



Direct Direct dialogue Direct dialogue

A stronger case for direct dialogue between donors and local communities can be made when developing local strategies for risk reduction. Too often, the negotiations take place between centralized structures such as headquarters of donors and implementers.

Communities are often invited to come up with ideas after important decisions are already made about what to spend the money on.

In recurrent disaster situations when the risk is high and the aim is to reduce vulnerability, spending money on things that have an immediate impact is probably a more effective approach to saving lives.

This is especially true for remote areas, and donor strategies may benefit from appropriating a larger portion of funds for basic material input such as:

- material for construction of additional floors;
- upgrading warehouses where relief material are pre-stocked;
- hand tools such as shovels and sandbags;
- life boats, life jackets, jerry cans; and
- supporting complete relocation of a disaster preparedness and relief warehouse if the location is not sound, such as the Red Cross regional warehouse around Guwahati, Assam which has its back one metre away from a wall of eroding clay.

First aid as an entry point for disaster preparedness

In 2002, monsoon floods killed more than 780 people and displaced 24 million others in eastern and north-eastern states.

When the pilot project was initiated, disaster preparedness, as a concept or a practicality, did not exist in the work of the branch. What existed were health and care services and a tradition of training people in first aid and as nurses. The first aid training session offered the first opening for a dialogue with both the communities and Red Cross staff on disaster preparedness.

During training workshops on first aid, the pilot project team was able to discuss and to transfer knowledge about the theories and concepts behind disaster preparedness. The first aid training events also served as a starting point for the Assam State Branch to identify eight volunteers from the two pilot districts of Nalbari and Goalpari to undergo a training of trainers on disaster preparedness. The training of trainers covers basic and fundamental aspects of disaster preparedness such as:

- defining disaster management, preparedness and response;
- different phases of disaster management;
- explaining vulnerability and capacity assessment (VCA);
- community mapping; and
- presenting mitigation and preparedness activities.

The group discussions on disaster preparedness during the first aid training courses generated curiosity about the subject and had a mobilizing effect. While this interest grew, the branch had sufficient time to translate from English to Assamese the necessary training material provided by the International Federation's regional delegation for south Asia.

The training modules have now been further developed to accommodate the context and culture in Assam. A small but important example is the fact that certain concepts in English do not have the same word associated with them in Assamese.

As an example, the word 'vulnerability' does not exist in Assamese and the word 'community' refers to specifying religious or socio-economic groups. The Assam State Branch played the lead role in ensuring that such concepts were sufficiently discussed with the communities and that an existing word in Assamese is associated with various concepts. For instance, the term 'community' has been replaced with rural society

Community participation

Once the National Society's perspective regarding their role in disaster management changed, the challenge was to ensure that the communities understand their role in reducing risks and preparing themselves before the floods. Chandan Chutia best captures the collective thinking of people in his home region prior to the pilot project: "We have always been aware of the flood problem because no monsoon goes by without a flood in Assam. The majority of our people know how to escape. What they didn't know is that as a community we can prepare and mitigate."

The branch surveyed the targeted areas with a team of 20 volunteers. The volunteers conducted a vulnerability and capacity assessment of the area based on the training provided to them as a key part of the pilot project. The outcome of the survey was then shared with the communities,

Motivation



Greater community motivation can be achieved by supporting activities that are important to the community and reduce vulnerabilities. One example is building water points at community centres such as schools and temples. Listening to the ideas of branches creates the environment for participation. The idea for raised platforms belongs to the IRCS as an appropriate local intervention for targeted communities.

The average cost for a 3,000 square metre platform, equipped with latrines and drinking water is between US\$10,000-20,000, depending on whether the land is purchased or donated. A raised platform of this size provides safety for up to 2,000 people. External funding for building these platforms is usually needed because of the cost of construction machinery.

When floods happen, schools and temples become the first shelter destination for villages and towns. Children's schooling is sometimes interrupted for up to two months. School

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Raising money in the targeted districts is difficult for the district Red Cross. This region has its share of armed conflict and asking for donations can be easily confused with asking for financial aid for rebels active in the guerrilla warfare in the jungles and can therefore threaten the organization's principle of neutrality.

encouraging them to participate in reducing their risks. The branch volunteers and staff also mapped out the demographic risk areas. Although the participants arrived with a relief perspective, the mapping exercise gave them the opportunity to understand that it is possible to prepare for and mitigate disaster risks without compromising relief services.

Since the communities were already aware of their flood-related problems, the invitation to join the training workshops was generally well received. Each time a training session takes place, often the entire village comes together to share flood stories, especially the elderly share their escape stories from great floods. Chandan Chutia underlines the importance of creating an approach that is relevant to their communities: "We weave into the flood stories shared by our people key messages on disaster preparedness. We have a therapeutic approach to encouraging participation. We do what we can to integrate elderly people into our meetings so they can share their stories from different floods...people still cry when they share their untold stories."

