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Community puppet theatre as a participatory alternative method to strengthen flood resilience

Keywords

Community participation, disaster risk reduction, flood resilience, puppet theatre, vulnerability.

Summary

In the municipality of Jonuta (Tabasco, Mexico), whose communities are regularly affected by floods, a puppet theatre was developed as a useful method to inform the community about floods and flood resilience. This creative approach allows to communicate disaster risk reduction information in a humorous and different way, which children and adults can easily relate to. The theatre spreads knowledge but also promotes social cohesion and organization in the community.

The problem

In the past, information about disaster risk reduction was delivered using traditional, often passive techniques. These did not appeal to the majority of people. They did not feel involved and there was no sharing or sense of celebration. To reach more people, it was decided to explore different ways of communicating, including the puppet theatre.



Figure 1. Performance of the puppet theatre "Strong as the Tinto tree" in Jonuta (Tabasco, Mexico).

How

Puppet theatres offer a simple and attractive way to spread information. Performances can be presented by trained community volunteers and the community can participate in the performance, acquiring knowledge in the process. In addition, a puppet play can be understood and appreciated in many different communities.

Under the Flood Resilience Programme, a play was developed in Jonuta jointly by volunteers from the Red Cross Youth Coordination in Tabasco and community members. Although it was originally written for children, the performances were attended by many adults, including primary and high school teachers.

The script discussed what the community knows about flood risks and how to cope with them, and added information on disaster risk reduction. It also promoted social cohesion and community organization.

The play, *Strong as the Tinto tree*, in four Acts, tells the story of a traditional family – a father and mother, their daughter and son, and the maternal grandparents. The characters spoke in local dialect and lived in the region.

- **Act 1. On the way to school**

The first act talks about knowing the environment and how to live better. The conversations at home and in school point out the importance of attending community meetings, understanding the community's needs, and managing them collectively. Disaster Risk Reduction concepts are introduced.

- **Act 2. The experience of my community**

A meeting of elders highlights the value of the community's collective memory, which includes expertise in surviving floods. While trying to tell their grandchildren why oral history is important, the grandparents reveal old wisdom

about protecting themselves from floods. The second act also highlights the need to work collectively through the Community Based Action Teams, civil protection and Red Cross.

- **Act 3. Constructing the response**

In this Act, the parents are called to a meeting which discusses the value of having an Emergency Family Plan and using a colour-coded early warning system. Particular emphasis is put on the point that, to design the plan, families must identify and understand the risks they face. This Act introduces the concept of vulnerability, making sure that the audience can relate to it in terms of their own experience.

- **Act 4. Rain and flood**

In the last act, the family gets ready just before a flood occurs. Because the community is well organized and has a Community Based Action Team, as well as evacuation routes and a safe place to shelter, its members are safe and cope well. At the end, they feel their strength and confidence: they say 'We are as strong as the Tinto tree'.

Process

Puppets were chosen because:

- The puppets and the mini-theatre are transportable.
- The materials for the theatre and the puppets can be obtained and repaired easily.
- A puppet play does not require actors.
- No one has stage fright because only the puppets can be seen.

The whole process was managed with the help of:

- 8 volunteers from the Red Cross Youth Coordination in Tabasco.
- 2 technical staff from the community.
- 7 community volunteers.

Times and activities

The script was written over the course of two months, with the help of a technical team that inserted risk reduction themes and local advice. Crafting the puppets and the theatre took another two months. The community became more actively involved as the puppet play progressed. A first workshop took place in September 2018 in the community of Torno Largo 2da Sección. During it, two additional puppet theatres were created, for the Red Cross Youth Coordination in Tabasco and the communities of Monte Grande and Boca de San Antonio. People from other communities could travel easily to these villages, and the play could be transported from them to surrounding villages as well.

How the project helped to promote resilience: case-study

In terms of **human capital**, the puppet theatre taught community members about the risks they face, particularly flood risks, and highlighted the experience communities have of managing floods. It explained to children why Family Emergency Plans are important.

In terms of **social capital**, it promoted social cohesion and community organization by performing the play in different communities and involving different people each time. Volunteers can continue to hold performances in the future, because they have two puppet theatre packages in different communities. Thus, plays on the topic of floods, but also other subjects, can be performed long after the FRP has come to an end.

Attracted to how entertaining the puppets were to children, teachers have shown interest in performing plays on the environment, garbage, the prevention of dengue fever, and bullying. Red Cross delegations in other states are also interested in performing the play.

Cost

The puppet theatre was performed nine times in the region, at:

- Monte Grande
- Chinal
- Torno Largo 2da Sección
- Torno Largo 3ra Sección
- Pueblo Nuevo
- Boca de San Antonio

Number of beneficiaries: 742

All the materials used cost approximately: USD 300.00.



Figure 2. The play was developed jointly by volunteers from the Red Cross Youth Coordination in Tabasco and community members.

How we work

Strategy 2020 voices the collective determination of the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) to move forward in tackling the major challenges that confront humanity in the next decade. Informed by the needs and vulnerabilities of the diverse communities with whom we work, as well as the basic rights and freedoms to which all are entitled, this strategy seeks to benefit all who look to Red Cross Red Crescent to help to build a more humane, dignified, and peaceful world.

Over the next ten years, the collective focus of the IFRC will be on achieving the following strategic aims:

1. Save lives, protect livelihoods, and strengthen recovery from disasters and crises.
2. Enable healthy and safe living.
3. Promote social inclusion and a culture of non-violence and peace.

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