

# Community-based food security work in Rwanda: A Rwandan Red Cross experience

Rwanda is one of Africa's most densely populated countries. Its total population is 8.1 million with 305 inhabitants occupying each square kilometre. It is a small country, with undulating hills home to thousands of small household farms which consume much of the produce they grow. The population density has always put tremendous economic and political pressure on the country and, historically, it can be considered one of many complex root factors that led to the genocide in 1994. Today in Rwanda, people are trying to rebuild all parts of their lives. Over the last ten years many important measures have been taken. Since 1994, the economy has grown on average 8 per cent per year. However, in spite of this progress, the country still faces enormous challenges, most of which are inherently linked to poverty. Many communities in Rwanda live with chronic food insecurity and, at times, famine.

With such widespread problems and so many places in need, how can the choice of just one province for support be justified? For the Rwandan Red Cross (RRC), the starting point was severe food insecurity experienced in Bugesara and Umutara provinces in 1999. Subsequently, the RRC launched a national-level vulnerability and capacity assessment (VCA) to identify the main types and areas of vulnerability throughout the country. This information was intended to help the RRC to begin to better understand and anticipate problems of chronic food insecurity and other disasters. In conjunction with the government, 62 of Rwanda's 92 districts were involved in collecting information through the national VCA. Soon after, this information helped the Red Cross and the government to launch targeted and appropriate relief operations in Gisenyi and Goma

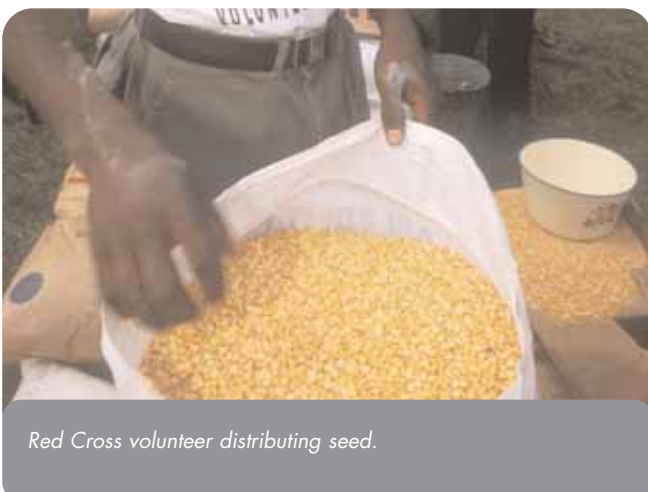
provinces when they were affected by, respectively, torrential rainfall and volcanic eruptions.

The VCA information was also used to identify which parts of the country could benefit from community-level disaster mitigation work. The district of Karaba was chosen as a starting point for a local-level VCA because of the chronic food insecurity problems in the area. However, it also had dynamic local committees and the potential for community involvement, both of which would help to facilitate the work.

## The intervention

In Karaba district, the Rwandan Red Cross worked in a participatory manner, designed to engage the local community and the local authorities as much as possible in the project. The first step was to raise awareness and understanding of the VCA's purpose throughout the district. To do this, Red Cross volunteers and the project coordinator travelled throughout Karaba, talking to people and informing them about the work that the Red Cross was planning to undertake. For reasons of time and funding, only 13 of the district's 26 sectors would benefit from the project but the selection was made on the basis of objective criteria such as geographical and social representation as well as people's availability to participate in the project. The next step was to engage local people in an exercise to identify what the main vulnerabilities were in the area, what resources or capacities they had and what strategies they had used to overcome problems in the past.

In order to get a wide range of perspectives that could be considered representative of the 13 sectors, interviews were conducted with 60 people over a period of two weeks throughout Karaba. Communities themselves elected the individuals to be their representatives, who were divided into three groups: elderly people, women and young people. The group of elderly people were questioned about the area's history and traditional practices; the opinions of the women were sought on the seasonal agricultural calendar; while the group of young people concentrated on a map of the area. A number of different local priorities and emphases could then be deduced, which gave a picture of not only the contemporary situation in the area but also its history, customs and future prospects. Each session of group work involved a transect walk and participatory mapping exercises, and was followed up by a report on the proceedings by the volunteers. Data was collected and triangulated to end up with a list of main vulnerabilities in the area, primary resources, untapped



*Red Cross volunteer distributing seed.*

potential and, finally, recommendations for future disaster mitigation work.

On the basis of the VCA, the following disaster mitigation activities were then designed and carried out with the community:

- A rotating credit scheme was established for small livestock.
- Livestock, animal medicines and pesticides were distributed.
- A field of ten hectares was cultivated and agricultural terraces were built.
- Seedlings were planted for plant diversification.

## Impact

At an organizational level, the VCA had at least two positive results for the RRC: its volunteers in the area gained valuable experience and the Red Cross and the district's communities, authorities and agriculturalists worked together in a close and constructive partnership.

In terms of sustainability, this type of project obviously needs material inputs and funding, and therefore is not in itself self-sustaining. However, the process of VCA led by the Rwandan Red Cross is now being improved and replicated in other areas of the country. In this sense, it can be considered that a sustainable model has been set up which



*Rwanda is densely populated with limited land resources.*

will help reduce vulnerability in other locations. At the same time, many of the inputs that were provided through this project, namely livestock and seeds, have led to the sustainable improvement of the lives of many people in economic and social terms.

As regards the sharing of information, the Rwandan Red Cross feels strongly that the results of the VCA should be

made available to everyone including government and other organizations so that they may also use the information and the model as a basis for planning future activities.

## Lessons learned

In order to manage the projects locally, there needed to be well-defined roles involving beneficiaries, local authorities and volunteers. For this purpose, four local committees were established: a livestock credit scheme committee; a piloting committee; a purchasing committee; and a managing committee. The role of these committees was to ensure the smooth and accountable implementation of project activities.

The project faced several difficulties, some natural and some man-made. Among the natural difficulties was the lack of sufficient rain during the rainy season and the fact that some livestock died unexpectedly and the seeds supplied were inappropriate for local use. Although none of these problems disrupted the project on a large scale, they did mean that while many families benefited, some lost out. The biggest man-made challenge to the project was the need to adhere to strict donor time frames, which proved to be particularly challenging given that this was a pilot project. As a result, some activities such as seed planting had to be undertaken at an inappropriate time in order to stick to the external calendar of events. However, once again, these pressures did not adversely affect the project on a large scale. Instead, they served as a lesson for all actors who will hopefully be able in future to factor such considerations into planned activities.

## Conclusion

The community-based approach with extensive vulnerability and capacity assessment ensured that communities considered that they 'owned' the project and participated in its management. While the pilot project raised several issues of timing of inputs, these are being carefully addressed in the development of further programming in new areas of Rwanda, demonstrating the importance of learning from experience.



*A woman collecting firewood for food preparation.*

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