When resettlement is not an option

The people who live in these flood plains are ancient communities, deeply rooted in their ways and attached to their livelihood which is primarily agriculture. In addition, the sheer number of people, 26 million, excludes resettlement as a strategy. So the only option is to open dialogue with these communities to see what their views are regarding preparedness and risk reduction. The pilot project provided an entry point for the National Society to initiate such a dialogue with the targeted localities.

Once the concept was understood and people saw the possibility to do something to lessen their risks, the ideas came forward. The raised flood platforms under construction with support from DFID are one example of appropriate local intervention proposed by both the communities and the National Society. Other ideas which emerged led the National Society's headquarters to also focus on pre-positioning relief stocks and increasing preparedness and response capacities through training.



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Raised flood platforms

The raised platforms must be constructed on earthen platforms high enough to remain above flood levels. The earth is compacted and the sides of the platform are sloped and turfed with grass to provide structural stability and resistance to flood waters and prevent erosion.



The soil for building these platforms is excavated from the surrounding flatlands leaving large holes in the ground. During the dry season, these holes are often filled with water helping with small-scale farming, fishery or bathing.

The raised platforms can be as vast as 3,000 square metres and elevated close to 2 metres off the ground.

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Some results in building local capacities

Performance

Because of the 2001 Gujarat earthquake, the Indian Red Cross Society already knew that disaster preparedness was a priority. What the National Society required was the technical guidance on how to link community-based capacity building to its overall disaster preparedness and response practices.

A concrete example of the benefits of investments made by the IRCS, DFID and the International Federation is the Assam State Branch response to 2002 floods. Compared to the year 2000 disaster, in 2002 the needs assessment took a total of three days as opposed to three months in 2000. In due time, a thorough evaluation of the pilot project will detail key elements that led to this incredible improvement. In the meantime, some of the reasons are already known: enough people were trained and actively participated in carrying out the assessment, and response stocks had been pre-positioned prior to the start of the monsoon season.

Civil society

The project team in Assam is positively surprised by the wave of community interest in disaster preparedness. The participants in both Nalbari and Goalpara districts go out and organize their own local disaster preparedness committees asking for Red Cross support when they need it. It is clear to Chandan Chutia that this project is linking people so effectively; “In our region, usually individual knowledge is kept within families, but now through the stories, the training and a true desire to take action our participants are connecting one family to another and bridging one community with another. We did not expect this when we first heard about the pilot project, but we are pleased about this unexpected outcome.”

Volunteerism

Sachindra Chakravarty is the lead person for the community-based disaster preparedness programme in Nalbari district. He has been involved with the Assam State Branch since 1997. He confirmed that since the initiation of the pilot project in the district, the community participates in most of their risk reduction work. “People participate with free labour during construction activities for latrines and raised platforms and the land is donated by the community. During the last flood, so many people came directly to our Red Cross office to volunteer with rescue missions and helped us survey the area, select the affected people. They even helped us manage the distribution.”

Ownership

Now that the targeted communities have been introduced to disaster preparedness and have been given practical tools, the district branches have asked for further training in disaster response. The project team in Assam believes that this is the result of witnessing a clear difference between 2000 and 2002 operations. The people involved with the pilot project agree that their training in disaster preparedness actually improved their effectiveness in disaster response. They also realized that while their rapid assessment was successful, the IRCS national procedures need to improve further to streamline bureaucratic processes to support the speed and quality of relief services.

Sharing authority

Another important side effect of the pilot project is the IRCS recognition that for any locally-based initiative to stand a chance for success, the organizational capacities of state branches to run community-based programs have to be given a chance to develop.



Local resources

The colossal task of emergency relief assistance for floods in Assam necessitates a close working relationship between district authorities and the Assamese branch of the IRCS. In Goalpara district, the authorities have loaned the Red Cross a building situated well above the flood zone for the disaster preparedness project. The IRCS district secretary for Goalpara is hopeful that the authorities will allow the branch to have permanent access to this location for both preparedness and response activities. This location is ideal as a meeting point for all emergency services in the district prior to and during disasters.

There is now an opportunity for the National Society to examine its procedures to ensure that the organization's centralized system is flexible enough to allow for quick access to resources and localized decision making during emergency relief operations. A decentralized approach delegates authority for use of resources, including money, to branches. This is a key element of organizational preparedness for an effective response to disasters.

Learning

Although National Society strategic plans are given great importance by the International Federation, it cannot mistake the absence of a completed written plan in the National Society with the absence of a sense of priorities. Paid and volunteer staff of National Societies, as members of their respective communities, are aware of the local vulnerabilities and have ideas about how to effect change. The risk reduction programme provided the opportunity to turn those ideas into solutions and put the decision-making responsibility into the hands of the people.