Transcript 1: The International Committee of the Red Cross

Conversation with Yves Daccord. Recorded 10 January 2024, online.

00:00:00 JE
Welcome, Yves Daccord, former Director General of the International Committee of the Red Cross between 2010 and 2020, with around 20,000 staff, mostly in war zones all around the globe, a leading senior figure in the humanitarian aid sector with over 20 years of experience with emergency relief operations across the world from Yemen to Chechnya and from Congo to Palestine. Hello and welcome, Yves.

00:00:27 YD
Thank you. Very happy to be with you.

00:00:30 JE
Just before we get our conversation started, could you very briefly summarize what you do in your own words? And tell us why thinking about global shocks, crises, emergencies matters to you personally.

00:00:42 YD
So I'm Yves, Yves Daccord. I'm a Swiss citizen, I'm 59 years old. I'm the father of three daughters. And I should maybe start with that because it was, you know, as a father that when I looked at my daughter, I always thought that their life would be more complex than mine, especially related to climate change, but also to, I would say, the polarization I was looking at and seeing, since the early 2000s. And what I realized over the last 10 years, and it was Africa, East Africa, that really taught me that, climate change, to start with that, migration, would be a shock that I would live in my generation still, together with my daughters. So, and, I do believe we've seen only the beginning of that kind of shock.

So I've worked in the humanitarian [sector] and that has been an extremely rewarding – tough, but also rewarding area. And I've decided to move outside and now to look to anything that somewhat help us to live together. I'm intrigued by how our social fabric in our society are [sic] very fragile. So I'm looking at information that we need to live together. So I'm the chair of a media group. [There] I'm looking at our social contract and how our social contracts, somewhat informal and formal, can evolve due to the digitalization of our world, especially to the digitalization of security. So I'm leading a Harvard Pop-up Research Institute about it. [At that institute,] I'm looking at how do you create conditions, systemic conditions to improve peace treaty and peace negotiations. So I'm a lead in one organization called Principle for Peace that is working on that. And I'm also looking at all the questions related to climate.

To end, I'm interested about [sic] the people that feel that and see that there's a climate crisis or disaster, but feel somewhat alienated by the one who's proposing solutions. They feel alienated by urban people. They feel alienated maybe by the activist, by the green. And I feel it's important to create an organization that somewhat

are reaching out to them. So reaching out to the farmer in Brazil, reaching out maybe to the Catholic Church in Poland, reaching out to a different kind of, what people could say, conservative society. And here all that is a different way to try to help and try to understand how do you manage, in fact, live together in a time of shock. And I think we will see a series of shock that are coming closer and closer to us, us meaning our Western society.

00:03:20 JE
Clearly, you're someone who thinks in terms of crises that relate to other crises, intersections between many different problems at a global scale, particularly if we go back to your experience at the International Committee of the Red Cross, about which I want to speak with you in more depth. So if we think about global shocks, and you mentioned climate change as one example, something that affects basically all sectors across different societies across the globe – during your time working for the International Committee of the Red Cross, what was the most challenging, or maybe one of the most challenging global shocks, if we will, that you had to manage, that the Red Cross had to manage?

00:04:02 YD
You mentioned climate change, and that's true. I've worked in the 90s already, and I think we started to see behavior of the nomads and of the farmer in part of Africa after they were changing, but we were not aware that the change will be so radical. And it would really dramatically change the way they operate, the way they are connecting with other parts of society, and the level of violence. So I never thought in the 90s that climate change would propel, in fact, millions of people to migrate and to put a lot of pressure to other societies where they have to migrate.

But this is, I don't ... I'm not sure we should call it the shock. This is maybe, a long-term shock. Now, the real shock for me is the 9-11 attack against the Twin Towers. And not so much the attack, the attack was absolutely a shock, but the fact that there was really an after, a before and after, and what it meant. For me, this is a moment that has really created an amazing polarization. And that was, by the way, the purpose of the people who did the attack. It created a polarization between somewhat the US and country that are connected to the US, and I would say society that are connected to US, versus suddenly the rest of the world, especially the Muslim world. And we all know that things have been much more complex than that, but that has been a shock.

That's, imagine as a leader of the Red Cross, suddenly you realize what the Red Cross means. It means an organization, but it means also a very powerful symbol. And it's a symbol of help and care in the 20 and 21st century. But at the time, it was also a symbol of crusader. You know, suddenly when you talk about, you know, the Red Cross in the Muslim world, and especially with extreme people that are playing with it, we had to immediately rethink the way we were projecting ourselves, the way we were connecting ourselves. And I do remember 10 years later when I became director general, already 70% of the context where we operated were Muslim contexts.

