

Community Disaster Response Teams in Action

Saint Lucia, 2010



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

Introduction

A striking characteristic of the the Caribbean is its high vulnerability to the effects of natural disasters, such as hurricanes, flooding and drought, as well as to the impact of climate change. The Caribbean hurricane season officially lasts six months—from June to November. During this period, the region is commonly hit by hurricanes, as well as floods, flash floods, landslides and accompanying mudslides. The 2010 Atlantic hurricane season was one of the busiest on record. A total of 19 named storms formed in the Atlantic Basin. Of these, 12 became hurricanes, and 5 of these were categorized as major hurricanes (a status of 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.

There is a widespread need and strong interest in the Caribbean for better disaster preparedness and increased mitigation capacities. The American Red Cross and the U.S. Agency for International Development's Office of U.S. Foreign Disaster Assistance have recognized this, and are 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—Antigua and Barbuda, the Bahamas, Haiti, Saint Kitts and Nevis, Saint Lucia. *Readiness to Respond* aims to enhance the capacity of Caribbean communities to better mitigate, prepare for and respond to the adverse effects of disaster and climate change.

The Red Cross has been implementing community disaster management projects in communities in the Caribbean since 2003. However, until a disaster occurs, it is difficult to measure the impact of the investments made in this community approach. During the 2010 Caribbean hurricane season, the communities of Dennery and Fond St. Jacques in Saint Lucia were affected by disasters.² In each of these communities, the community response team members put their response skills training to use.

To understand what happened in each of these situations, and to document the impact of the community-based disaster management projects, a case study was conducted.³ This document provides a description of the actions taken by the Dennery and Fond St. Jacques community response teams in response to the disaster incidents in their communities 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.html

² The community response team in the Dennery community in St. Lucia responded to flash flooding caused by heavy rains over a two week period in early October 2010; the community response team in the Fond St Jacques community, responded to Hurricane Tomas, which struck in late October 2010.

³ The exercise was carried out over a two-day period in Saint Lucia. 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 community response team 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

The *Readiness to Respond* project builds on work that began in past years, and complements other community-based disaster management projects that are being implemented in the Caribbean region.⁴ It was built 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 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.

With this in mind, 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 steps outline the Red Cross approach to community-based disaster management:

1. Red Cross support to communities often begins with a *vulnerability and capacity assessment*. This assessment is conducted using a participatory methodology that allows community members to identify their own vulnerabilities and capacities.
2. Based on the results, communities are given financial and technical support to conduct *small-scale mitigation projects* such as improved drainage or hazard-resistant housing techniques to address identified vulnerabilities.

Disasters can strike with or without warning . . . but measures can be taken to significantly reduce their impact.

3. 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 and shelter management. After their training, the community response teams work with their community to develop *community disaster plans*, and are equipped with *disaster response kits*. Another key activity is developing *early warning systems* and identifying evacuation routes. To put knowledge and skills into action, the communities receive practical experience through a *disaster simulation exercise*. The community response team members 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 strike with or without warning, and we may not always be in a position to prevent them, but measures can be taken to significantly reduce their impact. The lessons learned from the responses noted in this study will provide meaningful input to improving disaster management at the community level in the Caribbean.


⁴In 2008, the 'Readiness to Respond – Increased Disaster Preparedness Capacity through Enhanced Coordination and Community Awareness' project was carried out in Guyana, St. Lucia and Trinidad and Tobago. The 'Readiness to Respond' project builds on the work that began in 2008, and complements parallel IFRC Community Based Disaster Management (CBDM) projects supported by the European Commission of Humanitarian Aid & Civil Protection (ECHO).

