

NICARAGUAN RED CROSS

Facing the challenges of peace, reconstruction, and national reconciliation

For Nicaragua the revolution that ended the long period of Somoza rule meant profound political and socioeconomic changes. At the same time that they were taking place, the prolonged and costly armed conflict, economic sanctions, and the economic crisis, together with the impact of natural disasters, led the country into a dramatic and unprecedented economic and social situation. The deterioration in social and health services, unmet basic needs, the spread of poverty, and high unemployment and underemployment rates are some indicators of this situation, which is also beginning to reveal to some extent a crisis of ungovernability in which there are national protest demonstrations and marches demanding solutions to the social complaints of various sectors, as well as violence spurred by armed groups.

The advent of peace has also brought to the fore a problem of great magnitude. The large number of repatriated, displaced, and demobilized persons who returned to their places of origin in search of means of subsistence.

The Nicaraguan Red Cross has experienced all these processes and problems with the same intensity as the country itself, and so shares the challenges of peace and national reconciliation.

During the 1980s it conducted extensive efforts in relief and emergency services and areas of armed conflict, as well as through health and assistance services. In doing this it received major support from the International Red Cross Movement, especially the ICRC, whose presence in the country expanded greatly because of the domestic armed conflict.

During the present decade the National Society has acted largely as an auxiliary to the Government in recent emergency operations, especially after the seaquake of September 1992 assaulted the country's western coast. Its health and social assistance services still play an impor-

tant role in a country whose public services are in crisis. Continuing a useful institutional tradition, the Nicaraguan Red Cross has maintained the most important national blood service in Nicaragua with external aid

Nevertheless, its organizational cohesion and general profile of activities have been weakened during a continuing internal crisis which is related to the recent historical convulsions in the country.

The sociopolitical changes that have occurred, first as a result of the victory of the Sandinist revolution in 1979 and later after the election of the opposition coalition in 1990, have had a strong influence on the institution. Thus, the internal crisis was so intense in 1982 that the Federation had to assume responsibility for the National Society for 16 months. This phase led to a reorganization which was accompanied by major changes in the institution's leadership and structure, and culminated in the approval of new statutes (1984).

The political events of 1990 changed the terms of internal conflict. The intensity of the crisis was not comparable to that in 1982, but the deterioration of institutional unity was aggravated as a result of repeated confrontations in which various groups of volunteers took part. Their public projection has undoubtedly affected the institution's image and operating capacity negatively. In addition, the ICRC also withdrew.

By the end of 1992 the crisis had become intense. Elections to the National Council were pending, and the conditions of internal dialogue were quite difficult in a general climate of mutual distrust between volunteer factions. A basic agreement was reached and an election was held for a provisional Executive Committee which would sit for 12 months. Its essential task will be to create the organizational, regulatory, and technical conditions necessary for holding new

elections, this time for a normal statutory term during 1993.

In short, in the 1990s the Nicaraguan Red Cross faces challenges of major importance at a time when its human and financial resources for dealing with them are very small. These challenges result not only from the dramatic situation that affects the Nicaraguan population but also from the imperative need to rebuild its own image and protect its independence and internal pluralism, which are indispensable requirements for reconciling and overcoming its current problems and confronting the enormous challenges involved in caring for the most vulnerable

Organization of the National Society

Organizational structure and geographic coverage

In 1990 the Nicaraguan Red Cross undertook a revision of the 1984 statutes which culminated in 1992 in the approval of various reforms, made official by the Government in January 1993. According to the statutes, the highest authority in the National Society is the General Assembly, which is composed of all members of the National Council and departmental and local councils, and whose most important duties are electing the President and other members of the Executive Committee. A broadly participative mechanism also exists for the election of regional and local authorities. The National Council is composed of the members of the Executive Committee, the Presidents of each of the 17 departmental branches as spokesmen, and the national heads of volunteer units, also as spokesmen.

Elections were indirect up to 1982. Active members were later given the right to vote directly. This includes the members of the Volunteer Blood Donors Unit, an institutional peculiarity that has caused heated internal discussions since, given the deficient general registration of members, donors compose a group of electors that

constitutes a majority despite its imprecise numbers.

