

Preparing for climate change in Viet Nam

Background

The science is clear: it is very likely that global warming is leading to an increase in weather extremes such as heatwaves and heavy rainfall. Viet Nam has always suffered from extreme weather events. Every year, it is struck by typhoons which cause death and destruction along the long and low-lying coastal area, while heavy rains hit the mountainous hinterland and river deltas, causing floods and landslides. At other times of the year, parts of these same areas suffer from prolonged periods of drought. Because of climate change, it is likely that droughts will occur more often, and that tropical cyclones (typhoons and hurricanes) will also become more intense.

Recognizing the projected impact of global warming on the occurrence of extreme weather events, and

understanding how to adapt disaster management programmes accordingly, so as to anticipate and reduce the impact of the growing risks posed by climate change, is of paramount importance. This will enable the Red Cross of Viet Nam (RCVN) – working together with the Vietnamese government and other aid organizations – to contribute to the creation of safer communities for people living in disaster-prone areas.

In 2003, RCVN became one of the first National Red Cross Red Crescent Societies to launch a pilot project designed to integrate climate change into its existing disaster preparedness programmes. At the time, the global debate on climate change focused mainly on how to limit the greenhouse gas emissions that cause global warming



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(climate change mitigation). There was very limited experience in the area of reducing people's vulnerability to climate change and extreme weather events (climate change adaptation).

Starting from scratch, RCVN managed, in three years, to establish new partnerships, to understand the complex issue of climate change and its impact in Viet Nam, and to find ways to adapt to it.

The project helped 30 communes in Viet Nam become less vulnerable to climate-related disasters. Furthermore, the results and lessons learnt are now helping to make RCVN's other disaster preparedness programmes 'climate change-proof'. They have also helped the Red Cross Red Crescent develop similar programmes worldwide, and have served many other organizations working in the same field by sharing experience.

The project

The project was a pilot for RCVN and was designed to investigate how disaster preparedness programmes could be adapted so as to take into account climate change risks. The aim was twofold: firstly, to help the most vulnerable people prepare for disasters that are exacerbated by climate change; and secondly, to apply the lessons learnt in the disaster preparedness programme of RCVN and of other Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies and organizations worldwide.

The pilot project started in May 2003 and ended in March 2006. Since then, RCVN has been integrating the lessons learnt into both ongoing and new disaster preparedness projects. RCVN is continuing its mangrove-planting project for coastal and riverbank protection, and is currently starting up three new community-based disaster preparedness projects in eight provinces across the country. RCVN also explored the possibility of linking tree-planting (afforestation) for the purpose of disaster preparedness to generating funds from reducing greenhouse gas emissions (clean development mechanism).

The pilot project on disaster preparedness and climate change has created a valuable pool of knowledge and experience. The challenge now is to transform this into effective practice in order to better address the growing risks posed by climate change.

The project has been implemented in 30 communes in 5 central coastal provinces of Viet Nam, namely Nghe An, Ha Tinh, Quang Binh, Ninh Thuan and Binh Thuan.

The project started at a time when climate change was just a concern in terms of mitigation (how to halt or reduce climate change), not adaptation (how to live with the effects). It was therefore a challenge to raise understanding amongst both implementers and stakeholders, and beneficiaries. What was also challenging was the fact that there were no examples or best practice from others from which to learn. The project could not have been implemented had RCVN not reached out to new partners, such as the hydrometeorological institute, which helped it understand climate change and its impact on Viet Nam.

With this project, RCVN was one of the first organizations to take into account the impact of climate change so as to make a disaster preparedness intervention climate change-proof.

The project went through the following phases:

■ Raising the awareness of RCVN staff

Why should RCVN be concerned about climate change and climate variability? At the time, this was an important and very new issue that had to be explained to all RCVN staff before proceeding. In meetings and workshops, RCVN learnt more about climate change, its link to extreme weather events, and how it related to the organization's core mission: to support vulnerable people. These activities provided the necessary background and were required to build the confidence and capacities of staff in this area.

