

Harmonizing learning in Central America

Summary

The Regional Disaster Preparedness Reference Centre in El Salvador was created in 2005 to improve the capacity, quality and effectiveness of National Societies' disaster response in the Central America region. The centre is responsible for coordinating the training of members of national disaster response or intervention teams in the region. To this end, it has developed a standardized training curriculum and relevant support materials, with the aid of disaster relief and preparedness experts from Central American National Societies.

Background

National Societies in the Mexico, Central America and Caribbean region have been using many different educational methods, materials and tools to build their disaster preparedness capacities. With a view to coordinating and harmonizing these, the regional representation of the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (International Federation) proposed setting up a Regional Disaster Preparedness Reference Centre, an idea submitted to and approved by the presidents of the region's National Societies in 2005.



The decision was taken to locate the reference centre in El Salvador, where the National Society had already distinguished itself for its work in the area of capacity building, especially in the development of response and contingency plans and the ongoing training of national disaster response or intervention teams. The main aims of the reference centre are to facilitate the adoption of minimum standards by developing common training processes and materials and to improve coordination, trust and communication among the National Societies of the Central America region by building common goals.

Involving all of the region's National Societies in the work of harmonization has been one of the keys to the reference centre's success. In this case, coordination and harmonization do not mean imposing one view but rather developing agreed minimum standards, collectively identifying areas for improvement, and respecting and celebrating the diversity of the region's National Societies.

The International Federation and the British and Finnish Red Cross have supported the establishment of the reference centre by contributing their own resources, as well as helping to obtain resources from other donors. The identification of documentation and educational needs, the formulation of projects and the consequent financing from the UK government's Department for International Development (DFID) and the European Commission Humanitarian Aid Office's Disaster Preparedness Programme (DIPECHO) have enabled the reference centre to expand its work and to respond to increased demand for its services.

“When creating the centre, we were very clear that training could not be confined to workshops, and we knew we needed to come up with a vision for ongoing learning processes that included follow-up, hands-on training and knowledge-sharing initiatives. It is such a joy to see this vision come true.”

Miguel Vega, Coordinator of the Regional Disaster Preparedness Reference Centre

Participatory approach

The Regional Disaster Preparedness Reference Centre has become a regional meeting point. It specializes in research, documentation, validation and analysis of disaster preparedness methods, the development and dissemination of materials, and the organization of workshops. It collects, analyses and evaluates various tools and then shares the lessons learned and identifies best practices. Through its work, a coordinated training curriculum for national disaster response or intervention teams has been developed.

“Learning and humour are not mutually exclusive, just the opposite: an active learning methodology incorporates them both.”

Facilitator of the basic National Intervention Team training workshop in El Salvador (July 2007)

For its workshops, the reference centre has adopted a participatory and interactive learning methodology. The methodology is grounded in adult education principles: no one begins from zero; everyone has their particular experiences to offer, and participants and facilitators learn from each other. New knowledge is discovered and built on through dialogue and input from the facilitators. This active, experiential learning methodology also comprises individual and collective practical exercises aimed at the development of essential preparedness and response skills.

Courses at the reference centre are accompanied by tools that facilitate use and implementation of the learning: visual aids; lesson plans; manuals for participants, coordinators and facilitators; and practical exercises. There are also facilitator's guides designed to make these manuals accessible and understandable. Another key to the centre's success has been the continuous training of the facilitators, so that their knowledge and skills are constantly refreshed and up to date.

The reference centre also produces a range of guides and manuals based on the performance needs identified by the National Societies. The main sources of information for these publications are the National Societies, although some national and international organizations, including United Nations agencies, national disaster systems, USAID's Office of U.S. Foreign Disaster Assistance (OFDA) and the Red Cross's Pan-American Disaster Response Unit (PADRU), have contributed to their preparation and validation.

Guides and manuals produced by the Regional Disaster Preparedness Reference Centre¹

Guidelines

- Security Guide for Field Operations
- Field Manual for National Intervention Teams
- Guide to Drafting Response and Contingency Plans
- Drills Exercise Guidelines
- Guidelines for Managing Emergency Operations Centres

Training manuals

- Basic Training Manual for National Intervention Teams. Contains: lesson plans, coordinator's manual, facilitator's manual, participant's manual, simulation exercises, evaluations and other documents
- Response and contingency plans Facilitator's Guide
- Specialized training manuals for National Intervention Teams on water and sanitation in emergency situations, health in emergencies and logistics

¹ www.cruzroja.org

The reference centre disseminates other materials produced by the International Federation's secretariat in Geneva, such as protocols for assessing emergencies and a guide to assessing food security emergencies. As the

manuals produced thus far are disseminated and used by the National Societies and other organizations, ideas and proposals for future such publications can be developed in accordance with the National Societies' needs.



Lessons learned

- To avoid experiences and learning being lost as a result of a lack of documentation and staff continuity, a special effort is needed to collect, evaluate, improve, harmonize and validate materials, tools and guides related to disaster preparedness and response.
- Exchange of experiences is educational in itself. Independent of what is taught in the workshops, interaction between staff and volunteers from National Societies improves knowledge and understanding of disaster-related issues. This is true for both the course participants and the facilitators. The Regional Disaster Preparedness Reference Centre's prolific work has been achieved, in large part, thanks to these exchanges.
- The reference centre's approach is based on the conviction that learning from others and soliciting help in specific areas is a prerequisite for sharing one's own knowledge and skills. This is borne out by its openness to include like-minded organizations and institutions in the development and validation of methods, tools and materials.

Regional workshop to design and validate tools (El Salvador, September 2007). *At the workshop, several guides and other materials were revised with the assistance of regional National Society staff and others involved in national disaster management systems and international organizations (CARE, OXFAM, Plan International, etc.).*

- Workshops need to be well organized, focused and efficient. Great care in the selection of participants and the evaluation of the skills and capacities acquired (performance objectives) makes for a more solid educational process.
- Education is a much broader concept in its theoretical and practical implications than training. Education implies a more systematic vision of the concepts, skills and values offered. It goes beyond the mere delivery of workshops to include regular follow-up of past course

participants and continuously expanding and updating their knowledge. This is the ideal educational model that the Regional Disaster Preparedness Reference Centre endeavours to apply and promote.

Future challenges and next steps

- The initial idea behind the Regional Disaster Preparedness Reference Centre was to serve National Red Cross Societies in Central America, Mexico and the Caribbean, but now its work extends to the whole of Latin America, and other organizations are aware of and interested in gaining access to the valuable tools and resources it has developed.
- The website (www.cruzroja.org) is an important avenue for promoting the centre's work among National Societies and other organizations wishing to use Red Cross materials. This needs to be maintained and further exploited.
- The reference centre cannot do everything by itself. It needs the ongoing collaboration of the National Societies to improve and achieve consensus on the tools created. The continuing interest of the National Societies in carrying out this work is vital for the centre's future.
- The Red Cross Red Crescent can and should function as a system, both at local and global level. The reference centre contributes to this process through its work. In addition, the capacity that is being built is not focused solely on disaster preparedness or response, but also on strengthening the capacities of people who can facilitate courses and monitor processes and advances within their own National Societies.
- The International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement stands out, among other things, for its unparalleled network of millions of volunteers around the world. The challenge of attracting and motivating people and training them in disaster-related issues can be addressed through the broad dissemination of the work of centres such as the Regional Disaster Preparedness Reference Centre.

For more information, please contact:

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