So it tells you also clearly that the 9/11 really put fire in places like Afghanistan, Iraq, but certainly much more if you look also East Africa and down, you know, Central African

Republic, Sahel, the entire Sahel, the Chad, all that. So that has really changed dramatically the way a lot of people were perceiving each other, the way they were relating to an organization like the Red Cross, as an example, and the way they were related to international humanitarian law. Because one thing, when you were the lead of the international Red Cross, the International Committee of the Red Cross, you also have the responsibility to somewhat develop, but also promote the international humanitarian law. So you don't only operate, but you also have that diplomatic legal role and responsibility and the international remaining law regulate war. And when 9/11 came, the US, and not just the US, the US only used a different set of thinking about war in international law.

And for example, one thing that is still known today is Guantanamo and the prisoner of Guantanamo, that the US decided at the time to hold outside of international remaining law, which was, what are you talking about? So back to 9/11, that was certainly during my time, the biggest shock that changed really the line, if you want, of tensions in the world, but also in the diplomatic world, in the legal world.

00:07:40 JE
Right, so it's fascinating that you mentioned 9/11 as something that affected not only the action capacity of the Red Cross, but also the image of the Red Cross and how people relate to the Red Cross. Cultural divides across the planet, divides that are, on the one hand, targeted by the terrorists behind 9/11. But at the same time, of course, they had ripple effects and 9/11 created lots of discussions in the public sphere across the globe exactly on these questions of identity or context where the ICRC acts.

00:08:11 YD
Yeah, and somewhat brought back again the religious factor as an identity factor at the global level. The religious factor has always been there, but certainly not at that same level. And suddenly it created this kind of ... “the Muslim” against the rest. And of course, we know if you're a Muslim, that there's nothing like “the Muslim”. There is a lot of differences between the Sunni and the Shia, for example, and the way they will look at that as an example. There's, of course, moderate and extreme and whatever. And suddenly it was all that in the same bucket almost. And it has become, over the last 20 years, a crucial factor to define who is us, or, to define who is not us, right?

If you look at the numbers of relationship between the Muslim factor, religious factors, and migration, for example, in the Western world, that has increased dramatically, as an example. So that has also created that. And my point, too, is exactly what you mentioned. I would make a difference between a shock, which is something that happened and sometimes really shaken and synchronized, that's what I find interesting with the shock. The shock synchronized because it creates an experience that is similar. Doesn't mean that you react the same way, but 9/11 is ... we all have seen it, you know? So it synchronized that moment.

COVID, by the way, COVID has been very similar in that sense. So COVID happens. So suddenly we have a synchronization, whatever the functions, whatever is your responsibility, wherever you are in the society, somewhat you experience that

moment. And then, of course, you will then live through very differently. But this is what I consider a shock versus phases, right? Where you see phases that will have an influence. I mean, I would say when Russia, for example, decide to invade Ukraine, that is a shock that defined dramatically somewhat all of us. The way that this plays out are, I would consider much more phase on the consequence of the shock.

00:10:10 JE
So, I'm sure we'll get back to that one because I think it's a very good point. Just briefly on 9/11 still, I'm curious to hear what specifically had to change for the Red Cross, or how did the shock in this case challenge the Red Cross and its operations and what did it do specifically in response? How did you deal with this?

00:10:31 YD
So, I think it made several changes. The first one was to see the US as a major nation, one of the P5 being at war – but not at war in a classical way. So, it was when they were not going officially after a state, they were going after a non-state armed group, Al-Qaeda. And they didn't know exactly how to do it. So, they used the theory of war on terror around the world. And they somewhat attacked state and territory because they had to do it. But they used the fact that Afghanistan, for example, was a place that hosted Al-Qaeda, right? So, it was interesting to see a big, a major state who knows how to do interstate war, moving into themselves, a war that was somewhat much more complicated to describe, right? And to explain to the public opinion, to their public opinion.

And by the way, the way you start to announce war on terror, I mean, this is an endless war. I mean, where do you start? Who are the warrior[s]? And of course, that has a second impact for us, for the International Red Cross, was: how do you define then a combatant? Because as you know, international humanitarian law, the law of war, allow[s], in fact, to target military objective and ask to make a very big difference between military and civilian objective. And it comes the same, of course, about people. So suddenly, that came blurred and to see a country as important as the US. And then bringing into the equation also NATO, starting to play with a different role. That was a major change, major shock in a way, and had a huge consequences for our legal team, for our diplomatic, for our communication. And it put us sometimes in tensions with the US and the people that push in that direction.

At the same time for the ICRC, we had to learn and understand quickly how to deal with an organization like Al-Qaeda, that doesn't own a territory, that is going for a global ummah. So how do you deal with them? And who are the people who can influence these people, right? We are not interested about Osama bin Laden as such, but we were interested about much more the people that would feel what he represents needs to be continued. And what does that mean? How does that work?

So, we had to apply and learn what we've learned in Afghanistan. We had to apply that and understand that throughout our entire operation. We had, for example, to know how do you engage with it very quickly and at the highest level with, in fact, religious leaders across the board to understand what could happen and how to deal with that and make sure that they would understand also our position, making sure that they

understand the impartiality, neutrality, that they could translate that if they're necessary in the language. So, it radically changed the way we were connected and our network operation around the world.

