

Disaster preparedness and response: building up from the ground up

Summary

The concept of National Disaster Response Teams (NDRTs), known in some contexts as National Intervention Teams, has evolved as the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement seeks the most appropriate and effective mechanisms to address the challenges it faces in its disaster preparedness and response work. A good illustration of this evolution can be found in South Asia, where National Societies have embraced the concept and have contributed to its ongoing development. The formulation of minimum standards related to various aspects of the NDRTs' selection, training and work has also helped to improve their performance and to define their role in emergencies.

Background

The need for individual National Societies to be better prepared to respond to disasters at national and local level has been heightened by recent trends. The Humanitarian Futures Programme pointed out in the report of a study carried out for the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies that: "The Federation's own analysis has identified that the disaster 'landscape' of the future will consist of many more small-scale and medium-scale disasters than today. Paradoxically, the existing international tools and structures for disaster response and management are oriented toward large-scale disasters."



The Red Cross Red Crescent works to make at-risk communities safer and more resilient. It is now well recognized that the best way to do this is to build local disaster preparedness and response capacities, at the individual, household and community level. However, not all disasters can be managed at local level; sometimes the extent of the devastation is just too great. That is when a national disaster response system, backed up, if necessary, by regional and international support, comes into play.

The building blocks of a national disaster response system

The idea is to develop a complete national disaster response system from the ground up, encompassing teams at the community level (Community-Based Disaster Response Teams), at branch level (Branch Disaster Response Teams) and, at the top of the pyramid, National Disaster Response Teams (NDRTs). At each level, teams are made up of specially trained National Society staff and volunteers, who can be mobilized at short notice to work alongside Red Cross or Red Crescent volunteers at local level to assist people affected by a disaster. When local capacities are unable to cope with the scale of a disaster or the magnitude of the needs, teams from higher up the system, be it branch or national level – or even, if warranted, regional or international level – are called upon to bolster the local disaster effort.

NDRTs are composed of both generalists and specialists in health, logistics, relief, and water and sanitation, and are designed to carry out communication tasks, collect information in the field, assist in disaster response and,

where necessary, support the planning of the response operation.

The concept of national disaster response teams has been around for several decades. In South Asia, for example, the Bangladesh Red Crescent Society has long had an effective cyclone response system that links trained volunteers from the community to the national level. However, in the last five years, a more standardized approach has been taken in the region, with the establishment of the first NDRT in India to enhance the country's capacity to respond to large-scale disasters, such as earthquakes, floods and cyclones. Other South Asian countries, including Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka, have followed suit.

With time, the approach has evolved to include disaster risk reduction and capacity building activities in the community. For example, in Bangladesh and Nepal, members of Branch Disaster Response Teams are involved in disaster preparedness and risk reduction activities within the most at-risk communities. These team members are also involved in contingency planning and preparedness for their local branches. In addition, work is being done regionally to coordinate and share experiences, so that team members can learn from each other's experiences and do not have to reinvent the wheel each time.

Standardizing the system

As more and more National Societies develop their own national disaster management systems, the need has become apparent for a set of basic standards and guidelines to assist them in this process. The *National Disaster Preparedness and Response Mechanism Guidelines* contain shared standards, key indicators, guidance notes, key questions and real-life experiences to help National Societies determine the best way to achieve their objectives, while taking into account the particularities of each context.

The Guidelines are the result of a six-month process of global consultation (December 2006–May 2007), to which National Societies in the South Asia region contributed their extensive experience. Several meetings were held in the different regions, some to develop the document, others to present the preliminary draft to National Societies for ratification. South Asia is also one of the regions where the document has been field-tested for one year (June 2007–June 2008), so that any relevant revisions can be made.

The Guidelines are a tangible outcome of the consultation process, showing how the concept of the NDRT has been transformed to encompass other risk





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reduction activities and to translate theoretical concepts into practical tasks at the branch and community level.

Lessons learned

- The experience in South Asia shows that strengthening the regional system depends on strengthening each national system (National, Branch or Community-based Disaster Response Teams). NDRTs act as focal points that can build networks from the local to the regional and reinforce national preparedness and response. Constant communication, sharing and cooperation among countries and within each country are vital to working as a single global system both within and beyond the Movement.
- National, Branch and Community-based Disaster Response Teams cannot function in an organizational vacuum; it is essential that they be guided by methodological and thematic standards coordinated at the global level. This was the rationale behind the development of the *National Disaster Preparedness and Response Mechanism Guidelines*.
- The Guidelines have been well accepted by the National Societies in the South Asia region, in large part because they have been both participants and protagonists in the document's preparation ever since

the idea first arose and because they understand the need for an overarching vision that supports national and local disaster preparedness and response. This demonstrates the importance of consensus and of the National Societies' full participation in global processes.

- The Red Cross Red Crescent should not only dedicate itself to the work of disaster preparedness and response but also “sell” to others outside the Movement the formulas that have proven effective, such as the NDRTs, while ensuring their wide internal dissemination. In fact, National Disaster Response Forces, based in large part on the NDRT concept, now exist in some South Asian countries, under the aegis of the Home Ministry, the police or the army.

Future challenges and next steps

- NDRTs have gradually expanded their functions as a strategic approach to the Red Cross Red Crescent's disaster management system as a whole has developed. But greater responsibilities demand greater knowledge, skills and incentives and therefore increased capacity building.
- The NDRTs should be considered as another strategy for the promotion and retention of volunteers. Trained staff and volunteers leave the Red Cross Red Crescent, taking their knowledge, skills and institutional memory with them. High turnover can be countered by a strong policy of systematic training and incentives, which should include efforts to maintain ties with members of the various teams.
- Securing financing to establish, train and maintain NDRTs is a universal challenge. There is a need for greater creativity in taking best advantage of scarce financial resources in a way that ensures sustainability. In order to make more efficient use of resources invested in trained personnel, the role of the NDRT needs to be reoriented to include multiple risk management tasks.
- Gender balance in some NDRT workshops is not ideal: the majority of team members are still male. The International Federation continues to work with the National Societies in the region to address the role of women in disaster preparedness and response, taking into account local culture while remaining true to the Movement's Fundamental Principles, which is a delicate balancing act.
- The humanitarian system is increasingly adopting recognized, proven global standards such as the Sphere Project.¹ The *National Disaster Preparedness and Response Mechanism Guidelines*, which include elements of the Sphere Project, aim to improve the quality of disaster preparedness and response activities. The Guidelines should be adopted, adapted and implemented by each National Society as part of the International Federation's Global Agenda.



¹ One of the principal outputs of the Sphere Project is a set of minimum standards in core areas of humanitarian assistance, www.sphereproject.org.

For more information, please contact:

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