



Red Cross/Red Crescent Climate Guide

Community risk reduction



Community risk reduction

The figures speak for themselves. Over the past decade, an average of 250 million people a year have been affected by natural disasters, and those are the ones we know about. Most disasters go unnoticed, or at least they go uninvestigated.

What may be catastrophic to one or two villages in less well-known parts of the world is often overlooked when annual Asian floods, or the hurricane seasons, bring suffering to millions of people. But all disasters are serious and most are increasing, in number and intensity, the smaller ones more rapidly than the bigger events.

Globally over the decade from 1996 to 2005, the number of people reportedly affected by disasters was one third more than in the previous ten years, the Centre for Research on the Epidemiology of Disasters in Belgium tells us. For the first time in 30 years the number of people killed by disasters did not go down anymore. On the contrary, deaths from disasters were up 84 per cent on the previous decade. They tripled in Oceania and more than doubled in the Americas.

South Asia showed the trend again in 2007, so did China. Afghanistan, Bangladesh, India and Pakistan suffered massive monsoon rains, heavy flooding, tornadoes and landslides. Vast areas were devastated. West and East Africa were hit by equally devastating floods only a few weeks later. An early onset of China's flood season overwhelmed southern parts of the country and, in the east, hundreds of thousands of villagers fled the worst flood on a major river in more than 50 years.

In the low-lying, flood-prone northern plains of Bangladesh, rural people awaited the onslaught. Among them were Red Crescent volunteers like Amirul Islam who understand conditions may get worse before they start to get better. They know threats from extreme weather are growing and that because of climate change bigger floods may well occur and more often.

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

Amirul and his friends have been showing local people they *can* do something. Close to the village of Sirahkunj the volunteers have planted some 300 trees – the start of a nursery – and, when big enough, they will be transplanted along river banks and roadsides to help check the force of the flooding. A modest move, perhaps, but in community terms it is hugely significant.

As Amirul explained to villagers, the trees will help improve their environment and help the community not only to survive but also to develop.

For a start their root spread will stabilize the earth in which they are planted and help prevent the erosion of precious topsoil that is so important for agriculture. They will provide sustainable income as well for, when mature, the trees will be felled and replaced by fresh saplings. The wood will be sold on local markets with the money going to the community.

That is to say nothing of forestry's role in balancing the effects of greenhouse gases. But most important

After the August 2007 floods International Federation watsan officer Niaz Muhammed inspects work on a well in Koshkalat, Pakistan. Photo: Mubashir Fida/International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies



of all, the village will be less open to disaster. It will be more resilient, bounce back more rapidly, cope better with adversity. And it isn't alone. Across the country, disaster risk reduction programmes from the Bangladesh Red Crescent are benefiting village after village.

They vary according to community needs, and include practical measures, such as raising the height of wells to prevent the floods from swamping them and cutting people's access to safe drinking water. With them all comes a message: no matter where you are and how huge the hazards there is always a way to diminish their menace.

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 wide spread presence at the community level.

It is why, over the five years from 2006 to 2010, the Red Cross/Red Crescent Global Agenda is intent on reducing the number of deaths, injuries and illnesses from disasters, diseases and public-health emergencies along with their wider impact. It is why, at the same time, it wants to increase local community, civil society and Red Cross and Red Crescent ability to deal with extreme vulnerability.

What humanitarians call *community-based disaster reduction* (or, in the acronym-plagued parlance of disaster people, CBDR), is not exclusively about climate change, of course. Whether the measures taken are to decrease the consequences of hydro-meteorological disasters (avalanches, landslides, droughts, famines, extreme temperatures, floods, fires, storms, wave surges) or geophysical ones (earthquakes, tsunamis and volcanic eruptions) is immaterial. Good CBDR helps reduce the risks posed by climate change. Steps taken to contain an older menace can help contain new or increasing ones for which extreme weather or warming is responsible.

It was not climate change that caused the Viet Nam Red Cross to start planting mangrove trees along the seashore in 1994. Extensive 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.

If the National Society wasn't focused on climate change in 1994, it is today. The risks it brings could be disastrous still and while the mangrove programme continues much more is underway. Back in 2003, the Viet Nam Red Cross began a pilot project to integrate climate change into its existing disaster-preparedness programmes, joining forces with the Netherlands Red Cross and Red Cross/Red Crescent Climate Centre in The Hague to start what senior officer Nguyen Hung Thang describes as learning by doing.

"It isn't," he says, "that climate change alters the nature of our risk-reduction activities but it does raise matters of priority, particularly at the community level."