The Community Response Team Response to Flooding in Dennery, Saint Lucia—October 2010

Background

Dennery is a fishing community located on the eastern coast of Saint Lucia, with a population of 3,470. To the north, the boundary is the Dennery River right up to its source, while to the east, the sea provides the boundary. Due to its location within the Dennery River's flood plain and its proximity to the sea, the community has suffered major damage in the past due to both river overflow and sea surge. Approximately 600 households live in the lower, flat area of the village, which is the location with the highest vulnerability. This disaster-prone community has been adversely impacted by Hurricanes Allen (1980), Ivan (2005) and Dean (2007), as well as Tropical Storm Debby (2006).

In 2008, the Saint Lucia Red Cross selected the community of Dennery to be part of the first phase of the *Readiness to Respond* project. Hazards were identified through the vulnerability and capacity assessment, and the Saint Lucia Red Cross worked with the community to implement prevention, preparation and mitigation activities in response to the identified threats. The plan included establishing and training a community response team. The team was trained in May 2009 and has an active membership of 20 community members. The members of the team felt that their training empowered them with the skills to help support their community in times of a disaster.



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Actions Taken in Response to the Flooding

On October 6, 2010, heavy rain resulted in serious flooding in the Dennery Valley, cutting off the area for many hours. One community member, reflecting on the event, admitted, “Really and truly I was really afraid. I mean, that was an experience I will never forget.” On the day of the flood, a Saint Lucia Red Cross team was on its way to Vieux Fort, a town accessed by the same route as Dennery, but their mission was obstructed by the traffic. Inquiries were made and the team soon found out that the Dennery River had burst its bank and the village of Dennery was flooded due to the heavy rains. Initial reports indicated that the water was knee-high. The Red Cross team quickly returned to its headquarters in Castries to mobilize relief supplies for distribution in Dennery later that night. The roads were impassable, and until the flood waters receded, it was impossible for Red Cross personnel to transport relief items into the community.

In Dennery, the community response team followed its pre-arranged response plan. Their response equipment was kept at the home of the team leader and when team members living in the low-lying areas witnessed the waters rising, they went to retrieve their equipment so that they could begin to help evacuate persons who were trapped in their homes. Team members made their way through the strong currents of the flood waters to evacuate their neighbours. A member of the community commented, “The CDRT really helped move people who couldn't have done anything themselves . . . if they hadn't reacted there could have been deaths.” Some community members refused to evacuate, but the CRT members persisted in evacuating these persons to safer, higher ground, and provided much-needed comfort and reassurance.

Because there was limited mobile phone reception, the team members living on higher ground did not know that the lower areas of the village were flooded. Communication among team members took place largely by word of mouth.

When the waters began to recede, the community response team leader called a meeting for early in the afternoon of October 6, and the team assembled to plan the activities for the response to the flooding. They prepared assessment sheets, divided the community into several geographical areas and assigned responsibility for each of the areas to a team member. The team also communicated the immediate needs of the community to the Saint Lucia Red Cross headquarters. Initial rapid needs assessments done by the CDRT revealed that homes were flooded from 3 to 5 feet in depth, resulting in significant damage to peoples' homes and their personal effects. In total, 400 households were affected. One older man from the community shared his experience. At about 5:45 a.m. the rain started. He was at home, and he could see the waters rising rapidly. He screamed, "God, God, God, is this how my life is going to end?" and immediately ran out of the house, yelling to alert others. Later that day when he returned home, almost everything was washed away in the flood waters – his shoes, the radio. His bed did not go with the flood waters, but the mattress was completely soaked.

Hours later, when the flood waters subsided, the community response team members supported their neighbours by assisting with cleanup activities, and aided the Saint Lucia Red Cross with the distribution of blankets on the night of the flood and hygiene kits the next day. The response team members supported the Saint Lucia Red Cross in the distribution of food parcels and non-food items to 200 families, conducted house-to-house hygiene promotion and health education, and distributed educational materials on psycho-social support.

The response team managed the situation well. Some of the team members were themselves adversely affected by the flooding, but through their collective action, they managed the needs of the community – alerting neighbours and community members to the danger, evacuating them to safety, undertaking initial needs assessments, providing reassurance where needed and supporting the Saint Lucia Red Cross with the relief distribution activities.



