The heart of conflict: how the Red Cross stays true to its purpose in war zones

What can logistics businesses learn from the Red Cross's delivery of aid in some of the most difficult regions of the world?

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Just as companies have had to refocus their strategies and methods in order to meet the emerging challenges of an increasingly fractious and polarized world, so, too, have humanitarian agencies like the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC).

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“The traditional lines have been blurred,” says Christophe Hambye, a senior director of logistics at the ICRC’s Geneva headquarters, who has worked in Pakistan, Ethiopia, the ex-Soviet Union and the former Yugoslavia. “What used to be relatively straightforward has become something far more complex.”

When the scope of your operations spans the globe, how do you guarantee on-time delivery to those who need it most, when the man-made roadblocks you need to negotiate aren’t simply red tape, but are, quite literally, roadblocks, not to mention landmines, battlefields and disaster zones?

How do you maintain proximity to your “clients” when you’re sometimes based 10,000 miles away from the action?

These questions weigh heavily on Hambye, especially as the regions in which the ICRC operates — including the Gaza Strip, Iraq, Afghanistan and Yemen — seem to be growing more volatile by the day.

To some extent, the global working environment has always been fraught with conflict and tricky choices. But Hambye sees things intensifying somewhat since September 11, 2001.

For the ICRC, as for many international organizations, staying true to its historical mission requires greater discipline and commitment — “because if we really want to reach out to those who need our help and services, we may have to expose ourselves a lot more than before.”

A clearly defined chain of command

The **International Red Cross & Red Crescent Movement** has been delivering essential relief to victims of natural disasters and armed conflict for around 150 years and is one of the world’s most instantly recognizable and internationally respected institutions.

For a movement of its size and scope, establishing and maintaining a clearly defined chain of command and delineation of responsibilities is crucial.

As Hambye explains, the Red Cross is actually a worldwide network comprising three main components: the **ICRC** and the **International Federation**, both based in Geneva, along with the **National Societies**, which exist in nearly every country of the world.

To provide a clearer framework for effective cooperation and partnership among its various

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independent branches, the Red Cross established a clear task-sharing mechanism based on respective mandates. Here's how it works:

- In cases of international conflict, such as Israel's 33-day war against Hezbollah in Lebanon in 2006, the **ICRC** normally leads the movement's response.
- The **Federation**, meanwhile, spearheads the movement's natural disaster relief operations that require resources exceeding those of the respective National Society — as was the case with the January 2010 earthquake in Haiti.
- Finally, in some situations, the **National Society** may take the role of what the Red Cross calls the "lead agency," providing it has sufficient resources on the ground to coordinate the local operation within the affected country. This is what happened in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina in August 2005, with the U.S. Red Cross leading the movement's overall response there.

Once a decision has been reached as to who should lead a particular operation, the movement mobilizes the full range of resources at its disposal. Case in point: The Federation-coordinated earthquake relief operation in Haiti involved the participation of the ICRC, the Haitian Red Cross, the Red Cross of the Dominican Republic and many other participating National Societies — most notably the U.S. Red Cross.

Hambye singles out two factors essential to the Red Cross's success at providing aid:

- **Swift, effective, coordinated response.** The ICRC has developed a Rapid Deployment Unit, among other mechanisms, to help identify and mobilize the necessary staff, equipment and facilities at a moment's notice.
- **Strong outreach presence.** "If you cannot go into the field, you lose proximity with those on the ground whom you need to know, in order to reach those who need your assistance most," says Hambye. "As an ICRC delegate, you have to be prepared to go and speak to absolutely anyone."

As essential as this second factor is, it is not without controversy, as the ICRC knows all too well when it was publicly criticized for offering medical training to members of the Taliban.

"Our mandate is to look after the victims of conflict on all sides," Hambye insists. "To do so, we have to be able to talk with the Taliban, or the militant groups in Iraq and in Somalia. If you assume an attitude of not talking to people because they are not nice or you consider them to be bad people, then you risk losing access and not accomplishing what you are set up to do."

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Admittedly, the lines are blurry — but that is precisely why it is all the more important that an international organization needs to have a clear sense of its mission, and be prepared to explain it time and again, to fend off the critics who would cast doubt on the wisdom of its choices.

