

Vulnerability and capacity assessment: learning by doing – Lesotho case study

Background

Lesotho is a small, mountainous country, which forms an enclave within the eastern part of South Africa. There are two main mountain ranges, the Drakensberg and the Maluti, the first of which contains the highest peak in southern Africa. Just 13 per cent of the country's land can be cultivated and population pressure on land is acute.

Since 2002, Lesotho has been affected by recurring droughts. The disaster risk scenario for Lesotho can be described as moderate. The country experiences moderate risk conditions due to high vulnerability caused by dire poverty. As a result of these high poverty levels, a large proportion of the population is vulnerable to food insecurity.

The main hazards in Lesotho include:

- drought – the dry season delays the planting of crops, which usually affects maize crop yields leading to food insecurity.
- early frost and hailstorms – these often destroy many of the crops, especially maize.
- environmental degradation – this is mainly caused by population pressure forcing settlement in marginal areas. Since the economy is based on subsistence agriculture, especially livestock, settlement in marginal areas results in overgrazing, severe soil erosion, soil exhaustion and desertification.
- HIV and AIDS – the rate of adult HIV-infection is estimated at between 29 and 31 per cent.

All these factors contribute to high levels of vulnerability amongst households and communities in Lesotho, which ranks amongst the lowest income-generating countries in the world. Despite these challenges, the Lesotho Red Cross Society, working

together with other humanitarian agencies and the national government, is determined to reduce vulnerability through a vulnerability and capacity assessment (VCA) approach in targeted communities.

The VCA learning-by-doing approach provides an interactive opportunity to understand the vulnerabilities, risks and capacities of communities. Using the VCA learning-by-doing model, data is collected through community investigation tools such as direct observation, a range of mapping techniques (including



Map of Lesotho showing the area where the VCA was conducted in October 2006 using the learning-by-doing approach

transect walks, historical profiles, institutional and social network charts, seasonal calendars etc.) and focus group discussions with the community. The information gathered is validated by community members who, together with the VCA teams, identify the various vulnerabilities, risks and hazards to which they are exposed, along with their capacities to deal with them.

The available capacities will then be identified as potential resources to be built upon, to transform vulnerabilities into strengths. Specific actions and activities for transformation will be generated through the engagement of community discussions.

A regional VCA learning-by-doing exercise – hosted by the Lesotho Red Cross Society and supported by the UK's Department for International Development – was organized from 23 to 28 October 2006. The training took place in four communities in Mphahle's Hoek district with participants from the Red Cross, local Disaster Management Authorities, NGOs and the UN.

Putting VCA learning-by-doing into practice

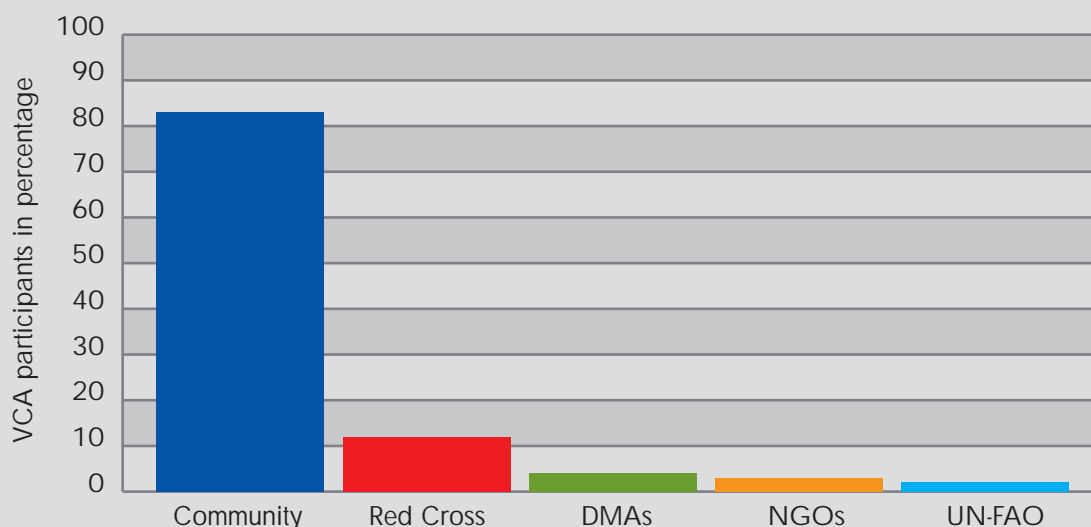
The VCA learning-by-doing training provided participants with an opportunity to immediately put their learning into practice, thanks to the mentoring and coaching provided by the facilitators, as well as by peers.

During the participatory evaluation session, one of the participants, Forster Matyatya, commented that “because of its pragmatic approach, knowledge and skills retention is very high”.

