Introduction

“The DRC Red Cross is for the people” - Apollinaire Lipandasi, the Provincial Secretary for Sud-Ubangi

The Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) is a vast country that experiences numerous different emergencies every year including floods, mudslides and epidemics. On top of these acute emergencies the country is also dealing with protracted crises including the decades long conflict in the East and migration in the Kasai region.

In January 2018, the DRC Red Cross undertook the IFRC’s Organization Capacity Assessment and Certification. One finding to emerge was that an area of improvement for the national society was Community Engagement and Accountability (CEA). Since then, the DRC Red Cross, with support from the Canadian Red Cross, has invested in growing its institutional capacity from the national headquarters down to the branch level to increase participation by communities in programs and emergency responses.

This case study will show two sides of CEA:
1) How when done well it increases the active participation of communities and helps guide Red Cross Red Crescent activities
2) How in times of crisis, providing timely and relevant information can save lives.

Institutionalization

To strengthen the DRC Red Cross capacity in Community Engagement and Accountability (CEA), it was important that CEA be mainstreamed into all aspects of the organization from governance to programming. This was done in two ways:
1) Governance Documents: The DRC Red Cross’ Strategic Plan for 2019 – 2023 lists strengthening their CEA capacity as one of their primary objectives.
2) Capacity building of staff and volunteers: The DRC Red Cross has engaged in several trainings on CEA in the past two years to build this capacity. In 2018, the Canadian Red Cross with other Movement partners supported a CEA training of 22 participants (12 men and 10 women) from ten branches in CEA. Those volunteers and staff members then returned to their branches to train board members, staff and volunteers in CEA.

The impact of this capacity building is evident. The trainings helped participants develop action plans for their respective branches. This included establishing feedback mechanisms in Red Cross programming and running discussion groups for diverse community consultations on projects to increase participation and inclusivity. For example, the Gemena branch established “Comités de réclamations” for all emergency operations, which consists of community leaders, volunteers and diverse community members. The office now also has a suggestion box for the general public as well as for its volunteers. After the trainings, volunteers and staff were also able to come up with effective means of reaching vulnerable populations in emergencies, listen to their feedback and be able to adapt messaging to overcome rumors in an emergency.

Since making CEA a strategic priority and building capacity within its staff, the DRC Red Cross has been recognized by the government and other organizations as a leader in this area. In Equateur province, the government asked DRC Red Cross to provide CEA volunteers to inform the community about their polio vaccination campaign and accompany vaccination teams into the community.

Methodology

The information presented in this case study was gathered through key informant interviews with headquarters staff, branch staff and volunteers at the Mbandaka and Sud-Ubungi branch, as well as community members in Ikongowasa community.

SERA Project

The 5-year Government of Canada funded Capacity Strengthening for Emergency Response in Africa (SERA) project was designed to strengthen the emergency response capacities of four Red Cross-National Societies across Africa, including the Democratic Republic of Congo Red Cross. The ultimate outcome of the program was to save lives and alleviate suffering and maintain human dignity of women and men. To achieve this, the SERA program had an intermediate outcome to obtain an increased commitment from the DRC Red Cross leadership and decision makers to attain gender equality, protection and community engagement and accountability at the national, regional and branch levels.
The Ripple Effect of Trainings – Becoming a Resource for Africa

“In May 2018, Apollinaire Lipandasi, the Provincial Secretary for Sud-Ubangi, attended a Community Engagement and Accountability (CEA) training supported by the Canadian Red Cross in Kinshasa. In the year since that training, Apollinaire has been chosen to take the training of trainers CEA training in Senegal. He feels this has deepened his knowledge of CEA and broadened his network to include people from across the continent. Apollinaire is now a resource for French Africa. He went to Cameroon to facilitate a CEA training, and will look for more opportunities to share his knowledge in the future.

Before the trainings he admits that as a branch, they were not overly engaged with members of the community. Since the trainings, he has become an advocate for CEA in DRC and across the continent. He created a CEA plan for his district, integrated it into a new building project (see example) and participates in DRC Red Cross and IFRC trainings as a facilitator to build capacity in volunteers.

CEA in Emergencies – Ebola in Equateur

On May 8th, 2018, Ebola was declared an emergency in Equateur province. This was the ninth Ebola outbreak in the country’s history. With the help of the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent, the local branch mobilized to contain the outbreak.

It was the CEA team’s responsibility to get information to the public on how to prevent the disease from spreading. The team of volunteers who interacted with the community daily tracked eleven rumors throughout the three-month operation. With each new one, they adapted their messaging to better inform people and temper any fear that was building in communities. It was also part of their role to support other aspects of the operation, such as accompanying the Safe and Dignified Burials teams to houses when someone passed away to help families understand why temporarily their loved ones could not be buried in accordance with local customs.

The CEA team in Equateur used several methods to get lifesaving information to the community. Educational materials were developed and distributed online and in person. Volunteers went to any and all community gatherings, including women’s groups, local customs.

The CEA team is now a resource for French Africa and DRC. Their expertise on CEA is now being acknowledged by the international community. The ripple effect of trainings has helped contribute to an increased inclusion of the aboriginal population in Red Cross activities.