The effects of climate change on this country of 85 million people may be disastrous. In the past few years Viet Nam has seen typhoons move faster, grow in intensity and make landfall to the south where they were never felt with such strength. Coastal floods may already be reflecting sea-level rise and there have been more flash floods in mountain areas. Drought is worse in south central areas. All of these events could well be signs of more to come.

Viet Nam is one of the most typhoon-lashed nations in Asia. Every year an average of four typhoons and many more storms wreak havoc on it but it is also very vulnerable to sea-level rise, which, over the past 30 years, has been about five centimetres. Low-lying areas like the Mekong and Red River deltas are densely populated and it is estimated millions of people would be displaced by the sea-level rise projected for the end of the century.



“It isn’t that climate change alters the nature of our risk-reduction activities but it does raise matters of priority”

NGUYEN HUNG THANG, VIET NAM

Nguyen Hung Thang says the greatest challenge is to gain community understanding of why the Red Cross is working on climate change, how it links to disaster and has a negative effect on their lives. Raising awareness about drought – a problem in many provinces – and how to reduce its consequences has posed particular challenges. “People tend to ask for things beyond our capability, like building a water factory.”

The Vulnerability and Capacity Assessment (VCA) – a method developed by the International Federation for communities themselves to weigh up the hazards they face and the capacity they have to deal with them – helped the Red Cross through, he says.

The process is an empowering one. With Red Cross/Red Crescent guidance, villagers sit down and map the dangers they face, analyse why they are vulnerable to such hazards, and then develop concrete steps for an action plan.

Pham The Phu knows all about VCAs. She’s a farmer in Quang Binh province where extremes are the name of the game – from heavy rains to extreme

droughts. In her Quang Phu commune they built a small makeshift dam to protect their rice fields but floods repeatedly destroyed it and reconstruction was an annual event.

When the Viet Nam Red Cross persuaded them to conduct a VCA the dam emerged as the thing the commune needed most. Almost everyone there is a farmer and water – not too much or too little – is what they depend upon. Red Cross funding was provided for a properly constructed one and the commune quickly saw the benefits. “The dam has not collapsed so the fields have not been flooded,” Pham The Phu reported. “We can have two crops a year instead of one and the amount we harvested last time was 30 per cent higher than usual.”

And when the rains did not come, there was still water enough for irrigation. Behind the dam was a simple reservoir.

It made much more sense than a water factory. But as the Red Cross’s Nguyen Hung Thang points out when disasters happen people are prepared to discuss things. Getting them to prepare for possible hurricanes in a community that has never seen one remains a greater challenge.

Watch your language

Diane Turnquest, Disaster Management Officer of the Bahamas Red Cross, understands that challenge. Her advice: watch your language, honey.

She never starts talking of climate change when she approaches a community, let alone uses a term as exciting as vulnerability and capacity assessment. You put people off, she says.

“Where are the big fish?” she asks of fishermen whose catches are getting smaller.

“Way out in the ocean these days.”

“Oh, why is that?”



“They think differently now. It empowered the community”

DIANE TURNQUEST, BAHAMAS

The conversation turns to the bleaching of the coral, a deadly process threatening the Caribbean and the Pacific. Coral reefs are very sensitive to increased water temperature. As the oceans warm, the corals, and their delicate ecosystems, are dying and the reef fish and marine animals living, breeding and feeding there are disappearing. The destruction affects tourism as well.

“It’s a conversation you can have with any fisherman,” Turnquest says. “Know your culture, know the people, know the language to use, know how to introduce what you want to do by adapting it to local circumstance.”

A guiding principle to climate change and VCA is always keep it simple. Keep in mind what the community can understand in terms of their own context.

Bahamians, Turnquest says, are indifferent to depressing conversation, averse to such thoughts as beautiful islands slowly sinking. Getting stronger is more the kind of language they appreciate.

West End, a storm-blasted community on Grand Bahama Island, is a case in point. After three successive hurricanes had ravaged it, a luxurious new tourism development that had arisen nearby donated an ambulance and a fire truck to the community. For the Bahamas Red Cross, busy so far with emergency relief, it seemed an opportune moment for some self-assessment.

“What will you do with those vehicles?” they asked.

West End wasn’t sure. The ambulance was bare – it hadn’t come with equipment – and West End had no firemen. The community sat down to discuss the options and a VCA got started.

Other issues arose. Someone said, “It’s all a waste of time. You’ll never *find* a fire or an accident.”

