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People not politics: Reflections on the 33rd International Conference of the Red Cross and Red Crescent

Interview with Balthasar Staehelin

Deputy Director-General,
International Committee of the Red Cross*

The International Conference of the Red Cross and Red Crescent (International Conference) is the supreme deliberative body of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement (the Movement). Established in 1867, it is a global forum that highlights the privileged dialogue and relationship between the components of the Movement (namely the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC), and 191 National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (National Societies)) and States Parties to the Geneva Conventions. Together, these bodies examine and decide upon humanitarian matters of common interest and any other related matters.

The 33rd International Conference was held in Geneva from 9 to 12 December 2019, and gathered together 2,393 representatives from 187 National Societies, 170 States and 77 observer organizations, as well as representatives from the ICRC and IFRC. Eight resolutions were adopted by consensus addressing a range of critical issues, such as national implementation of international humanitarian law (IHL), restoring family links while respecting privacy (including as it relates to personal data protection), women and leadership, tackling epidemics and pandemics, addressing mental health and psychosocial needs, and disaster law.[1]

* This interview was conducted in Geneva on 18 February 2020 by Lucia Cipullo, Head of Project for Movement Meetings, ICRC.

1 You can find the resolutions in this issue of the *Review*. All official documents and decisions of the Conference can be found on the Conference website at www.rcrcconference.org.

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INTERNATIONAL REVIEW of the Red Cross

Balthasar Staehelin has served as the Deputy Director-General of the ICRC since August 2012, before which he undertook several diverse roles with the ICRC across the globe. This is the second International Conference at which he has played an instrumental role on behalf of the ICRC in guiding the strategic development, preparation and delivery of the Conference. Following the successful completion of the 33rd International Conference, Balthasar kindly shared his views on this unique forum.

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The 33rd International Conference was held last December and was the second Conference you have overseen in your time as Deputy Director-General at the ICRC. How did it compare with the 32nd International Conference in 2015?

The International Conference takes place in a four-year cycle, and each time we try to build upon what came before; the lessons we learned, the experience we had. The greatest focus of the 32nd International Conference was on IHL, particularly at the political level and in relation to the compliance process. While IHL remained at the centre of the 33rd International Conference in 2019, we also discussed other pertinent issues – from digital transformation and restoring family links, to mental health, to climate change, and to migration and displacement – all while maintaining a sense of clarity in the structure of the Conference. We managed to attract the attention of a high number of States, National Societies, and organizations participating as observers. We had a significantly high degree of engagement, and I believe this is because we tried – and succeeded – to do things differently.

We set the scene on newer topics, such as trust in humanitarian action. It was the discussions around trust that really made the difference, in my opinion. By having the topic of trust on the table, we demonstrated how this is a conference that can examine issues which aren't framed in any other forum. Trust is an issue that will stay with us, and one that I hope other humanitarian events will also be inspired to explore. It is an issue that is connected to bigger operational challenges for the Movement, and one which I believe we succeeded in grounding as a priority issue for future editions of the Conference to take forward.

Four years ago, the global humanitarian stage was already crowded with different events, and the International Conference has had to continue competing for space. In a previous interview with the Review, you said this multitude of events actually helped to reinforce the position and profile of the International Conference.[2] Do you still think this is the case?

Absolutely. While the International Conference must be connected to the outside world, what this multitude of events demonstrates is that there is no other

2 "32nd International Conference of the Red Cross and Red Crescent: Interview with Balthasar Staehelin", *International Review of the Red Cross*, Vol. 97, No. 900, 2015.

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platform like the Conference. There is no other platform where you have civil society organizations meeting with States on an equal footing, with equal voting rights. If we tried to establish such a platform today, I am not sure we would succeed. Moreover, we must remember that States do not come as member States to the United Nations or otherwise – they come as *High Contracting Parties* to the Geneva Conventions. The Conference is deeply connected to IHL. We must not forget that. We must protect, and promote, the precious space to interact in this unique constellation. Of course we want and need to engage with observers, especially when it comes to the thematic discussions, and we must show that we are not operating in isolation. We saw this with the challenge of the Global Refugee Forum following immediately after the 33rd International Conference. What is critical for us, however, is the balance between protecting the unique nature of this forum while at the same time remaining cognizant of the outside world and demonstrating the connections with other processes.

Many have said that the current multilateral environment is not ripe for reaching consensus. What impact has this had on decisions taken at the International Conference in 2019? What does it mean for the future of the Conference as a vehicle for creating soft law?

Empirically speaking, if one observes the current multilateral environment it is clear that reaching consensus is becoming increasingly difficult. The Statutes of the Movement state that the International Conference should endeavour to adopt its resolutions by consensus, and I believe we must retain this element. In today's polarized geopolitical environment, to have the capacity to bring together almost all the States in the world, together with National Societies, to have discussions on difficult humanitarian topics, and to be able to reach consensus, is an incredible feat and not to be underestimated. We managed to have a people-centred approach at the 33rd International Conference, which was also largely the case due to the fact that discussions must abide by the Fundamental Principles of the Movement. So here we had the opportunity – and the obligation – to transcend political divisions in order to focus on what we can do for people affected by war and crises.

The ambition to reach consensus, however, does mean that it can be difficult to go as fast or as far as some would have liked on specific issues. For instance, it was difficult to reaffirm consensus on fundamental formulations pertaining to IHL adopted without difficulties at previous International Conferences, but we did nevertheless achieve consensus on concrete and practical measures that we must all take to better implement and enhance respect for IHL. We also managed to tackle an important issue which is at the heart of our Movement, on maintaining and restoring family links whilst managing crucial data protection challenges. This issue is deeply connected to that of trust, and despite the lengthy negotiations we managed to come up with a solid resolution that is a step in the right direction – and one which sets the tone for how we can

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INTERNATIONAL REVIEW of the Red Cross

protect and reinforce fundamental services that the Movement offers to the world. This also points to the fact that the soft-law instrument of resolutions remains an important and viable outcome of the Conference.

