

# Preparedness saves lives and livelihoods

Bos Lvea commune is like many other rural areas of Cambodia with farming and fishing the mainstay of the majority of its 1,435 families.

This lowland area of Kratie province is bordered by the Mekong River to the west; a Mekong tributary to the north; and a series of lakes to the east. In the rainy season, the Mekong River floods fertilize fields with nutrient-laden silts and flood forests enabling fish spawning thus sustaining the farming and fishing livelihoods of the villagers. However this very same location puts the villagers at high risk when annual Mekong flooding is higher or longer than normal. This can be further compounded by flash floods from the tributary to the north.

Provincial authorities ranked the area as the most flood-prone in the province. In response, a concerted effort, under the leadership of the local authorities, via its commune committee of disaster management since its establishment in 2007, has seen preparedness for flood disaster increase significantly.

Cambodian Red Cross has worked with the authorities and communities to protect lives and livelihoods in a long-term engagement that has brought many benefits. Improvements in flood early warning, planning and response have resulted from a more holistic approach to disaster management.

'Previously, at commune level we only had the structure assigned by the government for disaster management, but we did not have the skill and knowledge to perform the job,' said Mr. Phork Beurn, 60, commune chief and head of its committee of disaster management.

The Red Cross' community based disaster preparedness programme provided technical disaster management training and, more importantly, helped prepare a plan. Previously, people mostly had to organize themselves, with limited support from elsewhere. This left many of the more vulnerable at higher risk.



'For instance, arrangements for safe areas were carried out after an evacuation rather than in advance and no clean water was available once people arrived in the designated safe areas,' said Mr. Phork Beurn'

'Cattle are critical to livelihoods. Villagers would often push them to swim out but regularly two or three would drown during each flood evacuation.' Flood early warning and

improved planning now mean that both people and cattle are evacuated in good time before the flood peak approaches.

For the poorest farmers, the loss of cattle can be devastating making recovery a very long road indeed.

The community based disaster preparedness programme started in 2003 after severe flooding during the previous three years. The strategy supported the establishment and development of the commune disaster management committee and works to empower local villagers, volunteers, and community based organizations to work together to work together to increase understanding of various hazards, raise awareness of risks and deal with disasters that do occur.

The first stage trained representatives of these groups in the concept and practice of first aid, disaster preparedness, risk analysis and planning. Subsequent training helped communities organize their own village disaster reduction plan, a long-term guide for a series of activities and measures that households and communities can undertake to prepare for or soften the impact of various hazards including flooding. It contains measures that communities can take through local resources as well as other initiatives that require external support.

Once the village plan is agreed the local disaster committee organizes a meeting before each flood season so that communities are prepared for the coming hazards and to ensure that teams are trained in various tasks that make use of local expertise and experience.

There are several teams, all of which include Red Cross volunteers: one to disseminate flood forecasts and early warnings; one equipped with a community boat to evacuate villagers to safe areas; another to clean and prepare the safe areas; and another to talk to communities about health issues in relation to floods. VHF radio handsets have helped the various teams to quickly and effectively communicate. Since the village plan was made no cattle have died during flood season.



Mr. Phork Beurn facilitates the meeting for flood response

The progress in Kratie is very much in line with the Hyogo Framework for Action, the global strategy for disaster risk reduction, which emphasizes that disaster response preparedness and risk reduction should be addressed from community to national level.

The Red Cross has achieved this by utilizing two of its key comparative advantages: first its auxiliary status to public authorities during disaster response; and second its ability to mobilize communities through a nationwide network of community level volunteers

Because the local disaster management committee structure has played the leading role in this reduction of local vulnerability it is hoped that progress beyond this initiative, which ends

in 2008, is sustained through local capacity and leadership.

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