“Why?” asked the Red Cross.

“Our streets have no names. We have no addresses.”

Turnquest suggested, “Maybe we’d better go get some.”

A few days later, dressed in their finest clothes West Enders accompanied her to the city of Freeport, 65 kilometres away, to see the Director of Public Works. The community was moving. Soon it would be mobilized.

They got their street names, got excited, got firemen to train a volunteer brigade. They developed an evacuation plan, mapped the locations of the old, the frail and the handicapped, ensured care for the needy in emergencies.

Diane Turnquest says: “You had a community that had come to accept the hurricanes. They thought: they’ll hit us again, that’s life, there’s nothing anyone can do about it. They think differently now and what they have done they have done themselves, which is what the VCA was about. It empowered the community, and put value on their abilities. They are doing their own thing now. They don’t need outsiders.”

The Nicaraguan Red Cross has seen similar developments along their Atlantic coast after introducing one of the first climate change pilot programmes. Severe storms have hit the country frequently over the past decade and the National Society is helping communities face up to the threat of increasingly severe hurricane seasons and extreme weather.

VCA's have led to self-organization, and people knowing what to do when floods, bush fires and other catastrophes occur in their villages.

Elsewhere, the Samoa Red Cross is using VCA's to help vulnerable groups they have identified in the capital, Apia. Due to their social conditions, poverty and poor health they are particularly at risk from climate change effects. A drift of rural people to urban areas is ongoing and from its work in the social margins the National Society is convinced domestic migration exacerbated by climate change will challenge time-honoured systems and thinking and disrupt support structures.

And in Mozambique – hit every year by at least one cyclone and strong tropical storms that contribute to increasingly common and severe flooding – the Red Cross emphasizes respect for local tradition as it involves community members in data collection, risk mapping and planning.

Globally, risk and vulnerability to natural disaster is increasing but from within the community there is always a chance to turn the tide.

Community risk reduction

How-to guide

All around the world, the Red Cross and Red Crescent stands ready to respond, and to advocate for speedy recovery and reconstruction. But disaster response, recovery and reconstruction are not enough. Besides better early-warning systems and preparedness to respond, we are trying to reduce the risk of disasters, by making people aware of the hazards they face and helping them to reduce their own vulnerability. Climate change has made such efforts more urgent.

The Red Cross and Red Crescent can build on a key asset: its network and a grassroots community presence. It is at community level that disasters affect people's lives and livelihoods. But it is also there that many simple things can be done to reduce their impact. Community Risk Reduction, or in full Community-based disaster reduction (CBDR) has become an important part of the disaster-management activities of many national Red Cross /Red Crescent societies.

Helping communities to reduce their vulnerability does not mean telling them what to do, or installing some protective infrastructure. It is about facilitating a dialogue about local concerns, and helping people to define their own priorities for risk reduction.

A good instrument for such dialogue is the Vulnerability and Capacity Assessment (VCA), a set of tools developed by the International Federation to help communities assess and address the risks they are facing.

This section is aimed at National Society staff and volunteers working on disaster management and risk reduction at the community level, and discusses how they can integrate climate change into their work.

The approach: keeping it simple

Good CBDR helps reduce the risks of climate change, even when climate is not explicitly addressed. Many measures to reduce other dangers also help lessen new or growing threats brought on by climate itself.

CBDR, however, can be even more effective by directly addressing climate change. First, the threats involved are added motivation for a community to act. Second, some risk-reduction measures and strategies may need to adjust to new or increasing risks.

Incorporating climate change into VCAs to plan disaster reduction may seem complicated: introducing tricky scientific information and a host of additional considerations.

However, a key guiding principle should be to KEEP IT SIMPLE:

- Keep in mind that people are likely to have already noticed changes in weather patterns.
- Keep in mind what the community can grasp in terms of their local context.
- Keep in mind what the facilitators doing the VCAs can absorb and communicate.

Local people are the experts on their own risks. All you may need to do is ask what they have observed regarding unusual weather events, briefly explain why the climate is changing globally, and help them decide on how to respond locally.

Keeping it simple is even more important because a key challenge with CBDR is to reach a large number of communities. It is nice to spend time and energy on helping a few really well, but the challenge is to scale up, provide assistance to *all* your country's vulnerable people. You cannot do that if weeks and weeks are spent preparing each VCA or several highly qualified headquarters staff are required to conduct the discussions. To have a wide impact the approach *must* be simple enough to be applied by our local volunteers.

