Localization of Disaster Preparedness and Response Capacity in Ethiopia

Introduction

When a disaster occurs, communities are not only the first to be affected, they are also often among the first to respond. They have the local knowledge and presence within the affected communities. As such, they are best placed to understand the severity of the situation and the needs of the population. However, despite efforts to support communities in preparing for and leading disaster responses, in Ethiopia, there remains a need for more committed resources.

The eastern African country faces various disasters, such as floods, forest fires, and drought, which are cyclical, affecting communities with frequent recurrence. In more recent years, and owing to an unstable political landscape, Ethiopia has experienced inter-communal and cross-regional tensions, which have, at times, escalated into conflict, resulting in the displacement of communities.

Empowering the most vulnerable to prevent, mitigate, prepare for, cope with, or quickly recover from a disaster is essential to minimizing losses of life, property or assets, and environmental damage. However, the major determinants that make communities vulnerable and their ability to withstand and prepare for hazards, are rarely tackled.

“The humanitarian needs in Ethiopia are enormous, but there are limitations on the resources available to meet them. We have a responsibility to make sure that no one is left behind. However, even if resources are scarce, we can make a difference. But we must invest in the communities who are vulnerable and most at risk of disaster; to help them draw on their own skills and abilities and be less dependent on outside support.” Mohammed Dada, Ethiopian Red Cross Society, Head of Volunteer Management and Branch Development

With the Support of Canada

The Ethiopian Red Cross Society has recognized the need to move its support closer to communities affected by disaster, to have the response be as local as possible, and to invest in the communities themselves. The National Society has been engaged in helping communities react to natural and man-made disasters by using and building on their own skills and abilities.

The Community-Based Disaster Risk Management (CBDRM) project is aimed at avoiding, or at least minimizing, the impact of hazards, as well as ensuring that effective and efficient responses can be provided when disasters occur. This has been achieved by strengthening the capacity and resilience of communities, and ensuring sustainability through local ownership and communal responsibility.

This case study outlines the impact of the Capacity Strengthening for Emergency Response in Africa (SERA) initiative in which the Canadian Red Cross is supporting the provision of training, equipment, and technical assistance to the Ethiopian Red Cross Society, with funding provided by the Government of Canada.

Communities involved in the initiative were selected based on their vulnerability and risk to recurring hazards and disasters and include: Adele Chelekek and Kele Zuria in Sodo, Gurage zone; Gambelto, Hada Boso and Meraro Hawolo in Arsi Negele, West Arsi zone; and Afaf, Durlebes and in Woremigna in Rayo-kobo, North Wollo zone.

Mohammed Dada,
Ethiopian Red Cross Society,
Head of Volunteer Management and Branch Development
Key SERA Statistics in Ethiopia

- In participating communities, more than 140 people have been trained on emergency preparedness, response and risk reduction, and have strengthened their ability to generate income;
- Technical support has been provided to communities to assess the risks they face, and to develop and implement plans and procedures to address them. This has included the mobilization of cash and in-kind support for preparedness, response and mitigation activities; and
- Improvements to warehousing have been implemented in all three participating zones, including prepositioning equipment and stocks for more than 2,000 people. More than 20 people have been trained on improved warehouse management approaches.

Our Collective Impact: Communities are empowered to address the causes of vulnerability and risk to recurring hazards and disasters. They are prepared to respond effectively and efficiently to disasters.

"Communities have their own skills and knowledge that can help them cope when there is a disaster. Our role as the Ethiopian Red Cross Society is to build on what they already have; to bring the communities together to prepare for and manage the response themselves." Abraham Tesfaye, Ethiopian Red Cross Society, SERA Coordinator

Empowerment

Summary of activities: The Ethiopian Red Cross Society staff and representatives from the local authorities and various sectoral offices were orientated on the aim of the project. They then selected the communities to be involved based on an analysis of their vulnerability and risk to recurring disasters, the impacts of climate change, as well as economic, environmental, geographical, and social factors. Also considered were the capacities of the communities to respond to a disaster. Ethiopian Red Cross Society staff and local authorities approached the selected communities and if there was interest in participating, helped them to elect a local CBDRM committee to oversee implementation of the project. The CBDRM committee was drawn from the most respected members of the community, and those who would have acceptance, ensuring an equitable balance of men and women.

The impact: Ensuring that local actors, including communities at risk, were involved from the onset helped to create an understanding of the purpose of the project, acceptance, and minimized confusion on who was being targeted and why. This supported advocacy for increased participation by ensuring ownership and responsibility for implementation through the appointment of local CBDRM committees. As a result, communities now have a stronger, more confident voice when engaging with local authorities and with the Ethiopian Red Cross Society, ensuring they can coordinate as quickly as possible when disaster strikes. The inclusion of women has also provided them an increased role in decision making and helps ensure their needs are prioritized, as one of the most vulnerable segments of society during a disaster.