As noted, the National Society is today headed by a provisional Executive Committee, which will act until November 1993 when it is planned to hold elections.

Geographically, the Nicaraguan Red Cross had 16 regional committees and 24 municipal committees in 1990, and to some extent they were concentrated in regions IV and V. The latter is the region where the greatest armed conflict in recent years occurred. Geographic coverage was subsequently reduced because of financial problems and the fact that some branches were created solely to deal with short-term problems stemming from the conflict. In February 1993 the departmental branches in San Carlos and Bluefields, and the local branches in Talpaneca, Sébaco, Pantasma, Yalí, Siuna, Bonanza, and Puerto Cabezas, were inactive.

Administration and planning

In accordance with the statutes, executive management of the administrative affairs of the Nicaraguan Red Cross is the responsibility of a Director General, appointed by the President and approved by the National Council. He carries out the policies and directives established by the institution's governing bodies in managing the several departments under him. Nevertheless, because a provisional Executive Committee is now acting, there is in practice no institutional clarity about who is to define policies and carry them out, and decisions are often made in liaison between the members of the Council, the Executive Committee, and the Director General.

For several years the turnover of staff and leaders in the Nicaraguan Red Cross's central administration has been rapid. Because of that, administration and financial management have been affected by a lack of precise and stable criteria, which caused requests to be made for external audits.

The Society's rules do not contain clear regulations about the functions and relations of

the volunteer units, as a result of which there is some lack of cohesion between the activities of some programs and among those units. The National Society recently initiated certain organizational measures to streamline administrative matters.

The institution does not have a development plan. It is thought at different internal levels, however, that institutional planning should in the future prioritize activities linked to social welfare and community participation, and avoid a charitable approach.

Planning has been carried out through semi-annual or annual work plans without the existence of a scheme or general system of planning. Only the blood program has for some time had a specific plan, which is essential for obtaining funds from external cooperation.

There is no evaluation system and only periodic reports are made since the present staff does not have the training needed to plan and evaluate.

An institutional reactivation plan was recently initiated which focuses on training technical staff and preparing a development plan with a program structure and a set of first-priority projects. This process has been supported by the Federation through the Regional Delegation, and a workshop on institutional planning is planned for the end of July 1993 which will involve 30 persons representing the National Council, heads of national programs, regional representatives, and staff with program responsibilities.

Human resources

The Nicaraguan Red Cross organizes its volunteers into four units. Relief Workers, Volunteer Ladies, Youth, and Blood Donors. There is a general concern in various parts of the National Society about the inadequate coordination among these groups. It is thought that it is essential to reorganize them and provide them with more technical training.

There are no precise data about the number of blood donors. In the recent past it was said

that they numbered more than 20,000, but their participation is sporadic and poorly organized. Moreover, since their number has come to be an incidental concern, more electoral than of institutional consolidation, their exact membership has not been recorded.

The participation of women is not limited to the Volunteer Ladies Unit since they are also members of the Youth and Relief units, but it is difficult to determine how much they participate.

The National Society believes that the relief workers' unit, with approximately 400 active members, is its best organized and trained. Nevertheless, the recent operation carried out after the earthquake and seaquake of September 1992 revealed problems such as lack of essential relief equipment, the poor adaptation of relief worker training to field needs, and the limited training of relief coordinators for operating in emergencies and disasters.

In 1990 the National Society drew up a plan to provide volunteers and paid staff with training and technical advice which included training activities in three basic areas: disaster relief, communication and dissemination of International Humanitarian Law, and first aid. There are not enough data to evaluate the results of this plan, but it is clearly necessary to push forward in this area.

In 1990 the Nicaraguan Red Cross had a large paid staff. In Managua alone and in the central headquarters there were around 200, without counting the National Blood Center's staff. The new management has undertaken a plan to reduce the staff, and in June 1993 the payroll consisted of 96 people in the central headquarters and 117 in the National Blood Center.