An enormous amount of work was undertaken throughout the preparatory process in 2018-19, which sought to deliver a Conference that is engaging and focused, and which demonstrated that feedback from previous Conferences was taken on board. Do you think this was achieved?

This is one of the dimensions that I am very proud of and where I feel that the organizers have really managed to introduce interesting new practice which has added value. The ICRC and IFRC, as co-organizers of the Conference, together with the Standing Commission as trustee of the Conference, have built on intensive consultations with the Permanent Missions in Geneva and with National Societies around the world to create sustained engagement throughout an 18-month preparatory process. We have made the most of this engagement and created an environment where there was a genuine sense of trust, ownership and "no surprises".

We introduced a significant novelty with the Preparatory Meeting, which was held last June and open to all Conference members. This meeting was an opportunity not only to go through the draft resolutions and explain the background and purpose of the text, but also to understand and gain a good grasp of the issues from the Conference members' perspectives. We sought to understand, and ideally refine, most issues prior to the official negotiations at the Conference itself.

The Preparatory Meeting allowed States and National Societies to hear each other's positions in advance, which in turn allowed us to have a far more serene Conference and a better process in the drafting committee. The tone, engagement and constructive nature of the Preparatory Meeting greatly contributed to the success of the Conference. We received feedback that we could have gone further with our communication regarding changes made to the final text of the draft resolutions, and on how decisions were taken between the Preparatory Meeting and when the official documents were shared. We have heard this very well, and will take it on board when we prepare for the 34th International Conference in 2023.

In terms of "doing things differently", I also want to highlight that this was the first time the Conference took strides to be as inclusive and accessible as possible. In addition to the physical and structural adjustments that were made at the venue, we had sign language interpretation during the main plenaries, and audio transcription available for the first time in the history of the Conference. This really sets the tone for us as a humanitarian movement, and is something which we really want to showcase. We hope other event organizers will follow suit.

We took some daring decisions in terms of how we balanced the more protocol-driven side of the Conference with sessions that allowed for

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more participatory debate. We gave greater space to our desire to have more interactive, engaging sessions, rather than static and more formalistic plenaries. Some might argue that this comes at the cost of high-level political engagement, but these are choices we make, and views can be different. Many have told us in the past that they would not like to have a static conference and want more engagement. We now have to carefully analyze whether we struck the right balance, and must continue doing our best to be as attuned as we can to the needs of the Conference members.

How can the ambition for a focused, coherent Conference be balanced with the need to reflect the immense scope of the Movement's work, and the challenges that the Movement faces on the ground?

First of all, I want to be clear that the Conference cannot be monothematic. If we look at the Movement Statutes for guidance, there is a clear focus on IHL – and I cannot imagine a conference where IHL would not be central in one shape or another. At the same time, however, we must bring to the forefront different issues, including some which we may not even fully understand yet. The Health Care in Danger initiative is an earlier example of this: something which started with observations of Red Cross staff in the field, with concerns about real day-to-day issues about respect for our medical mission. What is important to maintain is that we first observe the issues on the ground, then bring them to the higher level to find solutions. We can find a mix of subjects which have matured, and which capture best practices – together with subjects that are emerging and need to be better understood. The challenge that will always remain, however, is how to retain a high degree of focus and coherence, but ensure that we are addressing the diverse scope of the Movement's work and – perhaps more importantly – the far-reaching humanitarian needs on the ground. The richness of the Movement is an asset for humanity but, coupled with the dilemma I've just mentioned, it remains a challenge for the Conference organizers.

There has been pressure to transform the International Conference into THE premier global humanitarian forum. How do you see such a transformation, and is it necessary in order for the Conference to remain relevant?

The Conference must shine beyond the Movement and States – it must help to influence a larger agenda. I want to come back to the example of Health Care in Danger. This was first framed at the International Conference and is now a recurrent issue of concern at the UN Security Council. It is an example of how the International Conference can, and must, shape the humanitarian agenda beyond the Movement.

I don't think the International Conference should necessarily be the only exclusive humanitarian gathering in the world. It should constructively engage

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INTERNATIONAL REVIEW of the Red Cross

with other, more specialized forums, in which specific issues are discussed. This isn't a quest to have a monopoly on humanitarian dialogue – and the rhythm of the Conference's four-year cycle doesn't allow for this. Rather, success is measured by shaping the debate on the right issues at the right time, and ensuring that we have an International Conference which is inclusive of the voices that we need to shape such a debate. Where I believe we can still do better is to have the voices of affected people more present in this debate.

Finally, the International Conference must maintain the specific connection between High Contracting Parties to the Geneva Conventions and the Movement. We don't *want* to dilute this specificity. We *could not* dilute this into a larger conference – we would lose out. The Movement needs a moment with the High Contracting Parties to discuss and resolve and decide upon issues of common concern.

What is your message for future editions of the International Conference?

My message would be that this is a fantastic forum, and one which is also a huge responsibility that has been given to the Movement. It is an enormous privilege to meet all the States of the world on an equal footing, and it is truly astounding that such a forum exists in today's world. We must make the absolute most of it, and not lose sight of the opportunity to use the Conference as a vehicle to better serve people who need assistance, and who need protection. We have an extremely precious instrument, and we must make sure that the focus remains on the people, not on politics.

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