

Communications

People need information

The global climate is changing and the past no longer explains the present. Traditional knowledge is increasingly unreliable because our experience of what has happened before does not necessarily help us prepare for today and tomorrow.

Progress in science and technology, though, has brought remarkable growth in the development of forecasts. From predictions of shifts in rainfall patterns to short-term tropical cyclone tracks, they are vital new tools in efforts to reduce the impact of natural hazards.

But the existence of predictions is not enough. They need to be *communicated*, and that is a challenge for all, especially in poor countries or among poor communities in rich ones. People must both understand and trust the warnings they are given. Events may be inevitable but those at risk need to know that they can do something about them.

Communicating on climate change is crucial for disaster risk reduction. From the Red Cross/Red Crescent perspective three important messages need to be conveyed.

- The risk of climate-related disasters is increasing
- The poor, the elderly and the sick are disproportionately vulnerable
- We *can* prepare

Providing information to people who need it can alleviate suffering as much as relief items such as food, water, medicine or shelter can. The need for it is just as great. Climate change is a complex issue and it must be explained in simple and effective terms – in order to engage National Society staff and volunteers, and to mobilize the communities in which they work.

If climate is changing, the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement has to change the way it communicates.

Success of effective communication

The first communications challenge may well be *within* the National Society: to convince leadership that climate change is something it should be concerned with.

Says Ethel Kaimila, Malawi Red Cross programme coordinator, “When we started communicating climate change we did it internally, mainly to an audience of senior managers. How was it going to affect our programming, our humanitarian work? Only when we’re comfortable talking about it in the National Society can we move on to address external audiences.”

Now, for example, the Malawi Red Cross is working with the national meteorological service to produce communication materials on climate change that can help often illiterate subsistence farmers to understand the implications of changing rainfall patterns on agriculture.

A Mozambique Red Cross disaster preparedness programme contributed to the design and implementation of a cyclone warning system set up by the Mozambican government. It began by asking communities about traditional forecasting methods, and sharing information about new ways to make predictions. Then a recognizable system was set up, based on radios, colour-coded flags, and whistles for broadcasting alerts. Escape routes and other options were discussed and made known at community level. During subsequent intense cyclones, this process greatly contributed to minimizing human losses.

Successful action requires effective communication.

Video in the picture

Information provided at community level needs to be in a form that is accessible and useful. Videos may help if combined with participatory approaches.

Community adaptation is essentially about change in human behaviour. Audiovisual tools – which are increasingly affordable – can help communicate scientifically complex issues in simple ways, with reliable accuracy, and using approaches that can inspire and motivate, sometimes in surprising ways.

After a workshop on flooding and climate change with Mozambican farmers, participants watched a four-minute video from a similar workshop held in a flood-prone Argentinean shanty town. Having seen the film on a laptop screen, a woman farmer said to the workshop facilitator, “I had followed your explanations of global warming, but didn’t fully believe you...like everybody else I thought it was God punishing us, or that the ancestors were angry... and we can’t do much about it.

“But now in the film I see that white women the other end of the world have the same problem we have! So maybe it is true that the global rainfall is changing, and if I can do something about it I will.”

The video had motivated her to consider changing crops to adapt to different climatic conditions.

How to communicate better

The following steps should guide National Societies in how to communicate about climate change.

Step 1: Learn about observed and projected changes in your region

Get a better sense of how rainfall, temperature, winds, storms and other weather patterns have been changing or are expected to change. See “*Getting Started*”.

- Reach out to people and institutions that have some level of expertise. You

are the link. Your role is to interpret their knowledge and repackage it in ways that can be understood by those who need to learn about this issue.

- See how other institutions have tried to communicate similar messages. Seek inspiration and advice, but remember your communications should focus on addressing the humanitarian consequences of climate change.

Step 2: Define your target audience and the transformation you seek

After you have learned what the humanitarian implications of climate change will be for your country, you need to identify your audience. You will need different communication approaches for staff, volunteers, communities or government agencies. Make sure you understand the perspectives and priorities of your audience.

Identify what you want your target group to think or do differently because of your message on climate change. For example:

- Focusing on volunteers in disaster management, you may want to highlight the need to be prepared for new threats
- Targeting policy-makers you may want to include your National Society in the design and implementation of government policies and programmes

Step 3: Tailor the contents and format of your message to the target audience

Bear in mind that there are trade-offs between complexity and clarity.

- Keep the key message accurate but simple – the audience will be more likely to understand, remember and respond
- Keep the message as accessible as possible. It is better to inspire curiosity and the desire to learn more in the audience, than bore and confuse them with complicated terms and difficult theory

Enhance credibility by building on the signals of climate change that people have already noticed. Use the voice of peers and other people trusted by the audience. In rural communities, a video with comments

from farmers will probably be more effective than a video with comments from climate experts.

Consider the options for communication, such as: oral presentations, brochures, posters, radio, video, drama.

Step 4: Develop communication products

Remember people are bombarded with messages competing for their attention, from government information to marketing campaigns. Your climate change message will not get through unless it captures hearts and minds in your target audience.

- Be creative: use innovative approaches, through humour, perhaps, or use of surprising tools to illustrate key concepts. Drama, puppet shows, art competitions, song and dance present some of the opportunities, and youth volunteers are often full of imagination.
- Be playful with language and images. A Cayman Island volunteer proposed the slogan “Climate change: It’s strange!” It is funny, easy to remember, and captures the essence of the problem

This phase requires several rounds of testing, correction and reformulation. Whenever possible, engage the target audience in the development of communication products. Ensure the message is understood and has the desired effect.

Step 5: Disseminate the message

Communication about climate change risks should be part of the National Society’s general communication. But make sure the product you use is delivered to your target audience. Identify potential partners in the dissemination effort. Volunteers may be the key messengers to deliver to their communities. Because they are part them, they are well placed to translate messages in a way people understand and can relate to. Private sector, government and civil society partners may assist you in using existing channels – radio and TV, distribution in retail outlets, special events. Check the success or failure of your efforts

and adjust your product if necessary for use in the future.

Find more information at

www.climatecentre.org

Examples of short films can be found at www.climatecentre.org/site/films-and-presentations

“Only when we’re comfortable talking about climate change internally in the National Society can we move on to addressing external audiences.”, Ethel Kaimila, Malawi.