

Getting Started

Rethinking the implications

The past no longer determines our future. It is time for the entire international community to understand and accept that traditional ways of thinking about disaster response no longer apply. More frequent floods, droughts, storms and heatwaves, sometimes in new places, will make it harder for poor people to pick up the pieces, and will stretch the resources of aid agencies further and further.

That does not mean that we need new programmes. Preparing for, reducing the risk of, and responding to natural hazards is what the Red Cross and Red Crescent already does. The new reality requires only that climate change be mainstreamed into disaster management, health and care, and other weather-sensitive areas of work such as food security or water and sanitation. Solutions may lie in early-warning systems, storm-resistant housing, or in alternative crops that can thrive in soils turned saline by the seepage of rising sea levels or coastal floods. Or in commonplace measures: educating children on how to behave in emergencies, evacuation plans, action teams, escape routes, disaster calendars, planting trees on hills and shorelines against landslides and surges. Many good strategies for climate change adaptation are indistinguishable from conventional risk management. The difference lies in the process. With changing risks, we have to rethink what can go wrong, and we must remain proactive. Otherwise the progress we have made in reducing death from disaster could be placed in jeopardy.

How to get started?

Here are some first steps in coming to terms with the rising risks of climate change and the implications for the work of National Societies.

Step 1: A first orientation

Organize a workshop with staff at national headquarters about the potential risks of climate change for your country and how these might affect the National Society's mission and programmes. One or two national climate change experts can be invited to make a presentation.

Step 2: Designate a focal point

It is helpful to appoint a climate change focal point within the National Society to follow up on the outcomes of the workshop, particularly by

- Building a network on climate change – such as with state departments of meteorology, environment and health, water authorities and NGOs. Even dialogue with older contacts – for example, the national disaster management office – may need to review the nature of changing risk and opportunities for improved climate-risk management
- Staying up to date with relevant information, in-country meetings and initiatives
- Liaising with Red Cross/Red Crescent colleagues interested in climate change
- Raising awareness within the organization on how risks may be changing

Bigger National Societies may have several focal points: one for health, one for disaster management, for example. The focal point may also organize a small working group for advice and feedback.

Step 3: Analysis and assessment of priorities

Prepare a national climate risk assessment, documenting a broad analysis of climate change implications for the country and the National Society. Look more deeply into available information about the risks, both in the country and the region. See the Climate Centre's website for templates, examples and guidance from the *'Preparedness for Climate Change Programme'*.

This assessment could be distributed to key society staff – with a briefer, simpler version for volunteers and field staff – and, as an advocacy document, to external stakeholders including donors, government and NGOs.

Step 4: Action: Prioritize the climate change risks that should be addressed first, or the programmes and branches that are most vulnerable to them. From here on climate change should be addressed through regular programmes, integrated into disaster management, health and so on, as well as into advocacy and community outreach.

What do you need to consider?

Science: The language that experts sometimes use can be scientific and complicated but don't be intimidated. People need to be challenged to explain things clearly and simply to you. Keep asking the experts questions. You are the expert on Red Cross/Red Crescent responsibilities and if the weather is changing you are the one who must understand what that means for your work.

Language: The national climate risk assessment (mentioned in Step 3 above) should be written in your own words with simple terminology to make it accessible to others. This could be distributed to key national society staff – with a briefer, simpler version for volunteers and field staff – and, as an advocacy document, to external stakeholders including donors, government and NGOs. Making a short video can be a very efficient tool in getting messages across.

Empowering the people: It is vital that communities understand the new challenges around them. Changes in climate patterns are even undermining the traditional knowledge on which livelihood is often based, in agriculture for example. See '*Community Risk Reduction*'.

Working together: Communities can be better prepared and more resilient, particularly when governments, knowledge institutes and aid agencies work together.

Focal Points

Bigger National Societies may have several focal points: one for health, one for disaster management, for example. The focal point may also organize a small working group for advice and feedback.

A climate change focal point can help prioritizing new climate risks that should be addressed, or identify programmes and branches that are most vulnerable to them.

Discuss this with all the relevant departments and staff to make sure these risks will be addressed in a way that would fit the existing programme.

As a climate change focal point you might find your self bridging departments and programmes.

Ground-breaking work by the Samoa Red Cross has shown that adapting to climate change in the Pacific is not just about building expensive sea walls. There are many low-cost options a National Society can assist with.

Crucially it can ensure the voices of vulnerable people are heard and practical risk-reduction steps are taken. Getting started, the Samoan Red Cross discussed internally what climate change was, what that meant for the population, and how the National Society could assist in addressing it. Then it sat down with community leaders, government departments and other potential partners to see how it could be placed within disaster management and health and care.

It has shown the way itself, at community level, by developing an integrated approach to raising awareness and reducing vulnerability: linking climate change to other key programmes such as first aid, community health and disaster preparedness.

Teams of volunteers conduct community assessments through household surveys.

They discuss with people the risks they face, their health and well-being, livelihoods, the availability and quality of food, and access to basic services such as running water and health care.

Participatory assessments of the baseline data follow, communities are helped to prioritize issues and – in terms of climate change – determine what can be done to minimize potential impacts.

Because the Red Cross cannot always meet all the priorities itself, it undertakes essential advocacy, bringing unmet needs to the attention of other stakeholders, particularly through its network of partners and a place on various national committees.

How important that is has been seen in its dialogue with the Samoan Water Authority. An increasing shortage of water has been a key concern to emerge from community assessment. Samoa's weather records – some of the oldest in the Pacific – show a steady increase in temperature and a decrease in rainfall in some parts of the country. As a consequence of Red Cross advocacy, the water authority has intervened to bring running water to communities most in need.

Further information

This factsheet is a brief summary from the first chapter in the Red Cross/ Red Crescent Climate Guide. More information on how to get started, including updates and links to relevant documents and sources, checklists, templates and best practice examples are available on www.climatecentre.org.

Find the complete modules in the Red Cross/Red Crescent Climate Guide and in guidance notes on the Preparedness for Climate Change Programme at www.climatecentre.org.

“Climate change is something new for many...They don't have a deep understanding.”, George Baragamu, Solomon Islands.