

Keynote address  
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**Council of Delegates**  
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It gives me great pleasure to welcome you, on behalf of the Standing Commission, to this Council of Delegates here in Geneva, as we approach our 30<sup>th</sup> International Conference. The Council, as you know, is the only forum for National Societies, the International Federation and the ICRC to come together to address 'family issues', to analyse where we are and where we want to go. This is of particular importance today in view of the serious external challenges we face, the most topical of which we will discuss at the Conference.

At this Council we will deal with some important 'family matters'. We will also discuss how best to achieve the objectives set for the International Conference, where we will meet with our government partners in just a few days. This time the Conference is of special importance to us as a Movement. Under the slogan 'Together for humanity' we are to stake out not only future challenges but also future partnerships that will help us to address those challenges.

We have a golden opportunity to present our case, to lead by example, to share our experiences in addressing needs on local, national, regional and global levels. Based on my long experience in this great Movement, I am convinced that we *are* what we say: we *are* the largest humanitarian organization in the world when we consider everything done nationally and internationally; we *are* best positioned with the best potential to offer expertise and baseline facts to partners and collaborators so as to allow informed choices to be made. Millions of members and volunteers in our 186 National Societies ensure that we have timely and accurate information, which reflects the humanitarian reality on the ground in local communities. This is the best possible starting point for effective preparedness and any pre-emptive action, which must be based on sound knowledge of the facts and the reality on the ground.

The new approach at the Conference, to define a Movement agenda for the next 10-15 years, will also call upon our ability to move with the times and the changing circumstances. We have to tackle the challenges that lie ahead boldly. At the Conference, we will address four specific areas of challenge: environmental degradation including climate change, urban violence, international migration and emergent and recurrent diseases and other public health concerns, as the basis for our future agenda. Whilst we look at the humanitarian consequences of these developments, we do so seeking cooperation and partnership and looking to the future.

We have to be clear on the vulnerabilities, what they mean for the people we serve in our respective contexts, and what the greatest risks are from the viewpoint of local communities. The key to all of this is *preparedness and risk reduction*. These concepts are not new to us. But do we know what preparedness and risk reduction will require of us in the face of all the new challenges that I just mentioned?

To be fully effective and to continue to be our governments' preferred partner, we must ensure that our local capacities are relevant and that we are able to respond to the needs. This means that we have to reliably assess existing vulnerabilities and anticipate the future risks, be they economical, social or environmental, which arise from changes in our climate.

At the Conference, we have another opportunity that we should not miss: to highlight human vulnerability, which is still largely neglected. Human vulnerability is just as important as scientific findings regarding the environmental hazards ahead and the economic implications of global warming 'Together for humanity' is not just a slogan for this year's Conference; it is a serious challenge for all of us.

We are proud of our global Movement, which reaches widely and deeply into local communities. We *are* present. The test for us is how we use this presence in view of the changes surrounding us. Are we adapting to new developments? Do we know what awaits us behind the bend? Are we responding to new needs? Are we recruiting and training volunteers to assist in new situations? The traditional patterns are changing; we should not provide yesterday's answers to tomorrow's problems.

I'm sure we will get an extra impetus at the coming Conference. I envisage a better global understanding of what we mean by our auxiliary role providing us with a universal framework for our specificity, upon which we can build our national plans and strategies. Furthermore, I am convinced we can do this in a new atmosphere, where the governments have a deeper insight into our role and our mandate. This will greatly facilitate our own process of clarifying and consolidating our role, our capacity and our preparedness so as to better respond to tomorrow's needs.

In the last years, we have learnt from events such as the Tsunami. The Tsunami brought a realisation of the need for mechanisms that allow the smooth delivery of emergency assistance in all types of disasters. The Federation has, over the years, developed what we came to know as IDRL or International Disaster Response Law. Guidelines for improved disaster response are now on the table at the Conference and I look forward to their adoption and wide use in both national and international contexts, which will be a significant step forward in serving the most vulnerable in situations of extreme need and suffering.

IHL was originally the *raison d'être* for the International Conferences; 140 years have passed since the first one convened. It continues to be at the core of the issues to be discussed, with ICRC and its specific mandate providing the lead. IHL is facing new challenges, too. The nature of war and conflict has dramatically changed, as you all have seen and sadly many of you have experienced first hand. New phenomena are involved and it is more urgent than ever to forcefully reaffirm the basic rules of IHL and their applicability in today's complex and changing conflict environment. Some things don't change, or should not be allowed to change; among them are the core humanitarian values embedded in IHL. Our Movement has to stand firm in defending those values, at the Conference and in our everyday work at home.

Before entering the Conference, we have some important internal matters to attend to. We are asked to adopt a comprehensive Strategy on restoring Family Links prepared by the ICRC in close consultation with NS. This is a truly important reinforcement and

activation of the traditional tracing service, with important implications in wide areas of our work. It does not apply only in conflict, it is increasingly important in a variety of other disaster situations and now also in the extensive movements of people across borders.

We will consider progress made with the Strategy for the Movement, updated at the previous Council in 2005. The Strategy is an important tool towards better and more effective internal cooperation and there is still work to be done, as you will hear once we get to that agenda item.

The report on the work of the Standing Commission includes a proposed change in the principle of financing the Commission. We will also hear about action undertaken since the 29th Conference last year in June, in particular pertaining to the implementation of the MoU. Among the follow-up reports on resolutions adopted in Seoul, we have important issues on weapons and IHL, with a draft resolution calling for a treaty prohibiting the use, production, stockpiling and transfer of cluster munitions that cause unacceptable harm to civilians.

Reverting to the preparations for the Conference, we have later today an opportunity, in three parallel commissions, to raise any issues relating to the Conference. We will also discuss key messages, which we should jointly advocate, and how best to ensure that we achieve the set objectives. The key messages are important from a Movement perspective and for NS to take a visible and strong role in the most important body of the Conference, the drafting committee.

In closing, I see and feel unease and concern that thousands and thousands of youngsters are growing into a generation of conflict. At the very core of many conflicts today we find intolerance and xenophobia or both. People, who wish to further extremist agendas, plant fear and hatred into young minds – with fearful results. It has been a very long time since I have seen such a level of religious rhetoric intertwined with violence and armed conflict. Furthermore, I see signs of increased racial tensions, if not hatred, in countries where such open intolerance has neither been accepted nor tolerated before.

For me, the Red Cross Red Crescent Movement is the only neutral global actor, which has tolerance and respect for others permanently embedded in its DNA. We have, time and again, proved that we respect and live by our principles.

We have to follow these worrying developments closely. Perhaps the time is ripening for us to think about some form of special forum that may be linked to our next set of statutory meetings, where we could analyse these undesirable trends and plan how we as a Movement could and should counteract. We already do much but we have to still reinforce our work, investing more energy and resources, using new avenues to prevent the spreading discrimination and intolerance from gaining more ground.

As Winston Churchill once said, “the empires of the future are the empires of the mind”. When it comes to shaping people’s thoughts and mindsets, we should be there to influence any agendas and strategies with our principles and beliefs. The first day of the future is today. I look forward to an interesting, innovating, challenging and successful Council and Conference.

Thank you.

Dr Mohammed Al-Hadid  
CoD  
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