Moral authority: calling out abuse

As vital as going into the field is for assessing local realities, what happens when your "clients" are less interested in cooperating with you, than they are in manipulating you, or denying and covering up malfeasance, as is sometimes the case in the ICRC's dealings with officials and authorities?

First of all, it helps if everyone has signed up to universally recognized conventions and agreed to the same standard working modalities, says Hambye. For the ICRC, this includes the right to meet with prisoners or detainees without the presence of third parties.

"Confidentiality is paramount," he says. "It allows the ICRC to build trust, open channels of communication and influence change."

Although the ICRC adopts a strict policy of not speaking publicly about individual allegations of abuse, confidentiality does not equal complacency, nor does it mean that it remains silent. If necessary, it will take its concerns all the way to the top, including to heads of State, in order to put a stop to the abuse it has documented. Authorities are often more likely to acknowledge problems and commit to taking action if they are addressed behind the scenes, the ICRC believes.

"The ICRC has a high level of moral authority, and governments cannot afford to be called out, even unofficially," says Hambye.

That said, there have been times when ICRC reports have been made public, as happened when its report on prisoner abuse and torture at the U.S.-controlled prison in Iraq, Abu Ghraib, found its way to the press.

Thanks to the proximity it cultivates with those on the ground, the ICRC collected information on missing people and detention locations where people were being held. "We compiled corroborated witness testimonies and other evidence in order to present as solid a case as possible to the authorities."

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The subsequent report documented ill treatment such as deliberate physical violence, verbal abuse, forced nudity and prolonged handcuffing in uncomfortable positions. Despite the fact that many of these methods contravened the Geneva conventions, the U.S. military's response was to drag its heels. The result was that in May 2004, the report was leaked to the press.

"Nobody knows why or by whom," says Hambye, insisting that it wasn't the ICRC. "It clearly caused headaches for the administration."

Parallels with corporate malfeasance

Obvious parallels can be drawn between the way that the ICRC monitors, inspects and tries to establish the real facts on the ground, and the role of inspectors, regulators and credit-rating agencies in the lead up to the recent financial crisis.

"In conflict, as in international finance, morality is far from the general norm and must be enforced and monitored in some way," says Hambye.

With regard to the financial sector, it is now clear that government regulators and credit-rating agencies enjoyed far too cozy a relationship with financial firms to effectively serve as independent watchdogs. The result was the worst global financial crisis in decades.

"How effective our regulation is depends a lot on the sincere willingness of the responsible authorities to implement it, their capacity to implement it, and then having common international standards."

Hambye illustrates his point this way: "You know very well that, in the banking system, for example, if you have one country implementing the rules strictly and the next one not, then you have all the funds evading one country by going to the other one. In war, it's the same. War is a highly profitable industry, and many countries are ready to finance war regardless of whether the warring factions respect international rules. If, in one specific conflict where the parties are behaving badly, we can find a way to leverage their financial base via the country next door, then we can make it work. So another weapon at our disposal is to exert pressure on a conflict's financial backers. In this, international cooperation around shared interests is of critical importance."

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Location, location, location: the use of strategic hubs

For an organization whose activities span the globe, location is everything. The ICRC has two corporate hubs, in Geneva and Nairobi, used to store and ship out low-volume, high added-value items, such as medical and engineering equipment.

The storage of more high-volume items, such as emergency household items — tarps, blankets, bulky first aid — is split more widely around the globe and partially subcontracted to the private sector and the Federation for low-intensity operations, in a model not too far removed from the virtual warehousing pioneered by the likes of Amazon and Dell.

“The ICRC has supplier stocks throughout the world, some of which we neither have to pre-finance nor maintain ourselves,” says Hambye.

The organization also operates a network of regional centers to serve the needs of field operations in high-intensity regions: Amman, Abidjan, Duala and Peshawar. “These four locations are in regions where we already have extensive, long-term commitments,” he says.

Building strong, flexible networks

Building strong networks is an essential part of making the whole thing work. Each country in the world has a National Red Cross or Red Crescent Society responsible for its own medical or social activities.

To help lend greater cohesion to the movement’s disparate parts, both the ICRC and Red Cross Federation hold regular conferences, as well as face-to-face meetings with the National Societies.

At the same time, the ICRC has to manage a looser, more flexible network of institutions to support its most urgent relief operations. This it does by first identifying places where it already has active crisis operations, which could serve as a launchpad for emergency relief operations. It then focuses on the strategic capacities and values of its National Societies.

