**Keynote Address by Yves Daccord, Director-General of the International Committee of the Red Cross**

*Delivered at the 11th retreat of the Independent Commission on Multilateralism, on humanitarian engagements, held from January 14-15 in New York.*

Good evening to all of you. First of all, I would like to thank the Independent Commission on Multilateralism for hosting us here but also for putting humanitarian engagement as a key topic in your reflection when it comes to the multilateral system. I believe this is indeed critical. I feel it is very useful to take and have the time to be able to reflect and look at some questions and issues together. It also provides the opportunity to maybe explore some new avenues. I am slightly overwhelmed by the world in which we operate today. I will not dwell on the problems and challenges humanitarian action faces today, which are very well summarized in the background paper. What I would like to offer tonight is some ideas on how this analysis will help us discuss the future, and explore possible solutions.

I would like to do three things tonight. First, I would like to look at some key features that impact the way in which we, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), operate and the way all of us interact in our respective functions as states, as international organizations, and as humanitarian organizations. I will look at four such features and then I would like to challenge some assumptions, because if we want to be able to think beyond our present practice, we need to challenge some assumptions; some common assumptions. Lastly, I would like to offer you one or two thoughts about tomorrow, and how I think we should approach it.

Now, to start with the features, and please, ladies and gentlemen, take them as they are: merely one perspective; only one among many different perspectives. They are coming from my own organization, the ICRC. We are, as you know, present in 84 countries, working with almost 16,000 people; trying to work in very close proximity to people affected by war. So what I will share with you is coming from that particular perspective; we could all have different perspectives.

The first feature I want to put forth, which will not be a surprise to many—our perspective is very clear—is the critical lack of international convergence when it comes to dealing with global issues on a political level. Clearly, at all levels we can see this; it is apparent when it comes to economic issues and when it comes to climate change. Maybe we can say COP 21 was a good answer, but it was one success among a lot of issues. Of course, when it comes to conflict, and addressing conflict, we've seen how difficult it is to obtain even minimal convergence among states at the highest level, including in the Security Council.

My worry, ladies and gentlemen, is that this lack of international convergence is also affecting humanitarian affairs. We have not, up to this day, obtained much or even any international convergence at the Security Council when it comes to the discussion of humanitarian affairs. We have, at the International Movement of the Red Cross and Red Crescent, had our quadrennial conference a month ago where we were not able to obtain minimum convergence on an issue which is important to all of us,

namely the effort to establish an IHL compliance mechanism. We are very much trying to ensure protection of people affected by armed conflict by strengthening compliance with international humanitarian law but nevertheless find it very difficult to really push issues such as addressing compliance and violations. So, I believe that we can agree that a lack of international convergence at the political level, including on conflict prevention and humanitarian affairs, is an important feature that must be addressed. There may be one issue which is an exception to the general lack of convergence, and that is terrorism, but even there the depth of that convergence is also questionable. I think generally speaking, there is clearly a lack of international convergence, and I would say that it is here to stay. Look at Syria. Look at most of the conflicts today, most of which are still not solved, and there is—in our opinion—really not a solution at hand.

The second key feature is related to vulnerabilities, particularly the vulnerabilities of people affected by armed conflict and other situations of violence. I am not sure whether I am using the right terminology, but there is something about the globalization of vulnerabilities, in two ways. Let me try to explain what I mean. One thing that I have found striking over the last few years, and especially during the last few months, relates to—as we can see with Syria, the Middle East more generally, and many other conflicts as well as with pandemics like Ebola—new challenges to our traditional containment strategy. The strategy of the international community for a long time was: "Let's contain conflicts far from the Global North," or "Let's contain pandemics far away from us." But now, suddenly, there is a recognition that the problems that were far away, are suddenly hitting us at home and have become much closer.

It is clearly apparent in Europe now, and this is why you see such a big focus on migration; even though we all know that the immigration question is a question that has resonated with many of us for many years. So there is something about the problems which were previously contained but are now becoming our own problems, and they are hitting us hard. It is also very interesting to see that the discussion about these issues is no longer only taking place amongst humanitarian professionals and governments. You will probably not be surprised that since recently the World Economic Forum is interested in conflict and fragility. Why? It is not to please us humanitarians but is because they also feel that, suddenly, humanitarian crises are at the core of their own agenda. So that is one aspect of the globalization of vulnerabilities: they are everywhere, and because of that they have made it to everyone's agenda. Another aspect of the globalization of vulnerability—again, probably not a surprise to many of you, but something we need to grasp more deeply—is the fact that today in the richest societies you also have the poorest people. This is something we feel very strongly about in the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement. There are more and more people who are "off the grid," whom we have to acknowledge as not only existing, but also as part of our society. If I just look at my own organization which, amongst other things, visits prisoners around the world, who cares about prisoners today?