And last but not least, it changed also, over time, the people that are International Red Cross delegates. Because what happens is over time, we started to realize that it was more and more difficult to have people coming from some Western country, because this Western country were [sic] challenged and perceived as being part of that war against "the Muslim", again, into bracket [viz. in brackets]. So, it also, we really had to thought, okay, how do we, who is us and move represent the International Red Cross? What kind of nationality can we have? Knowing maybe that when we intervene, we intervene without bodyguard and without protection.

So, I think we use, if you want, our vulnerability, the fact that we are vulnerable as a strength compared to other organizations like the UN, all that, will go and bunkerize themselves. We did the contrary. But it was a complicated one. So yeah, it changed quite a bit the way the organization was projecting its, its identity and the way we're related to a lot of people.

00:14:34 JE
It does sound like it's a very challenging kind of shock that goes, runs across so many different levels, so many different layers. Your legal team, your diplomatic team, everyone has to get involved in many different ways, respond to it, think about their position and possible institutional reforms that might need in order to deal with a very different kind of threat, in this case, al-Qaeda as a non-state actor.

00:14:55 YD
Yeah, and not just al-Qaeda, I would say, because I think what is interesting is it's an entire priority shift, from the US, from different actors that oblige you as an organization to engage in this shift and to accept that it will last.

00:15:12 JE
And can you give us an example of field experience from your time working at the ICRC around those years after 9/11? Where something practically in the response of the ICRC changed – in terms of, before 9/11 things were done in this particular way, [and] after 9/11, we suddenly saw this as a new priority, or we suddenly got these particular kinds of actors involved.

00:15:34 YD
I can give you a surprising example, which is related to social media. Because it was a time also where social media start to come in. And we, as an organization that also make [sic] some choices sometimes to be very confidential, we do understand the importance of silence, at a critical moment when we have to negotiate all that.

So, they knew we were confronted with the groups and government that we're using, and here I'm talking about early 2000s, so really the beginning of the social media, really, we're using very aggressively social media to put the position, but to challenge us. I do remember, for example, in Somalia being challenged by one specific group, Al-

Shabaab, who suddenly on Twitter just sent an image of a lorry and says, this is [inaudible] that the ISIS is bringing to Somalia to kill the Somalians. Boom, like that. Which normally, in a normal situation, you would have rumor, and then you would start to engage with the local leaders, try to understand what happened, was there a mistake, and engage with other, and then ask the leaders maybe to say, no, it was a mistake, whatever. All that was gone in one minute, and then you have to learn really quickly how do you engage on Twitter, right, or on other places, let's say another platform, in order to somewhat deflate the pressure, and at the same time, manage the discussions that you will have with elderly and the leaders and the important people.

So that was interesting to observe, and that change, it was not related only to 9/11, but it was related to the fact that you had the American[s] being involved, for sure. And you had also a very smart group that were using communication, communication means to put pressure. So that's a good, interesting example that changed totally the way we had to relate with communication and social media.

00:17:29 JE
Very interesting. I mean, you're just saying it changed totally how you had to engage with this. I'm curious, was it a kind of experience of making things up on the spot? Was it improvisation, or was there any kind of past experience that you could draw back on in order to come up with a good response?

00:17:44 YD
It's interesting. No, we decided to maintain discipline, not just all over the place. We decided to also have one golden rule that was whatever communication, public communication we would do, including a fast one, because sometimes you have to be fast. We would always informed or try to engage bilaterally before the communication. Yeah. So even if we would respond to this tweet very rather quickly, we would make sure that one of our message [sic] would go beforehand to the people. So, we would try always to use communication, probably coming to back up if you want, I would say private communication.

So, I think so we maintain[ed] that. And then we had to take some decision over time because we had to learn. And I know some organizations are doing differently. So, one thing we decided was that we would allow our staff also to have social media presence, because we decided that's also an interesting way. You can't imagine if you, Jan, you would represent the ICRC in Yemen, for example, or in Sahel, somewhat if you don't have yourself a presence that is known not just as the ICRC, but also as Jan, the head of the ICRC in Yemen. You would lose somewhat your authority because this is the world in which you operate.

So, it's interesting, we had to learn that. So, it means that we allow you to do that. And at the same time, we had to do that smartly, accompany our staff to be able to do that. Because we also knew if you would think, if you would react badly or you made a mistake, the cost would be enormous for the organization. So, very interesting learning as an organization. How do you collectively move and play with that.

00:19:24 JE

It's a fascinating example about [sic] social media and how the organization needs to find some kind of response, and then that response creates new conditions. And in this case, [it] creates [sic] the question of, are we going to let our staff have social media presences online or not in their official capacity? And a connected question, I can imagine that it creates new vulnerabilities to have staff have social media presences. They can be sort of attacked on social media. They face the question of how do we communicate, [how] we're doing. How did you experience that?

