

Preparedness for response to future disaster risk reduction:

The Syrian Arab Red Crescent Society experience

Evidence from recent disasters in other locations, shows that initial support, and a very significant portion of the total support provided, comes from the local community. It may take days for outside responders to gain access to affected areas due to the time needed to contact and assemble personnel, transportation limitations, or unfamiliarity to the area. Clearly it is the people in the community who will be the first response on the scene and can play a significant role in community disaster prevention. With this in mind, in 2001 the Syrian Arab Red Crescent Society (SARCS) began a community based approach with an integrated disaster preparedness and health training programme for local volunteers with input and involvement from government agencies such as the Civil Defence and the Ministry of Health.

The National Society was able to test their approach in 2002 during the Zaizon Dam disaster response. After the disaster response phase, a post disaster review and risk reduction meeting was held with the community and volunteers. The learning led to changes in Disaster Management within the SARCS and community and a decision to hold a community disaster simulation exercise followed. The outcomes helped to inform the National Society about its Disaster Management planning needs in 2003-2004.

The intervention

People in Zaizon village observed cracks developing in the dam and responded by gathering neighbors on a high ridge. In the neighbouring villages the flash floods were unexpected and 21 deaths resulted. The infrastructure damage in Zaizon included 251 houses completely destroyed and 129 partly damaged. Within a few hours of the disaster, volunteers from the Hama and Edlib branches were mobilized, food aid was distributed and the first consignment of tents and blankets arrived at Hama Branch from the National Society headquarters.

The SARCS was in a position to provide rapid assistance and assess the needs of victims because of its network of trained volunteers and staff. They were proud of their



SARCS Volunteers taking charge of distribution.

response actions but the responsibilities and duties were much more than the capacities of the SARCS. Despite this, volunteers used whatever resources were available to help.

They began by assessing the needs of victims whilst distributing initial relief to families in the Zaizon area. An important factor was that villagers wanted to stay with their land and this was respected. Volunteers helped them to establish their first camp to provide shelter for people involved in the disaster. First aid, health education and cleaning of the camp were also part of the response from the first day.

The volunteers erected the Zaizon tent-camp (135 tents) within 48-hours of the disaster and the National Society was responsible for running the camp for the first month.

In total 20 full-time staff members and 180 volunteers from all over the country were involved in the assistance. The actions of the volunteers highlighted to the community and government the important role of the SARCS in disaster preparedness and response.

Changes Stimulated by the experience

It was clear that local communities and those affected placed great trust in the volunteers. Such trust was helpful in obtaining more accurate assessment of needs

because of the direct relationship with communities. The confidence afforded to the SARCS resulted in the SARCS being charged with responsibility for relief distribution (food and non food items) during the operation. Additionally, the National Society played a key role in coordinating and cooperating with governmental and international agencies at the flood locations.

In addition, after the disaster, a community participatory post disaster review and risk reduction meeting was held facilitated by the SARCS and the Federation Regional Delegation in Amman which included those members of the community, staff and volunteers who were involved in the Dam disaster. It was anticipated that small risk reduction projects could be developed to reduce human and material losses in the future.

The review concluded there was a need for:

- staff and volunteer skill development in hands on disaster response experience;
- better coordination between National Society, government, local and international NGOs;
- development of community disaster awareness raising and education material;
- development of a logistics system as part of the National Society development;
- neighbourhood disaster risk mapping and awareness.



Tents and water - essential parts of camp management.

Red Crescent role relating to government and community mobilisation

Recommendations from the post disaster review risk reduction meeting resulted in a simulation exercise relating to camp management. All branches were involved and there were close to 100 volunteers.

The objective of the simulation exercise was further cooperation and coordination between SARCS, government and other organizations. The experience was designed to improve the community, volunteers and staff capacities in camp management through involving them in all stages of the relief and logistic preparedness process. In terms of preparedness, the need to support refugee camps in the future was a reality facing the SARCS in the contingency planning for the Iraq Crisis.

Conclusion and recommendations

The contributing factor to the successful response in this disaster was the integrated community based disaster-health management approach which resulted in trained volunteers prepared for disaster response. The Zaizon Dam disaster provided an opportunity to use these volunteers 'in action'. The 'post-disaster review' was an opportunity to learn from those involved in the disaster community and to identify future disaster risk reduction actions. The developing role of the National Society with communities and as auxiliary to government was imperative to SARCS.

In addition, SARCS recognized the importance of working with external partners and having signed agreements in place between the National Society with government, other agencies and vendors to systemize the response and preparedness programme. Further, the SARCS is developing a disaster management strategy which will reflect a development approach to integrated response training and simulation leading to action as highlighted within this case study.

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