The team members expressed appreciation for the training and the equipment that they received, not only for the benefit to the community, but also for the knowledge that they gained personally, and the sense of fulfilment they felt knowing that they were empowered to support their community in its time of greatest need. "... now I understand what to do so it has helped me. It has helped my community too because now I can tell people what to do in the event of a disaster." The community response team members also explained the extent to which the simulation exercise in which they participated strengthened their capacity to respond. "The simulation exercise . . . it has helped me to be more aware of what is going on in the community – the danger spots, what is likely to happen, things we may have overlooked before," one team member commented.

“ The CDRT really helped move people who couldn’t have done anything themselves.”

The Community Response Team Response to Hurricane Tomas in Fond St. Jacques, Saint Lucia—October 2010

Background

Fond St. Jacques, with a population of 1,349, forms part of Soufriere, a larger agricultural community located on the west coast of St. Lucia. Fond St Jacques itself is made up of six smaller communities (St. Phillip, Belvedere, Ti Bough, L'Esperance, Migny and Mocha) and is described as rural due to its location at the interior of Soufriere high in the hills within a forested area.

The community is accessed via the West Coast Road. Its location in the mountains makes it easy to be cut off from the rest of Soufriere and the rest of the island, which has happened in the past due to major landslides. The fact that a river runs through the entire community provides a constant source of water but also increases the risk of floods during heavy rains, especially as Fond St Jacques is also in a watershed area. One member of the community response team commented, "We have this one main river and all the roads cross that river at some point, so if the bridges are blocked or damaged, we are marooned. We are blessed with the water, but the downside is we suffer from the landslides and the rains falling."


Although the community is in close proximity to the Soufriere volcano, this is not perceived as a major threat to community members who, above all, share a collective memory of destructive tropical storms, hurricanes and landslides with Hurricane Allen (1980) and Tropical Storm Debby (1994) severely damaging the community and isolating it from the rest of the island.

In 2009, Fond St Jacques was selected by St. Lucia Red Cross to be a part of the *Better Be Ready* project. After a series of community meetings, members of the Fond St. Jacques community reflected on their current situation, identified potential risks and vulnerabilities and actions to be taken to transform those vulnerabilities into capacities. Many of these same community members were trained as members of the Fond St. Jacques community response team in May 2009, just prior to the official start of the hurricane season in June. They felt that the community response team training was not just valuable but necessary in light of their past experiences with storms and their extreme vulnerability to isolation.

Actions Taken in Response to Hurricane Tomas

Beginning on Saturday, October 30, Hurricane Tomas brought severe wind and rains to the island of Saint Lucia, causing flooding and major land and mudslides. Access to a number of communities in the country, including Fond St. Jacques, was impossible as a result. On Sunday, October 31, the St. Lucia Red Cross initiated its relief operations. On the same day, the government of Saint Lucia declared a state of emergency. In the wake of the storm, widespread devastation to crops, homes and water supplies was apparent, and communities remained isolated.

In the early morning of October 31 a massive landslide brought water, trees and mud rushing down from the mountains and through the community, destroying homes in its path as well as a critical bridge that allows access between the two sides of the community, which is split by the river. Relief from Red Cross headquarters was 48 hours from reaching the cutoff Fond St. Jacques community, where the community response team had launched its own response. One team member commented, "All of us had a fair idea of what was expected of us and did what we could in turns, and of course all of us were allotted to certain areas to take care of."



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At daybreak, members of the CDRT did what they could to account for and assist neighbors before initiating treks through precarious terrain to reach their central meeting point, the Credit Union building, which also served as the storage area for the team's equipment.

