

# Thai Red Cross wins community trust to support risk reduction

## Background

Community Based Disaster Risk Reduction (CBDRR) is a well established and increasingly effective approach in Thailand. Various organizations use CBDRR in their own way according to experiences, knowledge, and resources.

However, practice has shown that a continued traditional focus on disaster response narrows the potential benefits of a more holistic approach to CBDRR that empowers communities to initiate their own ideas and reduce risk. A persistent reliance on top-down management style has also limited community input and influence on outcomes.

Effective CBDRR programming requires staff and volunteers to have strong commitment to working with communities and indeed the skill to effectively do so; in short they need to be good motivators and facilitators.

Once community trust is won the potential for effective work and a 'positive' chain of change among fellow communities is increased dramatically.

## The Project

The CBDRR project focused on creating 'change agents' to influence the attitudes people and organisations involved in disaster management (DM) so that communities change from being recipients to actors in risk reduction initiatives.

The project's major goal was to strengthen the capacity of vulnerable communities to be well prepared. As part of this, Thai Red Cross needed to strengthen its capacity to act as



*Early warning: an evacuation exercise helps communities be disaster ready.*



a 'change agent'.

Several individual Red Cross 'change agents' were trained to work with and support communities at risk.

The first CBDRR team began in July 2003 at Ta Kor Pai community on the bank of Moon River, Ubon Ratchathani province, lower north-eastern Thailand. Momentum was somewhat lost as a result of the tsunami in 2004. However, by 2006 things started moving much quicker. Work began in Phang Nga, Stun and Trang provinces in the southern part of Thailand on the Andaman Sea which were affected by the tsunami.

Efforts were in coordination with Red Cross Provincial Chapters, Provincial Disaster Prevention and Mitigation Departments, Provincial Governors and various lower authorities, and official and unofficial community leaders.

In Phang Nga, the focus was on 220 community members (31 households), most of whom were fishermen and farmers. In Satun, it was 1,500 residents of three villages, comprising mostly students, fishermen and housewives. In Trang, it was 2,400 from four villages, who were mostly fishermen, farmers and labourers.

The project used various CBDRR tools to stimulate community reflection on awareness, cooperation and self help with the technical support from the Thai Red Cross staff, volunteers and the Federation.



*Community participation: change agents helped people make their own decisions.*



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## Outcomes

- Several effective change agents have emerged at national, branch and local level of Thai Red Cross.
- Communities have participated and are undoubtedly more aware of the impact of disasters. They have endeavoured to prepare and plan more through the organization of groups to help each other. The focus has included environmental issues and a more holistic approach to development planning.
- Recognition of respective roles and responsibilities has strengthened and the relationship between communities, local authorities, Thai Red Cross, and the Federation is closer.
- Integration of related issues such as water and sanitation, environment, health, livelihood has strengthened.

## Lessons learned

- Change agents need to be trustworthy, flexible, sincere, patient and ready to resolve unexpected issues. To be a CBDRR change agent is particularly challenging and not all people are able to perform this task.
- CBDRR workers should not play a leading role in community processes but be facilitators.
- It is essential for community culture and profiles to be studied before any engagement so that the chances of successful support increase.
- Recognition and trust proved to be the major challenges for Thai Red Cross especially in the wake of the tsunami when a plethora of organizations approached communities in various partnership initiatives that often resulted in nothing. Persistence, combined with sincerity, humility and transparency was shown to often win through in the end.
- The three different CBDRR teams gained many different experiences which should be consolidated and then reflected upon. One clear lesson is that a standard process does not tend to work: each community is different.
- Sometimes engagement with communities led to something (i.e. a micro project) being provided that was not absolutely necessary.
- Sustainability still proves to be a significant challenge.

## The way forward

The ability to replicate good practice in CBDRR depends on the quality and effectiveness of the change agents who need to be able to work with various communities who in their own way are all different. Experience shows that communities that are more aware and motivated can begin to actively improve their lot and be well prepared and less vulnerable in the face of existing and/or emerging hazards. This journey is best made in coordination with the authorities as well as other agencies and NGOs working in community risk reduction.

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