



NATIONAL SOCIETIES PREPAREDNESS AND COVID-19 RESPONSE

Lessons for strengthening National Society response capacity

Department of Disasters, Climate and Crises (Prevention, Response and Recovery)

September 2022





The International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) is the world's largest humanitarian network, with 192 National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies and around 15 million volunteers. Our volunteers are present in communities before, during and after a crisis or disaster. We work in the most hard to reach and complex settings in the world, saving lives and promoting human dignity. We support communities to become stronger and more resilient places where people can live safe and healthy lives, and have opportunities to thrive.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Since early 2020, the IFRC network of 192 National Societies has been responding to the COVID 19 pandemic globally. Response to the pandemic is primarily a local response, with National Societies responding to the local needs of those affected by COVID-19 in their own countries, based on their domestic Response Plans. At the same time, this has been a truly global response, showing the international solidarity of the IFRC network through the mobilization of mutual assistance to strengthen capacities and reach, the sharing of guidance on best practice, and the leveraging of logistics supply chains and resource mobilization channels.

Response to the COVID-19 pandemic has been an accelerator force in many areas of IFRC work and presents an opportunity to build on lessons from existing approaches and models to strengthen IFRC network response capacity.

To ensure that the IFRC network can work effectively and at scale, the transformational change outlined by the *Agenda for Renewal* is critical to enhancing *localization of response* through the enhancement of the core aspects of respective mandates of the components of the network:

National Societies:

1. As an auxiliary to public authorities, deliver humanitarian services, including in times of crises.
2. Support other National Societies.

IFRC Secretariat:

1. Support National Societies to be strong, effective local organizations that are trusted, accountable and capable to respond to needs of vulnerable communities at scale.
2. Coordinate the network's assistance when crises surpass the capacity of a local National Society to respond and support National Societies to connect with, and learn from, one another to capitalize on existing capacities, reduce overlap and make the network stronger.
3. Represent the network to influence global discussions and decisions to serve vulnerable communities and facilitate access for National Societies to global discussions and funding.

Concentrating on these core aspects of differentiated mandates enables the IFRC as a network to work more effectively. As response to COVID-19 has demonstrated, this network functionality will continue to become even more important as we face the global consequences of climate change, the continued impacts of COVID-19 and future global health threats.

The components of an effective response mechanism, central to the Preparedness for Effective Response (PER) approach, provide a useful framework for analysing lessons not only from the COVID-19 response, but other response operations as well. Categorizing lessons according to related response mechanism component enables an analysis of preparedness contribution to response effectiveness, as well as of areas for further investment in National Society and IFRC network preparedness. Increasingly, lessons from Disaster Relief Emergency Funds (DREF) supported operations, as well as global appeal supported operations such as COVID-19 are being systematically categorized to enable analysis that can strengthen response capacity through preparedness efforts.

A 2021-2022 review of COVID-19 learning found evidence highlighting the important contribution of National Society preparedness to effective response to the pandemic, and for further investment in both National Society and IFRC Network preparedness to strengthen response capacity for future pandemics and global crises.

2. REVIEWS' OBJECTIVES

1

To categorize learnings by response mechanism component to facilitate analysis and planning.



2

To analyze how preparedness for response has contributed to COVID-19 operations.



3

To compile evidence to support investment in preparedness for effective response.



3. METHODOLOGY

The aim of the review was to identify key learning from COVID-19 operations using data entry and analysis tools recently developed by IFRC. The review was conducted using a mixed method systematic review, incorporating classification analysis of quantified data, and a narrative synthesis of qualitative data.