Finance and budgets

A serious concern of the Nicaraguan Red Cross is its critical financial situation, which derives both from internal problems and the grave economic crisis the country has experienced. In recent years there were various nega-

tive situations in that there was no budget or accounting system nationally, as well as the paralysis of the fund-raising office operating in Managua and the branches.

Twenty percent of the institution's revenue in 1991 came from the national collection and the lottery. The Institute of Tourism paid 50% of the total cost of the relief plan for beaches. Furthermore, the branches have traditionally held raffles and lotteries, and have regular food posts or shops that enable them to meet some of their costs. Contributing members also support the institution.

No mechanism has been established for direct governmental financial support of the Nicaraguan Red Cross, but there are various precedents in that the Government has granted tax exemptions and rebates on services (telephone, water, electricity) and has assumed part of the cost of operating the Blood Bank and other activities related to ambulances and relief work.

Today the Executive Committee has undertaken an extensive money-raising campaign including the raffling off of an automobile, the recruitment of business members who can pay higher dues, the annual collection in August, and the future establishment of bingo games. These activities, however, have run into problems caused by deterioration of the institutional image and the financial hardships that affect the population. In addition, talks have been held with the Government aimed at getting it to resume its financial contribution directly and regularly. More stable financial management procedures are to be established as part of the next Development Plan. The draft of the general budget for 1993 provides that 55% of total revenues will come from promotion and fund raising; 17% will be provided through the state's subsidy for the National Blood Center; 5% will come from donations for the beach plan; 17% from the annual collection in August, 5% from rents, and 0.01% from the sale of insignias and minor activities.

The role and activities of the National Society in the context of the country

Principal activities

Relief and emergency services

In this category, relief activities and the ambulance service are both traditional activities and the National Society's priority fields of operation because of their coverage, the budgetary resources they receive, and the Nicaraguan community's positive image of them. Ambulance service, in great demand by the population, is provided round the clock to transport the sick and injured. More than 4,000 such calls were carried out in 1990.

In the relief area, disaster relief services are the main activity and in them the National Society plays an important role as auxiliary to the public authorities. Major operations have been conducted as a result of Hurricane Joan in 1988, the 1990 floods in the North Atlantic area, and, more recently, the volcanic eruptions in León. In September 1992, with Federation support, the National Society took on one of its largest operations as a result of the earthquake and later seaquake that hit the country's western coast. At that time the Nicaraguan Red Cross involved the Youth and Ladies units in addition to relief workers and provided the facilities and support necessary for the Federation's delegates, assuming with responsibility and transparency the administration of the financial resources, which enabled it to strengthen its public image. This operation also showed up certain weak areas of the National Society which must be strengthened, such as the poor training of field relief personnel in practical matters, the need for satisfactory relief equipment for volunteers, and great fragmentation of the operating structures of the branches and central headquarters, which may disperse the execution of activities and hinder the institution's overall line of action.

The National Society also conducts routine surveillance at beaches, spas, and public events as well as water, land, and mountain rescue services.

Health services

In the Nicaraguan Red Cross, the National Blood Center has traditionally been the priority activity in the field of health. Since the 1970s it has been the only body responsible for blood activities in the country, and it has kept this role despite changes in Government. This service is considered one of the best and strongest in Latin America, it provides the blood products the country needs, it conducts AIDS and HIV tests, it provides care and treatment for hemophilic children, and its technical staff are well trained and very experienced. Nevertheless, the volunteer donor program, categorized as one of the region's best, is declining and there is a need to reeducate donors. The physical plant needs expansion and the entire program requires greater financial resources. External technical and financial support has been provided to consolidate this service, especially in the area of technical training.

In the realm of health education and reduction of child morbidity and mortality, the "Child Alive" program was started in Ciudad Sandino, an outlying Managua neighborhood. It has been extended to other branches (Ocotal, Chinandega, and Estelí). Another program in operation is the medical and dental service, which has one mobile unit to cover work centers.

