Disaster Management

Rapid change in how we manage disaster

When disaster strikes the Red Cross and Red Crescent moves as fast as it can, to save life and assist the people affected. National Societies prepare for future events as well, reducing human vulnerability to hazards that can be expected.

But what if the future is radically different from the past? And in ways that cannot confidently be predicted? What if 21st-century climate change impacts mean not just more serious disasters but also unfamiliar ones?

The whole field of disaster management – humanitarian action both before and after an event – may be changing rapidly.

Due to climate change, National Societies will face greater demands on their capacities: more and larger operations, disasters of a different nature. They may face increased health risks, diminished food security and water supply, and even increased migration and displacement. Climate change will create complex disasters as well.

But climate change also brings opportunities. It can and must act as a catalyst for better disaster management.

Early warning, early action

We can save more lives and reduce suffering further if we can act before a disaster.

We have known for decades that it is much more effective to evacuate people before a flood than to rescue them during one, or to provide relief to its victims. Helping farmers find alternative livelihoods is more effective than food aid when harvests fail.

The Red Cross and Red Crescent is investing more in people-centred early-warning systems so that early action – preparedness, prevention and mitigation – rises to the challenge of extreme weather events. Early action depends on all levels, from global to local, understanding and communicating early warning.

Advances in science and technology provide access to a wide range of early warnings. We can understand better what is happening – and what is likely to happen. We can anticipate the threats much better.

But an early warning has no effect unless there is early action. (*See the International Federation handbook 'Early warning>Early action'*.)

Early action works best when it spans a range of timescales, not just providing a more rapid response to a disaster but also anticipating it days, hours, months, years and even decades in advance. That bridging of timescales is the key to early warning, early action.

Kenya safeguards livelihood

Climatic extremes overlap in Kenya, then become embroiled in human factors like deforestation and migration to produce virtually permanent disaster.

"In months that used to be rainy there may not be rain," says Abdishakur Othowai Abdulla, Kenya Red Cross drought project manager. "The winters that used to be cold are no longer cold. When it rains it floods and that kills people. When it doesn't rain there's a drought and that kills people too."

Part of the National Society's response is a "de-stocking" project. During drought, the Red Cross buys cattle in poor condition and slaughters them for meat, enabling farmers to save the money they earn. Healthy cattle are then sold back to farmers once the drought abates.

"The traditional Red Cross role is blood, ambulances, giving people blankets after

disasters," Othowai Abdulla says. "But we also have to move to safeguarding livelihoods as well as lives."

How to integrate changing risks

Climate change is not a wholly new or separate issue but an additional factor on top of many that determine disaster risk. We must, therefore, integrate the changing threats into regular disaster management operations. Here are four steps.

Step 1: Collecting general background information
Understand the changing risks that your country may be facing. This is part of the national climate risk assessment (*see Getting Started 'How to' section, step 3*). Where possible, such information could also include country risk maps identifying hazards and vulnerable areas, and Vulnerability and Capacity Assessments (VCA) carried out with local communities.

Step 2: Assessing priorities
Most National Societies' disaster management strategy will include prioritization of resources and target areas. Climate change should be factored in. To start with, check the following questions using the information from *Step 1*.

On a strategic level, are you:
- Prepared for all the disasters that can be expected?
- Prepared for them in all parts of the country?
- Focusing on the most vulnerable groups?
- Aware of new diseases that may arise during disasters?
- Aware of new threats to food security?
- Aware of new potential conflicts, for instance due to increasing pressure on natural resources?

On an operational level, are you:
- Making use of short-term weather forecasts, seasonal rainfall forecasts, and long-term climate change projections?
- Including the changing risks in training activities?
- Informing communities about the changing risks and involving them in preparedness programmes?

These questions should be discussed in regular planning meetings involving the key DM staff.

Step 3: Action
- *Enhancing preparedness to respond*. Response capacity may need to be adjusted to account for new and rising risks. Activities should be planned using regular National Society and International Federation tools such as the Disaster Management Information System (DMIS) and your national climate-risk assessment.

- *Enhancing disaster risk reduction*. Often, risk reduction is rooted at community level (*see Community Risk Reduction*) although larger programmes have also proven successful. Solutions similar to those already used will often be effective for climate change. Keep in mind that vulnerability is frequently caused by underlying factors – such as people living in unsuitable places – and addressing them can help reduce impacts.

- *Enhancing food security*. Climate change affects people's livelihoods and food security. Food security programmes should take account of the way climate change may affect the rural population. Simple solutions may be available such as drought-resistant crops.

- *Enhancing early warning*. Use weather forecasts better, at the National Society planning level and within communities at risk, ensuring that people really understand the information. Be mindful of the chain of efficient early warning. In the face of rising uncertainty about the weather, those activities are of increasing importance. Make sure you are aware of forecasts for your country.

- *Enhancing advocacy and partnerships*. Effective DM requires close cooperation with governments and many other actors (*see Dialogues*).

- *Enhancing awareness-raising among vulnerable groups*. Raising awareness of new risks can be a key role of National Societies using their networks and trust at community level. Methods can include drama, school programmes and media (*see Communications*).

- *Capturing local information*. Listen to local perceptions and observations of changes in the weather (*see Community Risk Reduction*). Such information can be an invaluable planning tool.

- *Enhanced training*. Regular DM training for staff and volunteers needs to cover the way risks are changing. *See the Climate Centre's website for resources.*

Step 4: Evaluation
At least once a year, National Societies should evaluate the risks they face and possible need to update plans, start new activities, and recruit more volunteers. Consider using information on climate trends in contingency planning. National Societies should also document success stories to share with others.

Find the complete modules in the Red Cross/Red Crescent Climate Guide, www.climatecentre.org