

# Cayman Islands: Applying VCA

## Background

Vulnerability and capacity assessment (VCA) training and practical exercises were carried out in at risk communities of the Cayman Islands. VCA has been described by a Cayman Islands newspaper as “a risk assessment tool and process that can be used as basis for disaster management and risk reduction planning”.

VCA is a tool used by Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies to help communities to better understand the main risks and hazards they face, and to identify the people most at risk from these disasters and their vulnerabilities and capacities. It also recommends actions that communities can take to reduce risks, to cope better with disasters and to recover from them. In addition, a VCA suggests priorities for communities at risk, how humanitarian actors can best work together and how to ensure that communities feel ‘ownership’ for projects that aim to find solutions to their main problems.

## The project

- In March 2004, the Cayman Islands branch of the British Red Cross, held a VCA workshop with the support of the International Federation’s secretariat and its sub-regional office in Port of Spain (Trinidad and Tobago). A total of 17 participants took part in the workshop, which aimed at identifying potential hazards within the community, how vulnerable some people are to those disasters and assessing their capacity to cope with the subsequent effects. In addition to the Red Cross, the participants represented the ministries of health, child and family services, and tourism, the departments of fire, police, public works, civil aviation and government information system, as well as the Adventist Relief and Development Agency (ADRA), the water authority and Cayman Airways.
- The practical and theoretical VCA training ended with participants putting together an action plan to establish a National Disaster Plan. The Cayman Islands Red Cross wrote to the islands’ Chief Secretary asking for help in achieving this goal.
- Using the VCA methodology, the workshop participants took into account all types of potential hazard-related risks that could affect the Islands and their inhabitants. These ranged from the disaster effects caused by chemical hazards, explosions, flooding and issues related

to health, banking and immigration. Banking was included because the Cayman Islanders are to a large extent dependent on jobs in the sector for their livelihoods.

- One of the facilitators noted that the methodology was extremely flexible and allowed participants to understand how the risks they identified could be managed by using existing capacities and skills within their own communities, as well as by private or public institutions in the island.
- A national VCA training for Red Cross volunteers was developed after the March workshop in order to improve both the knowledge of Red Cross members and their awareness of the methodology. As part of the training, a community vulnerable to floods was chosen as the site for a VCA, with participants using the methodology to define actions that would help the community to be better prepared and to identify potential mitigation initiatives.

The training assessments that took place in different communities revealed garbage collection as a major health hazard. The recommendation from the group was to initiate contact with the department of environmental health for debris removal.

## Lessons learned

- According to Jonda Malafa-Obi, Director General of the Cayman Islands Red Cross, “VCA not only encourages us to think ahead but also means that key government ministries and departments are working together with us to ensure that we are prepared in the case of hurricanes or other disasters.”
- After the VCA training, all participants recognized the need for a single National Disaster Plan. A follow-up meeting was scheduled for September to discuss such a plan, but had to be postponed because of Hurricane Ivan.
- At present, the government has plans to cover emergencies such as hurricanes, oil spills and crises in airports. However, not all government officials are aware of them and have not been trained to implement them. Those who attended the workshop and/or Red Cross first-aid training now have a better idea of what is expected of them.

## Conclusion

The training offered the possibility to increase collaboration between the Cayman Islands Red Cross and government authorities. This had led to a number of concrete examples of cooperation:

- After Hurricane Ivan hit the Islands, project managers from the department of public works and the Red Cross worked together closely and efficiently.
- The department of environmental health has proved helpful in acting upon issues raised after Red Cross assessments (for example, the need for an efficient waste removal system). The two organizations were able to find rapid solutions to a number of problems related to garbage management to reduce potential risk of health

issues. It also helped to ensure proper coordination in terms of sanitation messages developed by the Red Cross in order to reach the most need and vulnerable for potential hygiene problems.

- Through the government's information systems department, the Red Cross is able to communicate messages to every government employee.

“If you do not know the people it will take more time; but once you know them, things are easier,” concludes the director-general of the Cayman Islands Red Cross. “Certainly, through VCA, we have been able to address some other issues outside the scope of disasters.”



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