Training was enhanced by the participation and blending of experiences drawn from various humanitarian organizations, the National Disaster Management Authorities (DMAs), National Societies (Red Cross), NGOs, the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (UN-FAO) and the community itself. This VCA training provided a platform for programme integration such as disaster management, disaster risk reduction, health, water and sanitation, food security, relief, monitoring and evaluation. The graphic below depicts the participation levels of the various organizations.

The training provided the Lesotho Red Cross Society with an opportunity to work with other partners and with the community through a pragmatic approach that was well received by the participants, the local authorities, the Red Cross, NGOs working in the area and the community.

VCA learning by doing empowered community members, who became an integral part of the team collecting data, supporting the data analysis and validating information. They were able to draw their



Representation of VCA learning-by-doing participation



Ha-Mapotsane community members ranking their problems, Lesotho, 2006

own hazard, risk and capacity maps, as well as to rank their problems according to priority and find possible solutions to build safer and resilient households and communities.

Traditional leaders in the four communities of Mphahle's Hoek felt empowered by this participatory process, which involved and valued their traditional knowledge and ideas unlike previous assessments.

Lessons learned

The VCA learning-by-doing approach:

- has enhanced networking and commitment amongst communities, government agencies, NGOs, the UN and the Lesotho Red Cross Society to reduce risks in communities
- has enhanced community participation and ownership, due to the participatory nature of data collection, data analysis and validation. The validation process allows the community to provide feedback and confirm the findings whilst, at the same time, committing itself to the risk reduction initiatives
- promotes a high degree of knowledge and skills retention through its practical work in the field with the community, and in dealing with their real-life situation
- enables the development of project indicators against each hazard identified, while the 'actions for transformation' process allows the communities to commit themselves to actions they can change on their own, what they can influence and what requires complete transformation
- enables a better understanding of community beliefs, norms and values, which helps in moderating the behaviour of the VCA team to work in the community to develop and implement projects based on a deeper understanding of the capacities and problems of the community. When conducting a VCA, one has to enter the community with 'optimal ignorance' in order to avoid any prejudice during the assessment. However, there is a need for secondary data about the area to be assessed
- while carrying out the VCA, there is a need to narrow the geographical area to a few local communities rather than targeting the whole district in order to get a better understanding of the community by maximizing their involvement in the process.
- provided an opportunity to identify community risks, hazards and vulnerabilities, as well as capacities the communities might have taken for granted, thereby raising community awareness to reduce dependency and promoting the participatory transformation of actions and activities by engaging in discussions amongst themselves
- encourages and allows a greater collaboration and sharing of resources amongst different humanitarian organizations, local government authorities and the Red Cross, thereby reducing duplication and bridging gaps. Involving participants from various organizations generates a cross-fertilization of ideas



Women mapping coping strategies, Lesotho, 2006

from a wider pool of experience as well as allowing programme integration with the Red Cross Red Crescent Movement

- enabled a profiling of the Lesotho Red Cross Society. The engagement of National Disaster Management Authorities provided an opportunity to influence policy-makers, to seriously consider using the VCA learning-by-doing approach as a programme planning and monitoring tool

The way forward

At the closing ceremony of the VCA learning-by-doing exercise, the chief executive of the Disaster Management Authority, Mr Haretsebe Mahosi, said that he would work closely with the Lesotho Red Cross Society to reduce risk in the community. His trained staff will help in following up recommendations and implementing the VCA learning-by-doing concept, as well as in training other humanitarian workers how to conduct focused VCA exercises in the country.

Following the vulnerability and capacity assessment, the Lesotho Red Cross Society has been able to work together with the government's Disaster Management Authorities to share the benefits of the learning-by-doing approach with the Lesotho Vulnerability Assessment Committee (LVAC).

The Lesotho Red Cross Society has been invited to be part of the LVAC technical group that is planning to review the VCA tools. These tools will be used to assess community vulnerability and capacity to develop community risk reduction projects. The society has also been invited to train other NGOs, government authorities and other humanitarian agencies how to use the VCA learning-by-doing approach for their programme planning and monitoring.

The Sankatana community and its leadership committed themselves to source technical support from the Ministry of Agriculture and Food Security to improve their farming skills, and from the Ministry of Forestry and Land Reclamation for support with tree saplings and techniques on how to grow them within the context of land reclamation.

As part of fulfilling commitments made through the 'actions for transformation', villagers from the Maqoala community in Mohale's Hoek district were trained in conservation farming through a project funded by the German Red Cross.

A regional database of all the VCA graduates was developed. Participants from Malawi were able to influence in their Institutional Strategic Partnership 3rd phase (ISP3) programming to have the VCA learning-by-doing approach as the basis for community-based disaster risk reduction interventions for the period 2007–2008 and beyond.



School awareness, Lesotho, 2006

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