00:19:54 YD
So maybe I should say three or four things. The first one is let's recognize, and I've seen that myself during my time as a CEO of the International Committee of the Red Cross. Trust is becoming a rarer commodity. And of course, when you work for the Red Cross, trust is at the core of what you do. You have to somewhat manage if it's not acceptance, at least to be tolerated by the government to work in a very complex environment, right? And you need to be somewhat trusted by the people that you try to help. So we've seen over time how much trust has become more difficult to gain, and not just because of us, because in the world in which we operate, I think, because of the polarization, because of the segmentation maybe, of the world. So that's just as a background to remember that.

Point two is, if you don't communicate yourself, somebody else will communicate about you. That's the problem. There's not anymore the world where you can say, “oh, I don't communicate. That's okay. Oh, no problem.” You have constantly, especially these days, people that are communicating about you and then nobody knows if it's you or not anymore. So, controlling the message becomes much more important. So how do you pass the important message that has been very central?

And last but not least, you create some element of rules and I would say principle. And one of the guiding principles, whatever the communication is, whatever the situation is, create predictability. As an organization, you can't, even if the situation is very unpredictable, that's one of the reasons why you need to be predictable and you are predictable by your methodology. And it's not because it's Jan or Yves or Eloise or whoever. It is about a delegate, a person working for the International Red Cross. And this person, whoever the personality, has a certain methodology and follow the same methodology and we can connect them. Super important.

So, you should allow, of course, the people to be personally engaged. It's important. And at the same time, follow a specific methodology. And we were very careful about that. So instead of controlling very specific, no, you can't say that or not. You allow the people, but ... and they need to follow a methodology that is clear. And why do we do that, is because centralization of communication can be useful from time to time, but in a given context also, you need to be able to be fast.

And if you centralize everything in Geneva, you can't, as an example, or in New York, or – you can't be fast enough when, or maybe contextual enough when you need to respond to something specific in a given place or in a given situation. So, I think there is this dynamic that you need to manage, what needs to be centralized, what needs to be

decentralized. And having a staff that are able to engage in social media allows you, if they know the methodology and they follow certain discipline, allows you also to be able to play and to be much more closer to the people when it's necessary. Otherwise, a message coming from Geneva to talk to the Somali people or to talk to Washington, to example, that doesn't really work anymore.

00:22:57 JE
Right. So, you mentioned the necessity, the need for speedy reactions. And we talked about shocks and moments in which there was a lot of stress on the organization. Of course, also on the humanitarian situation. One interesting aspect of this is that there's debate as to what counts as a crisis and when something counts as a crisis and why we suddenly label something as a crisis. So, we can think of relief operations, of course, in the context of your work. Aid organizations such as the Red Cross often refer to crises that they tackle, solutions that they have on offer. Whereas on the receiving end of these operations, critics, other actors, actors in the field, might speak instead of humanitarian interventions or even intrusions, and the language can be completely different. So, I'm curious to hear how, on the one hand, you experience this kind of tension, and on the other hand, second point, how did your organization go about, the Red Cross, go about interpreting what the crisis was about?

00:24:00 YD
So firstly, whatever the language you use, you need to reflect about for whom and by whom is it used, right? So, it's very useful, right, to know, because you can talk about the crisis, absolutely. And say, oh my God, there is a crisis. But then for the very same people where it's happening, it's not a crisis. I mean, think about emergency. When we say, my God, there is a, right now, if you think, for example, there was this terrible disaster in Turkey and in Syria, right, where the house is a major shake of the earth. And what is interesting, if you look at specifically Syria, that's a disaster, absolutely crisis. The problem is, this is an emergency that is just built over the other emergency of the situation.

So, you have to somewhat be very careful to talk about, yes, it's a crisis, it's an emergency in Syria in that specific place, where, of course, you immediately understand that the crisis will not be dealt with and will not start and finish the same way that this was in Turkey, for example. So, when I'm thinking crisis or shock, I'm always thinking, who has defined the crisis and the shock? Who called for it? And what does that mean for the people? And that helps you then to manage.

For example, it's true when you think about humanitarian, still, I would say the large public things, humanitarian, are about a crisis, right? And for the people, a crisis is a shock. It's a moment where you have a natural disaster, for example, or you have a bomb, or, you know, there is a moment X, something happened, a lot of people are hurt, then the Red Cross come in almost as a fire brigade, comes in, bring expertise and leave. You know, that's a little bit the vision. And what is interesting, in the world where I've operated, and where my colleagues still operate, is a world where emergencies last, crises last.

Think about Afghanistan. When was the crisis started and when it ended? When, you know, there emerged ... think about Myanmar. Think about Ukraine. Take three very different examples. So, I think what has been new is also to understand the importance of crisis and emergency, including to mobilize people's interest, but to know what it means for the people's needs, right? And that leads me nicely to the second question. You said, how do we deal with it? What does it mean? For us at the Red Cross, at the core of all crises, what you start as, what are the needs of the people, really? And it's very helpful. How does that change their needs? What do they request? What is important for them?