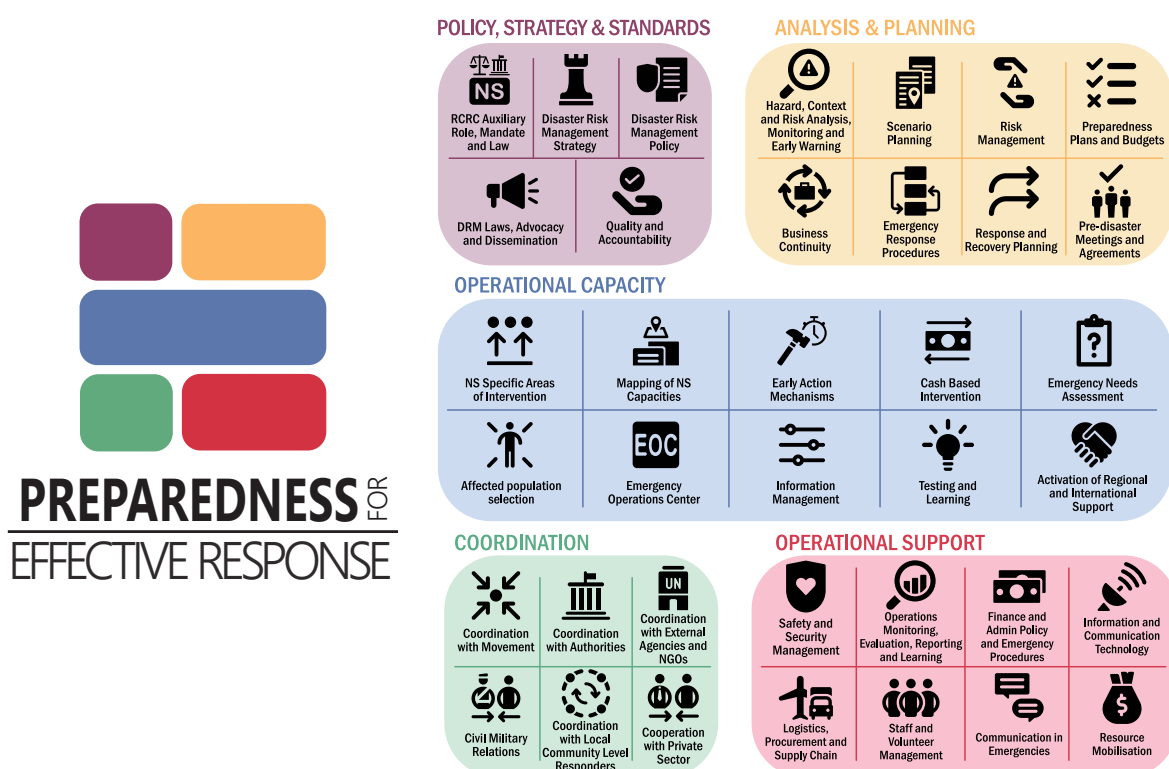
Classification analysis utilized a tagging protocol, analytical framework within the Data Entry and Exploration Platform (DEEP), and the data visualization dashboard within the GO platform, that had been previously developed by IFRC. Classification analysis continued from, and built on, existing classification tagging undertaken by IFRC alumni volunteers, and the author would like to thank and acknowledge their contribution and support.

Classification analysis was disaggregated by 1) *National Society Response* and 2) *IFRC Network Support*, then for each, further disaggregated by *Appeal Priority Area*. For each Appeal Priority Area, the top 3-5 learnings by *Response Mechanism Component* (see figure below) were further disaggregated by *learning type (challenge, lessons, and recommendations)*.

Through document review of 21 internal documents that captured learning from the COVID-19 response, 959 learnings were newly tagged or validated from previous early tagging by IFRC alumni volunteers and were categorized by the above-described disaggregation.

To enable enhancement of COVID-19 response, and preparedness and response for future large-scale public health emergencies and crises, the narrative synthesis focused on the top five most frequently related response mechanism components for National Society response and the top three for IFRC Network support. The outcome of this synthesis is reflected in the key findings section below.

Along with *learnings from DREF operations*, *COVID-19 learnings* can be accessed through an information dashboard. Learnings can be reviewed using filter criteria that includes PER area/component, region, country, and learning type. Accessing learning by relevant PER component can enhance preparedness planning and new innovative ways of linking learning with operational decision making, such as the IFRC Pandemic and Global Crises Playbook, can also further enhance response.



