

## Community risk reduction

### Containing menaces old and new

Reducing the risks that natural hazards bring is a Red Cross/Red Crescent priority around the world and something National Societies are uniquely placed to pursue because of their widespread presence at the community level.

Of course, community-based disaster reduction (CBDR) is about more than climate change. But whether measures are aimed at climate-related hazards or earthquakes, or tsunamis, or volcanic eruptions, is immaterial. Steps taken to contain an older menace can help contain new or increasing ones for which extreme weather or warming are responsible.

It was not climate change that caused the Viet Nam Red Cross to start planting mangrove trees along the seashore in 1994. Deforestation had robbed large coastal tracts of the mangrove they once had and exposed coastal inhabitants to the ravages of typhoons and storms. But as sea temperatures and levels rise, more severe meteorological hazards can be expected and the natural defences restored by crucial community effort are more important than ever.

“It isn’t that climate change alters the nature of our risk-reduction activities,” says Viet Nam Red Cross senior officer, Nguyen Hung Thang, “but it does raise matters of priority, particularly at the community level.”

### *Ways to diminish the dangers*

In 2008, some 213 million people were affected by natural disasters, and most disasters are increasing in number and intensity.

People’s options are limited. They can run. They can wait in despair for the worst to happen. Or they can reduce the impact of

what is likely to happen, as Bangladesh Red Crescent volunteers are showing villagers in the low-lying, flood-prone northern plains of their country. Already monsoon rains bring heavy floods and they could become bigger and more frequent as climate changes. The steps the volunteers advocate may seem modest at first but in community terms are hugely significant.

Planting trees along river banks and roadsides can help check the force of the flooding, help to improve the environment, and help a community not only to survive but develop.

The root spread stabilizes the earth and helps prevent the erosion of topsoil, and trees provide sustainable income. When mature, they are felled and replaced by fresh saplings, the wood being sold to enhance community coffers. Most importantly, though, villages are less open to disaster, more resilient, better able to cope with adversity.

Across the country, Red Crescent programmes are benefiting village after village, varying according to community needs. All of them come with a message: no matter where you are and how huge the hazards, there are always ways to diminish their menace.

### Preparing for the unexpected

The Nicaraguan Red Cross has promoted preparation for the unexpected since the start of its climate change programme. The wisdom of this was seen when 2007’s Hurricane Felix scythed its way through the Mosquito Coast. After Hurricane Dean, it was the region’s second Category-5 storm in less than a month – the first time on record that two of that force had made landfall in a single hurricane season.

Severe storms have hit the country frequently over the past decade and the National Society is helping communities face up to the clearly increasing threats.

The Vulnerability and Capacity Assessment (VCA, *see below*) – a method by which

communities themselves can assess and address the hazards they face – has been of enormous assistance. Having mapped the dangers, people analyse why they are vulnerable to them. Then they develop action plans. VCAs in Nicaragua have led to self-organization, with communities aware not only of how to deal with storms but other hazards they encounter.

## How to integrate climate change

Helping communities reduce their own vulnerability is more urgent than ever. That does not mean telling them what to do but facilitating a dialogue about their concerns, empowering them to define their own priorities.

A key guiding principle should be to **keep it simple**. All you may need to do is ask people if they have noticed unusual weather, briefly explain why climate is changing globally, and help them decide on local responses.

Keeping it simple is even more important because a key challenge with CBDR is to reach a large number of communities. The approach *must* be simple enough to be applied by our local volunteers in ways communities can understand.

### Step 1: Collecting and analysing general background information

See *Getting Started 'How to' section*.

### Step 2: Assessing priorities

Using the background information gathered, assess priority areas to work on within the National Society's overall disaster-management context (see *Disaster Management 'How to' section, Steps 1 and 2*).

The prioritization should be guided by, among other things, the way climate change is affecting particular parts of the country.

### Step 3: Conducting VCAs

Integrating climate change into VCAs can be done very simply. The team preparing

the VCA should decide beforehand how basic or complex the integration of climate change should be. Below are three options to choose from:

#### OPTION A (BASIC): Getting additional information from the community

Make sure the VCA asks the right questions to get information about unusual climate phenomena and trends. Consider a number of VCA tools that examine trends, particularly:

- *Seasonal calendar*. Ask whether seasons have been changing.
- *Historical calendar*. Ask about systematic changes in temperature, rainfall and other weather events; and occurrences of "strange" phenomena.
- *Risk map (or transect walk)*. Ask people to describe not only the current situation but also how it has been changing.
- *Questionnaires and focus group discussions*. Add special questions such as, "How did that weather affect you, your family and your community?"

#### OPTION A + B (INTERMEDIATE): Briefing VCA facilitators on climate change

Ensure that facilitators are familiar with climate change concepts, this could include use of video resources, a climate expert or integrating it into training manuals. Using this option facilitators aren't expected to explain climate change to communities.

#### OPTION A + B + C (ADVANCED): Bringing the knowledge to communities

Through careful training, facilitators must feel confident in explaining the concept of climate change and relating it to the community's context. The important part is to be careful not to over-emphasise climate change. The aim is for communities to understand that the risks are changing and that they can take action to reduce the risks they face.

#### *Analysing the results of VCA's*

The team should analyse the community's information, particularly documenting the way they have described new risks or trends in weather patterns. Compare community observations with the scientific

information from your society's national climate-risk assessment. Assess whether risk-reduction strategies identified in the VCA will improve resilience to climate change trends suggested by scientific reports.

#### **Step 4: Implementing CBDR**

The VCA may already have resulted in enhanced awareness and disaster risk reduction by the communities themselves. It may also help plan further Red Cross/Red Crescent material assistance – such as communication equipment or provision of seedlings for reforestation – or improved community processes, such as plans for disaster management. Follow-up may involve partnership with NGOs and local government, and advocacy regarding local and national policies, for instance on evacuation shelters or building codes.

#### **Step 5: Evaluation**

Risks are continuously changing so it is important to evaluate the National Society's CBDR programmes regularly. Evaluation should be a continuous process.

- If new threats or diseases have occurred, there may be a need to update the priorities.
- VCA information has a special role. Local communities may report changing risks that no one else has picked up.
- Return regularly to assessed communities to check on follow-up and maintain a dialogue on risks.
- Document information on VCAs as well as the experiences from actual CBDR programmes. The more such examples are shared, the faster we can expand our coverage.

Find the complete modules in the Red Cross/Red Crescent Climate Guide, [www.climatecentre.org](http://www.climatecentre.org). Main source of general information on CBDR and VCAs is the International Federation's website, [www.ifrc.org](http://www.ifrc.org).

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