

by social unrest in its neighboring countries, while internally it has to address poverty alleviation as its first national development objective.

Focus on response preparedness—a case study of the Bangladesh Red Crescent Society

Given the predictable disasters likely to strike the 130 million people of Bangladesh and the fragile livelihood of its population, the Bangladesh Red Crescent Society (BDRCS) has focused its activities in disaster response on providing food, medical services and other aid to people affected by disaster episodes. Curative health care is offered through nine hospitals and health clinics, 62 maternal child health centers and two blood centers. The BDRCS development priorities are to:

- strengthen the overall organisation—the National Headquarters and the local Branch network, and its management, staff and volunteers—in order to achieve the characteristics of a well functioning National Society
- increase protection and assistance to the most vulnerable people through appropriate response and disaster preparedness measures
- improve health and blood services, promote socio-economic development in the weakest sections of society and improve tracing services

Within its latest five-year Plan of Action, the BDRCS is seeking to modernise its governance functions, decentralise decision-making processes, introduce a new financial management system, develop human resources, and strengthen the capacities of both departments and branches. Institutional development and disaster preparedness is essential, given the dimensions of the activities of its 68 branches that serve populations varying from three hundred thousand in the hill tracts to ten million in the capital of Dhaka.

In their Community Based Disaster Preparedness Program the BDRCS seeks to develop, within each branch, a District Emergency Plan that targets vulnerable communities affected by flooding, tornadoes, river erosion, drought and cyclone. Community activities in first aid, awareness raising on risk reduction and improved coping mechanisms, disaster early warning, and support to raise the level of health through construction of tube-wells and latrines, are some of the activities initiated by the branches.

The Cyclone Preparedness Program, partially funded by the Government of Bangladesh, seeks to increase the effec-

tiveness of its 33 000 volunteers and their capacity to advocate for greater community awareness of cyclone preparedness, improve the dissemination of warning signals to vulnerable communities along the coastal belt, assist communities in evacuating to shelters and provision of first aid and relief. The CPP also operates the largest radio communications systems offering a reliable means of communications for the entire coastal belt in both pre- and post-cyclone conditions.

Focus on coastal environmental preservation—a case study of the Vietnam Red Cross

The Environmental Preservation Project, undertaken by the Thai Binh Red Cross branch of the Vietnam Red Cross, elected to undertake this mitigation program to address two issues affecting people living along the sea coast in the Thai Thuy district of Thai Binh province. With eight to ten typhoon storms striking the coast of Vietnam annually, tidal flooding often breaches sea dykes causing economic losses to the local population engaged in aquaculture.

The planting of mangrove plantations served two important purposes:

- to act as a buffer zone in front of the sea dyke system to reduce the water velocity, wave strength and wind energy to protect coastal land, human life and assets invested in development, and
- to contribute to the production of valuable export products like shrimp and crabs, high value marine fish species in cages, mollusk farming and seaweed culture for agar and alginate extraction.

By contributing to environmental support to coastal fisheries and aqua-

culture through the development of 2,000 hectares of mangroves. The Thai Binh Red Cross also helped to provide a livelihood benefit to the vulnerable population through new employment opportunities for their labor.

An evaluation of the project in 1996 indicated that 'By helping to protect the sea dykes, the mangroves are contributing to the economic stability of the communes. All members of the community stand to benefit as their homes, livestock and agricultural land are better protected from the risk of flooding. Poor families, with little money to repair or replace material losses from storm damage, are the greatest potential beneficiaries.' The project area was struck by the worst typhoon in a decade two months prior to the project evaluation. Lack of any significant damage to the sea dyke and aquaculture pond systems in Thai Thuy provided the best possible indicator of the effectiveness of the mangroves.

And, the perception of the local population is that the mangroves planted will:

- lessen storm, flood protection of sea dykes and ponds
- protect property and the coastal inhabitants
- improve aquatic production and the environment
- prevent saline intrusion into agricultural land
- expand the land area for the national benefit of Vietnam

Regional disaster preparedness programs

In addition to activities initiated by individual National Societies, the 13 Regional Delegations located around the world contribute to strategic programming undertaken by the National Societies.



