

Community Disaster Response Teams in Action

Antigua and Barbuda, 2010



What can a community do on its own to respond to a disaster?



Introduction

The Caribbean is highly vulnerable to the effects of natural disasters such as hurricanes, flooding and drought, as well as to the impact of climate change. Particularly during the months of June to November—known as the Atlantic Hurricane Season—the region is vulnerable to hurricanes, as well as the flooding, landslides and mudslides that accompany them. In recent years, there has been a rise in both the frequency and the impact of such disasters. The 2010 Atlantic Hurricane Season was one of the busiest on record. A total of 19 named storms formed in the Atlantic Basin—12 became hurricanes, and 5 of these were categorized as major hurricanes (Category 3 or higher)¹. In the English-speaking Caribbean alone, 6 countries—Antigua and Barbuda, Barbados, Belize, Jamaica, Saint Lucia and St. Vincent and the Grenadines—were affected by named storms. This demonstrates the region's vulnerability and the need to emphasize disaster preparedness, risk reduction and increased mitigation capacities across the Caribbean.

The American Red Cross and the United States Agency for International Development's Office of U.S. Foreign Disaster Assistance (USAID/OFDA) have been working in partnership with the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies on a two-year, Readiness to Respond project that covers five countries, one of which is Antigua and Barbuda². This project builds on the collective Red Cross experience in community disaster management in the Caribbean region, and aims to enhance the capacity of Caribbean communities to better mitigate, prepare for and respond to the adverse effects of climate change and disasters. It is a complement of parallel IFRC Community-Based Disaster Management (CBDM) projects supported by the European Commission of Humanitarian Aid and Civil Protection (ECHO).

Until a disaster occurs, it is difficult to measure the impact of the investments made using this community approach. During the 2010 Caribbean hurricane season, the community of Bendals in Antigua and Barbuda was affected by the flooding that occurred in the aftermath of Hurricane Earl. The Bendals community response team members put their response skills and training to use. In order to understand what happened in Bendals, and to document the impact of the community-based disaster management project, a case study was conducted³. This document provides a description of the actions taken by the community response team in response to the disaster incident in the community with the aim of answering the central study question: *What can a community do on its own to respond to a disaster?*

¹ Source: National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, United States Department of Commerce, 'Extremely Active Atlantic Hurricane Season was a 'Gentle Giant' for U.S.' http://www.noaanews.noaa.gov/stories2010/20101129_hurricanesseason.htm

² In addition to Antigua and Barbuda, the Readiness to Respond project is being implemented in the Bahamas, Haiti, St. Kitts and Nevis, and Saint Lucia.

³ The exercise was carried out over a two-day period in Antigua. The methodology for data collection included a literature review of key project documents including Vulnerability and Capacity Assessment (VCA) reports, field observations, a focus group discussion with a representative selection of CDRT members and key informant interviews with community members and key stakeholders. Data was collected using key informant surveys and focus group guides which were developed prior to field work and reviewed for appropriateness with National Society staff. Prior to the data collection exercise, all participants were informed of the objectives and methodology of the evaluation, and all consented to participate.

The Red Cross Approach to Disaster Management in the Caribbean

Readiness to Respond was developed as part of the 2009-2014 Caribbean Disaster Management Strategy. The strategy identifies a core set of Community-Based Disaster Management (CBDM) activities to be implemented across all Red Cross CBDM projects in the region. The focus of these activities is on building community resilience. The Red Cross recognizes that community members themselves are first responders and that in each community, capacity and resources already exist. This community-based approach serves to:

- strengthen the capacity of a community to recognize and proactively reduce its own vulnerability to disasters, and
- empower the community to respond in a rapid and coordinated manner when disaster strikes.


The Red Cross mobilizes and organizes community members to build upon existing capacity. In this way, the communities are better positioned to respond, on their own, in the first hours after a disaster. The following are the basic components of the Red Cross community-based process.

Vulnerability and Capacity Assessment (VCA)

Red Cross support to communities often begins with a Vulnerability and Capacity Assessment (VCA). This assessment is conducted using a participatory methodology that allows community members to identify their own vulnerabilities and capacities.