And you don't start with you, uh, with, you know, the feeling that, wow, there's a crisis. No, you really start with, what does that mean for them? And if you're able to assess the need of the people, really, and listen to them, not just assess, but listen to them. What are they telling you? That allows you then to understand possibly what could be the response and what could be relevant for them. And I think there has been too many tendencies when there is a crisis to try to rush and to bring your own services that you have deployed and defined in London, maybe, or in Geneva, versus trying to understand what really people are willing [sic].

I'll give you two or three examples that really struck me. I do remember, for example, we were able to rush and to come to Syria, to a place that was besieged for months, and we were able then to come into that. And we were really expecting the people to ask us, of course, for water, medicines, maybe food. And interestingly enough, the first request absolutely was Wi-Fi and electricity. Really? You have nothing else? No, for them, Wi-Fi was much more important than anything. Water was there. And I do remember also they were asking, please help us to deal with our people who died. So, the way you are managing dead people is very crucial. And that was an absolute priority for them because they were stuck for three months, completely busy.

So, you know, suddenly you said, oh, dead management, Wi-Fi is a priority? You would never ever define that in London or in Geneva. But if you listen to the people, that helps you then to define what the crisis is and how it works.

00:28:02 JE
So, there's a tension between the kind of field-level experience, the sort of first-hand experience, the first-hand perspective that gives you the best picture, that is available of the needs in a given situation. And then on the other hand, we've got the organization that has its kind of perspective, has its kind of set of methodologies that you mentioned earlier. And then there's a balancing act between those two poles – it's very important for the Red Cross in Yemen, in Syria, to go in not with too much of a preconception. Is that what you're saying?

00:28:42 YD
Yes, and it's a complicated balance. And I think what you need as an organization is to reflect where the balance is defined, where is it? And you need to define also what's important, what's not. I'll give you one example, which is an interesting one. I think 15 years ago, there was several issues, especially related to Afghanistan and Iraq. And one of the terrible issues was the bombing of the Iraqi delegation of the UN. And I think 36

UN colleagues died. And I think it was really a shock. And I think there was also reflections about the way the UN would then deal with its own security. And since then, it was already the case, but now it has been confirmed, since then, the UN is in fact managing security centrally.

So, Jan, if you would be the head of UN humanitarian affairs, you have a colleague in the UN that is the head of security that is the same level than you, that you don't control, right? And if you would be the head of the UN, [the] other way, in Myanmar right now, you would have to, in fact, ask every day, what's the assessment by the UN security people? And they would say, today it's three or four, level four. So, if it's level four, you can't go out of your house. And you can say, no, but I'm on the spot. I see, I can do [it]. [They] Say I'm sorry, globally, and we've decided it's four.

So whereas we at the ICRC did exactly the contrary, we decided that the person that would define the security context, if you want, would be the person that leads, in fact, the response, which means, Jan, if you would work for the ICRC, you would have the right, you would define yourself, the level of risk that you would take and you would say, maybe this morning I can go because I can meet this important person that allows me to access this hospital. Whereas if it would be defined centrally, the definition comes once a day and tells you level five.

And the problem is, of course, the measure of success is very different. You are measured against the ability to reach out to people, to provide relevant aid. Whereas if you would be in charge of security centralized in New York, you are measured against the level of wounded and people that have been your organization, have been killed or put in danger. And of course, the person in charge of security, then his or her objective would be to create a condition that reduced the risk. So, I'm just giving you an example to explain to you that the balance is always there, but, uhm, the decision you take, who has the, at the end of the day, the decision to define where the balance is, a crucial part of the humanitarian response.

00:30:58 JE
Can you pinpoint a moment during your position as a director general between 2010 and 2020, when it struck you that this was the way in which the ICRC is learning exactly this? You just outlined in very interesting detail how the Red Cross has a need to sort of straddle these lines. Has that changed over the time that you were Director General, or would you say this has always been around, this is a sort of standard feature of the Red Cross?

00:31:39 YD
No, what has changed is the fact that you are suddenly, your security can be, including when you are locally driven, to be affected by something global. I can give you an example about Afghanistan. I do remember that suddenly there was a rumor that one guard, American guard in Guantanamo, flushed in a toilet a Koran. Then I tell you, in 30 minutes, there was pressure, people in the street, willing to attack anything that was related to the U.S., but also to Guantanamo, and we were visiting Guantanamo and protecting prisoners, so ... we had to very quickly inform our colleagues in Afghanistan, in Pakistan, how to deal with that as an example.

So, it's not just, we're living in a world where a global anecdote, if I may say, or rumors or fact, could have a huge impact and you need to be able to play with it. So, and being smart about it. But at the end, it's still the people in charge of the relationship and create an environment that is conducive for humanitarian affair, that's what I would call, that would make a difference. So, in that case, it would be the head of delegation of the ICRC in Afghanistan that would really reflect what is the best strategy and to whom to talk and who to engage, because that's what it is, and explain very quickly what happens, what we've seen, what are we doing, how it works, in order to create the kind of interesting relationship and dynamic around that. And so that's one.

