

Vietnam Red Cross Society

Preparing for climate change in Vietnam

Location: Hanoi, Vietnam, 2007

What does a changing climate mean for vulnerable people in Vietnam, and how could the Red Cross help to enhance the resilience of those people?

The Vietnam Red Cross has been learning by doing since 2003. By understanding the projected impact of global warming on the occurrence of extreme weather events, and adjusting disaster management programs accordingly, the Vietnam Red Cross aims to contribute to safer communities for people living in disaster prone areas.

So what's the problem?

The science is clear: it is very likely that global warming is leading to an increase in weather extremes like heat waves and heavy rainfall. It is likely that droughts will occur more often, and that tropical cyclones (typhoons and hurricanes) will become more intense (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, Fourth Assessment Report, 2007).

Vietnam has always been suffering from extreme weather events and is struck by typhoons annually. Strong winds and sea surges cause death and destruction along the long and low-lying coastal area, while heavy rains hit the mountainous hinterland and river deltas with floods and landslides. In other times of the year, parts of these very same areas suffer from prolonged periods of drought.

Understanding how to anticipate and reduce the rising climate risks is of utmost importance for the Vietnam Red Cross (together with the Vietnamese government and other aid organisations) to succeed in its efforts to improve the lives of the most vulnerable people.

Step 0. Where did it all begin?

In 2003 the Vietnam Red Cross was one of the first national societies of the Red Cross/Red Crescent to start a pilot project to integrate climate change into its existing disaster preparedness programs. At that time the global debate about climate change mainly focused on how to limit the greenhouse gas emissions that cause global warming (climate change mitigation). There was very limited experience with reducing people's vulnerability to climate change and extreme weather events (climate change adaptation). The Vietnam Red Cross joined forces with the Netherlands Red Cross and the Red Cross/Red Crescent Climate Centre to start learning by doing in order to find the right approach.

Step 1. Raising the awareness of Vietnam Red Cross staff

Why should the Red Cross be concerned about climate change and climate variability? At the time this was an essential and very new question that had to be clarified to all Red Cross staff before taking any other action. In meetings and workshops the Vietnam Red Cross

learned more about climate change, its link to the occurrence of extreme weather events, and the relation to the organisation's core mission: to support vulnerable people. These activities provided the necessary background and were needed to build the confidence and capacities of the staff on this issue.

Step 2. Raising a voice among disaster preparedness stakeholders

Through consultations with Vietnam's meteorological institute, several other climate experts, and existing partners like the government agency for disaster preparedness, the Vietnam Red Cross learned a lot about the projected impacts of climate change. The main findings were summarised in a publication, which together with a national seminar on climate change and disaster preparedness was used to advocate the issue and the need for action among relevant NGOs and governmental institutions.

The Vietnam Red Cross and the Netherlands Red Cross delegation in Vietnam started to raise their voice to underline the importance of integrating climate change projections into existing policies and programs.

To explain the value of climate risk reduction to a wider audience, two documentaries were produced. Both were broadcasted several times on national television.



Planting trees will reduce sand-drift that threatens the rice fields so many people depend on for food and income.

Step 3. Making people aware of their capacity to reduce their vulnerability

The Vietnam Red Cross has access to an extensive network of trainers throughout the country. They are specialised in raising awareness among vulnerable communities, on hazards, disasters and the importance of disaster risk reduction. During the climate change pilot program, the Vietnam Red Cross integrated climate change into its disaster preparedness training modules.

Information about climate change and extreme weather events has been included in education and training materials ever since.

Step 4. Getting into action

Reducing vulnerability starts with self-awareness on vulnerabilities and opportunities to reduce risks. The Vietnam Red Cross has extensive experience with participatory assessments in vulnerable communities, how to consider people's vulnerability to disasters, and how to increase people's resilience. The notion of climate change has been integrated into the assessment to increase the awareness of the people living in the pilot communities. Based on the outcomes of the assessments, the Red Cross supported the implementation of small scale disaster risk reduction measures, prioritised by the communities themselves. This resulted in a wide variety of measures, such as the construction of search and rescue centres, the training of search and rescue teams to coordinate rescue operations, the strengthening of existing loudspeaker systems for early warning, the planting of trees and the construction of dams to protect the (agricultural) land against strong winds and sand-drift or salt-water intrusion.

Lessons learned

- Climate change needs to be part of the disaster management strategies of the Red Cross, to ensure strong disaster risk reduction programs.
- The best way to address climate change is to integrate it into the existing disaster preparedness programs. The Red Cross is now engaged in a more systematic consultation with the national meteorological office and climate change experts, and using that knowledge for more effective risk management activities. Consideration of climate change typically does not change the nature of the risk reduction activities, such as establishment of search and rescue teams, planting of trees and improved early warning systems. However, climate change clearly raises the priority of such disaster risk reduction initiatives, within the Red Cross, among other actors, and particularly at the community level.
- The strength of the Vietnam Red Cross is to initiate and stimulate community dialogue and action. These activities should complement disaster risk reduction and development activities by relevant government agencies and other organisations.
- Climate change is a complicated subject, with many scientific and global aspects that are difficult to communicate at the community level. How complete does the information on climate change to vulnerable people need to be? And how can communication about climate change be simplified in a way that helps to engage vulnerable people in climate risk reduction, without compromising scientific credibility?

Approaches to address these issues are under continuous development.

Where to from here?

The pilot project ended in 2006. Since then the Vietnam Red Cross has been integrating the lessons learned into ongoing and new disaster preparedness projects.

In cooperation with a different variety of sister Red Cross/Red Crescent societies, the Vietnam Red Cross is continuing its mangrove-planting project for coastal and riverbank protection, and is currently starting up two new community-based disaster preparedness projects in 6 provinces throughout the country, funded by the EU. The Vietnam Red Cross also explored the possibility of linking tree planting (afforestation) for the purpose of disaster preparedness to generate funds from reducing greenhouse gas emission (Clean Development Mechanism).

The pilot project on disaster preparedness and climate change has created a valuable pool of knowledge and experience. The challenge is now to transform and up-scale these into effective practices to better address the risks that are rising due to climate change.

Conclusion

Why should a national society become involved in climate change? The answer is simple:

- Climate change will primarily hit the poorest and most vulnerable people.
- National Red Cross/Red Crescent societies can support communities to reduce the impacts of climate change and extreme weather events at relatively low cost, from disaster risk reduction to health and care.
- National Red Cross/Red Crescent societies are in a unique position to work with groups and individuals at the community level that government agencies may sometimes find difficult to reach.
- Climate change often provides an additional incentive for proactive disaster risk reduction and may offer new opportunities to fund such programs.
- The Red Cross should take the voice of the most vulnerable to national and international policy makers.

Red Cross/Red Crescent Climate Centre

P.O. Box 28120
2502 KC The Hague
The Netherlands

Tel.: +31 (0)70 4455666
Email: climatecentre@redcross.nl

www.climatecentre.org