



Regional Programme for Building Resilient Local Communities in Georgia and Armenia

Background

South Caucasus is known as an earthquake prone region. Besides that, rural areas are also afflicted with floods, hail and snowstorms, especially in the winter. Sometimes the emergency services are located simply too far to come to the rescue in time. Lastly, unemployment and poverty rates are also high and these are some of the reasons why the Red Cross deemed these areas as highly vulnerable and through funding from the European Union/EU through its Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations established a Disaster Risk Reduction project. For 17 months the Georgian Red Cross Society and the Armenian Red Cross Society have been implementing activities in the region with the help and guidance from the Danish Red Cross Society, the Austrian Red Cross Society, the Icelandic Red Cross Society, the Swiss Red Cross Society and the International Federation of the Red Cross and the Red Crescent.



Community First Aid Training

Project and intervention

Working in Imereti, Racha-Lechkhumi, Kvemo Svaneti regions in Georgia and Shirak region in Armenia the Red Cross has carefully designed actions that match the needs of each individual location aiming at building resilient local communities, with a special focus on vulnerable groups such as the elderly, people with disabilities and children. In each location Community Volunteer Groups are established. The volunteer groups are trained and active within First Aid, Basic Search and Rescue, Shelter provision, Psycho-Social Support, Disaster Risk Mitigation, Family Emergency Planning and School safety. Each volunteer group is fully equipped for multi-purpose disaster response. Furthermore, its focus is on enhancing the theoretical knowledge with practical skills such as participatory needs assessment in community needs and emergencies. The Community Volunteer Groups are strongly linked to local government services. Joint simulation exercises are organized and the volunteers and equipment are included in the emergency response plans of the local authorities and are able to act as first responders or auxiliary personnel in emergencies using their equipment skills.



Simulation Exercise



Volunteer Equipment

Each volunteer group is fully equipped for multi-purpose disaster response. Furthermore, its focus is on enhancing the theoretical knowledge with practical skills such as participatory needs assessment in community needs and emergencies. The Community Volunteer Groups are strongly linked to local government services. Joint simulation exercises are organized and the volunteers and equipment are included in the emergency response plans of the local authorities and are able to act as first responders or auxiliary personnel in emergencies using their equipment skills.



Georgia & Armenia: Women empowerment through Disaster Risk Reduction

Aftermath of training with the Red Cross

No matter the reason that brought the volunteers to the activities, what is undeniable is the profound changes upon these women. Though these volunteers do their best when they wear their uniforms and have their equipment at hand, each of them is still a mother, a sister, a daughter or even a helping neighbor in time of need at any other time of the day. Family everyday problems can arise without warning and disasters can happen anytime. After all, the duty of a volunteer does not have office hours.

Besides establishing in the women a sense of confidence and independence, it has also empowered them to acquire more responsibilities. After being trained on Psychosocial Support for the last 4 years, Teona has not only achieved a position in the local volunteer branch but is already giving back some of that knowledge and designing activities for the betterment of her community:

“Currently I am a team leader in Psychosocial Support (PSS) and I teach not only the other volunteers but also the community. I am every day at the branch and I feel it like my second home by now. It’s crucial for me to create activities that correspond to my community. It means a lot to deal and work with teachers and students about PSS, because there is no psychologist in the school. So I feel that what I do helps people directly.”



Teona Nemstsveridze, 26, volunteer from Ambrolauri, Georgia

Change in mentality

But do these Red Cross initiatives do anything else, besides having an immediate impact on the people directly involved? Varditer and Hamest appear to believe so. In fact they go as far as saying that Community Volunteer Groups, that have a balanced men women ratio, shift the mentality of the area; from the repressive remnants of a bygone era that is still far reaching, towards that of a more equalitarian one:



“It’s a pleasure to be included in such a significant group and to be equal with the men. The community doesn’t have a problem with that. It’s very important because of the old Soviet mentality and legislation that dictated that a woman shouldn’t/couldn’t hold any kind of important position or even be included in activities such as these. These Red Cross activities help in changing that mentality.”

Varditer Avetisyan, 60, Hamest Goroyan, 53, volunteers from Nor Kyank, Armenia

Male perspective

Of course it wouldn’t be fair to forget the male viewpoint too. What do the men think of so many women taking part in activities that a few decades ago would be characterized as masculine? Bakar may have an answer for that. Not only he doesn’t think that the presence of women is detrimental to their cause, but in reality it augments it:

“It’s very important to have people from all over the community because it’s going to make better work, if all the perspectives are taken into account. We can’t think like women and women can’t think like men. So we don’t know each other’s problems. And the same holds true for people with disability too. Diversity makes us stronger.”

Bakar Bakuradze, 26, volunteer from Ambrolauri, Georgia





Armenia: Disaster Risk Reduction Volunteer Family

We met Satenik inside the community building while she, together with several villagers, was trained in First Aid. The walls of the classroom were adorned with pictures of volunteers in their uniforms being engaged in simulation exercises with firemen.