What we've learned also is that we, these days you have to be very local, but also being able to work on, at the same times, on somewhat global network. So, to give you an example, UK before the Brexit, you would engage with special forces of UK in Iraq, for example, around this very specific issue. You would also understand exactly how to talk at the headquarters about ... maybe not the specific issue, but the trend, and being able to combine that smartly, right? And if you want to have an influence on a network or on the government, you can't anymore just focus on one target person or target population. You need to think this person part of a much more complex ecosystem. True in Afghanistan with the Taliban, very true also with the Special Forces in UK. They give you two examples, very different. And you need as an organization to be able to think about it.

00:33:49 JE
I'm very interested, and we as a project are generally very interested in the question of how international organizations not only experience shocks, crises, turbulence, protracted complexity, but also how they then adapt their responses and possibly do that in coordination with other international organizations and agencies. And so, you just mentioned how there's this need for coordinating action in a kind of global perspective in order to properly understand the problem, but also, of course, to carry out a response.

And I know that from 2014 to 2019, you were chair of the steering committee for humanitarian response, one example of a coordination platform between different humanitarian organizations, in this case, an alliance, a voluntary alliance of, in this case, nine leading organizations. And another example is in 2015, you were appointed by the World Health Organization as member of the advisory group on reform of the World Health Organization's work in emergencies. And these are different examples of how the Red Cross interacts and coordinates its action with other agencies, other international organizations, whether it's in the same sector as in the first example, the steering committee, or it's with other sectors, other agencies that work on different areas, but that are connected given the overlap in what different sectors are affected by a crisis. So, can you tell us a little bit about your experience with that and how that might have changed over the time that you worked as a director general?

00:35:49 YD

So, several examples. The first one, and it's the obvious example, is there is no way that you're able to respond as an organization to all the needs of the people. No way, no way, no way. So, I think there is a responsibility to you as an organization to create, again, the condition to partner. And you can't just comment, “hi, I'm partnering.” That needs to be prepared. There needs to be trust. There needs to be understood [sic] about that.

And it's two level. One, partnering locally is absolutely central. So being the Red Cross, International Red Cross, one of the beauties that you can really partner with your local Red Cross. And I'm really thinking about partnering, which means also, you know, it's a peer-to-peer, sometimes difficult, but it's an important one. But it means also partnering with, you know, local association, with, in fact, groups that are very central to you.

And at the same time, partnering internationally is super central. And the partnering internationally, most of the time is about, A, assessing the situation, very important. How do you read the situation? What's important? What's not? B, influencing the actor, and not just the actors on the ground. So, we, the ICRC, we're doing that well, was influencing the donors, the way the donors would look at us, the way they would request us to do something or not, the level of risk they were ready to go.

So, I was a chair, as you mentioned, of the steering humanitarian of response, which brought, in fact, eight alliances and one organization, the ICRC, but the alliances were very important. So ICVA, for example, or Oxfam, that are very important. And this organization will play a critical role into understanding what's happening, but also reflecting about that donor. So, we would also agree, what do we want, what needs to happen in terms of behavior? Because I think one thing we've seen over the last ten years is a trend for donors to somewhat being very risk averse and wanted to transfer risk to the human response organization. So how do we deal with that? So that was very useful. So that's, I would say, the first bucket of partnering with your peers internationally and locally and trying to make your response more relevant both internationally and locally.

The second level is partnering with people that have much more capability than you in a specific domain, both intellectually, or sometimes concretely in terms of production. One example is I've been the director general of an organization that had to go through the transformation of data. You know, when I started in 2010, data were important, but there was nothing close to a real protection data strategy office where we had to completely rethink how do you manage data, whereas as an organization like the ICSE data are central to a work of protection because we follow the people through the data, their data.

But we had to realize, oh my God, yes, we want to protect their data and we don't want them to be hacked. How do we do that? How do we reflect about that? How do we think about protection of data, you know, on a daily basis, you know, in a situation as complex as Syria or Ukraine, you know? So, we, and here we work with top level

university, for example, in terms of blockchain, in terms of trust, in terms also of, we also worked with policy maker. We work with the European Union, for example, to really influence the GDR policy around protection of data. So here it's a domain, for example, data, protection of data, where you as an organization, you want to somewhat influence the way people think about data, but you also want to learn and you want to build, in fact, the best protection and best service possible. So that's the second one.

And the third one is much more about our own people, our own staff. And you need somewhat to think also how do you partner with your own staff. The time is over where you just have a staff and you pay them or the volunteers. You really need to think about their quality, their competence, and they come in. And of course, they come in and they paid. And they have a contractor relationship with you, but you also need to think about partnering. I've seen how much the people were more intrigued about their own ability to grow. What can you offer them in terms of training?