People gather to get water from a huge well in the village of Natwarghad, India. Photo: Reuters/Amit Dave



Step by step: integrating climate change into CBDR and VCAs

Step 1:

Collecting general background information.

Step 2:

Assessing priorities.

These two steps are typically undertaken as part of a broader assessment of the changing risks a country faces (see *Getting Started: How-to guide, step 3*) and priorities within the overall disaster-management activities of a National Society (see *Disaster management: How-to guide, steps 1 and 2*).

The prioritization should consider the selection of areas/communities to be targeted for CBDR and VCAs, guided (among other things) by the way climate change is affecting particular parts of the country.

Step 3:

Conducting VCAs

Integrating climate change into VCAs can be done in a very simple way. The main purpose of the VCA is to discuss the risks a community faces so they can identify *their* priorities for risk reduction.

This does not depend on complicated scientific information, although sometimes it can be discussed to confront a community with what they may

face in the future. But explaining that information and making it relevant can be a challenge.

So 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.

By default: *keep it simple (Option A)*. More detailed

discussions on climate change should only be included when the National Society has clear and relevant information about how risks are changing at the local level, and skilled facilitators are available to discuss this comfortably with the communities.

OPTION A (BASIC): Getting additional information from the community, by asking the right questions

Make sure that the VCA asks the right questions to get information about unusual climate phenomena and trends that the community is experiencing, or has seen happening over the past decades. This requires attention to a number of VCA tools that examine trends, particularly:

- *Seasonal calendar*: ask whether seasons have been changing, for instance if the rainy season is starting particularly early or late, or if weather that used to occur in one season is now occurring in another.
- *Historical calendar*: ask about systematic changes in temperature, rainfall and other weather events; as well as occurrences of “strange” weather phenomena.

- *Risk map (or transect walk)*: ask people to describe not only the current situation in a particular place but also how it has been changing.
- *Questionnaires and focus group discussions*: add special questions such as, “Have you noticed unusual weather patterns?” and “How did that weather affect you, your family and your community?”

Preparations

You do not need to include any new scientific climate information in the VCA process: it is enough to clearly communicate, after eliciting observed changes from participants, that people all over the world are reporting similar changes, and that scientists tell us that things are likely to get worse in the coming decades. During preparations, all that needs to be done differently is to include questions such as the ones above in the VCA materials (checklists, tools, etc.).

VCA training

The training needs to pay attention to the additional questions to be asked, and how to use the answers to improve dialogue with communities. For awareness raising, it might be good to inform them about global climate change, but it should be stressed that there is no expectation that they discuss these issues during the VCA.

Conducting the VCA

Include the suggestions listed above.

Analysing the results

After the VCA, the team should analyse the community's information, particularly documenting the way they have described new risks or trends in weather patterns.

If possible, you should cross-compare those community observations with the scientific information from your society's national climate-risk assessment. Assess whether risk reduction strategies identified in the VCA are robust in the face of climate change trends suggested by scientific reports.

OPTION B (INTERMEDIATE): Provide climate information as a backgrounder for VCA facilitators

Option B is similar to Option A, but with the additional element that facilitators are briefed on climate change so they are aware of the context when they conduct the VCA. The intention is simply to provide them with background information, *not* that facilitators should “explain” climate change, and the changing risks, to the communities.

This places more demands on training and development of communication materials (such as posters or video tools). There is a risk of misleading communities if volunteers wrongly interpret scientific information or erroneously guide the VCA's outcomes in a particular direction. However, it can help the facilitators to have a more meaningful dialogue with the communities, and to better

assist them in discussing options to reduce their risks.

When preparing and conducting the VCA, just follow the steps of Option A. In addition, the *training* should include a presentation on climate change and its implications in the local context. The information is generally based on the national risk assessment done at national society headquarters, and adapted to the circumstances of the communities where the VCA will take place.

During *preparations*, try to tailor relevant climate change information (for instance, from the national risk assessment) to the specific situation of the VCA. Keep in mind that the general climate information needs to be examined from the local perspective: what might the changes mean for the location/community? This should be done in general terms, written down on one page, in simple language, such as:

“The rainfall may come in heavier bursts, and there may be longer periods without rain”,

“Storms may be stronger than before”,

“The rainy season may start later”.

You may need to ask for help from a climate expert, but make sure that the analysis stays relevant to Red Cross/Red Crescent needs. “Increasing risk of flood” is better than “six out of seven of the best climate models agree that there is at least a 70 per cent probability that the return period

of extreme precipitation (above the 90th percentile in the current distribution) will decrease by at least 10 per cent”. Force climate experts to explain what they mean, and to translate it into language that facilitators and communities will understand.

