

The development of the co-ordination and planning of Voluntary Societies' assistance within official preparations for relief work during the military stage in liberated territories in Europe

1. In July of 1942 the Post War Relief and Commodity Policy Department, then a section of the British Ministry of Economic Warfare, instigated discussions among certain British Voluntary Societies with a view to the formation of a co-ordinating Council of Voluntary Societies interested in relief work where fighting had ended. These discussions were held under the aegis of the Joint War Organisation of the British Red Cross and Order of St. John. A constitution was drawn up for a "Consultative Council of Voluntary Societies for the Relief of suffering and for Aiding Social Recovery," and the Red Cross indicated that they did not wish to provide the Chairman for the Council, but would prefer an outside Chairman not connected with any one member Society. Sir John Kennedy of the Red Cross continued, however, to act as Chairman after the formal establishment of the Council until November 1942. At that time an outside Chairman was found in Sir William Goode, who had been Director of the British Relief Mission after the last war but was not in this war officially connected with relief planning. The Joint War Organisation continued, of course, to be represented on the Council - by members of both the Red Cross and St. John. Some months later a Secretary was appointed to take the place of a member of the Red Cross Headquarters staff who had been acting as Secretary until then. An office was established for the Council separate from both the Red Cross and the Relief Department. The Relief Department, which had moved into the Board of Trade, had from the beginning sent an observer to the Meetings of the Council. It was agreed, however, that this observer should act only in a liaison and not in an executive capacity. Thus the principle was established of a Council of Voluntary Societies which, while working under the auspices of the official Departments of State, was a self-governing body with power to make its own recommendations for the work of its member Societies within official planning.

2. By its constitution the Council limited its membership to "British Societies which have national counterparts in more than one other country outside the British Commonwealth or to British branches of international Societies or to international Societies which for reasons of communication or emergency of war are largely conducted from their British branches." Thus the principle of international co-operation in relief and rehabilitation was clearly envisaged from the start. Many Societies had in mind that the revival and support of their fellow organisations in the countries of occupied Europe would be one of the most valuable tasks they could perform. In this way the work of relief could be done in partnership between those countries with relief goods and those in need of them, and as part of the wider rehabilitation of territories liberated from Axis rule.

It soon became necessary, however, to associate other Voluntary organisations, e.g. Catholic Women's League, Church Army, English Speaking Union, which did not come within these limiting terms of membership, in a Standing Conference. The Council and Conference, each consisting of about twenty Societies, are presided over by the same Chairman and share the same secretariat.

3. The aims of the Council, which subsequently changed its name to "Council of British Societies for Relief Abroad" (C.O.B.S.R.A.) have been to pool the