4. KEY FINDINGS

- **Related PER Component: Preparedness Planning**

National Societies already engaged in improving their preparedness and response capacities prior to the pandemic showed high levels of performance in their COVID-19 response actions. Preparedness efforts played a fundamental role in the multi-threat response during the pandemic. Specifically, National Societies who applied multi-hazard preparedness planning before the COVID-19 crisis hit were able to adapt and respond fast – not only regarding the pandemic, but also other complex disasters.

- **Related PER Component: Coordination with Authorities**

Effective coordination with local authorities was a key enabler to effective response. National Societies that had an established auxiliary role and response mandate, were most effective in coordinating with local authorities.

- **Related PER Component: Coordination with local level responders**

National Societies that had prioritized sustaining a community presence through a volunteer network were better able to mobilize a timely and effective response to COVID-19 by engendering trust and enabling access. Community health, water, sanitation and hygiene and disaster risk reduction projects were particularly effective platforms for the integration and scale up of crisis specific interventions and for enabling volunteer readiness, engagement, and retention.

- **Related PER Component: Communication in Emergencies**

Community engagement and accountability (CEA) was highlighted as a critical aspect of National Societies' response, ensuring that the public (i) was informed about the risks (ii) received action oriented messages and (iii) could provide feedback through diverse means. Diverse communication channels (TV, radio, social media) allowed information to be targeted to different audiences, but also enabled spread of misinformation that risked a breakdown of trust with communities.

- **Related PER Component: Staff and Volunteer Management**

In general, when National Societies teams and volunteers were well prepared and well trained, the outcomes in the response were more positive. A surge in volunteering was unmatched by capacity to absorb and retain volunteers for National Societies that had not invested in digital systems for onboarding and processing volunteers.

- **Related PER Component: Business Continuity Planning**

Business Continuity thinking is a new concept for most National Societies and many lacked business continuity plans that incorporated remote working scenarios and loss of National Society income.

- **Related PER Component: RCRC Movement Coordination**

More effective IFRC network coordination mechanisms are required to mitigate a narrow and siloed approach in terms of alignment of IFRC Secretariat and Membership support to local preparedness and response plans.

- **Related PER Component: Resource Mobilization**

Donors' requirements and standards are heightening, calling for major preparedness without necessarily providing the flexibility and early financial support for National Societies. In cases where donors do not provide major flexibility or innovative funding approaches, the current capacities of National Societies to adapt and respond to them can be limited. There is a need to continuously negotiate with partner National Societies and donors to make the resource allocation needs driven. Unearmarked funds to National Societies worked well since they were re-allocated accordingly as per the National Society response plans.

5. NATIONAL SOCIETY PREPAREDNESS CONTRIBUTION TO THE COVID-19 RESPONSE

A contribution analysis was undertaken to attribute National Society preparedness activities with COVID-19 response outcomes to provide specific examples that compliment the synthesized learnings of the review.

A *series of success stories* from around the world (available in English, French, Spanish, Arabic and Bahasa) have also been developed that further illustrate that a strong *preparedness for response* mechanism is crucial and will continue to become even more important as we face the global consequences of climate change, the continued impacts of COVID-19 and future global health threats.

National Societies Preparedness: COVID-19 Success Stories

Institutional preparedness enables an effective response

The International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) has demonstrated amazing resilience and adaptability as an organization and a humanitarian network during the response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Since the beginning of the pandemic, Red Cross and Red Crescent National Societies have quickly adapted their way of working, building on local solutions, leveraging their auxiliary role, and striving to meet the growing demands of local communities facing the health, social and economic impacts of COVID-19. In many cases, such consequences have increased and compounded local vulnerabilities caused by climate-related hazards and other crises.

These experiences show that a strong preparedness for response mechanism is crucial and will continue to become even more important as we face the global consequences of climate change, the continued impacts of COVID-19 and future global health threats.

