



# **Vulnerability and capacity assessment**

Lessons learned and  
recommendations



International Federation  
of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies

# The International Federation's Global Agenda (2006-2010)

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Over the next five years, the collective focus of the Federation will be on achieving the following goals and priorities:

## Our goals

**Goal 1:** Reduce the number of deaths, injuries and impact from disasters.

**Goal 2:** Reduce the number of deaths, illnesses and impact from diseases and public health emergencies.

**Goal 3:** Increase local community, civil society and Red Cross Red Crescent capacity to address the most urgent situations of vulnerability.

**Goal 4:** Promote respect for diversity and human dignity, and reduce intolerance, discrimination and social exclusion.

## Our priorities

Improving our local, regional and international capacity to respond to disasters and public health emergencies.

Scaling up our actions with vulnerable communities in health promotion, disease prevention and disaster risk reduction.

Increasing significantly our HIV/AIDS programming and advocacy.

Renewing our advocacy on priority humanitarian issues, especially fighting intolerance, stigma and discrimination, and promoting disaster risk reduction.

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*Photos:*

*International Federation*

2006

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# Background

Vulnerability and capacity assessment (VCA) has become widely used by many National Societies over the past ten years. Between 2003 and 2005, the VCA process was evaluated and revised by the International Federation's secretariat. In 2005, National Society staff and International Federation regional delegates who had been directly involved in conducting VCAs attended "practitioners' forums" in order to review and collect good practice and lessons learned.

The purpose of the forums was to:

- summarize the process of conducting a VCA, evaluate the use of the tools and extract positive and negative lessons from participants' recent practical experience;
- examine the impact and outcomes of VCA (local projects, national programmes, priority setting and transformative aspects);
- define how to make VCA link effectively between local (community) and higher levels (national risk assessment for different types of hazards);
- identify the roles of International Federation delegates, secretariat staff and other stakeholders in this process; and
- evaluate the new VCA publications and incorporate meeting results into them.

National Societies are at different stages of the VCA process. In Latin America and the Caribbean, they have been active in VCA for some time. In Central Europe, many have carried out participatory community development (PCD), but few have done VCA.

For some countries in the Middle East and North Africa, VCA is still at the planning stage, and therefore some participants were not able to report on results.

# Lessons learned

Community-based work has a very powerful effect on the National Societies involved. It is clear that VCA:

- often revitalizes the National Society at branch level, and sometimes at national level;
- changes people's attitude towards the Red Cross Red Crescent in a positive way;
- frequently brings in more volunteers, who are often motivated to be "social volunteers" (i.e., without specific specialities);
- can alter relationships with government and other institutions in a positive way;
- brings more respect for and better integration of the Red Cross Red Crescent in the community, increasing the potential for better partnerships;
- makes the National Society realize that it can integrate existing programmes more effectively;
- can reduce the artificial barriers between work on health, first aid, water and sanitation and disaster preparedness;
- means the National Society becomes more capable of working with people rather than for them; and
- helps fulfil the mission of assisting the most vulnerable people through the power of humanity.

On the other hand, it was noted that:

- VCA always raises the expectations of people in the community, so it must be matched by action and projects that meet at least some of these expectations soon after the investigation is carried out;
- more volunteers mean increased demands for training and integration that the National Society must meet;
- links with the political system are sometimes awkward: local politicians or even governments can hijack VCA in order to boost their own agendas;
- donors sometimes use VCA (and PCD) funding to pursue their own priorities rather than those of the National Society. As a result, National Society action may be diverted into activities that attract foreign funding for VCA and PCD, rather than focusing on their own priorities. This can increase dependency

on donors, when in fact VCA should be about enhancing the participation and motivation of people in communities.

If VCA is associated with donor funding, only National Societies with access to external funding may decide to carry such an assessment out. This may lead to senior staff and delegates supporting VCA because it is attractive to donors, not for its own inherent benefits.

Some National Societies (e.g., in Albania and Palestine) received significant external funding for their VCAs, which became well known and were considered successful (which they were). The danger is that people think that a “good” VCA needs donor support. But examples do exist of good and “cheap” VCAs, which have led to projects that require little external funding (e.g., in the Solomon Islands).



*Gathering information through participatory group meetings: consulting women in the community is very important.*

*Data collected are reviewed and validated.*

National Societies sometimes find it difficult to involve their governments in a VCA until donors show interest in supporting it. Governments may then view the Red Cross Red Crescent as a conduit to accessing donor funds, increasing their interest in the Movement, but not necessarily for the best reasons.