“Some National Societies, such as those in Scandinavia, have very strong, broad capacities, while others have expertise in specific areas. For example, the Japanese Red Cross has a strong capacity in the field of earthquake management and played an important role in our

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relief operation in Haiti."

Aside from its worldwide web of National Societies, the ICRC also boasts strong networks in the fields of research and academia, providing the movement with a broad spectrum of ideas and perspectives from around the globe.

Getting out from behind the desk

The ICRC employs around 900 staff at its Geneva headquarters, with an additional 1,400 expatriates on field missions around the world. Their work is backed up by some 11,000 local employees.

When it comes to assigning staff to oversee field operations, the ICRC still uses relatively high numbers of expatriate employees, though, as Hambye contends, the organization is working toward awarding more senior field management positions to local staff in the future.

There are, however, compelling arguments in favor of sometimes using expatriates in the field. Chief among these is the fact that expats may find it easier to maintain emotional distance from events on the ground and be somewhat less susceptible to local pressures.

To illustrate this point, Hambye recounts an episode from his own experience when, while stationed in Pakistan, he began receiving anonymous threats, most likely from a network of local suppliers who had been prevented from diverting money from the ICRC.

"The situation became very tense, and our level of exposure was high, so I was assigned a personal driver/unarmed bodyguard, and we prepared for my wife and children to leave the country right away — something that would have been much more difficult had we been native citizens."

Diverse skill sets with human qualities

In its recruitment of logistics personnel, the ICRC seeks experienced supply-chain specialists with the full range of human qualities and soft skills needed for working in sensitive and sometimes dangerous situations.

As the ICRC's official recruitment webpage states, this means being "tenacious yet flexible, creative but methodical, at one and the same time curious and discreet, sensitive but able to control their emotions."

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With his background in law and economics, Hambye exemplifies the broad skill set generally demanded of ICRC staff.

“In the logistics department, we are responsible for the purchasing, storage and delivery of all the institutions’ goods and services, ranging from vehicles and medicine to fuel and chartered aircraft,” he says.

This means being in constant liaison with the organization’s suppliers as well as reporting regularly to the ICRC’s financial and fundraising departments.

Logistics personnel, therefore, need to have a certain amount of financial literacy, as well as well-honed negotiating skills and the ability to use and analyze contracts.

What is perhaps most striking, though, is the broad range of responsibilities assigned to ICRC logistics staff: “You have to be able to do some HR management, finance, planning and programming, reporting, purchasing, shipping, research and development,” he says.

To motivate desk-bound staff and give them a more rounded perspective, the ICRC strongly encourages them to get out from behind their desks and go to where the “clients” are: in the field.

There they visit projects and field warehouses, and work alongside and meet with the projects’ direct beneficiaries.

Hambye believes this sums up what the ICRC is about: “I would say this is at the heart of our corporate identity. We want all our workers to have close proximity.”

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A business trip that changed the world

The ICRC owes its origins to the vision and determination of one man: Henry Dunant, a Swiss businessman.

In June 1859, Henry Dunant, while passing through northern Italy on business, witnessed the Battle of Solferino in Italy's war for independence. Horrified by the sight of tens of thousands of soldiers from the opposing armies left to suffer for want of medical care, Dunant appealed to local people to help him tend the victims on both sides.

On his return to Geneva, Dunant published *A Memory of Solferino* (1862), in which he called for the formation of voluntary aid societies for the relief of war victims. He also asked that service to military sick and wounded be neutral.

In 1863, the organization that would later become known as the International Committee of the Red Cross was formed.

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The following year, delegates from 16 nations gathered in Switzerland, and the Geneva Convention for “the amelioration of the condition of the wounded in armies in the field” was signed and adopted.

The covenant underscored the neutrality of medical personnel, impartial and humane treatment of the wounded, the protection of civilians who helped provide aid, and the use of a recognized international symbol to mark medical personnel and supplies.

In honor of Dunant’s nationality, the emblem adopted — a red cross on a white background — was essentially the Swiss flag with the colors reversed. The Red Crescent, first used by the Ottoman Empire in 1876, was formally recognized in 1929.

The original Geneva Convention, along with its subsequent revisions and allied treaties, such as those covering prisoners of war, has been signed by nearly every country of the world.

The International Committee of the Red Cross was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1917, 1944 and 1963.

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