Small-Scale Mitigation Projects

Based on the outcomes of the VCA, communities are given financial and technical support to implement small-scale mitigation projects such as improved drainage or hazard-resistant housing techniques that address identified vulnerabilities.



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Community Response Teams

The Red Cross trains and equips community response teams. In the Red Cross, these teams are called Community Disaster Response Teams, or CDRTs. These community response team members are trained in areas such as first aid, basic search and rescue, psychological first aid, response coordination, fire safety and shelter management.

After their training, the community response teams work with their community to develop community disaster plans as well as to identify early warning systems and evacuation routes, and the Red Cross equips them with disaster response kits. Team members receive practical experience through a simulation exercise carried out in the community, and are also empowered to disseminate messages to the wider community using communications materials such as the Family Disaster Plan Checklist, which provides guidance on family preparedness and risk reduction.


Disasters can occur with or without warning. The experience of Bendals reminds us that we may not always be in a position to prevent a disaster, but measures can be taken to significantly reduce their impact. The lessons learned from the response that are noted in this study will provide meaningful input to improving disaster management at the community level in the Caribbean.

The Community Response Team Response to Flooding in Bendals, Antigua and Barbuda, Following Hurricane Earl

Background

Bendals is a well-established farming community with a history of successful crop production. Creeks in the highlands that surround Bendals run down into water systems within it — one of which is known as Body Pond. As the natural drainage system is only sufficient in mild rainfall, over the years, the people of Bendals have become accustomed to flooding accompanying heavy rainfall.

Recent construction work in the area has been thought to have increased the likelihood of flooding as it disturbed the natural flow of the water. When flooding occurs, apart from homes and personal effects being severely affected, the farmland becomes inundated, affecting livelihoods. In part due to the continuous flooding, a principal access bridge to Bendals has become eroded, jeopardizing movement into and out of the community. Community members have been trying to gain attention—national and international—in order to secure funding to revamp the bridge which, in their opinion, represents one of their greatest vulnerabilities. During Hurricane Omar in 2008, water levels rose above the bridge, leaving the community entirely cut off from the rest of the island. In addition, the community clinic is staffed with only a nurse and a nurse's aide. If a serious medical emergency arises, the case is referred to the hospital, located about 30 minutes away. In the event that Bendals is cut off from the rest of the island for an extended period of time, access to health care services is a concern for residents.



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The Bendals community response team was trained as part of the 2010 Readiness to Respond USAID/OFDA funded Community-Based Disaster Management program. Bendals was chosen to participate in the project because of the history of flash flooding and its impact on the community members. Some of the team members are part of an active neighborhood watch group, and overall, the community has a strong sense of camaraderie. The team members had past experience working together—responding to, cleaning up and rebuilding after previous hurricanes—and had experience with severe flooding and being cut off from the rest of the country as a result of roads becoming impassable to vehicular traffic. In particular, the response team cited Hurricanes Hugo (1989) and Luis (1995) as unforgettable past events.

Despite this strong sense of community, the Red Cross had some challenges generating interest in the project, and there was low participation in community meetings at the start. The Red Cross learned that the low turnout was not a function of a lack interest in being part of the response team, but that more consultation with the team members was needed in scheduling meetings and trainings, for times more convenient to them. Slowly the Red Cross was able to garner interest in the project and the community members began to better understand the Red Cross approach to disaster management and the community-based process.

The disaster response equipment provided to the Bendals community response team included a chain saw, boots, rain-coats, loud speaker and cutlasses, and is kept in three places, as when there is flooding, some sections of the community can be cut off from others, and it is important for all the members to be in a position to access their equipment.

Actions Taken in Response to the Flooding Following Hurricane Earl

Hurricane Earl threatened the Leeward Islands in August 2010. Based on their past experiences with hurricanes, and on the knowledge they had gained from Red Cross interventions, the Bendals community response team and the community itself monitored the hurricane bulletins on the radio and began preparing for potential impact. Community members knew how to reinforce their windows, as well as where the shelter was located—Bendals Primary School. For the most part, people in houses vulnerable to flooding evacuated to the shelter. However, community response team members also took it upon themselves to encourage those with histories of not evacuating or evacuating at the very last minute to take early action. They went directly to the homes of vulnerable community members and encouraged them to take refuge at Bendals Primary School.

