

From debate to action on climate change in Indonesia

Climate change is more than a matter of debate in the thousands of islands that comprise Indonesia: instead it is an issue that is already changing lives and livelihoods ... mostly for the worst.

The February 2007 floods that ravaged western Java is one disaster where expert opinion concurs that climate change was a factor in the devastation.

'The February floods can probably be seen as being influenced by climate change because these previously unusual occurrences are becoming more commonplace,' said Arifin Muh Hadi, head of Indonesian Red Cross (PMI) disaster management division. 'In recent years, rainfall patterns have changed and become more unpredictable.'

In light of this and other evidence, the choice of Bali for the December 2007 United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change conference was appropriate.

Indonesian Red Cross (known as PMI) has been a pioneer on climate change issues both in country as well as regionally. It is part of the national climate change network

comprising the Ministry of Environment and its climate change focal point, the national meteorological office, and other agencies.

The value of Indonesian Red Cross' work and the significance of this issue has attracted strong support from Netherlands Red Cross, through the Red Cross Red Crescent Climate Change Centre, German Red Cross and the International Federation. This combination approach demonstrates Red Cross Red Crescent being a global network in action that is capable of having a strong local impact.

Indeed, Red Cross Red Crescent climate change initiatives in Indonesia, and elsewhere, build on one of the great traditions – and successes – of national society work: community engagement and mobilization. In Indonesia, the Red Cross is working with communities to help them understand the basic science of climate change and use this knowledge to *adapt* to the consequent changing weather and nature of disasters.

One 'typical' vulnerable community is the 360,000-strong population of Wajo district, in South Sulawesi. People are exposed to the usual array of disasters in many parts of Indonesia and rely on an often-blocked lake – Tempe, the biggest in the region – for drinking water, as a toilet, and as a dump. The local authority's response to the community's vulnerability is relocation but this is not favourable to many.

'Floods are a common problem here,' said Abu Bakar Fattah, 61. 'The local government has a policy to relocate us to other areas which are safer, but we don't want to move. This land belongs to our ancestors and we don't know how to earn our living if we are not fishing.'

The Indonesian Red Cross has listened to these local concerns and as a result supports a community based risk reduction initiative to help people adapt – in their current habitats – to global warming. The approach is comprehensive with the provision of clean drinking water; prevention of flooding, landslides, erosion, coastal abrasion; and construction of earthquake-resistant houses all being addressed.

This integrative and adaptive approach to programming means that the increasing importance and relevance of climate change can be incorporated into thinking and action. 'When we supported the planning of this five years ago, climate change issue wasn't really integrated in the programme,' said Danish Red Cross programme manager Lars Moller, whose national society works with Indonesian Red Cross in Wajo. 'But as this has started to have an influence we are adjusting the next stage to better serve the community.'

The influence of climate change does not change the core focus of the initiative, to: improve disaster preparedness to reduce risks from natural hazard; and build capacity of the local communities to deal with emergencies. In fact, climate change makes these objectives even more appropriate ... and pressing.



The here and now of climate change.

Picture: Kanyasorn Tansubhapol, IFRC



The blockage of Lake Tempe is often caused by a build up of water hyacinths, which obstruct the flow of rivers that bisect the lake and also silt up riverbeds. In time of flooding, to which the build up of plants contributes, the water hyacinths are swept along in huge masses damaging houses.

‘Most villagers have little knowledge that the flooding results from chronic environmental problems in the area,’ said Indonesian Red Cross’ Irawan Kharie. ‘Climate change is another such environmental issue that contributes to pre-existing vulnerability ... and they don’t understand what climate change is really about.’

A large barrier of concrete poles was erected to prevent the water hyacinths from hitting houses. This was a necessary measure but insufficient on its own in terms of building safety, resilience and preparedness. Local villagers were also trained as members of a Red Cross community based action team. Water towers for clean supplies were constructed and 24-hour health centres provided.

‘Though climate change was not a direct influence on the programme at the beginning, aspects of it – such as the changing nature of floods and rainfall patterns – were subsequently integrated into preparedness, prevention and response action plans,’ said Arifin Muh Hadi.

Indonesian Red Cross has campaigned both within the Red Cross and externally (ie with the government, communities and other partners) to promote the fact that climate change is best approached as an integrated part of either pre-existing or planned community based disaster preparedness and risk reduction programmes

‘The term ‘climate change’ sounds very abstract and most people don’t understand what it is about. Indonesian Red Cross feels



Paddles and puddles: a PMI centre rises above the effects of climate change.

Picture: Kanyasorn Tansubhapol, IFRC

this is the time to start doing something to educate and inform the public through our community based disaster preparedness and risk reduction programmes,’ said Maria Rosa Aswi Reksaningtyas, head of the national society’s communication division.

The challenge for the Federation, meanwhile, is to support national societies, such as Indonesian Red Cross, in reducing risks while strengthening disaster preparedness and response capacity.

The regional disaster management committee, which comprises representatives from Southeast Asia’s 11 national societies, has led much of the effort to make the Red Cross Red Crescent relevant supporters of communities adapting to changing climate. After much consideration, the national societies recommend that climate change should be part of the Red Cross Red Crescent’s overall approach to disaster risk reduction, and not be considered as a new area per se. The Red Cross Red Crescent’s

considerable experience and existing tools to assist community preparedness for hazards are appropriate and adaptable for climate change work.

To help the Red Cross Red Crescent in its approach to climate change, the SE Asian national societies proposed a guiding statement to be considered at the International Conference: ‘The Red Cross Red Crescent works with communities to help them interpret, prepare for and adapt to climate change. This is achieved by building community resilience through disaster risk reduction, research and advocacy both locally and globally.’

The committee also developed recommendations to: raise awareness of the impact of climate change, support community adaptation, undertake advocacy and use the Red Cross and Red Crescent’s unique advantage of being an auxiliary to their Governments.

In Indonesia, the Federation disaster management coordinator, Jeong Park, sees Red Cross action as in the following terms. ‘We attempt to show that often simple things in daily life are very relevant to climate change and its influences,’ he said.

‘For example, take the throwing away of plastic bags; these bags can block drains, which can exacerbate the effect of floods, which in turn are now increasingly influenced by climate changes. So throwing away a plastic bag – a small act in itself – can exacerbate the ultimate impact of a climate change-influenced flood.’

Meanwhile, the Red Cross Red Crescent in Indonesia – and across Southeast Asia – will continue to try to strengthen its programming and awareness raising, which in turn should lead to safer and more resilient communities in the face of climate change and other challenges.