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Mr President,

The International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) welcomes the report of the Secretary-General on “the promotion of a culture of peace and interreligious and intercultural dialogue, understanding and cooperation for peace” (A/69/413) and the progress described in this report, led by UNESCO, the United Nations Alliance of Civilizations, the Peace Building Commission (PBC), UNV, UN-WOMEN, and many other UN entities. More specifically, the IFRC agrees with the Secretary-General’s highlighting of the interconnectedness between the culture of peace and interreligious and intercultural dialogue, and calling for “an increasingly integrated approach on the part of the entities of the United Nations system to these problems, particularly in their activities at the field level”, as exemplified by this single report presented this year.

The IFRC is strongly committed to fostering a global culture of respect for peace and non-violence, inter-cultural dialogue and social inclusion where human values and dignity are truly celebrated. Indeed, promoting social inclusion and a culture of non-violence and peace is one of our three strategic aims for the present decade; It states that, for a culture of violence to turn into one of peace requires a global mind and behaviour shift from the way we currently think and interact: from being locked into differences to valuing diversity and pluralism, from adverse reaction to joint response and proactive prevention, from exclusion based on fear to connection based on our common humanity, from resorting to verbal or physical violence when feeling threatened, to constructive dialogue and trust.

In this framework, we believe that women, youth and children are powerful sources of change, whose energy and skills need to be harnessed when pursuing societal transformation leading to a culture of non-violence and peace. Furthermore, we believe that education and volunteerism are crucial pillars when pursuing societal transformation leading to a culture of non-violence and peace.

Mr. President,

Women are still suffering from the impact of the economic and financial crisis. They are disproportionately vulnerable and affected by other humanitarian challenges as well, such as poverty, climate change, food insecurity, migration, internal displacement and conflict, which result in additional vulnerabilities. But, women are also affected disproportionately by the impact of natural disasters, the scarcity of resources, and the lack of or inequitable access to adequate health and education services and facilities. Unfortunately, we also know that women continue to be subjected to unacceptable levels of violence.

To that effect, the IFRC ensures that, in responding to emergencies, appropriate violence prevention, mitigation and response strategies, including counselling to survivors of violence, are incorporated into our programming. The IFRC also ensures that gender considerations are also built into all areas of our work, including water and sanitation, health and shelter, in line with our Strategic Framework on Gender and Diversity Issues; that is to say, we identify and address the distinct needs and capacities of women, girls, boys and men of all ages and abilities.
To address the underlying causes of vulnerability and foster safe and resilient communities, we also encourage an increase and strengthening of volunteer programmes. By enhancing volunteerism we are able to put forward a two-fold approach to supporting women. Firstly, women volunteers, both young and old, are best placed in providing humanitarian assistance to their communities, and in particular to other women. Secondly, experience has shown that, when engaged, women more easily find support systems, which help them build the confidence necessary to face their day-to-day problems.

Mr. President,

As stressed in the UN Secretary-General’s “Education First Initiative”, the importance of ensuring access to quality education for all is widely agreed upon. The essential question that remains is: What kind of education do we want to provide? What should be its purpose and hence contents, in terms of the over-arching human values that we want education to instil?

The IFRC strongly believe that education - in school or non-formal setting - is not only about developing cognition or knowledge, but also about instilling and nurturing human values, as well as the social and life skills that enable individuals to act and interact harmoniously and constructively.

If we wish to work towards a world free of discrimination, exclusion and violence, the IFRC believes that education must instil skills like empathy, non-judgement, active listening, critical thinking, non-violent communication, collaborative negotiation and mediation. When “touching the heart”, education fosters a genuine appreciation of and respect for diversity. Education is therefore essentially very much about “learning to be and learning to live together”.

But how to be non-violent in violent situations? How not to resort to violence in fragile environments? We believe that the answers start with acquiring the ability of “feeling yourself”, analysing situations from the humanitarian perspective and then engaging in constructive actions. It has been proven that application of these skills in fact reduces the likelihood of us resorting to violence in response to violent behaviours of others.

Acquiring an ability to engage in a constructive dialogue and respect diversity lessens the chance that children and youth will engage in discriminatory behaviour. It also reduces the likelihood of them resorting to violence to deal with differences or solve tensions. This snowball effect of education positively impacts society as a whole by reducing the well proven social and economic costs that violence creates and by creating safer and more inclusive communities. Family life, school, media and community interactions all constitute potential educational platforms to promote a culture of non-violence and peace.

Mr. President,

Lastly, in addition to values and skills-based education to address the underlying causes of violence, we strongly encourage an increase and strengthening of volunteering opportunities. Volunteering, which we consider as non-formal education, is at the heart of community building and a catalyst for social cohesion. Beyond the benefits which I have outlined earlier for women and girls, it is an excellent way for individuals to be contributing to their community through working together with people from diverse backgrounds, cultures, and religions. It strengthens community support systems and thus increases resilience and reduces vulnerability to violent actions.

Mr. President,

In conclusion, we believe that the cumulative effect of non-cognitive approaches within skills-and values-based education, combined with volunteering, positively impacts society as a whole by reducing the well-proven social and economic impacts that violence creates and by creating safer and more inclusive communities.

Thank you, Mr. President.