The third key feature I would like to put forth is that we are living in a world that is incredibly connected. Even thought recent figures show that only 40% of the world population is connected through internet, 40% is still an incredible number! And it is not just the internet: mobile phones have become the new norm everywhere. In every single place, we are working with mobile phones and this has changed not only the way we work but also the behavior of the people we work for, because of the way they connect and look at each other. Connection and fragmentation are happening simultaneously. New technology and mobile phones have changed the way people are connecting with their own communities, governments, and countries. New technology has also changed the way people choose which community they are part of. When I look at what has happened in the Middle East over the last few years—Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and Syria—we can see how the use of new means of technology made history. What was striking at the beginning of these crises, before they turned into outright war, was that there was a great

mobilization of people but actually no Nelson Mandela, there was no leader who said, "Now, let's change, or let's move into this direction." There were a lot of people, connecting, moving, changing. But we may be living in a world where many movements are leaderless; a world that is very much connected, allowing people to communicate more and more broadly, but also very fragmented at the same time, as the conversation in many places does not seem to go in any clear direction. I think this is a feature which is extremely important to keep in mind.

The fourth feature, which is something striking for us as a humanitarian organization but may also be striking for all of you in your different functions, is the lack of trust. Trust has become a rare commodity. You can see that in every single survey around the world. We at the ICRC see that also in our daily experiences on the ground. People do not automatically trust us anymore just because we are the ICRC, or the Red Cross or Red Crescent. People are saying: "Prove to me that you're doing good work; prove to me that you're neutral and impartial; prove to me that you serve." And the same holds true for all of our institutions and organizations, including the UN. If I look at what people think about the UN, the multilateral system, even about humanitarian agencies, I see a clear and enormous lack of trust.

These are the four key features that I would like us to keep in mind when we reflect upon today's challenges for humanitarian engagement, because they impact the way people interact, look at us, perceive us, and relate to the multilateral system. I have no doubt about this.

Now, in order to help us make some proposals and go beyond simply discussing the problems and challenges, there are three assumptions that I would like to challenge. The first one is about the way we are talking about reality; the way we are using concepts. I think there are some concepts that are widely used and that need to be challenged. The first one is that of the humanitarian system. Let's ask ourselves: what does a humanitarian system actually mean? The words give us the sense that there is something clearly organized, with a command center, with agreed rules, clearly aligned, with a common culture. Let me put it this way: the reality is totally different. There is no such system in the humanitarian realm. And I don't think that is necessarily negative. But if we want to look at the challenges around humanitarian engagement, we need to understand what we are talking about. We are not talking about an organized system.

Humanitarian action and aid today are not only delivered by formal sectors such as the Red Cross, the UN, and humanitarian NGOs. For example, in Syria we see that quite a large amount of aid comes from the affected communities themselves, including through local charities, diaspora, businesses, and even smugglers. I'm not saying all of this is necessarily good aid or that is impartial and covers all needs. But it is out there. If you look at what happens in today's migration crisis, you will see a lot of very active volunteers; people who are helping, although not through the formal humanitarian sectors. Even in the formal sectors, you will see a lot of difference in approaches and activities. So if we want to refer to the totality of actors involved in some sort of humanitarian relief, I would recommend using words that better capture what we are talking about. Possibly we could speak of an ecosystem. An ecosystem is beautiful in that it is dynamic, and is not only formal. It encompasses actors with different goals and different approaches and there is not one single center of command. Such an ecosystem is in some ways also more difficult to deal with, because of the need to manage all these difference, but overall it is a positive thing. So when we talk about the reality of humanitarian affairs and engagement, maybe we can agree to talk about the humanitarian ecosystem. The same holds true, by the way, for the multilateral system anchored in the UN.

When it comes to the multilateral system, there is also a variety of different actors and stakeholders. Of course the multilateral system is state-led. This is very clear, as states are at its very core; they are the members that make up the United Nations. But then, if I translate that in my own reality, in the reality of my organization, what do I see? What I see in contexts of armed conflict and other violence is, roughly speaking, two types of situations. One where the national and local authorities are in a position to provide basic services to their populations and tend to their needs. In these situations, state authorities are critical to the overall response and critical to the humanitarian response. On the other hand, we also see a lot of situations where the local and national authorities are not in a position or even not willing to provide basic services to the populations. They may not be in a position to do so because they lack the infrastructure, or they may not have the people to provide services. I am thinking about the Central African Republic, for example. But also, they are not in a position to do so because they are not only at war with other external parties, but they are at war with their own populations. We have to accept that there are populations under the control of authorities which are not government-led, for example in Syria, Yemen, or South Sudan. We have to accept that non-state armed groups sometimes play a critical role in delivering a humanitarian response to populations' needs. We have to look into that when we discuss accountability: how do we bring that into a multilateral system which is state-led? It is critical to have these two elements in mind when discussing the reality of humanitarian engagement.