Social assistance and welfare services

This includes community development and social assistance activities. An occupational preparation and training project is being conducted in this area in Ciudad Sandino. Programs to build housing for persons affected by disasters are of some importance. Both rely on the participation of beneficiaries in the construction phase and provide them food.

Finally, food, clothing, and other goods have been distributed to people displaced by war or affected by disasters. The new program to care for recently delivered mothers includes their transfer to their homes and delivery of basic packages for their children.

Relations with the Government

During the 1980s relations between the National Society and the Government were very easy and close, numerous representatives of the ministries sat on the National Council, and there were governmental delegates in each region.

After the change in Government in 1990, the relations between the Nicaraguan Red Cross and the Government entered a difficult period and there was even risk of governmental intervention. In 1992 and 1993, however, the situation improved significantly and there are signs of governmental support for the National Society. Examples are the donation by the National Telephone Company (TELCOR) of three ambulances to the Nicaraguan Red Cross and the Government's recent approval of exemptions for the National Society on telephone and electricity service, as well as facilities to import the supplies the National Blood Center requires. Another area of collaboration is with the state aviation company, which provides free passage to the Red Cross for trips within the country.

Some members of the National Society believe that its ties with the Government may compromise the principles of independence and autonomy that should govern the organization, while others view them as essential and not necessarily opposed to such principles.

Relations with other organizations and agencies

The National Society has maintained relations with various international and national organizations such as PAHO, UNICEF, and church organi-

zations, though they have not always led to concrete cooperation.

In 1990 the Nicaraguan Red Cross signed a collaborative agreement with the NIME-HUATZIN Foundation to carry out a joint project to train educators in AIDS prevention. In recent years support has also been received from various private companies which have financed parts of the beach rescue program; examples are Esso (about USD 4,000) and recently Mercedes Benz, which donated an ambulance after arrangements by the German Red Cross.

The role of international cooperation

The Red Cross Movement gave sustained support to the Nicaraguan Red Cross during the past decade. The ICRC, the Federation of National Societies, the Nordic Societies, the Spanish Red Cross, and the German Red Cross, as well as other international organizations and NGOs, have provided it with financial and technical cooperation for on-going programs and in response to relief appeals.

Because of the emergencies caused by natural disasters and the armed conflict, various appeals were made to which the Federation and several National Societies responded and which enabled coverage of relief and assistance services for those affected to be widened. This resulted, for example, in the Housing Reconstruction Program in the Rama area, which included community development components and received substantial financial and technical support from the Swedish Red Cross through the Federation. Also in this field, the Spanish Red Cross has financed a project to provide comprehensive housing improvements for displaced persons and repatriates.

The "Child Alive" program is financed by the Norwegian Red Cross, which contributed more than USD 25,000 in 1989 and 1990. The additional collaboration of the Spanish Red Cross was requested for this program in 1991. That Society has been financing medical and dental services for several communities. The ICRC implemented

a major program to produce and provide prostheses for war victims. The program to care for recently delivered mothers is supported by the Finnish Red Cross, and in 1990 its budget was USD 30,000.

According to 1991 data, the German Red Cross had contributed USD 560,000 to develop branches in the country since 1989.

The appeals submitted by the Nicaraguan Red Cross for 1991 were oriented toward strengthening dental and blood program services. In 1992 the Federation, with European Community support, approved a CHF 578,000 appeal to provide assistance to 1,500 families affected by the earthquake and seaquake of September 1992, in which the Nicaraguan Red Cross took responsibility for supplying and distributing food to the affected population in 13 municipalities on the Pacific coast. In February 1993, the German Red Cross and American Red Cross signed a bilateral agreement approving USD 91,464 to support a reconstruction program for 52 families in the communities of Huehueté and Casares, also affected by the seaquake. The agreement includes infrastructure support for building health centers and providing potable water and equipment.

The National Society has been interested in expanding subregional cooperation by concluding bilateral agreements in specific fields such as training, administration, and branch development. The German Red Cross will provide support for starting a program in August 1993 to educate and train the staff of the National Society managerially, an effort closely coordinated with the comprehensive plan to reactivate the National Society which the Federation is promoting and which will culminate in the First Seminar-Workshop on institutional planning, from July 31 to August 3, 1993.