Community First Aid Training

Satenik lives in Bagravan, a peaceful village of 960 people in South Caucasus. As it is located in the rural areas of Western Armenia, the main source of income of villagers is agriculture, mainly cattle breeding, and stone mining. Earthquakes are common, as well as flooding and snowstorms. Socioeconomic problems, such as high unemployment, are also detrimental to the local community. There are no hospitals in Bagravan, besides one small, albeit not well equipped medical point staffed by a single nurse.

Satenik has been chosen along with several other villagers to become a member of Bagravan's Community Volunteer Group (CVG), consisting of 20 people. The presence of her group is essential to her community's wellbeing as the area's location is far from hospitals or government rescue services. Fully equipped and trained by the Red Cross (RC) they attend to local emergencies and disasters before government help arrives.

Satenik joined the CVG out of a need for self-improvement, as she saw it as an opportunity to be educated on topics that were important to her and her family, as well as using it as a medium to help her community. Not being foreign to the ideals of the Red Cross, she is a second generation RC volunteer, as her aunt used to volunteer with the RC when Satenik was younger. Along with her husband and her son, all three of them, have been trained and volunteer in Bagravan.

After the presence of the CVG in Bagravan for many months, changes have started to be felt in the local community. The villagers have started to become more active inside their community and participation in local matters has increased. At the same time, it has instilled in them a deeper and more vocal environmental identity. Lastly, it has reaffirmed their trust in the Red Cross.

"My aunt used to be a volunteer for the Red Cross, so I knew about it for a long time, but I got the opportunity to join only when it came to our community through this program. We knew of the project and we took the opportunity to gain knowledge from it and help our community at the same time. My husband and I first joined the group, then our oldest son joined too when he returned from the army. I think my youngest son is going to join too, when he comes back from the army himself. The community prioritizes the environment more now. We cleaned the area (from garbage and debris) and we planted trees. We want more green areas."

Satenik Grigoryan, 37, volunteer from Bagravan, Armenia





Georgia & Armenia: Disaster Risk Reduction for people with disability



Beneficiaries

Disasters can be devastating events by themselves, but they are even more threatening to people with disability. Therefore a crucial goal of Disaster Risk Reduction is to mitigate damage to vulnerable social groups. Through close cooperation of groups of people with disability with the Red Cross (RC) their particular issues are closely heard, their needs identified and unique strategies that correspond to exposed individuals are developed. At the same time, they are informed and educated on their situation, as it is quite often that marginalized people do not know their rights or the procedures to ask for assistance. In addition, small scale mitigation plans are developed together, such as wheelchair accessible ramps in buildings, and people with disability are taught how to apply for actions like these themselves. Furthermore, activities are planned that aim to incorporate them into the local population, thus increasing social integration and acceptance, reducing the stigma and exclusion that follows a disability and promoting a more active and healthier lifestyle for the afflicted. Lastly, it shouldn't be forgotten that besides being beneficiaries people with disability can be volunteers.

People with disability are included both in volunteers' First Aid trainings, since each disability requires a different way of approach, but also they participate actively in RC simulation exercises. One simulation exercise such as this was in Sahkhere in Georgia, where local volunteers were asked to evacuate children, elderly and people with disability from a building after an earthquake, while under the supervision of the local fire department and government representatives. In a lot of cases for people with disability, the first Psychosocial Support (PSS) after their accident is provided by RC volunteers, who also facilitate the procedures between the Health Department and various ministries on their behalf and also their wheelchairs are delivered through them.



Simulation Exercise

“They (Red Cross) organized a free charity concert that 700 people attended. Children with disability participated along with regular children. It raised awareness and helped in society integration. This happened for the first time in this region. Also they train us on how to write project proposals for small scale projects, like building ramps for building through competition, how to keep budget and basic computer skills so that we can apply for ourselves.”

Gigo Aranidze, 42, beneficiary from Sahkhere, Georgia

“Participating in the RC as a volunteer is very important for me as a person with a disability. It means that I don't sit alone at home all the time. I have learned how to protect myself and not to rely on others. And now after 4 years I can not only support others properly, but I can also pass that knowledge as a Team Leader in PSS.”

Teona Nemstsveridze, 26, volunteer from Ambrolauri, Georgia



Georgia & Armenia: Disaster Risk Reduction in Youth



Simulation exercise: Child evacuated from school by youth volunteers

Besides having as focus women, the elderly and people with disability, DRR activities aim heavily towards the youth too. More than one third of the project's final beneficiaries are people 0-17 years of age. Aiming at enhancing both household and school preparedness and safety, the use of Family Emergency Planning (FEP) is employed. By training school teachers and providing them with printed teaching and education materials in topics of DRR, First Aid, Psychosocial Support (PSS), school evacuation, climate change & adaptation and the use FEP, the capacity building of educators is increased. Furthermore, libraries with educational material were created, emergency equipment was disseminated and small scale mitigation plans were enacted in schools, in order to promote safer and more disability inclusive learning environments. In continuation, after-school activities and simulation exercises were conducted focusing on climate change & adaptation, home risk assessment through the FEP, fire & flood safety, PSS, earthquake and school evacuation, when age appropriate information materials were provided to students. FEPs were carried out in students' households by the students, thus ensuring maximum community penetration.



