

**7th Pan African Red Cross and Red Crescent Conference
Opening Address**

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Chairman
Standing Commission of the Red Cross and Red Crescent**

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It is a great pleasure and honour for me to be here with the leaders and representatives of African National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies and guests from Sister Societies the world over. It is a privilege to address you at this 7th Pan African Conference in beautiful South Africa. I would like to congratulate our host Society and Secretary General Mandisa Kalako-Williams and her team for the excellent preparations and the very warm welcome that we received upon our arrival to this statutory Conference of the International Federation.

South Africa is a country known for its diversity with eleven official languages recognised in its constitution. Though this is no prerogative of South Africa alone! In the words of Kenyan Prime Minister Raila Odinga 'Most countries in Africa are multi-ethnic, multi-linguistic, multi-cultural and multi-religious. That is not going to change. But if we fail to use this diversity as a force for good, welcoming and blending the positive aspects of our differences into a richer whole, we shall fail in our quest to embrace and uphold democratic ideals.' Unquote.

In the coming days we shall stake out the road ahead under the theme of 'Together for action in Africa'. The comprehensive background documents stake well out the challenges we have to deal with, inspiring and motivating us in our deliberations. The subthemes highlight the role of the community from various angles. That helps us focus on the realities on the level most important to us, to stay within our resources and to look at the issues from the point of view of the people directly affected by the challenges.

Desmond Tutu wisely said – and I quote – “ do your little bit of good where you are; its those little bits of good put together that overwhelm the world”.

It is a message tailor-made for the RCRC Movement. We are the largest humanitarian network in the world; we are best positioned with the *best potential* to offer expertise to partners and collaborators because of our local knowledge. The volunteers in the 53 National Societies in Africa, reaching into the local communities, ensure that we have timely and accurate information, which reflects the humanitarian reality on the ground. It is the best possible basis for effective preparedness and action, which must be based on sound knowledge of facts and realities. Our impact is measured by the services we render, the good we do to assist the most vulnerable people and communities – not by nice words in well crafted policies, strategies and plans. To maximise our impact, we must be sure that our local capacities are relevant and that we are indeed able to respond to reliably assessed needs in order to anticipate future risks – be they economical, social or environmental.

Africa certainly has its share of challenges to overcome. To again quote Prime Minister Odinga, 'Africa is a continent of huge contrasts; it is a paradox that it is

the richest in terms of resources, and yet the poorest in terms of living standards. Each year nearly 15 million people in Africa die from causes that have their roots in poverty.'

In many Sub-Saharan African countries, AIDS is erasing decades of progress made in extending life expectancy. Millions of adults are dying from AIDS while they are still young, or in the early middle age. According to the Global Fund, average life expectancy in Sub-Saharan Africa is now 47 years; without AIDS it could have been 62. HIV/AIDS is not only a medical problem, it is a major developmental challenge for the affected countries as people at the peak of their productive life are swept away.

Not only are they swept away but they leave behind a human tragedy: worldwide it is estimated that more than 15 million children under 18 have been orphaned as a result of AIDS; almost 12 million live in sub-Saharan Africa. In some countries, they comprise half or more of all orphans nationally. With youth forming about half of the population in most African countries, a future for these children is high priority. A well functioning community based RCRC *can* make a difference here.

Climate change is affecting Africa as well as others parts of the world. As Red Cross Red Crescent we focus on *human vulnerability* as a consequence of climate change and global warming. This is our sphere of excellence, the area where we can do the most. We must make sure that human vulnerability is considered with the same urgency and importance as other consequences in the on-going debate.

Some of the land in Africa carrying large concentrations of human beings will be rendered unable to sustain its people. People are forced to leave areas that can no longer support them. They will, like so many before them, head for cities, where they often end up in the slums. Worldwide, urban slums are growing faster than any other form of human habitation. Increasingly, the global poor are exchanging the misery of rural unhappiness for the hopelessness of the urban slums, which often are the first to be affected by epidemics, floods, landslides, violence, drugs or simply a total lack of public services.

Only about 100 years ago about 95% of the people in Sub-Saharan Africa lived from farming, hunting and tending to cattle. In 2000 more than a third already lived in urban areas and in a few years time almost half are expected to live in the cities. Lagos is expected to become the worlds 11th biggest city by 2015 with 16 million inhabitants according to some UN estimates.

Africa's challenge is not only population movements within countries; it is also greatly affected by migration to other parts of the world. The inequality of the world has created pull effects, leading people from the less well-off countries to seek employment in the wealthy, post-industrial service societies of the Northern hemisphere. The consequences of climate change add an irrevocable push effect to this equation. Though migration also has its positive effects, it is a grim source for vulnerability which the RCRC cannot bypass.

The global financial crisis is the latest ordeal the world, and Africa with it, is facing. It will affect not only the economies of countries but again the lives of vulnerable people. Soaring food prices are already hitting the poorest of the poor, who again will pay the heaviest price in human suffering. They will inevitably affect also the capacities of humanitarian organisations to deliver assistance to

those in need; we are seeing and feeling the effects in terms of increased expenses for just about all aspects of humanitarian assistance.

The 'era of benevolence', with relatively easy access to resources for the support of worthy causes is in for challenges. We must prepare ourselves for the possibility of a "depression" hitting also humanitarian funding. This further underlines the need to invest in better local capacity on both sides of the North/South divide.

An African proverb says "When the music changes, so does the dance". In these challenging times it is important for us as a Movement to go forward together, taking into account the ever changing environment and our role in the bigger setting. Another African saying guides us further: "If you want to go quickly, go alone; if you want to go far, go together".

I'm convinced that we want to go far and we want to go together to help the most vulnerable people in Africa and elsewhere. This Conference is important also in that it looks at our role in the increasingly complex overall environment and in relation to other actors. We are not alone in addressing the many challenges. Cooperation and partnerships are becoming increasingly important in the face of decreasing resources. Working with others, we have to highlight our comparative advantage of being present in all countries and communities, combined with our invaluable fundamental principles. That is a powerful tool.

To use that tool well, let the advice of Nelson Mandela guide your deliberations at this Pan-African Conference: "A good head and a good heart are always a formidable combination."

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