

Developing regional food security capacity: The East Africa regional food security working group

The 5th Pan African Conference in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso¹ committed National Societies to address food insecurity throughout Africa. Supported by the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies and the RCnet² National Societies developed a regional food security working group (RFSWG) in 2002. Although the original group is no longer in operation, its members had been deployed on a number of occasions and their work was considered useful. As a result, a follow-up workshop was planned to re-enforce the existing RFSWG.

The objectives of the food security working group are to:

- help National Societies to translate the East Africa food security strategy and Ouagadougou declaration into programmes and plan of actions;
- design and establish pilot food security projects with National Societies annually as per annual plans and budgets; and
- take the lead in training National Society staff and volunteers on food security issues in areas of awareness-raising, skills training and advocacy.

Eight National Societies participated in the workshop. Participants came from diverse backgrounds and included health, disaster relief and preparedness, and organizational development officers as well as branch secretaries and programme coordinators. The workshop was supported through annual appeal funds and direct funding by the British Red Cross.

1. Ouagadougou declaration, 2000.

2. RCNet is the East Africa Regional Red Cross and Red Crescent Network.

The intervention

The workshop's aim was to reinforce the East and Horn of Africa working group on food security by expanding its membership and enhancing training on operational, food security issues. In addition to building a team spirit through sharing experiences, the specific objectives of the workshop were to gain an understanding of:

- the work and origin of the food security working group;
- food security in general, and its relationship to other sectors such as health;
- different organizational food security approaches;
- existing tools such as policies, strategies and the Ouagadougou declaration; and
- vulnerability and capacity assessment tools, in order to select and use a number of them in relation to food security assessments;

Workshop participants were also able to gain experience in food security information analysis and programme design, and aimed to develop country-specific action plans on food security, as well as a regional action plan.

The workshop, which included work in the field, was held from 4–11 August 2003 in Sinkat, Sudan. The location, which is repeatedly affected by acute food insecurity as a result of droughts, was chosen specifically in order to place participants in a chronically food insecure environment. Participants endured harsh climatic and living conditions, but which reflected the sort of conditions they would probably face in the areas they were sent to.

Theoretical work took up the first four days of the workshop. Participants were introduced to different learning methods, such as presentations, group work, plenary discussion and role-plays. These sessions were followed by field work to enable participants to practise what they had learned. An important aspect of the workshop was the emphasis on sharing information and experience with the whole group.

Work in the field enabled participants to gather information using techniques such as:

- secondary data collection;
- key informant interviews;
- seasonal calendars;
- focus group discussions; and
- direct observation.

After their field work, participants analysed the information collected and developed programmes and country and regional action plans.



A Red Cross volunteer collects information on the prices of foods on the local market.



Hygienic practices are important to ensure good nutrition.

Impact

- Participants discussed the linkages between food security and HIV/AIDS.
- They were able to gain an understanding of vulnerability and capacity assessments and how to use participatory tools in assessing food security.
- They acquired practical experience of using participatory tools with communities.
- They gained practical experience of an area (Sudan's Red Sea state) that suffers from chronic food insecurity, which is exacerbated by recurrent droughts.
- The food security working group was revitalized through new membership and can be used by National Societies in the region as a technical resource.
- The workshop allowed an exchange of experiences in food security and led to the development of country-level action plans.

Lessons learned

- Maintaining a regional food security working group requires continued support of the RCnet in order to permit the deployment of staff.
- Trained National Society staff need to be deployed in order to maintain motivation once training has ended.
- Training in food security vulnerability and capacity assessments should include analytical and planning skills.
- Carrying out the training session in Sudan's Red Sea state enabled participants to experience a new environment whose conditions are closer to those they would experience when deployed.
- The development of action plans needs to be followed up to ensure implementation of plans.

Conclusion

The regional food security working group is an important resource for the East Africa region. It will be important to ensure that working group members are used in deployments in order to put into practice the new skills developed. This relies on the RCnet in the region enabling the deployment of group members. It will also be important to continue to organize refresher courses as well as training to maintain a certain number of group members over time in order to keep the food security working group functioning.



Distributing food during disasters is a common Red Cross/Red Crescent intervention.

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