Fire extinguishing equipment in school in Shirakavan, Armenia

Students' reactions have been positive from the project. In both Georgia and Armenia, teachers noted the eagerness of participants to learn more about the subject and in some instances the children became Red Cross volunteers afterwards.



“The children are asking when they are going to do more things with the Red Cross. The things the Red Cross teaches and does are done in a very nice way, so that the children understand them easily and quickly. They make them get involved and interested about the activities. And that’s why they are asking for more.”
Eldar Gogoreliani, 60, teacher from Ambrolauri, Georgia

In some cases, like Shirakavan in Armenia, the action was so successful that it has changed the mentality of the local population. After, using FEP to make action plans on a household level in case of emergency, the community is currently thinking of establishing a community-wide action plan.

“It has changed my priorities on the topic. Because I am a school director, I had a different perspective of what Risk and Disasters were and I was more involved in the school aspect of the subject. But now I realize it is so much bigger and it involves the whole community. And more importantly that it needs to include the whole community, if it has any chance to have any real success.”

Julyeta Simonyan, 64, volunteer from Shirakavan, Armenia





Georgia & Armenia: Disaster Risk Reduction in the elderly

Battling loneliness, the elderly often occupy themselves at the RC branches participating in various activities, such as knitting, sewing and charity fundraising among others. By training in DRR the elderly learn how to keep safe and support themselves during an emergency. Their regular participation in simulation exercises ensures that volunteers are taught the elderly needs and also the correct approach and treatment of geriatric patients. The seniors are included in community emergency contingency plans and a list of marginalized seniors and their location is kept and routinely updated in various RC branches for quick response.



Simulation exercise



Simulation exercise

By employing a closer contact with the elderly, a wide array of different and specialized needs has emerged and psychosocial support given has become more focused. Small and mundane issues can escalate to huge significance for seniors, increasing their vulnerability to disasters. Being helped with everyday things by volunteers, such as going to pay on their behalf for the electricity or fuel can impact immensely on their disaster preparedness, let alone augmenting their quality of life at the same time.

In cities like Tkibuli in Georgia, the majority of people living are either youth or elders. Organization of social activities, which raise awareness on the needs of different social groups, help in increasing social cohesion and bridge the gap between generations. Knowledge that would otherwise be lost gets passed on to the younger generation; in turn, increased youth capacity building returns to the elderly in many forms. Finally, intensified social engagement promotes a more active and healthier lifestyle in seniors.

"We like to take part in the (Red Cross simulation) exercises. Today we were trapped in building hit by an earthquake and the volunteers had to evacuate us. The volunteers show us how to protect ourselves and they know where we live and check up on us in an emergency."

Venera Gaprindashvili, 80, beneficiary & volunteer from Sachkhere, Georgia

"In my home we have my grandfather who is also a person with disability and sometimes when he needs things, I now know how to help him more properly. For example when he was burned it was me who did First Aid to him."

Nanuka Kereselidze, 15, youth volunteer from Ambrolauri, Georgia





Georgia & Armenia: Opinion of officials on Red Cross Disaster Risk Reduction

The support of the community within which it is implemented is a critical aspect of for the success of any project. Parts of that community are the various governmental organizations. Whether it is a Ministry in the capital, a small Fire Department in a rural city or the mayor of a village, each plays an integral part in DRR. Volunteer groups in target communities have been trained in using their multi-purpose disaster rescue equipment in joint simulation exercises with the governmental rescue services and when the need arises volunteer operate with their equipment as auxiliary personnel to them.



Volunteer equipment



Simulation Exercise

At the same time, governmental organizations benefit from the knowledge of the Red Cross, capitalizing on their close connection to the target communities and their swift and customized response to local issues. Increased confidence in leadership abilities and decreased reaction time in emergencies has been reported by several mayors in the areas affected by the project. At the same time, the high relevance of the project has been acknowledged by them, as the distance of marginalized villages is far from rescue services. In addition, many examples of community volunteers engaging as first responders to accidents or crisis has been given. Furthermore, governmental services have started being implemented for the first time in target areas due to DRR activities, such as organized garbage collection or routine cleaning of mud flow channels, thus impeding flooding or reducing their intensity. Governmental funding and participation has steadily risen in activities over the years, a sure indication that officials value and support project activities.

“It’s essential to train the Red Cross volunteers and also give them practical information through simulation exercises. We try to include them in awareness raising and in various different activities. They are well equipped and help us in times of need. The cooperation with the Red Cross is not just important, it’s necessary. Nobody even realized that when we started.”

Davit Dushuasvili, 36, Chief Inspector of Emergency Management Agency from Georgia



“The coordination with the Red Cross is significant because we are making these big simulation exercises with their help. Also the Red Cross in the only non-state actor that participates in disaster response. We also value their disaster preparedness because it reduces the damage afterwards.”

Eduard Gvianidze, 45, Deputy of local governor from Sachkhere, Georgia