So, as an example of partnering, instead of imposing them training, we had a series of training that they had to go, but we also offer them every year an amount of money that they could use to choose their training, where they wanted to be trained, where they wanted to grow. And this kind of almost, I would say, partnering with your own personal and own people is absolutely central. To create the trust, to create the relationship, to be also influenced by your own people. It doesn't work always, by the way, sometimes [it is] difficult, but it's a very central one in terms of mindset if you want to think about moving together and improving together.

00:40:21 JE
So, we've talked about partnering with other agencies, partnering across different levels, of course partnering with the local population of the place that the Red Cross is acting in. Another question, of course, is the partnering of governments. And there's a lot of talk about a crisis of multilateralism, for example, that makes that more challenging or might make that more challenging as we see power political divides, for example, harden between the United States, China, the European Union, Russia. There are lots of dynamics that might make it harder to pursue international cooperation. And so, I'm curious to hear from your perspective, how does the ICRC deal with these kinds of tangents when thinking of a crisis response, when implementing a crisis response. How has that changed over the last 20 or so years?

00:41:08 YD
Yeah, it has changed and for different reasons. One is because suddenly you have states that start to be involved in war and when they involve in war, the tendency over time always is somewhat to play with, or at least to maximize what they consider the chance to win. And what I've seen over the last 20 years is important states, including P5 states, so really permanent members of the Security Council, the ones that are supposed to uphold international humanitarian law, international norm, playing with international public law, right?

And it's true that over the last, let's say, ten years, the polarization has made suddenly basic consensus on international norms much more difficult. And that is difficult when

you are, as an organization like the ICRC, willing to create consensus around very important issue that needs to be regulated, right? Cyber war, for example, is a super important dynamic, and you need to have an agreement from the collective of states about what is, for a missile of war, an objective that is military, what is an objective that is civil. Sounds basic, but it's super complicated. And you need to have an agreement, because this is what international law is about. It's about common understanding, common regulation, I would say almost common grammar that allows you to navigate. So that has made our work when it comes to international human and law for a law much more difficult, much more complicated, to bring state[s] to agree on critical issue, to agree to act together and not to be taken by their competition, that has been very, very difficult.

I think the other issue that has been difficult is I would say we are living in a time where, and this is not just related to international law, it is related to also the ability to somewhat challenge state[s], we're living in a time where it seems to me sovereignty has become the new keyword in international affair. So, it means that somewhat not just us, but the security concept or other international body. I saw that at WHO, you mentioned WTO, where normally you have really rules that needs to regulate the trade. And suddenly there is no agreement anymore because important states are saying, no, our own interest first, you know, our sovereignty first. And when they start that, what I see is a level of trust between states being extremely undamaged, being, if you want, shaken, being sometimes destroyed. And that is a very difficult time.

So yes, I think what we see right now in terms of polarization and tensions you mentioned between China and the US, for example, we could think about, you know, regional organization and also government, whatever, creates a lot of difficulties. Yeah, absolutely. And look at what is happening to Niger right now, and how, if I may, a rather small state that is not very powerful, is managed and looked at with a lot of carefulness by the entire international sector and the international community because they don't know who would play the sovereignty element, how it works anymore. Where I would say 20 years ago, if you would have a situation like that, where military would take power in a situation that is global, I think it would have been dealt much more quickly.

00:44:36 JE
Another backdrop that's been talked a lot about, lots of people talk about the pluralization of global governance. Many more actors are sort of becoming visible as being relevant mattering to international responses, and I'm curious to hear how that has played out at the ICRC? Has that changed? Has the perception of the ICRC vis-a-vis global governance issues changed?

00:44:57 YD
Yes, [it] just made things much more complicated. And on one hand, positively, because it's great to see actors of a different level, you know, coming in and joining and willing to participate. And I would say both at the international level, you mentioned the multilateral dimension, so essentially to observe a country that we never heard of or were very shy, suddenly be much more vocal, much more specific and pushing it.

But it's also interesting to observe other actors, like the cities, for example. I do believe that the cities have a bigger role to play, or I would say even [the] university. Some of them are still a bit shy, but university we see over the next coming 10 years, I'm deeply convinced, will suddenly play a big role, surprisingly, in places that we don't think. I think, for example, the university might have a role to play in what I could say in a time where we lack the ability to regulate issue that are too complex and to do that timely, right? I am deeply convinced that we can't wait 10 years. That's normally what happens when you want to regulate an issue within state or between state. You can't work 10 years. You can't. You have to work much more closely and much more quickly.

You could imagine that [the] university could pad [?] together and make some proposal and offer some temporary regulation around issue like AI, you know, that says these are the principle that needs to be followed. Maybe things will change next year, but right now it is what happened. I'll give you just an example. So, what I see is more actor[s] coming in and contributing. So that is difficult, but it's also much more positive, because it creates the ability to, yeah, try to respond specifically.

Now, what we are lacking is a global governance. And at least for the years to come, I don't see any positive move into global governance. So, what I see is a much more diverse set of governance coming up with a diverse set of principle. So, we will deal more and more around issue with a set of governance. And that will make it sometimes very relevant. But the global governance that we were hoping, I would say 10 years ago, is far away, far away, far away, far away. So, it means for an actor like the International Committee of the Red Cross that is working globally and wants to engage, makes life more complex, no questions.

