict just one member,  
All the other members will feel his pain.  
Thou who art unaware of others' suffering,  
Thou art not worthy to call thyself "Man".

Volunteer service today is not limited by nationality, religion, sex or age, and this is its strength in a divided world. It acts as a bond between people in two ways: the volunteers themselves are tied together by their common interests and work, but in addition they are linked to the persons in distress whom they are seeking to help.

"Man cannot breathe in a world without hope," said Malraux. Is the hope that lies in the heart of the volunteers, and that animates all those to whom they bring relief, not the basic reason why millions of human beings set aside for a while their everyday worries and open their hearts to those of others?