National Society disaster management departments (sometimes with the support of disaster management delegates) are often behind VCAs, but the projects they end up supporting are not necessarily related to natural hazards. In most communities where VCAs have been carried out, local people voiced major concerns other than disasters, such as health issues, drinking water, crime and road accidents. In Yemen, for example, a VCA in an area that had suffered severe flash floods revealed that, for the communities, addressing road safety was more pressing than flood protection. Indeed, disaster data showed that more people die in Yemen in road accidents than as a result of flooding – so the communities' perception of where the priority lay made sense.

For most Red Cross Red Crescent staff and volunteers, VCA is linked only to disaster management. The process needs to be demystified.

A task for disaster management departments and delegates is to find a way of translating community concerns into action to combat the very real hazards they face.

VCA has become a means to find out what people's own priorities are. This enriches the Red Cross Red Crescent and leads to greater involvement with the communities concerned.

The key point for National Societies is that they should use participatory methods to work with communities no matter what the outcome is. Their starting point should be a community-based investigation (not necessarily disaster management-based) which can lead to participatory programmes and projects run with and by the people. The secretariat is helping to harmonize participatory tools to make them useful for any community-level investigation, not just disaster management.

Experience shows that VCA does not automatically lead to independent community development. In some cases, medium- to long-term support, building of community capacities and the establishment of effective partnerships appear to be necessary to achieve this.

One of the most important elements for successful VCA implementation is good planning (including developing objectives and finding resources). Many National Societies consider coordination with government organizations and familiarizing officials with VCA to be essential. They noted, however, that winning over decision-makers (especially in government and where an attitude-change is required) can take up to six months or more.

VCA – indeed, any community-based work – is seen as inherently “political”. It can challenge existing systems and their failures, and may involve dealing with politicians whom some may consider part of the problem rather than part of the solution. Some National Societies feel that training in “how to do” advocacy, in addition to VCA training, is necessary.





*Children's perspective is useful in developing community historical charts and profiles.*

Participants' VCA experience brought to light a key lesson: conditions at both national and local levels have a significant impact on how a VCA can be carried out. This may mean that National Societies will have to adapt the process to their country and communities, because the general VCA model, outlined by the International Federation, does not correspond to their needs. VCA guidelines for implementation, monitoring and evaluation should therefore be flexible and adaptable to local conditions. A low level of trust (between the National Society and (a) the people and (b) the government) and conflict are factors that may make carrying out a "normal" VCA more difficult.

VCA has different effects on national-level programmes and policies. Its limited scope and coverage is both a strength and a weakness. VCA may provide:

- guidance for the design of national or regional disaster mitigation policies;



- information for advocacy in national disaster preparedness and mitigation;
- a sample of the population in order to scale up policies on vulnerability reduction to national level; or
- a combination of some or all of these.

What VCA represents needs to be clear; otherwise everyone involved – communities, National Society staff and volunteers, government, non-governmental organizations, etc. – may not understand why only a few areas take part in the process when hazards are widespread.

It does not matter if VCA leads to an activity or programme that is not related to the hazards affecting the area in question, as long as:

- local people are engaged and become active; and
- local and national governments become more involved in supporting their citizens.

The process will in all likelihood result in increasing awareness of other types of risk even when the immediate activities are not related to natural hazards.

Much more guidance is needed on how to run VCA workshops with children. VCA training tools do not as yet fully cover working with children, even though some National Societies are enthusiastic about involving them in all aspects of the process, and they are frequently very effective in transmitting their new knowledge to parents and families.

The enthusiasm and interest of volunteers and middle management increase when they are involved in the VCA process. The same is true for other institutions, including local government, the media and donors. However, there is little evidence of any significant interest or involvement by the private sector; Red Cross Red Crescent attempts to engage this sector are weak.

VCA creates an ideal environment for strengthening partnerships with other organizations. But this requires proper exchange of

information and implies that the National Society is strong enough to increase its capacity to work with others. In many countries, it also reinforces the role of the Red Cross Red Crescent as the “partner of choice” for organizations working at community level.

Carrying out a VCA strengthens knowledge and application of its founding principles, but also highlights the need to improve the capacities of the National Societies. Capacity building of volunteers and staff, especially, is needed in order to make both VCA and disaster management activities in general work well.

### Good practice

Following are examples of good practice from a number of National Societies, which may be of interest to National Societies involved in VCA and other community-based investigations.

A checklist (see example below) was developed by the Armenian Red Cross Society. It could be useful for other National Societies. It can be expanded to include other stakeholders, as appropriate, and to cover other issues.

#### Project emerging from VCA: Flood mitigation in village

Who will be the responsible partner(s) with the National Society?	Local government authorities
What will the community's input be?	Labour
What other resources are needed?	Equipment, materials
Does it comply with Red Cross Red Crescent principles?	Yes
Does it comply with National Society principles?	Yes

Attracting the attention of the media during the VCA process and project implementation is important. It may lead to support for future projects, assist in fund-raising and promote the National Society's identity. The VCA itself may be newsworthy, which could encourage the media to cover other disaster preparedness activities.