Success stories

- **Botswana:** "Adapting to the 'new normal'". [Link](#)
- **Cameroon:** "The Cameroon Red Cross partners with local radio stations in the fight against COVID-19". [Link](#)
- **Colombia:** "Adapting emergency services to COVID-19". [Link](#)
- **Costa Rica:** "A National response plan for a global pandemic". [Link](#)
- **Egypt:** "Mental health and primary healthcare outreach initiatives". [Link](#)
- **Indonesia:** "Strong relationships with community and government partners are key in epidemic preparedness and response". [Link](#)
- **Indonesia:** "Preparing a hospital for COVID-19". [Link](#)
- **Lebanon:** "Multi-hazard scenario planning: Ensuring effective response in complex disasters and crises". [Link](#)
- **Sierra Leone:** "From Ebola to COVID-19: Coordination with local authorities for effective response". [Link](#)
- **Somaliland:** "Community-Based surveillance for COVID-19". [Link](#)
- **South-Eastern Europe:** "Enhancing emergency operations coordination". [Link](#)
- **Spain:** "Ensuring the safety of volunteers: Preparedness for procurement of protective equipment". [Link](#)
- **Trinidad and Tobago:** "Volunteers on the front line of the response". [Link](#)
- **Uganda:** "Is one lesson ever enough? The need to respond in a contextualized manner". [Link](#)
- **Vanuatu:** "Disaster response: as local as possible - as international as necessary". [Link](#)

Access to the repository in
other languages here

Findings of a desk review of multihazard preparedness efforts and its contribution to COVID-19 response

The following tables present contributions of National Society preparedness to COVID-19 response, classified according to the *Preparedness for Effective Response Mechanism's* areas and components.

POLICY, STRATEGY & STANDARDS



RC Auxiliary Role, Mandate, and Law

Preparedness effort	Positive outcome in COVID-19
National level. Argentina. The Argentine RC, with support from the IFRC, has made significant advocacy efforts to pass a Red Cross law. Governmental advocacy efforts for Red Cross law were strategically intensified during the COVID-19 pandemic.	National level. Argentina. The Argentine RC saw its Red Cross law passed during the pandemic; this was the result of several years of advocacy work by the National Society with Movement support helping the NS to have more access and resources to support the COVID-19 response.



Disaster Risk Management Policy

Preparedness effort	Positive outcome in COVID-19
Regional/National level. Africa and MENA. Disaster Management policies and strategies, which include epidemics and weather-related hazards, were reviewed and updated.	Regional/National level. Africa and MENA. National Societies such as Central African Republic (CAR), Kenya, Lebanon, and Zambia, among others, were able to mobilize all concerned sectors from headquarters and branch level teams more rapidly during COVID-19 to activate their emergency response.



Quality and Accountability

Preparedness effort	Positive outcome in COVID-19
Regional/National level. Africa and MENA. National Societies and the media were cooperating to disseminate information about epidemic preparedness prior to COVID-19. They were able to quickly scale-up radio programming and include messages about the pandemic. (Response and Preparedness programmes – Netherlands Red Cross / IFRC).	<p>National level. Sierra Leone. Red Cross personnel and media representatives were trained on risk communication during public health emergencies prior to the COVID-19 outbreak. During the pandemic, interactive radio shows on COVID-19 were broadcast during prime-time simultaneously on seven local FM stations. Expert panels comprised staff from the Ministry of Health, Ministry of Agriculture, and the Office of National Security (ONS), as well as Red Cross branch officials.</p> <p>National level. Cameroon. A national CEA training and workshops on risk communication with the media held prior to the pandemic allowed the Red Cross to quickly deploy volunteers and work with radio stations to respond to COVID-19.</p> <p>National level. Zambia. Zambia saw speedy development of (1) <i>Community Response and Feedback Mechanism committees</i> and (2) <i>Rumour tracking mechanism</i> integrated into the Ministry of Health's call centre.</p>
National level. Bolivia. The Bolivian Red Cross developed a Community Engagement and Accountability (CEA) strategy and used it to prepare and communicate key prevention messages with community participation during the Influenza outbreak of 2018 (DREF/IFRC).	National level. Bolivia. The Bolivian Red Cross also has conducted Risk Communication and Community Engagement (RCCE) actions to reach different populations in different languages spoken in the country. A total of 76 radio spots were broadcast in four languages (Spanish, Aymara, Quechua, and Guarani), as well as 13 key prevention message campaigns on social media.

