Case study

Disaster Preparedness for Climate change in Nicaragua

Background

In June 2002, the Netherlands Red Cross and the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies established the Red Cross and Red Crescent Centre on Climate Change and Disaster Preparedness. The centre, which is located in The Hague, aims at finding ways to respond to one of the principal problems of the 21st century: climate change.

The centre focuses on the links between climate change and disasters, and helps individual Red Cross and Red Crescent National Societies find out more about the possible effects of a changing climate on their region. For example, knowing that hydro-meteorological disasters (e.g., floods, droughts, landslides, etc.) may increase in frequency and intensity will incite a National Society to step up community awareness-raising and disaster preparedness and response activities in order to reduce the vulnerability of disaster-prone populations.

National Societies are also aware of the importance of ensuring that any disaster risk management projects should not only help communities to develop, but also that such development must be sustainable.

Through the Climate Centre, the Netherlands Red Cross supports two pilot climate change and disaster risk reduction initiatives in Nicaragua and Viet Nam. In Nicaragua, the project aims at strengthening the Nicaraguan Red Cross's capacity to carry out local-level activities related to risk reduction and to respond to extreme weather events.

The project

- The pilot project was carried out in Wawabom and Betania, two communities in the Puerto Cabezas municipality (North Atlantic Ocean region) and in the Bluff (Bluefields municipality in the South Atlantic Ocean region).
- In order to generate wide interest and acceptance of the project, the Nicaraguan Red Cross sought the participation of a number of partner institutions, schools and universities. This ensured that the topic was included in local agendas.
- Tangible disaster prevention, mitigation and management activities were carried out in the high risk communities. Training, for example in damage/need assessment, shelter management, first aid, risk mapping, forest fire prevention, community health, water and sanitation took place as well as projects with community representatives in mangrove planting, and early warning.
- One of the aims of the project was to strengthen the image and efficacy of local Red Cross branches, and to bring together environmental scientists and technicians with the local communities and humanitarian aid organisations.

Local Red Cross volunteers join forces with local experts in environmental projects.

Lessons learned

- Mid- and long-term projects need to involve local communities and foster their 'ownership' of the programmes.
- People working on the projects should have a proactive and positive attitude.
- Communities' existing capacities need to be identified and taken into account when designing awareness-raising strategies.
- It is important to build capacity-building and transition or exit strategies into such projects.
- Good coordination between all participating

institutions, as well as bridge building between the 'climate change' world and that of disaster risk management, is essential in order to promote a constructive approach and increase local 'ownership'.

- Community-level actions must centre on sensitization and education, to encourage a change in local practices and behaviour.
- It is important to be able to talk about climate change in simple terms so that all sectors of the population can easily understand and learn.
- The impact of climate change is still uncertain, making it all the more important for communities to be prepared and able to adjust to its effects, whatever they may be.
- It is necessary to train and educate local leaders in what the possible impact of climate change might be and ways to prepare and mitigate that risk.
- This type of project requires a long-term commitment in order to change attitudes, develop 'best practices' and encourage decision-making at all levels.

Conclusion

In November 2004, the Nicaraguan Red Cross and the Netherlands Red Cross organized a two-day meeting which brought together not only representatives of a number of ministries, national, regional and international NGOs, but also members of the communities participating in the project.

Climate change and disaster preparedness experts shared knowledge and 'best practices', while the community members helped to make participants consider the project activities from a wider perspective. The feeling of 'ownership' of the project was also increased. The 120 participants explored ways to promote climate change and disaster risk management initiatives in Nicaragua.

The Nicaraguan Red Cross intends to carry on with the project, by increasing the inter-agency approach and doing what it can to put climate change on the national agenda.

Local people learning about disaster preparedness, mitigation and climate change.

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