The National Society's perception of its public image

The institution's image greatly deteriorated between 1988 and 1991 as its internal conflicts.

and especially harsh accusations that found their way into print in the sensationalist press, were publicized. Although there are differences among the institution's members about the positions it has taken, there is complete consensus about the damage done.

A particularly serious problem is the population's reluctance to make contributions to the institution, in contrast to the sometimes very intense demands made by the poorest people. Paradoxically, some people have not been able to distinguish between the institutional capacity of the Nicaraguan Red Cross itself and that which the Movement's international agencies and even other National Societies have shown in Nicara-

gua, which leads to the belief that the former's resources are extremely abundant.

As a result of the relief activities carried out by the National Society with the support of the international community to care for those affected by the 1992 seaquake, it was possible to improve the institutional image somewhat. Another event that has helped strengthen the image is the consensus achieved in appointing provisional authorities and the serious attitude the new team is showing. Even so, the National Society has still not managed to restore all its credibility, transparency, and good name despite the efforts it has made.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusions

An analysis of the possibilities facing the Nicaraguan Red Cross in meeting the enormous challenges of the 1990s is related to closely intertwined internal and external factors. In fact, the nature of the prolonged internal institutional crisis experienced by the National Society, despite its own peculiarities, is closely related to events in the political, economic, and social spheres in Nicaragua. Moreover, the present and future development of the Nicaraguan Red Cross is to some extent conditioned by the evolution of events in a rather uncertain environment in which economic deterioration, relative political ungovernability, and great vulnerability and social discontent prevail.

Despite the internal crisis, the institution has remained in operation and, in particular, has some strengths for recovering its social role. Its volunteers, and especially relief workers, include a large number of new young members who may play a major reactivating role. Although affected by the lack of resources, the principal programs—blood, health care, social welfare, and relief work—have shown some ability to sustain a significant level of activity. The National Society has made major efforts to reorganize the institutional base in the areas of electing authorities, regulating the membership, and strengthening the branches. In 1993, with Federation support, it will undertake a cycle of self-analysis and training in institutional planning and a managerial education and training program for the staff. All this creates a hopeful picture for the National Society's future.

Various problems nevertheless persist in the National Society, among which the following can be noted.

In the sphere of planning, the absence of a national development plan has prompted the establishment of semiannual or annual plans, which some members of the National Society call "fiefs" because they are partial and not integrated in a general system. Nor have strategies and priority action areas been defined for dealing with the needs of the vulnerable in an uncertain and troubled context.

The institution's financial situation is critical. Although it has been heavily affected by the country's grave economic crisis, this is also due to internal factors such as deterioration of its image, the lack of clear fund-raising methods, and the weakness of budgets and accounting systems nationally.

The balance and environment of agreement in the organization resulting from the recent elections are important, but there is a risk that internal confrontations will spring up again if there is no systematic progress in bringing the statutes and administration up to date.

In the area of human resources, there is a lack of coordination among the volunteer units, together with organizational and communications deficiencies. There are no up-to-date membership records or clear policies pertaining to their recruitment, retention, and stability. Although a plan to train and provide technical advice to volunteers and paid staff was drawn up in 1990, institutional practice has shown the need for increasing training to reinforce doctrinal knowledge about the Movement's Principles, new development activities, disaster preparedness, project design and evaluation, and the area of administration and management.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1. Establish an overall strategic planning system**
- 2. Design and implement a financial recovery plan**
- 3. Review and modernize the organizational structure**
- 4. Adopt a human resources development strategy**

1. Establish an overall strategic planning system

- 1.1 Train a representative group of staff in the basic knowledge and skills needed for project planning, formulation, and evaluation.
- 1.2 Create a national planning committee and regional committees to promote the use of such staff and continue the planning process.
- 1.3 Prepare a national development plan defining institutional strategies and priorities which sets improvement in the situation of the most vulnerable as the strategic direction of the National Society's activities.
- 1.4 Evaluate the semiannual and annual plans currently being carried out in light of established priorities and integrate them in the development plan to ensure an orderly and coherent planning system.
- 1.5 Establish a reference framework for development cooperation.