ANALYSIS & PLANNING



Emergency Response Procedures

Preparedness effort	Positive outcome in COVID-19
<p>National level. Yemen. In the three years prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Yemen RC strengthened National Response Teams, pre-positioned emergency stocks and equipment in warehouses, established a National Emergency Operations Centre (EOC), and built a knowledge base on Emergency Response Procedures that includes lessons learned and best practices (IFRC/German Red Cross).</p>	<p>National level. Yemen. During the 2020 floods and the 2021 cyclone, the Yemen RC was able to effectively activate its emergency response protocol with branches in the affected areas of Aden, Hajja, and Marib, mobilizing over 20 staff and 80 volunteers. This demonstrated improved coordination, procedures, and communications across the YRCS's HQ and branches, all within the pandemic context.</p>



Response and Recovery Planning

Preparedness effort	Positive outcome in COVID-19
<p>Regional level. Africa. Multi-hazard response plans in Uganda, Kenya, and Ethiopia and Zambia, which included epidemics and pandemics, floods, Desert Locust invasions, or droughts, were developed with socio-economic, food security, and health indicators (Netherlands Red Cross / British Red Cross, IFRC, Climate Centre, Community Epidemic and Pandemic Preparedness - CP3).</p>	<p>National level. Zambia. The Zambian RC was first to develop its COVID-19 response plan in the Southern Africa subregion; it was used as a benchmark for other National Societies.</p>
<p>Regional level. Africa/MENA. Contingency planning trainings and simulations (Netherlands RC, IFRC).</p>	<p>National level. Uganda. In Uganda, Emergency Response Procedures and Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) were immediately applied to COVID-19 contingency planning.</p> <p>National level. Lebanon. The Lebanese Red Crescent and Palestinian Red Crescent-Lebanon Branch quickly developed COVID-19 response plans and initiated fundraising at the very early stages of the pandemic.</p> <p>National level. Fiji. A contingency plan for cyclones allowed for an early response to tropical cyclone Harold within the pandemic context. The Fiji NS had pre-positioned relief stocks, and the needed relief items were delivered quicker than in the past, and to more remote areas. Also, the Fiji Red Cross was able to support evacuations and conduct immediate assessments and distributions just hours after the cyclone passed. Information from the Fiji Red Cross has been a trusted source for government stakeholders.</p>