When the rains came, the flood waters rose to approximately five feet above the access bridge to the community. A team from Red Cross headquarters attempted to enter the community, but as they approached the main access bridge, the level of the water had already reached the hood of the vehicle. The team was forced to turn back and to try the alternate access road to the Bendals community. When team members tried to access to the community via the other route, however, they realized that even this road was impassable due to the high level of the water. Thus, for a number of hours, Bendals was cut off from the rest of the country.

Just prior to Hurricane Earl's passage, the community response team members of Bendals had received their equipment, and were therefore able to put it to use in the preparedness and response operations associated. One of the critical actions taken by the community response team was to clear the debris that blocked the flow of the creek. A number of heavy branches had fallen and the team utilized the chain saw and cutlasses provided by the Readiness to Respond program to cut and clear the debris. The team explained that this was not an easy effort as water levels were high and visibility was low as they worked. Consequently they suggested that water-proof flashlights, sturdier cutlasses and life jackets would have made their actions more efficient.

The community response team, through its collective action, was able to manage the needs of the community—monitoring the information bulletins, taking preventative measures to evacuate their neighbors to a safe place and clearing the water course to restore access to the community. The flood response was the first opportunity for the Bendals community response team to apply their knowledge and skills. As a result of their performance, the team members are confident in their ability to take the necessary actions to significantly reduce the impact of hazards in the future, especially ones that may impact as severely as the events they have experienced in past years.

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Lessons Learned

Community consultation is key

The Red Cross faced challenges in mobilizing the Bendals community to attend meetings and trainings, and learned from community members that the issue was not a lack of interest in the project. In fact, the training was highly desirable but the training times proposed were not convenient for the community members. Regular Red Cross consultation with the community provides an opportunity for feedback on what works well, and what areas need to be improved in order to enhance the effectiveness of the response. It is important to consult the community on matters ranging from the optimal time of the week and/or day for scheduling of meetings and trainings to enable participation of as many community members as possible, to the types of training and the most appropriate tools and equipment for the context of the community.

Community volunteers are an asset

Having a team of volunteers embedded within a vulnerable community is very useful, both to the community and to the Red Cross. The members are from the community, know it well and played a critical role in the disaster response to the extent that additional support from the Red Cross was not required. This disaster was small in scale. However, in the event of a future larger-scale disaster in which outside assistance is needed, the team recognizes the value of its relationship with the Red Cross and the National Office of Disaster Services (NODS). If the need arises, this team will be well positioned to interpret and relay assessment information so that relief needs can be effectively and efficiently met.

Through this study it became evident that the community-based disaster management process, as a whole, served to inform and empower the community of Bendals.

Conclusion

The community response teams represent only one component of a wider community-based process in which Red Cross volunteers and community members work together to identify strengths and weaknesses, and plan activities to eliminate, mitigate or reduce disaster risks. Through this study it became evident that the community-based disaster management process, as a whole, served to inform and empower the community of Bendals. A critical value added was the creation of the community disaster response team and the provision of training and equipment to allow them to more effectively assist in the immediate disaster response. The link to the resources and the expertise of the Red Cross network, should this support be needed within the community, was also considered to be of value.

The team members were trained to be the first responders in the case of any emergency—to conduct the initial assessments, liaise with the Red Cross and NODS and provide first-hand information about what was happening at the community level. In the past, most communities responded to disasters without guidance, training or equipment and without being linked to key government disaster agencies and the Red Cross, which serves as an auxiliary to government. However, in recent times, Community-Based Disaster Management has taken the skills, the equipment and training to the community, enabling a degree of self-sufficiency at that level.

The community members are the first responders, and because of the Red Cross interventions and the presence of the response team, the community of Bendals was more knowledgeable in terms of its preparedness and its capacity to respond, and was able to put this knowledge into practice when the circumstances arose.

In the case cited in this study, the actions of the community response team in response to the flood incident demonstrated that Red Cross had strengthened the capacity of the community to provide an independent, organized, immediate response to the disaster, meeting the needs of the community, thereby fulfilling the objectives of the project, and proving to be a worthwhile investment overall.

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