



Kristiina Kumpula
Secretary General Finnish Red Cross
North-South award ceremony 7.5.2018

Mr. President,
Members of the North-South Center,
Your Excellences,
Friends and colleagues
Dear Abbas,

It is a great honor to be awarded by the North-South Center of the Council of Europe. It makes me humble and speechless.

Working as an employee of the Red Cross for more than thirty years has given me the great privilege of being involved in Finnish and global humanitarian action. A special privilege is the opportunity to work together with volunteers serving in different parts of the world. Therefore, I would like to dedicate this prestigious award to all volunteers.

I recently visited the Burundi Red Cross to learn about their community programme, which the Finnish Red Cross has supported for some years. Before my departure to the countryside, the Secretary General of the Burundi Red Cross requested that when talking with the people in the villages I would first take up their work to help vulnerable people, not that we have funded the programme. The request contains an important message: people first. The message also works the other way round: in Finland, likewise, the public wants to hear how the aid has changed people's lives.

For me this Prize means the recognition and acknowledgment of the everyday work of volunteers both in the south and in the north. The volunteer work that often remains invisible puts into practice the values recorded in international human rights treaties at their best.

We are living in an era characterized by unpredictability, polarization and disruption. People lose their trust in traditional institutions, the media and politics. At least for the time being, voluntary action and civic-society organizations are trusted. There are many reasons for this sustained trust. Can we think that common unselfish action enhances the sense of belonging to a community and builds trust? Community action creates a platform for social inclusion that strengthens democracy.

Theories of social capital emphasize that voluntary action improves the individual's wellbeing and strengthens resilience. Doing good together for the benefit of others gives to its doer more than it takes. The power of volunteering also lies in its universality: it works just as well in Portugal, Kenya or Kazakhstan.

For the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, voluntary service is one of its fundamental principles that joins together 191 National Red Cross or Red Crescent Societies globally.

Today it is important to notice that development in the past years has made volunteering increasingly significant in humanitarian assistance. Inter- and intra-territorial inequality, polarization, natural disasters and conflicts increase the need for aid faster than the international community is prepared to provide it. The ability of states or the international community to respond to growing needs has not grown in the same proportion as the need for aid has. We see this phenomenon in different parts of the world – also in Europe: unofficial aid based on caring for other people replaces official aid in crises, disasters and in poor communities. IFRC has just recently published as a statistic which is telling the significance of RCRC as a global concern bound by shared values: there were more than 800 million documented collaborations between National Societies as givers and receivers of support.

Voluntary assistance cannot solve structural problems, poverty or inequality. Its strength rather lies in the hope and courage the assistance generates. Even in the most enduring situation, people have not been forgotten. This is the relevance of the international community based on solidarity: to keep hope alive.

In crises and conflicts the immediate help always comes from next door neighbors; international aid arrives late even in the best case. Therefore, the goal is to improve people's own ability to cope. This is the basis of cooperation between sister Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies. It has been my privilege to witness how community-based programmes of the Red Cross Red Crescent Societies which have served as an example to others in various parts of the world in Nepal, Burundi, Kenya, Philippines. Red Cross has provided support to improving disaster preparedness in villages, to reducing the vulnerability of women and to promoting the quality of life and health of people living in remote local communities. Partnership yields common outcomes but it is by no means simple, let alone easy.

Help given by volunteers is familiar in all cultures. However, what is new today is that helping requires exceptional bravery. Too many people have to pay for humanitarian assistance with their own lives. In Syria alone, seventy-three (73) Syrian Arab Red Crescent volunteers have lost their

lives in their assistance duties. This is a grave breach of the universal understanding of human dignity.

The movement of millions of people from one country and continent to another is a concrete manifestation of the unequal distribution of the benefits of globalization. People leave their homes to escape from persecution or to find a better future for themselves. People seeking to enter Europe encounter a variety of Europes: one turning inward, negative, racist, in which there is no solidarity towards newcomers. This also incorporates the wish to deny the provision of aid to those in need. But immigrants also discover a Europe that seeks solutions, wants to help newcomers and creates space for genuine encounters. In Denmark, two thousand (2 000) Red Cross volunteers support two thousand five hundred (2 500) immigrants to integrate into their new home country. In different corners of Europe thousands of people want to defend human dignity and human rights. It is an important message to all decision-makers and people with influence.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Women are an important resource to address both immediate and underlying causes of vulnerability affecting the resilience of individuals, communities, organizations or countries. The Red Cross was born in Europe with the aim to assist wounded and sick soldiers. In his book Henry Dunant describes how the women of Solferino helped the sick and wounded.

Social and financial investments made to improve women's abilities to act as agents of change reduce not only their own vulnerability to poverty but also enable them to secure sources of food and livelihoods, and to maintain the health of themselves and their families.

Women all over the world have been actors of humanitarian aid. Their voice can increasingly often be heard also in the tables where decisions are made but a lot remains to be done to make equality a reality. Achieving equality is achieving fundamental rights but it also increases accountability and quality of services. The North-South Prize provides an opportunity to bring up women's competence and rights. For me, bringing up the position of women and gender equality also in this context is an opportunity and an ethical duty. We need the competence, skills and wisdom of all to solve common problems.

Once again, I wish to express my gratitude for the privilege of receiving the North-South Prize.