Above: In this Red Cross cyclone shelter in India, residents of the community use the shelters for multiple purposes during non-emergency periods.

in their respective regions. The International Federation Regional Delegation for Eastern Africa in Nairobi has been supporting disaster preparedness since 1993 when staff began to offer technical advice and support relief operations in Uganda and Kenya. The program continued to develop standardised procedures and preparedness initiatives in the Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies in Ethiopia, Eritrea, Kenya, Sudan, Somalia and Tanzania.

In 1999, the Regional Delegation described its role as: 'to assist National Societies develop disaster preparedness policies and plans for an effective disaster response. The emphasis will be on capacity building at the National Society level'. The Regional Delegation was requested by National Societies to undertake several initiatives related to capacity building, such as a training of trainers workshop on vulnerability and capacity analysis in Ethiopia, facilitation of a contingency planning workshop for government and the Red Cross in Uganda, and a request from Sudan to facilitate disaster preparedness and logistics training. In addition, the Regional Delegation has agreed to undertake a variety of other activities including:

- offering Kenya branch staff training in risk mapping analysis and other tools for vulnerability and capacity assessments
- preparation of a Disaster Profile, development of a National Society Disaster Response and Preparedness Policy and facilitation of the development of practical linkages between the National Society and the in-country Early Warning Systems at strategic branch level for the Tanzania Red Cross
- participation in contingency planning and standardisation of relief procedures in the Great Lakes region
- building/strengthening capacity in high-risk areas in the Francophone countries through the preparation of disaster preparedness for cyclones in the Indian Ocean Islands.

Conclusion

The International Federation of the Red Cross and Red Crescent has adopted policies to effect a pro-active disaster preparedness capacity in all of the current 176 National Societies. The dimensions of disaster preparedness now includes both the development of a response capacity and the creation of more effective mitigation programs that enable people at risk to gain mastery of their own lives while overcoming the vulnera-

bilities that inhibit social development.

This challenge has required the International Federation to develop new policies, frameworks and tools to support the capacity building required within National Societies to adopt new methods of outreach to vulnerable segments of their nations. National Societies have responded in a highly favorable manner—National Societies in economically affluent conditions providing financial and human resources to support the initiatives developed by National Societies with limited resources. Mitigation programs that are planned and initiated in coordination with vulnerable groups and which compliment national development strategies have begun to demonstrate a capacity to lessen the impact of local disasters while raising the capacities of at-risk groups.

The Palang Merah Indonesia has shown its capacity to develop a social safety net for vulnerable groups during socio-economic and political crises. The Red Cross Societies in the Caribbean have begun to develop their in-house capacities to 'serve those of greatest risk' and create an innovative program with the hotel industry. The Bangladesh Red Crescent Society is maintaining a constant disaster response aptitude to react rapidly to ever-frequent floods and cyclones, while also expanding the coverage of its Cyclone Preparedness Program. And, in the Eastern Africa region, the International Federation is supporting initiatives that will ultimately serve vulnerable groups from the strategically sound disaster preparedness aptitudes of National Societies.

In the July 1999 Forum (Strategy for a Safer World in the 21st Century: Disaster and Risk Reduction) organised by the International Decade for Natural Disaster Reduction (IDNDR), participants arrived at the following statement on disaster and risk reduction:

While hazards are inevitable, and the elimination of all risks is impossible, there are many technical measures, traditional practices, and public experiences that can reduce the extent or severity of economic and social disasters. Hazards and emergency requirements are a part of living with nature, but human behavior can be changed.

The International Federation is also conforming to the Geneva Mandate on Disaster Reduction, adopted on July 9, 1999, which declared:

'We shall adopt and implement policy measures at the international, regional, sub-regional, national and local levels

aimed at reducing the vulnerability of our societies to both natural and technological hazards through proactive rather than reactive approaches. These measures shall have as main objectives the establishment of hazard-resilient communities and the protection of people from the threat of disasters. They shall also contribute to safeguarding our natural and economic resources, and our social well being and livelihoods.'

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