OPERATIONAL CAPACITY



NS specific Areas of Intervention

Preparedness effort	Positive outcome in COVID-19
<p>National level. Democratic Republic of Congo. Between 2014 and 2019, different projects were implemented to strengthen different areas of intervention related to the NS's Emergency Response capacity (Canadian Red Cross).</p>	<p>National/sub-national level. Democratic Republic of Congo. In the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Sud Ubangi Branch, an isolated region in the northern part of the country, leveraged its increased capacity to work with the Ministry of Health and the communities to respond to the pandemic autonomously with no external support.</p>
<p>Regional level. Africa. Uganda and Democratic Republic of Congo.</p> <p>Epidemic/pandemic preparedness programmes with key components such as community health promotion, RCCE, and community-based surveillance, have allowed National Societies to work closely with One Health partners prior to the pandemic, and trained community-based health volunteers (IFRC Community Epidemic and Pandemic Preparedness Programme - CP3).</p>	<p>National level. Uganda. In Uganda, the NS health team provided training/technical support to staff and volunteers. The NS was able to quickly engage in risk communication, as well as conduct health screenings at points of entry, markets, and food distribution centres.</p> <p>National/Sub-national level. Democratic Republic of Congo. The CP3 programme was being implemented in provinces which were the most impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. Over 350 staff/trained volunteers were deployed to demonstrate how to wash hands and disseminate self-isolation messages, reaching 45 000 people in April 2020 alone.</p> <p>National/Sub-national level. Democratic Republic of Congo. The NS responded to a cholera outbreak in June 2020 in Kongo Central, one of the provinces most impacted by COVID-19. One member of the NS who was trained in cholera control trained 34 volunteers, who then set up an Oral Rehydration Point (ORP) using the NS's prepositioned materials (tarpaulins, tables and chairs, buckets, jerrycans, chlorine, gloves, aprons, etc.).</p>
<p>National level. Vanuatu.</p> <p>Epidemic Control Programme/Training and ToT on Epidemic Control for Volunteers (ECV) tools (IFRC/Australian Red Cross).</p>	<p>National level. Vanuatu. The Vanuatu RC supported a COVID-19 awareness hotline set up by the Ministry of Health and conducted volunteer-led surveillance in communities to report suspected cases and flu-like symptoms.</p> <p>Also, the NS mobilized staff and volunteers to deliver awareness on COVID-19 and hygiene promotion in multiple provinces, reaching a total of 68 562 people. At the same time, the NS responded to Tropical Cyclone Harold, and incorporated COVID-19 messaging in recovery activities.</p>

OPERATIONAL CAPACITY



Early Actions Mechanisms

Preparedness effort	Positive outcome in COVID-19
<p>Regional level. Africa/Asia Pacific. Combined DREF and Forecast-based Financing (FbF), and activated Early Action Protocols, during 2020 (Belgian Red Cross, British Red Cross, Danish Red Cross, Netherlands Red Cross, German Red Cross, IFRC).</p>	<p>National level. Mozambique. During a COVID-19 surge in Beira, Mozambique, forecast-based early actions were triggered by the Mozambican RC in anticipation of Cyclone Chalane (December 2020). The NS led preparedness actions to minimize impact on communities. One month later, tropical storm Eloise hit the same province. Activation of the Early Action Protocol (EAP) helped manage the ravages of both cyclones.</p> <p>National level. Mongolia. As of February 2021, Mongolia was one of the countries with less COVID-19 cases and deaths. The Mongolian Red Cross forecast-based EAP was triggered for Dzud (extreme winter).</p> <p>National Level. Bangladesh. An EAP was triggered to mitigate the impact of Cyclone Amphan in 10 districts of Bangladesh's coastal areas. Vulnerable populations were already constrained by the COVID-19 pandemic, with no means to protect themselves from the virus. Within the measures taken under the EAP, the Bangladesh RC procured and distributed masks and hand sanitizers. Staff and volunteers encouraged people to maintain physical distancing in the shelters where support was provided.</p>



Cash and Voucher Assistance

Preparedness effort	Positive outcome in COVID-19
<p>National level. Vietnam. The Vietnam Red Cross increased the use of large-scale cash transfer programming in emergencies, with support from the American Red Cross, Danish Red Cross, British Red Cross, IFRC, and ECHO. It started with the response to Typhoon Ketsana in 2009.</p>	<p>National level. Vietnam. The Vietnam Red Cross distributed unconditional cash grants to almost 10 000 people affected by the COVID-19 pandemic and conducted a Financial Services Provider (FSP) mapping assessment in each target province to select the most suitable FSPs to deliver cash grants.</p>

OPERATIONAL CAPACITY



Communications in Emergencies

Preparedness effort	Positive outcome in COVID-19
<p>Regional level. Cameroon, DRC, Guinea, Kenya, Sierra Leona, and Uganda. Training courses on Communication in Emergencies delivered by BBC Media Action between 2019 and 2020 targeted RC National Societies, journalists, and government representatives. (CP3/IFRC).</p>	<p>Regional level. Kenya. NS reports using information from the BBC Media Action training, focusing on Communications in Emergencies during the COVID-19 pandemic, on clear messages, credible sources, addressing myths and rumours, and using media contacts gained in workshops.</p>