OPTION C (ADVANCED): Helping communities to plan for the future by bringing in outside information on climate change

In this option, VCA facilitators are explicitly instructed to discuss climate change with the community. It requires much more expertise and experience, and should only be chosen if you are confident you have the information, training capacity, support materials and experienced volunteers who will be comfortable doing it.

The process is similar to Option B, but during the *training* you should not only convey key information about climate change to the facilitators but also enable them to really understand it and explain it to communities. This is not easy! Most importantly, the training must also provide guidance on how to *carefully* introduce changing risks into the VCA discussions.

Without proper guidance, communities may be tempted to start labeling every weather-related problem they have faced as “climate change”. This is unhelpful. All we want to accomplish is to increase their understanding of their circumstances, and explain

that some unusual patterns and events are not necessarily unique results of supernatural forces: they are likely to be part of a global trend that will go on occurring. And more importantly, to help the community to consider what *they* can do about the new risks they face.

This dialogue requires learning-by-doing, including simulations or other exercises that force the facilitators to practice.

Step 4:

Implementing CBDR

To some extent, the VCA may already have resulted in enhanced awareness and disaster risk reduction by the communities themselves. To some extent, it may also help plan further Red Cross/Red Crescent material assistance (such as the construction of shelters, communications equipment, seedlings for reforestation to prevent flooding, and water-catchment systems) or improved community processes (such as plans for disaster management, or diversification of the local economy to reduce vulnerability to droughts). In some cases, follow-up may involve partnership with NGOs and local government, and advocacy regarding local and national policies, for instance on safe shelters, building codes or joint risk-awareness programmes. Such things are no different to regular CBDR activities – except that when climate change has been taken into account, activities are planned with the changing risks in mind.

Step 5:

Evaluation

Given that risks are continuously changing, it is important to regularly evaluate the National Society's CBDR programmes. *Evaluation should be a continuous process.* Have climate-related programmes been targeted at the right areas? Are they reaching a sufficient number of vulnerable people? And, particularly if new threats or diseases have occurred, is there a need to update the priorities?

In this evaluation, there is a special role for the information from the VCAs. Local communities may report changing risks that may not yet have been picked up by the National Society at headquarters level or by the relevant government institutions.

In addition, it is important to return regularly to communities where a VCA has taken place to check on follow-up and maintain a continuous dialogue on the risks they face and the way these can be reduced.

It is important to document information from VCAs, as well as the experiences (positive and negative) from actual CBDR programmes. The more such examples are shared and the successful ones replicated, the faster we will be able to expand our coverage, dealing effectively with changing risks.

Checklist

- Are you addressing the new risks in your CBDR programmes?

- Have you kept it simple?
- Does the scope of the VCA fit the capacities of the staff and volunteers involved?
- Does the plan of action that results from the VCA respond to the trends in risk that were identified?
- Have you thought about how to evaluate and scale up the outcomes, reaching not just a few communities but many?

Pitfalls

Climate change may seem daunting and complicated, and many National Societies may feel uncomfortable discussing it with communities. Volunteers doing the VCAs may find the scientific information confusing and, in turn, risk confusing the communities, rather than helping them.

If this is the feeling you have, take a step back and simplify. The science of climate change does not need to be discussed with the community. You don't need to enter into a dialogue about weather statistics. All you need to discuss is the fact that risks may be changing. Just asking questions about changes and trends in the weather may be enough to raise people's awareness, and trigger them to thinking about reducing their vulnerability.

Planning for climate change is not new and complicated. It should remain rooted in your local priorities and understanding.

Don't be overwhelmed, just get started and keep it simple.

Opportunities

Climate change provides a strong incentive for more and better CBDR, because it helps communities not only to identify the changing risks they are facing, but also to realize their growing importance and identify ways to reduce them. It can strengthen the Red Cross/Red Crescent relationship with communities because the National Society can really help.

Further information

All information from this guide is available on www.climatecentre.org, including updates and links to relevant documents and sources of information, checklists, templates and best practice examples.

The main source of general information on CBDR and VCAs is the International Federation's website: www.ifrc.org.

Further general information on community risk assessments (CRAs) from other organizations is available from the ProVention Consortium's CRA toolkit on www.proventionconsortium.org



A woman stands outside her house damaged by Hurricane Dean in the town of Tecolutla, Mexico. Photo: Reuters/Tomas Bravo

