

BIGRED: The World's Emergency Service

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Far from being marooned, the red cross sees an opportunity for leverage as big business moves into the social conscience arena

If computer giant IBM is forceful-yet-friendly 'Big Blue', there can only be one title for the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement to sum up its reach and responsibilities, inspiring history and a multi-billion dollar budget: Big Red.

Big Red is not just a network of international and local charities, though collecting tins are part of its financial foundations, but a global enterprise on a big business scale. From almost 190 countries, 300,000 staff and almost 100 million volunteers and members run the world's largest aid agency and emergency organisation, helping hundreds of millions of vulnerable people each year. Annual turnover? A cool \$20 billion.

All its National Societies, from Afghanistan to Zimbabwe, are bound by specific legislation to play a crucial auxiliary role, alongside governments, as humanitarian leaders in crises on their doorstep. They control the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC), whose Geneva secretariat is close to the Movement's founding International Committee of the Red Cross

(ICRC), itself guardian of the city's namesake conventions on war and a key agency in every conflict. Between Geneva and activities in each country are dozens of regional and national delegations whose role supporting National Societies and managing disaster and war operations, from staff to supplies, is growing with decentralisation.

Founded in 1863 by businessman Henry Dunant, who was horrified by casualties left untreated on the battlefield, the elements of the Red Cross and Red Crescent soon grew into a global movement. Beyond disaster relief and caring amid conflict, this non-profit multinational now manages hospitals in Japan, ambulances in Ethiopia, blood donations in Mexico, babysitting courses in the UK, family support services for American soldiers being shot at in Iraq and far more.

For domestic tasks and cross-border operations, building Big Red's front line National Societies is a key challenge, requiring a strong management focus on objectives and performance, according to Jean-Francois Goulay, senior officer in the IFRC's organisational development department.

"We are not in the business of developing large, centralised bureaucracies. Our aim is to link capacity to the overall mission of

assisting vulnerable people by mobilising the power of humanity. We don't want to do everything, but to find the space, so many groups can come together to help those in greatest need."

Goulay sees the corporate sector as a source of support, but with a caveat: "There is definitely more interest from business to partner with us, though that partnership is much easier if the business works to a clear set of values as we do."

Helping IFRC generate funds – and people, equipment and expertise – from such partnerships is head of resource mobilisation and donor relations, Jeremy Hughes. He says: "We find that as the need for corporate social responsibility is increasingly recognised, more major companies want to engage with the non-profit sector. From Geneva we secure global relationships and help National Societies with model agreements to get a fair price for an association with the Red Cross, one of the most recognised emblems and admired brands in the world."

Company deals include financial support, joint work and supplying emergency goods and services, from syringes to tents and food. In Europe, oil giant BP supported an appeal for foreign currency when the Euro was launched, which brought in 23

million. Phone firm Ericsson is helping disaster communications with equipment, training and staff. Insurer Royal & Sun Alliance aims to raise \$5 million a year and offer local support, from financing publications in Asia and promoting the Irish Red Cross with Bond actor Pierce Brosnan, to training its Canadian staff in emergency preparedness and selling Danish first aid CDs.

Sophisticated technological assistance has come from the US-based Fritz Institute of Logistics to develop a Humanitarian Logistics System. This simplifies purchasing of supplies, tracks ordered materials, cuts back on paperwork, deals with warehouse inventories, employs a coding mechanism for goods and offers an essential building block for any future end-to-end e-commerce system.

But a system to handle international emergency goods leaves untouched the far larger prize of global economies of scale through joint purchasing by National Societies of domestic supplies and services, such as computers and printing, transport and accounting. In part that

reflects the politics preventing full cooperation within this sometimes-uneasy family, which is losing ground for the wallets and concern of supporters against hundreds of competing charities and facing a range of challenges.

Externally, there was controversy about US fundraising for those affected by 9/11 and the safety of blood products amid the HIV/AIDS threat, while funding is rarely sufficient to meet all needs. Internally, there's a demographic dichotomy between aging supporters in developed countries and the young volunteers of developing nations, disputes over the Israeli and Palestinian equivalents of National Societies, and the recent resignation earlier than might have been expected of the IFRC's Secretary General, former international banker Didier Cherpitel. Meanwhile, ICRC suffers as the world's superpower makes its own rules of war for treatment of prisoners in Guantanamo Bay and the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq.

There's a chance to tackle some of those troubles in December

when well over 1,000 people from National Societies and new candidate societies, IFRC, ICRC, almost every government and other key organisations, from the EU to the UN, are expected to attend Big Red's 28th International Conference in Geneva.

There will be at least one piece of good news. The Foundation for the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies was established to find powerful business friends, and its new chair is billionaire businessman Mukesh Ambani of the oil-totelecoms Reliance Group, India's largest firm. Another half a dozen members from North America and Europe will be announced soon. Ambani, who admired Big Red's work following the earthquake in his home state of Gujarat, aims to raise \$25 million in five years by "building a partnership between the world's biggest corporate enterprises and the world's biggest humanitarian organisation".

Nick Cater is an international aid and development writer and consultant