Training

Summary of activities: The Ethiopian Red Cross Society invested in trainings to build the skills and knowledge of the CBDRM committees. This included vulnerability and capacity assessment, hazard mapping, emergency needs assessment, action planning, reporting, and resource mobilization. The trainings involved classroom and practical simulation exercises.

The impact: Following the trainings, the CBDRM committees were able to conduct assessments to identify the hazards, vulnerabilities and capacities in their communities. They developed action plans, hazard maps, and agreed on operating procedures should a disaster occur. This included assigning roles and responsibilities to committee members, consulting with communities to identify the most vulnerable groups, and developing targeting criteria such as age, disability, and gender. Utilizing their own capacity and through the mobilization of local resources including cash, food, labour, and land, the CBDRM committees have been able to begin implementing their action plans. They have also constructed centres where they hold meetings, display their action plans and hazard maps, and store pre-positioned supplies.

Equipment And Technical Assistance

Summary of activities: The Ethiopian Red Cross Society has improved warehouse management in its Gurage, North Wollo, and West Arsi branches. This includes the pre-positioning gender-sensitive emergency stocks, as well as investing in equipment to help the branches better manage their mobilization and distribution. Storekeepers from all three branches received training on warehouse-management techniques, including warehouse layout, inventory control, stock movement, and security management. The trainings were done with technical support provided by the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) using a competency-based approach, considering the roles and responsibilities of staff at the branch level.

The impact: Previously when a disaster occurred, all stocks had to be requested from a central warehouse, which negatively impacted the ability of the Ethiopian Red Cross Society to respond in a timely manner. In some cases, it could take up to one month for stocks to be mobilized. Now, with warehouses that are equipped and stocked, and located closer to the communities, the National Society can respond more effectively when there is a disaster.
GURAGE: Planning Ahead to Ensure Food Security

Sodo Woreda is susceptible to disasters. After discussions with the community, 24 men and women were selected for the CBDRM committee. These members received training on what CBDRM means, its sustainability, and how to prevent, prepare for, and respond to a disaster.

Following the training, the Ethiopian Red Cross Society and the CBDRM committee selected two communities and conducted a baseline study to identify the hazards prevalent in the region, including what should be done to mitigate and respond to them. The study concluded that flooding and droughts were the two major recurring disasters.

The Ethiopian Red Cross Society and the CBDRM committee then began planning the implementation of activities. They started by raising awareness about the project and disasters within the communities. Once they had gained the trust of community members, an agreement was reached that grain would be stocked to ensure emergency supplies would be available for distribution in the event of a drought.

Community members collected wood and constructed a small centre in which to house the grain. In monetary value, the wood and labour contributed was worth more than 20,000 Ethiopian Birr ($891 CAD). The CBDRM committee convinced community members to each contribute five kilograms of maize, resulting in 50 - 60 quintals of maize being donated for the year. Going forward, the CBDRM committee decided that it was not sustainable to collect maize from communities for every year, so they decided to create a sustainable chain to ensure the ongoing protection of the community’s stock of maize.

The National Society did not have the financial capacity to rehabilitate the land, so it decided to mobilize human resources from the community. The CBDRM committee came up with a plan that identified activities that could be done by volunteers and then raised awareness and educated the volunteers on the plan.

Abraham Teka, a youth volunteer, was tasked with directing 46 male and 38 female volunteers to care for the land by planting various trees and preventing cattle from entering the area. The volunteers developed a sense of ownership of the project and established a sustainable chain to ensure the ongoing protection and preservation of the land.

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GURAGE: Youth Volunteers Dedicated to Preventing Environmental Disasters

Volunteers are a vital part of the Ethiopian Red Cross Society and play a key role in supporting communities and responding to disasters. The CBDRM committee at the Red Cross branch in Gurage has been mobilizing young people in Kefa Zuria Woreda to serve as volunteers in disaster prevention.

The major challenges faced by residents are flooding and landslides, which cause significant damage to arable farmland. The frequency of landslides is increasing due to soil erosion and, in an effort to try and combat this, the Government of Ethiopia donated four hectares of land to the branch to rehabilitate and preserve the topography.