The second assumption I would like to challenge is about people. It seems to me that we—including in meetings and discussions leading up to the World Humanitarian Summit and to the report of the High Level Panel on Humanitarian Financing—have a tendency to talk about people as passive victims; people receiving help, waiting for our help. Our experience has, however, shown that people are often all but passive victims; people have opinions about what they need, what they want; they look at humanitarian action, evaluate it, judge it, they are moving forward themselves. If there is one thing we need to learn from the recent migrant question, it is how much people respond collectively. They adapt their tactics by looking at what states were doing and they are even faster than states. So I think it is critical that we understand that people are changing the way they are connecting with us as humanitarians, as states, and as the multilateral system. People are not passive anymore. They are sometimes in very difficult situations, but they are changing the way they are connecting and this is something we certainly need to grasp.

Now we come to the third assumption I would like to challenge. Humanitarian engagement, when we look at today's world, in fact is one of the most important subjects. For many humanitarian organizations such as the ICRC, it is the top priority. But in the multilateral system, including in the UN, humanitarian affairs are not a priority. The top priorities for the international community, including the UN, remain, in hierarchical order: security, trade, and development. Why and when do you think, for example, Ebola suddenly became such an important issue for many stakeholders, triggering a fast response? It was when the pandemic affected trade and security. Why did the migrant crisis suddenly rise up on everyone's agenda, or the humanitarian situation in Syria? It is because the problems were no longer the problems of one country and started to affect global trade and security. To be clear, I am not saying this as criticism. But when we try to address the challenges to humanitarian engagement, we need to acknowledge the fact that humanitarian affairs are important, but that they are not the top priority of the multilateral system.

These three assumptions, about the so-called system, the passivity of victims and the importance of humanitarian action, need to be challenged; we need to acknowledge facts and realities. Otherwise, our discussion—including the discussions at the World Humanitarian Summit in May—will continue to take

place in silos and be disconnected from reality. We may make a lot of declarations of intentions, but they will not connect to each other and to reality, and they will end up not having much impact on the ground.

My last two comments, ladies and gentlemen, relate to solutions; opportunities to address the challenges we face. Taking into account the features of today's world and the assumptions I challenged before, it seems to me that when we will have to make some recommendations. Be it for the ICM or to the WHS, there are two issues which will have to be central in all of our recommendations. The first one is collaboration. I'm deeply convinced that it is now the time for us to move on from our obsession with coordination and to think of diversity as positive potential and collaboration as effective and efficient for delivering humanitarian relief. Look at Syria, look at Ukraine: we are confronted with situations where we are constantly dealing with questions that are short-term and long-term. That is one of the reasons, by the way, that the High Level Panel on Humanitarian Financing is saying that the mere division between development and humanitarian affairs is obsolete, at least on some levels. We are dealing with protracted crises where you have to deal with extreme poverty at the same time as violence. When you look at the questions related to Syria, you have to look at, of course, violence, war, and protection, but you also have to be prepared to think about education, health, and climate change. This is very complex. Nobody is able to simply address these problems without thinking of how to collaborate with others and how to bring in different perspectives, from states, international humanitarian actors, development actors, the wide variety of local actors, and many more. So the word to use is not "or," it is "and." This is very difficult, because we don't know how to do that and with diversity comes disagreement and conflict, which will need to be managed.

Also, we must involve the corporate sector. Not the private sector, the corporate sector, such as Google for example. Why Google? Google is one example of an organization/company which I think will be the number one actor on health within the next three years. They will not only influence the way health and healthcare are perceived, but also how they are managed. Big data is central to influencing governments, influencing humanitarian aid, and, of course, influencing people. We need to be able to bring the corporate sector in, not just to collaborate or to ask for money, but also to influence the way they look at multilateral systems and humanitarian engagement. I am deeply convinced about this: now is the time to bring the corporate sector in, before they have decided where to go or how to frame the debate on these issues. So collaboration should be at the core of whatever recommendations we make about the future of humanitarian engagement.

The second—as the background paper points out—is that we need to make recommendations, offer solutions, that are people-centered rather than process-centered. We also have to make sure that we can protect people. I feel that on the protection of people, we are still on a very slippery slope. It is a very difficult time for us to work on protection issues right now. So how are we able to produce proposals which are people-centered and not process-centered? Moreover, it is critical—and I would say that is particularly challenging for the multilateral system—we must be able to propose concrete recommendations that are understood by people. If people do not understand what we are proposing, they will not support it. If I may say so, the multilateral system has the great ability of bringing states together but also has some weaknesses from our perspective. It takes a lot of time between defining the problems and proposing solutions. In our world today, when you define problems and five years later you are still trying to find a solution to the problems, this is unacceptable to the people. Even if the issues are well understood, we still have to show we can propose solutions and build consensus around them.

I hope these thoughts were helpful and I look forward to our discussions. Thank you very much.