On August 4th, the emergency was declared over. When asked if the community engagement during Ebola was helpful, Merci, a woman from Ikongowasa, said she appreciated the information she had received from the door-to-door visits at her home. "After getting information we were less afraid."

Her sister Meda still has questions though about things she does not understand about Ebola, despite all the work that has been done. She wants to know “How did it start?” “Why doesn’t it affect white people?” Her questions demonstrate that while CEA is very effective in emergencies, it is equally as important to keep the dialogue going once the crisis has passed.

The impact of CEA initiatives integrated during the Ebola response will be long-lasting. Dozens of volunteers are now trained. Their expertise on CEA is now being acknowledged by other organizations working in the area.

Niclette Loote and the Aboriginals

Niclette Loote is a young woman from Equateur who was tasked with a special assignment during the Ebola outbreak in 2018. A week after completing the CEA training supported by the Canadian Red Cross, she was made the lead of the CEA team responsible for engaging with the aboriginal community nearby.

She was grateful for the CEA training. “The training was great for learning techniques to engage with the population and give them information on Ebola. And I feel like we used every [technique] to engage the aboriginals, I even danced!” The challenge comes from the fact that the aboriginal community in that area is isolated and has been historically excluded from Red Cross activities.

She met with leaders and listened to how the community felt about the DRC Red Cross and the emergency operations. She wanted to communicate a show of good faith, so she arranged for soap to be distributed in the community to prove that the Red Cross was interested in supporting them the way they had supported other communities.

After earning the trust of community leaders, Niclette and her team were able to return to the community to do mass sensitization through group discussions.

Niclette stresses that the work she did in the community has helped contribute to an increased inclusion of the aboriginal population in Red Cross activities. At the time of the Ebola outbreak, the branch had one aboriginal volunteer. Since then, 20 were brought to Mbundaka to participate in the volunteer training and 250 more community members are waiting to be trained.

Profile

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Niclette is proud to see that the work she did in the community has helped contribute to an increased inclusion of the aboriginal population in Red Cross activities. At the time of the Ebola outbreak, the branch had one aboriginal volunteer. Since then, 20 were brought to Mbundaka to participate in the volunteer training and 250 more community members are waiting to be trained.
Valery Bayei Mboka-Unda

Valery had been with the DRC Red Cross branch in Mandala for two years when he was chosen to attend the Canadian Red Cross supported training on CEA in Kinshasa. Before volunteering with the Red Cross, Valery had worked with agricultural associations where he was constantly in contact with them, providing information and education on their business as well as listening to their concerns and challenges. For Valery, there was an easy link between his previous work and the CEA skills he was being asked to build now.

As soon as he returned home to Equateur from the training in May 2018, an Ebola outbreak was declared. He began training volunteers in CEA. These volunteers were the first people to go into the communities to share information and educational materials. Most importantly though, the volunteers were in the communities listening to what people were saying through community meetings and door to door conversations. They would then come back to Valery and report what they had heard. Eleven different rumors were tracked. Each time a new rumor would be heard, Valery and his team would alter their messaging and find other ways to connect with communities. Two of the most effective means used were a call-in radio show and door to door visits.

In a twelve-month period, he conducted ten trainings across the DRC to build capacity with volunteers and staff. In August of 2018, Valery was asked to replicate his work for the Ebola operation in the East. For him, finding out that the volunteers that he trained have remained active in Mbandaka makes him really proud. He sees the relationship that the Red Cross has built with the community now and how that can be helpful with so much of their work.

Non-Emergency Programming

When the Red Cross Sud-Ubangi branch decided it was time to build a new building, they grappled with the question of how to construct a building that would be inclusive of everyone. To answer this question, they organized discussion groups with different groups within the community. They met with a group of women, a group of Pygmy, and a group of Red Cross volunteers. Within these groups there was diversity in age and abilities.

To ensure that the wider community was informed about what was happening with the branch, they also did call in radio shows where the public could ask questions about the project. There is now a suggestion box at the reception of the current building so people can also provide anonymous feedback about the building project and other Red Cross programming through that.

From these community consultations the project team learned that they needed to consider people living with disabilities more carefully. Previous designs have used stairs and had inaccessible latrines. Young women were also able to express their desire for activities targeted for them specifically, so they could feel included in the space.

The building project is ongoing. The next step is to create a building design based on what they were able to learn from community members. The branch intends to continue to engage with the community every step of the way.

“The work of the Red Cross is for that community, so the buildings are for everyone: women, the elderly, people with disabilities, everyone.” - Apollinaire Lipandasi, the Provincial Secretary for Sud-Ubangi

Demographic Breakdown of the Community Consultations

**Leadership group**
- 2 women / 2 men

**Women’s group**
- 12 women – 2 young women, 1 pregnant woman or woman with small children, 1 woman with disability, 2 elderly women, 2 women of reproductive age

**Pygmy Community**
- 6 women / 6 men – 1 elderly woman, 1 elderly man, 2 young women, 2 young men, 1 woman with disability, 1 man with disability, 11 from the Pygmy community, 1 Bantou married to a Pygmy

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