2. Design and implement a financial recovery plan

- 2.1 Create a permanent unit (commission, committee), with a plan of action and professional staff, to coordinate the initiation of adequate activities to raise funds in the country.
- 2.2 Include efforts to inform about activities to reactivate the institution in all fund-raising campaigns.
- 2.3 Initiate a campaign to recruit "benefactor members" by making use of the recent improvement in the public image, and encourage their membership through adequate symbolic rewards and image-building campaigns.
- 2.4 Undertake negotiations with the Government in order to obtain a regular governmental subsidy for the National Society
- 2.5 Establish accords or agreements between the branches and municipalities that allow public services provided by the Red Cross to be cofinanced locally (examples are the reconstruction programs financed by the Nicaraguan, American, and German Red Crosses and the municipal government of Jinotepe).

- 2.6 Establish new accords or agreements with other public institutions responsible for social policies or for carrying out assistance and development programs with the most vulnerable population (INSSBI, Ministry of Health, Emergency Social Investment Fund, etc.).

3. Review and modernize the organizational structure

- 3.1 Initiate review and updating of the prevailing statutes that promotes a more flexible and decentralized organizational structure.
- 3.2 In this vein, schedule the election of permanent authorities in accordance with the timetable mandated by the provisional Executive Committee.
- 3.3 Draw up and approve internal regulations in order to normalize the internal life of the institution.
- 3.4 Review and update administrative functions, procedures, structure, and style in order to bring about a more streamlined, flexible, and operational administration.
- 3.5 Establish regulations that clearly define the functions, organization, and relations of the volunteer groups so as to improve their internal communication and coordination.

4. Adopt a human resources development strategy

- 4.1 Prepare and keep updated a national volunteer registry in conformity with the standards noted.
- 4.2 Broaden the volunteer base of the National Society through a continuous recruitment campaign linked to image-building campaigns and systems for assigning volunteers according to their expectations, motives, skills, and occupational knowledge.
- 4.3 Adopt measures promoting greater identification of the volunteer units with the entire institution by diversifying volunteers' participation in the National Society's various programs.
- 4.4 Increase activities to train volunteers and paid staff in the areas of social action, the Movement's Principles, International Humanitarian Law, planning, and disaster relief.
- 4.5 Conduct training activities on administration and management for paid staff.

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54. Data drawn from the exhaustive study of Official Development Aid (ODA) that Nicaragua received by Solon Barraclough et al *Nicaragua: desarrollo y supervivencia*. Madrid, IEPALA/CIP/CRIES/ Transnational Institute, 1988, p. 23 and Appendices II and III.
55. Barraclough 1988, Appendix II.
56. Fernando Cardesa. "Los programas de cooperación de la Comunidad Europea en Centroamérica." In Joaquín Roy (ed). *La reconstrucción de Centroamérica: El papel de la Comunidad Europea*. Miami, Institute of Iberian Studies, University of Miami, 1992, p. 85.
57. Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). *Development co-operation: 1991 report*. Paris, OECD, 1991, p. 210.
58. The United States Agency for International Development (USAID) blocked the disbursement of USD 100 million in 1992 after a motion by U.S. Sen. Jesse Helms; this caused tension between the two countries.
59. Angel Saldomando. *El retorno de la AID. El caso de Nicaragua: condicionalidad y reestructuración conservadora*. Managua, CRIES, 1992, pp. 20 et seq.
60. Colin Danby. *Stabilization and transformation: Bilateral U.S. economic aid in Central America*. N.p., PACCA, 1989, p. 72
61. José Ernesto Ibarra. *La cooperación internacional al desarrollo de Centroamérica. La ayuda pública al desarrollo y las organizaciones no gubernamentales (un enfoque preliminar)* San José, Liga de Sociedades de Cruz Roja/FLACSO, 1990, p. 80.