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“We believe that when someone serves and sees the community benefitting from what he/she did, it also benefits themselves. What we do here gives us mental satisfaction. We have a plan to do a lot in the future.” — Abraham Teka, Ethiopian Red Cross Society, Youth Volunteer

NORTH WOLLO: Mobilizing the Community to Respond to Flooding and Erosion

Qobo Woreda in North Wollo is one of the most disaster-prone areas in Amhara region. For the past five years the community has been impacted by severe soil erosion due to flooding, which has impacted livelihoods and destroyed the homes of many residents.

A farmer and father of six, Temesgen Belay lives in Qobo Woreda. “There are residents who have already left the area due to their land being almost eroded, and there are others whose houses are on the verge of being taken away by the erosion caused by flooding. They are still there facing the risk because there is no place to resettle them,” said Temesgen about the severity of damage caused by recurring flooding and erosion.

After receiving training and support on CBDRM from the Ethiopian Red Cross Society, Temesgen and other members of the community are now trying to prevent similar disasters by implementing solutions to mitigate risks. The community has built terraces to prevent heavy rainfall from flooding and destroying houses, and trees are being grown to prevent erosion and landslides.

“We really need to stop the damage and protect the land before everything is ruined or damaged to a stage that it is impossible to reverse,” said Temesgen. “I will not stop trying to mobilize resources, contribute physically, and work with the community and the government.” — Temesgen Belay, Qobo Woreda

NORTH WOLLO: Supporting Families Displaced by Conflict

Dejen Derb is a husband and father of four. Dejen and his family lived in Wellega, where they owned two coffee farms and grew ginger, eucalyptus, hops, and Cardia Africana trees, which produce a popular wood for furniture. They had a well-built home, plenty of food, and the children attended school; theirs was a blessed life.

However, in 2018 that changed when conflict broke out in Wellega. The family’s home and crops were burned, their oxen slaughtered, and Dejen so badly beaten that he spent six months in hospital recovering.

In search of safety, the family left everything behind and fled to Qobo town in North Wollo. They spent five days living on the streets before they were discovered by Ethiopian Red Cross Society youth volunteers. These volunteers had been involved in CBDRM activities and were helping to provide support to other internally displaced persons (IDPs) who had also arrived from Wellega.

In total, they were assisting 66 households with close to 330 family members. The Derb family became one of those households.

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Because of advocacy by the CBDRM committee and the youth volunteers, Dejen and his family are among those who have received land from the local government administration. It is here that Dejen has built a new home for his family as they begin to rebuild their lives.” — Tirunseh Seifu, Ethiopian Red Cross Society, Youth Volunteer

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WEST ARSI: Community Education Leads to Behaviour Change

Deforestation and inappropriate harvesting of sand were leading to many man-made disasters in Hada Boso. Residents of the community were digging sand from the surrounding land for use in their compounds. Due to this, the rain eroded uncovered fertile soil to the extent it created massive gorges in the land, and agricultural lands were unusable. Even residential houses had to be relocated due to the threat of floods and other disasters resulting from the sand collection and cutting down of trees.

After receiving training, the CBDRM committee raised awareness about the issue by holding discussions with the community about the causes and effects of sand harvesting. Together with the community, they identified practical prevention activities.

Amina Gabow, a development worker and CBDRM committee member in Hada Boso Kebele, expressed the importance of community awareness and participation in disaster prevention:

“In my opinion, as a CBDRM committee member, disaster risk management activities are crucial for our community. People are now aware of how the activities they were carrying out were also creating a serious risk to them. They learned how to avoid being the cause of man-made disasters and to prevent the risks.”

Residents of Hada Boso are now actively engaged in soil-conservation activities such as filling in the gorges, digging dams to store flowing water, and building terraces. The community is determined to not repeat the same activities that were causing the land cracking and environmental destruction.

“Those involved in the initiative presented the activities that had been carried out - the result, the impact - they presented everything. The regional representatives were astonished. All of them said they wish to adopt the approach in their regions too. It’s an approach that does not require a lot of funds to start and which can be sustained with minimal technical support from the Ethiopian Red Cross Society. There is already interest from neighbouring communities in adopting the CBDRM approach. In West Arsi alone, around 100 communities want to be involved. They have seen the benefit.” Abraham Tesfaye, SERA Coordinator

Project Overview

SERA: The SERA initiative is a five-year project to strengthen the emergency response capacities of National Red Cross Societies in Ethiopia, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Mali, and South Sudan, enabling them to better prepare for, respond to, and recover from crisis situations and lead humanitarian response efforts.

Methodology

The information presented in this case study was gathered through key informant interviews and focus group discussions conducted with communities and zonal branches in Ethiopia – Gurage, North Wollo and West Arsi - in addition to interviews and discussions at the headquarters level with both Ethiopian and Canadian Red Cross Society staff.