■ Speaking out amongst disaster preparedness stakeholders

Through consultations with Viet Nam's hydrometeorological institute, with several other climate experts, as well as with existing partners, such as the government agency for disaster preparedness, RCVN learnt much about the projected impact of climate change. The main findings were summarized in a publication, which, together with a national seminar on climate change and disaster preparedness, was used to advocate the issue and the need for action amongst relevant NGOs and governmental institutions.

The RCVN and the Netherlands Red Cross delegation in Viet Nam began to speak out to underline the importance of integrating climate change projections into existing policies and programmes. In order to explain the value of climate risk reduction to a wider audience, two documentaries were produced. Both were broadcast several times on national television.

■ Making people aware of their capacity to reduce their vulnerability

RCVN has access to an extensive network of trainers throughout the country. They specialize in raising awareness amongst vulnerable communities, about hazards, disasters and the importance of disaster risk reduction. During the climate change pilot programme, RCVN integrated climate change into its disaster preparedness training modules. Information about climate change and extreme weather events has been included in education and training materials ever since.

■ Taking action

Reducing vulnerability begins with self-awareness about vulnerability and opportunities to reduce risks. RCVN has extensive experience in participatory assessments in vulnerable communities, in how to consider people's vulnerability to disasters, and in how to increase people's resilience. The notion of climate change has been integrated into the assessment in order to increase the awareness of people living in the pilot communities. Based on the outcomes of the assessments, the RCVN supported the implementation of small-scale disaster risk reduction measures, which were prioritized by the communities

themselves. This resulted in a wide variety of measures, such as the construction of search and rescue centres, the training of search and rescue teams to coordinate rescue operations, the reinforcing of existing loudspeaker systems for early warning, the planting of trees and the construction of dams to protect the (agricultural) land against strong winds, sand drift and salt-water intrusion.

Outcomes

Impact and results

- Over 268,000 people in 30 disaster-prone communes learnt how to prepare for disasters, and profited from small-scale mitigation works.
- Approximately 1,200 RCVN staff and volunteers gained considerable knowledge, skills and experience in the areas of climate change and disaster preparedness, helping them to further develop and strengthen disaster management programmes.
- Both RCVN staff as well as local authorities and social-political organizations, at provincial, district and local level, boosted their knowledge and skills in the participatory assessment of hazards, vulnerabilities and capacity, planning for disaster preparedness, first aid and search and rescue.



The experiences have been disseminated both nationally and internationally to be used by Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies and other organizations worldwide.

Lessons learnt

- Climate change needs to be an integral part of disaster management strategies, in order to ensure strong disaster risk reduction programmes.
- The best way to address climate change is to integrate it into the existing disaster preparedness programmes (of the RCVN). RCVN is now engaged in a more systematic consultation with the national meteorological office and climate change experts, and is using this knowledge for more effective risk management activities.
- Consideration of climate change typically does not change the nature of risk reduction activities, such as the establishment of search and rescue teams, the planting of trees and improved early warning systems. However, climate change clearly raises the priority of such disaster risk reduction initiatives, within the RCVN, amongst other actors, and particularly at the community level.
- RCVN's strength lies in its ability to initiate and stimulate community dialogue and action. These

activities should complement the disaster risk reduction and development activities carried out by the relevant government agencies and other organizations.

- Climate change is a complicated subject, with many scientific and global aspects that are difficult to communicate at community level. How complete does the information on climate change to vulnerable people need to be? And how can communication about climate change be simplified in a way that helps to engage vulnerable people in climate risk reduction, without compromising scientific credibility? Approaches designed to address these issues are under continuous development.

The way forward

Learning from this project, the Red Cross/Red Crescent Centre on Climate Change and Disaster Preparedness has developed a programme to help Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies worldwide understand and address the risks of climate change, particularly in disaster risk reduction programmes. It is a flexible programme, designed to meet the specific situations of National Societies that are interested in participating. ■



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