

Community Based Disaster Preparedness Red Cross/Red Crescent Approach and Cases

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Context – International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement

The General Assembly of the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies in 1999 adopted the document "Strategy for 2010" which guides the International Federation with its 179 member National Societies in the coming decade of the 21 century. The Strategy 2010 defines a reviewed mission statement;

**to improve the lives of vulnerable people
by mobilizing the power of humanity**

The International Federation also defined its strategic direction; National Society programmes are responsive to local vulnerability and focused on the areas where they can have greatest impact. The collective focus will be on promoting the Movement's Fundamental Principles and humanitarian values, disaster response, disaster preparedness and health and care in the community.

Community based disaster preparedness – its rationale

The rationale for the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies to become involved in community based Disaster Preparedness activities is based on the recognition that people in high risk areas have often developed their own coping mechanisms and strategies to reduce the impact of disaster. It is important to appreciate this local knowledge and resources and to build on them in order to improve people's capacity to withstand the impact of disasters. Furthermore, the inhabitants of disaster prone communities will always be the first to respond to a disaster. Furthermore it is not only the "big" disasters that destroy life and livelihoods. Accumulated losses from small floods, droughts and landslides can exceed the losses from big disasters and contribute significantly to increased vulnerability at the local level. These disasters attract little media attention and communities are often left on their own to cope with the destruction. This provides another reason to invest in community based Disaster Preparedness.

Approach

Through its network of 179 locally based National Societies the International Federation is in a particularly good position to reach communities in high-risk areas. National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies extend activities to the whole territory of a country through their local branch network. While recognized fundamentally as an emergency response organization a great majority of National Societies run activities that address everyday risks of communities through programmes such as health, social welfare and first aid activities. Through these and other similar programmes National Societies have developed a network of volunteers who have excellent knowledge of local conditions and often come from the communities themselves. Preparedness activities can be integrated into everyday activities and thus be built on the knowledge and capacity of volunteers to interact with communities. This approach can enable the organization to maintain a structure for disaster preparedness and response that is useful and sustainable during 'normal' times.

Cases

The Disaster Preparedness activities of each National Society vary depending on such factors as type and frequency of disasters, institutional capacities and the mandate vis a vis other actors in the country. There are many examples of community based approaches relevant to disaster preparedness and response. These include Community Based Self Reliance in the Pacific which merges community disaster preparedness with community based first aid. There are integrated community programmes in the Americas region such as the Camelote and Golfo Fonseca projects. Others are described as community based disaster management programmes. The following

examples illustrate some of the Community Based Disaster Preparedness activities of two National Societies within the Asia Region. These are chosen as particularly successful models of the approach.

Bangladesh

The Cyclone Preparedness Programme (CPP) of the Bangladesh Red Crescent Society (BDRCS) disseminates cyclone early warning messages through its extensive radio network (143 stations) to districts along the coastal belt. 33,000 volunteers deliver the messages to most at risk villages and assist especially the weakest members of communities to seek refuge in cyclone shelters. In total there are 1,600 shelters across the coastal region, 149 of them built by the BDRCS. These shelters are laid out to take up to 1,500 people and can serve as schools and community centres during "normal" times. Cyclone Preparedness Volunteers also get involved in rescue, First Aid activities and the distribution of relief items. Outside the 4 months cyclone season they run public awareness activities such as staging educational dramas and simulation exercises. Increasingly volunteers also contribute to longer- term mitigation activities such as planting palm trees as wind breaks along the coast.

As the whole of Bangladesh is disaster prone the Bangladesh Red Crescent Society supported by the International Federation has initiated community based Disaster Preparedness activities also in the rest of the country. In the recent large scale floods in 1998 local voluntary CBDP squads supported the local communities' own efforts to cope with the floods long before anybody from the capital or other major cities could reach the disaster areas.

Philippines

The Philippines National Red Cross has been especially successful in involving high-risk communities in Disaster Preparedness work. The Integrated Community Disaster Planning Programme seeks to increase the capacity of communities to prepare for and cope with natural disasters such as typhoons, volcanic eruptions and floods but also with everyday emergencies such as health related hazards. The highly participatory process involves both people as well as local government units who are in charge of the overall community development process. This ensures that preparedness and mitigation strategies are shared with authorities, later on included in official community development plans and thus sustained. The programme conducts Disaster Preparedness training, which familiarizes people with the identification of local hazards, mapping, community organization and team building. Supported by this training communities develop Hazard Maps and Disaster Action Plans. They also form Disaster Action Teams as the operational focal points for Disaster Preparedness and response. Disaster Action Plans identify suitable community preparedness projects. According to the findings of participatory assessments these may include: health education and training (First Aid, Home nursing), physical improvements to the community infrastructure (footpaths, footbridges, water and sanitation) and income generating projects to sustain preparedness activities.

Successes – Lesson learnt

From the two cases above, I would like to share some of lessons that have contributed to making two programmes successful.

- Collaboration with local governments has been a prerequisite for the programme success and long-term viability.
- This in turn helps the Red Cross/Red Crescent to advocate for stronger preparedness and mitigation measures to be incorporated in local public land use planning and annual budgeting.
- Red Cross/Red Crescent hazard mapping has helped to capture local knowledge of natural hazards and transfer this information to municipal planners for incorporation into land use planning.
- Mitigation is not just about natural disasters. Some measures are health-related.
- Well-trained volunteers, who could successfully assist the population during warnings and disasters and reduce loss of lives, were a key to success.
- Vast network of volunteers helped to transform from a "project based" approach into a long-term, ongoing operation and to scale up from a community-based initiative to a system large enough to protect all those living in areas at risk.

Conclusion

Community Based initiatives in these two examples have made an important contribution to improving the lives of the most vulnerable in these countries. The programmes have provided communities with the basic tools to protect themselves and contribute to local preparedness in a participatory way. The National Society's preparedness to respond and risk reduction is provided as the first line of action through these programmes. In an increasingly complex world of disasters, the Red Cross & Red Crescent Societies is in a unique position to mobilize its network of community volunteers as well as build its National response capacities.

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