So that's one, that's the international. But at the national level, it's the same. Today, good luck if you want to engage with government or institutions like the European Union, like the US, or like Russia, or China, take a different example. This is not one government. You have to talk with the parliament or with the party. You have to understand the security forces. You have to understand the difference between the State Department, the new ICID. You have to understand the difference between the White House and the people within the White House, how they play around that. It's the same in ... it's the same in Russia. It's quite a very different country.

Today, you have a very complicated set of actors. And we're living in a time where power and organization are slightly more complex and more diffused than it was today. Even if it's on the map, it looks very controlled and very much more complicated than we think. I mean, we all know, for example, that when you want right now to sit down with Russia and discuss the peace with Ukraine, It's not just about Mr. Putin. It's much more complicated than that.

00:48:10 JE
So, faced with all that complexity, all these different actors who matter, all these different demands, would you say that the Red Cross, the ICRC, has a bigger role to play in the future? Or does it need to give away some of its tasks to other organizations, to other actors? Or where do you see that going?

00:48:30 YD
I don't know if it would call [sic] a bigger role or not. I think the question is about what will be relevant tomorrow. And I think what is great with the Red Cross in general and the ICRC in particular is that the relevance of this organization has evolved. And I think the question is, how are you allowing possibility to your relevance to evolve? The human in service will change for sure. I wouldn't be surprised that tomorrow an organization like the ICRC would provide service around data to the people that are in crisis. So they will be the guardian of the personal data of people that are in crisis. And maybe in crisis, not just war, it might be migrants or other people that are really at risk. And there is one place, kind of a Google, if you want, humanitarian, that would really protect that. So it could be that kind of service that nobody has thought about, suddenly comes in, you know. I think there will be a lot of ethical questions, in my sense, if I look at the world of tomorrow. So, [we] also need the Red Cross, [it] could also be a very relevant actor and maybe less into concretely providing aid to people. They will still do that, [but] maybe less so because maybe the local actors will be stronger.

So what I mean is a lot of flexibility in the way you operate, though, with one thing that would make the Red Cross, I think, still relevant is a set of principles that are what we call the humanitarian principle and that are really related to humanity, related to impartiality, related to neutrality, independence, you know, a series of principles that guide you, whatever the service, whatever your endeavor is, and that should remain. So yes, I think the ICRC will remain and the Red Cross will remain an important factor as long as they have the ability to adapt and to understand that the relevance they are providing might shift.

00:50:18 JE
Okay, so we're coming to the end of our conversation. I've got one final question for you. It's a big question, so it might be hard to answer, but it's I think an important one. So, how would you say the Red Cross can learn from past shocks, past experiences with crises and emergency to improve its preparedness for the future? What are the limits to learning from the past? How can the Red Cross learn from the past for the future?

00:50:42 YD
I think it's an important question. I think it's, I recognize it sounds basic, that in a lot of contexts where you operate, the people that operate with you have memory, the people affected, they've been there sometimes for decades. The people that you deal with, the non-state arm group, the government, some people have been there for decades. So, first, there is an element of respect, where you need to have memory, just also, it's a minimum of respect. You don't come into a country or a situation without trying to understand what you did before, what your colleague did before, what was happening. So that's an important element for me, a must that is very valid to the present time. So past allows you to be present.

That's one. B, I think you need to understand why your relevance is shifting and what makes your relevance in this specific context or at this specific moment stronger than another moment. And you need to be aware of that. And I think that is a place where you can bring in the organization a form of reflections and try to understand what made you

relevant at that moment and why this relevance has been lost or has been shifted. So, I think there is an element of relevance that makes it important.

And last but not least, of course, it's the questions of learning how to do it. You know, how do you negotiate? How do you engage? Something that are [sic] coming from the practice that are, some of them are very strategic and are very tactical. I've learned, for example, from colleagues, when I was a young delegate, they told me, “Yves, never ever wear sunglasses, and especially don't wear sunglasses at the checkpoint, never.” Because if you have sunglasses, people need ... to see your eyes, you know, it will create a minimum of trust. It sounds so basic, you know, as an example. But this can also be very useful, and that needs to be engaged in the organization and the ... so you can see the learning are [sic] different.

I think the main element, if you want to learn from the past, you need to make it very relevant to the present. Otherwise, organizations don't spend the time to learn.

00:52:38 JE
Fascinating. So, there are many different layers to how the organization learns from the past, but also it's all about the people. It's first-hand experiences, and that's what we need to learn from. – It's been a fascinating conversation. We've talked about social media, about data, about your experiences with relief operations in Yemen and Afghanistan. It's been really fascinating. I've certainly learned a lot from it. I hope you enjoyed it too.

00:53:01 YD
I did.

00:53:02 JE
Thank you, Yves.

00:53:03 YD
Thanks to you.