According to one team member, “Very early in the morning we got out, thanks to the daylight, we braved, those of us who could. We reached out to those close by. It was not possible to get to everybody. The rivers were up. In fact, all of us at some point could not get to somebody else, but as much as possible, we tried to use whatever track to come together and we tried to mobilize even persons who were willing as volunteers, and got the supplies out because we had to get to the homes. The flood waters were very dangerous.” It took the team leader until dusk to reach the other members, including their appointed team information officer who had already sent other community response team members out with equipment to fulfill their assigned roles. The team worked together for days and weeks, operating out of the Credit Union building and a community shelter they had established in the nearby church, a site that had been identified prior to the disaster.

In the initial hours and days one worker traversed much of the damaged terrain making assessments and noting individuals who were severely affected. With the help of others, he secured multiple rope lines across the river in order to evacuate persons in vulnerable situations and to allow other community members a safe passageway. The community response team member worked well with the team's Red Cross-donated response equipment, but also recommended that more specialized equipment, such as stretchers, be added to the disaster response kit for evacuation of older persons, persons with physical challenges and expectant mothers in life-threatening situations in hazardous terrain. Two other community response team members began a slow journey down to Soufriere to notify government authorities of the deaths and the damage sustained. The national statistics note that the landslide took the lives of four Fond St. Jacques community members.

The team leader, who had benefited from IFRC shelter management training, managed the shelter, which housed upwards of 300 community members at one time. Another community response team member assumed the responsibility of cooking for the persons housed in the shelter, while another member coordinated the logistics, serving as the stores manager from the outset, rationing and distributing supplies as they came in.

Although the community response team members had convened prior to Hurricane Tomas making landfall to trace its movements via radio bulletins, organize themselves and prepare for the potential impacts of the storm, they admitted they had not anticipated such challenging circumstances but agreed that the training they received helped them to manage the difficulties they encountered.

The community response team members highlighted the complexities of shelter management. They experienced the stress and trauma of being separated from their families while at the same time living through a severe disaster situation and providing care, comfort and psychological support to the persons housed at the shelter. This was no easy task. Managing the personalities and the various manifestations of stress and trauma proved challenging, but the community response team members remained determined to carry out their work. The team leader, in particular, expressed her appreciation for the CDRT shelter management training, and noted that “If we had not attended these workshops, we wouldn't have been able to know what we should do, because we have different age groups, different types of people, different types of personalities you have to deal with. The training has helped me personally and towards the community it has helped quite a bit.”

When government authorities and the Red Cross reached Fond St. Jacques days after the disaster, the community response team worked with them to ensure that the most severely affected beneficiaries received priority assistance. It was unclear to the community response team, though, what were their roles and responsibilities vis-à-vis the government agencies that came in to assist, and the members ask for further clarification on this subject. One team member stressed, "The idea of communication cannot be overestimated at all. For me, one of the things I think needs to be addressed is where does the CDRT end and NEMO (National Emergency Management Organization) begin. I think that it was critical for us because we were on the ground."

The community response team members worked on their own, for the most part, for three weeks to bring relief to Fond St. Jacques, and team members admitted that it was difficult at times, both emotionally and physically, to continue the relief and response operation. Separated from their families, they drew on the support and encouragement of their fellow team members to keep going. One team member admitted, *"We're each other's shoulder, and that makes us even stronger and determined to go forward, and I'm very thankful for that."* Community response team members indicated that they were buoyed by the words of encouragement and admiration from persons housed at the shelter, from community members, and from the general public. Fond St. Jacques was one of the communities most severely damaged by Hurricane Tomas. The devastation experienced in the community, as well as the good work of the Fond St. Jacques community response team, was highlighted in the local media. The team leader commented that two persons from Castries, the capital of Saint Lucia, called her and remarked to her that they felt she was doing a good job. She admitted, "After that I felt so strong and continued until the end."

One community response team member, when reflecting upon the collective response, said, "It gave me faith in my fellow countrymen, St. Lucians, Fond St. Jacques...there could have been a lot more fatalities..." Without a CDRT in the community", he commented, "there would be chaos, I could imagine chaos with no one on the ground to coordinate and maintain cool. We were prepared to lend a hand and to do it without fear or favor."