Emergency Operations Centres

Preparedness effort	Positive outcome in COVID-19
<p>Global level. Several National Societies were supported in setting up Emergency Operations Centres (EOCs).</p>	<p>Regional level. Guyana and Dominica. Both NS upgraded their EOCs with equipment procured locally through the IFRC. Also, enhancement of HQ and branch EOC Units, including furnishing and procurement of equipment.</p> <p>National level. Bosnia and Herzegovina. Bosnia and Herzegovina NS implemented its EOC with support from the IFRC's Regional Office for Europe. As a result of the more efficient information management allowed through the EOC, stakeholders (movement partners, donors, authorities, etc.) were kept regularly informed with up-to-date quality and visual information, including mapping of locations where NS mobile teams and services were available. Increased NS reporting and evidence-based actions stimulated partnerships and resource mobilization, which enabled the NS to do more and do better in both response operations, but also to provide greater in-country visibility for NS endeavours.</p>

OPERATIONAL SUPPORT



Safety and Security Management

Preparedness effort	Positive outcome in COVID-19
<p>Global level. As a part of the COVID-19 Global Appeal's Priority 3 (National Society Strengthening), the IFRC is managing staff and volunteer safety and security as an enabling action. Support to National Societies is being provided to update security plans and protocols, Security Risk Registers, and emergency plans, with pandemic and potential new risks included. Also, the IFRC has increased monitoring of staff mobilization from home to field and vice versa.</p>	<p>Regional level. Barbados and Dominica. The National Society security system has been upgraded in Barbados and installed in Dominica, including staff access credentials (labour, security equipment purchase, and staff access cards).</p>
<p>Global level. Also, as part of Priority 3, National Societies are providing active volunteers with full or partial insurance coverage (including private, solidarity funds, or public coverage from authorities) that covers accidents, illness and death benefits to family members.</p>	<p>Global. Duty of Care for Volunteers (COVID-19) has enabled massive protection to volunteers' integrity. At the same time, it has helped to develop stronger mechanisms to manage volunteer information. National Societies now have updated and more complete volunteer databases.</p>



Information, Communication, and Technology

Preparedness effort	Positive outcome in COVID-19
<p>Regional. Africa. Data literacy and GIS trainings, and innovative approaches to preparedness for response programmes.</p>	<p>Regional. Africa. The data readiness capacities built in Uganda, Kenya, and Ethiopia enabled precise and rapid risk analysis for more accurate identification of the areas at risk to be targeted for COVID-19 preparedness and response activities.</p> <p>The Uganda RC developed a COVID-19 dashboard to monitor risk communication and community engagement activities.</p> <p>In Ethiopia and Kenya, GIS staff were assigned to monitor and share COVID-19 updates globally and nationally via the Ethiopia Red Cross Society and Kenya Red Cross Society dashboards in their respective Emergency Operations Centres.</p> <p>National level. Zambia. The data preparedness training, particularly on data literacy and mobile data tools, delivered to Zambian RC volunteers, made onsite data entry during emergency operations possible and reduced excessive interaction with communities, which causes unnecessary fatigue and disturbance to the affected population.</p> <p>National level. Guinea. At the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, NS-trained staff used recent maps created with geospatial technology to localize NS branches, health facilities, and entry points in the country.</p>

6. RECOMENDATIONS



Key findings of this review should be further analysed and integrated into the Mid-long term institutional preparedness and response capacity programs and other operations.



Further investment in global data collection and analysis of the preparedness and response capacity information. Using the Preparedness for Effective Response (PER) Mechanism also as analytical framework of the learnings from DREF supported operations and COVID-19 response would facilitate the triangulation and complementarities between the PER results and the learnings from operations.



Innovative approaches should be explored to link learnings with response decision making and preparedness efforts.



Malagasy Red Cross, 2021



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