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# Table of contents

<b>Acknowledgements</b>	2
<b>Introduction</b>	4
<b>Indian Red Cross Society and disaster preparedness</b>	5
<b>Making a case for disaster preparedness in Assam</b>	6
The Brahmaputra basin	6
A double impact	6
Floods in Assam	7
Earthquakes	7
Natural disasters without borders	7
Pilot project objectives	8
Setting the criteria for selecting communities	8
A real-time evaluation	8
<b>Organizing the pilot project</b>	9
Changing the order of things	9
Expanding priorities	9
Material input for the disaster reduction pilot project	9
Material needs	10
Assam State Branch	10
Direct dialogue	12
<b>First aid as an entry point for disaster preparedness</b>	13
Community participation	13
Motivation	14
<b>When resettlement is not an option</b>	15
Raised platforms	15
<b>Some results in building local capacities</b>	16
Performance	16
Civil society	16
Volunteerism	16
Ownership	16
Sharing authority	16
Learning	17
<b>Local resources</b>	17
<b>Clarifying the fine line between auxiliary and autonomy</b>	18
<b>Annex</b>	
Disaster preparedness risk reduction - logical framework	20

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# Introduction

The people of Assam have lived with grave floods for centuries. They understand nature's cycle of flooding and traditionally cope with it by knowing when it is time to escape and take shelter in

temples, schools or on higher ground. Discussions with those participating in the disaster preparedness pilot project suggest that targeted communities are now starting to consider what they can do to reduce their flood risks.

"I am convinced that one more year and we will be able to create a wave of community action across the flood plains. During each training course I ask the participants to give the Red Cross 15 days a year, the full 24 hours in each day. Even if we retain 10 per cent of the people we have trained as active volunteers in disaster preparedness and response, we have achieved something that did not exist two years ago."

Chandan Chutia, Assam State Branch

Experience has shown that emergency relief assistance does not reach the flood-affected masses before three days. During this period of isolation communities have no choice but to cope on their own. This makes investment in community-based disaster preparedness and self-help a necessity.

The Red Cross experience in Assam underlines the importance of taking whatever time is necessary to turn awareness into action.

This case study is not an evaluation. Its purpose is to underline community-based risk reduction and building organizational capacities as important elements of disaster management. The case study also aims to serve learning by sharing the experiences of the Indian Red Cross Society in risk reduction activities.

## India's mighty rivers

In India, natural disasters occur regularly due to the country's geo-climatic situation. Among all the disasters afflicting the country, river floods are the most frequent and often the most devastating. In a country of continental proportions, 85 per cent of the 1,200 millimeters rainfall happens over four months. Three great northern rivers, the Indus, the Brahmaputra and the Ganges, flow through India. The Indus, about 2,900 km long, originates in the Himalayas of western Tibet, flows through the Ladakh region of Jammu and Kashmir state, then enters Pakistan. The Brahmaputra is about 2,900 km long and likewise rises in the Tibetan Himalayas. It flows through Assam state and then south through Bangladesh to the Bay of Bengal. The

2,510 km Ganges, known as Ganga in India, rises in the Indian Himalayas and enters the Gangetic Plain northeast of Delhi. At Allahabad it is joined by its major tributary, the Yamuna. The main branch of the Ganges flows through Bangladesh to the Bay of Bengal. A second branch meets India, near Kolkata.





# Indian Red Cross Society and disaster preparedness



Established in 1920 the Indian Red Cross Society (IRCS) is one of the largest National Societies in the world, with a network of 650 state, district and sub district branches. Until 2001, the IRCS was primarily relief-oriented with isolated but effective experiences in disaster preparedness such as building cyclone shelters in the states of Andhra Pradesh and Orissa, construction of six regional warehouses throughout the country and establishment of a training institute.

Mr. Michael Siromony, a senior disaster management advisor at IRCS headquarters in New Delhi, explains that “because of continuous disasters in different parts of the country, our government made national disaster preparedness planning a priority. The IRCS as a key player in disaster relief also had to rethink its approach towards disaster management.

In 1999, the government of India established the High Powered Committee (HPC) to look at different disaster scenarios. In the meantime, the National Society created a disaster management department at its headquarters in New Delhi, consolidating disaster relief and preparedness staff.

The National Society also converted one of its warehouses into a disaster management centre, fortified the building against earthquakes and equipped it. Additionally, it pre-positioned relief stocks for 10,000 families in its north-eastern regional warehouse in Assam. Due to these measures and the performance of the National Society during the Gujarat earthquake and the floods in 2001 and 2002, the public and the government of India recognize the crucial humanitarian role played by the IRCS in disaster preparedness and relief services.

“What we have learned with the Red Cross is useful to us not only in relation to disasters but also in unifying our communities for a longer lifespan than a disaster”

Diphak Rabha, Goalpara district volunteer, age 20