"If we had not attended these workshops, we wouldn't have been able to know what we should do"

Lessons Learned

Training community members empowers the community

For each of the disaster events, the community response teams were able to put their training and equipment to use in an organized and systematic manner. Each team recognized the value of the training. Community response team members, as well as the people reached by their actions, all acknowledged that the community response team is an asset to the community. Of note was the hands-on experience gained from the simulation exercise scenarios built into training. These proved extremely valuable in preparing the teams for their real-life responses to the disaster situations that they faced.

Community consultation is key

Regular Red Cross consultation with the community provides an opportunity for feedback on what works well, and what areas need to be improved. It is important that the community be consulted on matters such as the types of training and the most appropriate tools and equipment for their needs. This generates valuable information, such as the need for more specialized training and equipment (radio equipment and training in the event that standard communication channels become compromised or cease to function, stretchers for evacuating and moving older persons, persons with physical challenges, and expectant mothers to safety).

Community volunteers are an asset

A team of volunteers embedded within a vulnerable community is a very useful asset, both to the community and to the Red Cross. The team members are from the community and know it well. This presents a tremendous advantage over a new group of people coming in to conduct post-impact assessments and lend support after the disaster has taken place. Not only can the community response team play a critical role in the response, but it is in the best position to interpret and relay assessment information to the Red Cross headquarters, so that relief needs can be effectively and efficiently met.

Motivate, guide and acknowledge a job well done

The community response team members are local volunteers, giving their time and their skills for the benefit of their communities. Throughout the response and relief operations, the team members addressed their own trauma, while also dealing with extremely stressful situations. In some instances, team members sacrificed providing comfort to their own families, in favor of fulfilling their responsibility to their community. The team members supported each other, drew on each other for motivation and for support and kept the operation going in the midst of challenging circumstances. It is critical that the Red Cross and government representatives recognize the value and service provided by the volunteers.

Roles and responsibilities must be clearly defined

The CBDM methodology provides an opportunity for the Red Cross to engage with partners through every phase of the process. The key partners in CBDM are the community itself, government authorities, international organizations and non-governmental organizations. Intrinsic to a successful disaster operation is the clear definition of the roles and responsibilities of the actors. This study highlighted the need to work more closely with the national disaster authorities to clarify the role of the community response team vis-à-vis that of other government actors.

Conclusion

As already mentioned, the community response teams are 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 mitigate and reduce disaster risks. Through this study it became evident that the community-based process as a whole served to inform and empower the communities of Dennery and Fond St. Jacques. A critical value added was creation of the community response teams and the provision of training and equipment to assist them in the immediate disaster response, and link to the resources and the expertise of the Red Cross.

The teams were trained to be the first responders in the case of any emergency — to do the initial on-the-ground assessments, to liaise with the Red Cross and national disaster authorities, and to provide first-hand information of what was happening at the level of the community. In the past, in most cases, community members 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. Now, the Community-based Disaster Management program, through the community response teams, has taken the skills, the equipment and training to the community, to enable a degree of self-sufficiency at that level.

The communities are the first responders, and because of the Red Cross interventions and the presence of the response teams, each of the communities cited in this case study was more knowledgeable in terms of their preparedness and their capacity to respond, and was able to put this knowledge into practice when the need arose. It is interesting to note that these community response teams were trained and equipped in past years (Dennery, 2008, and Fond St. Jacques, 2009), and were able to lead a response in 2010 — a testament to the fact that capacity at the community level was strengthened and sustained.

In the two cases cited in this study, the actions of the community disaster response teams in response to disasters in their respective communities demonstrated that Red Cross strengthened the capacity of communities to provide an immediate response to disasters *on their own*, meeting local needs of the community, fulfilling the objectives of the program and proving to be a worthwhile investment overall.

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