Some National Societies have undertaken disaster preparedness activities unrelated to VCA or PCD, but which could help the future development of this type of investigation. The Belarusian Red Cross, for example, carried out a national risk mapping exercise, which looked at hazards at the national level. The Red Cross of Serbia and Montenegro's Municipal Emergency Management Improvement programme selects urban areas considered most at risk and seeks ways to integrate different actors into a framework for preparedness. Both are useful models of how VCA can be connected with higher-level hazard risks.

The Albanian Red Cross carried out a VCA in 2005, which identified clear recommendations for all relevant national and international stakeholders. This was perhaps easier for the Albanian Red Cross than other National Societies, for it has greater influence over the government and other stakeholders because of substantial donor funding. But it is a useful lesson for all National Societies: if the solution to a problem requires action by other actors, then it should be clearly explained and promoted, and partnerships actively sought.

A few National Societies have used video to record different aspects of the VCA process. If this is done carefully, it can be very useful for recording information, sharing it with others (including governments and donors) and holding various stakeholders to account for their commitments.

# Recommendations

VCA is an investigation at community level that involves using participatory information-gathering tools or participatory rapid appraisal. The results enable the National Society and local people to take stock of a community's vulnerabilities and capacities, to identify the risks they face and to design actions and projects to reduce their vulnerabilities (usually by increasing their capacities). Other agencies can be encouraged to enter into partnerships with the National Society where appropriate and/or to take action on other aspects of the risks.

The community's priorities will most probably differ from those of the Red Cross Red Crescent. The projects emerging from the process, therefore, may have little or no connection to the natural hazards and disasters that the National Society intended to prepare for. This does not matter, since a VCA's main advantage is precisely the participation of local people – and it may be possible to incorporate disaster preparedness issues at a later stage.

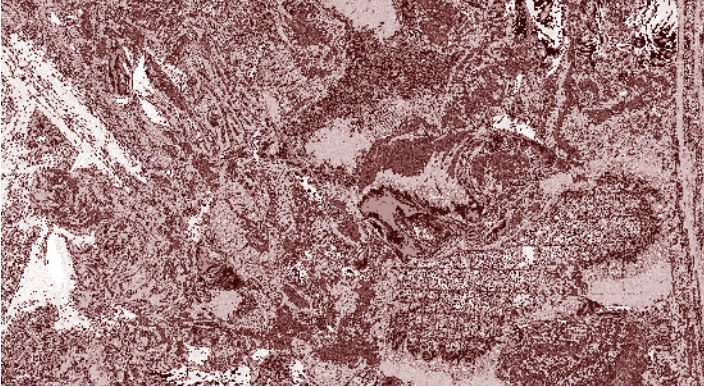
The most important aspects of a VCA are:

- to undertake work with people at the community level; and
- to ensure that the resultant projects are in tune with the community's priorities.

VCA is not just a disaster preparedness or disaster management exercise, and the investigation does not need to be labelled as such or linked with a specific department.

In many Latin American National Societies, for example, community integrated programmes have emerged in parallel with VCA, and are in fact converging. The secretariat has recognized this and is “harmonizing” its VCA and participatory rapid appraisal tools for use in a wide range of situations.

VCA and PCD activities do not “belong” to any one department in a National Society, because the investigation of communities extends over a number of programme areas. However, in order to free VCA from its link with disaster management, it might be



*When building up a historical chart, elderly participants provide a key to the past.*

useful to set up a “community research and action” department, which could ensure that different parts of the National Society work at the grass-roots level and that their activities are designed to take the priorities of the most vulnerable people into account.

VCA should always have sufficient resources to begin at least one activity or mini-project immediately after the investigation stage. If donor funds are involved, a code of conduct should stipulate that the donor provide adequate funding for both the investigation and an immediate activity or project.

Issues similar to the “dividers and connectors” that are assessed in the Better Programming Initiative (BPI) merit more attention. Communities are not necessarily united, and cooperation among local people cannot be taken for granted. The VCA process may highlight both divisions and connections between different community groups, which should be carefully monitored during the investigation. Dividers almost always exist – team members should anticipate them and their consequences.

Carrying out a VCA often encourages new people to volunteer. But involving volunteers entails training them properly and integrating them into the National Society. This is especially important where Red Cross Red Crescent structures are weak. VCA

planning should include integrating volunteers, especially as the process may require volunteers in new fields who need to be trained in a new way.

Sharing of knowledge and experience between branches is vital. This is best achieved by involving representatives from different branches in the PCD or VCA process, so that they can spread their knowledge to members of another branch, who pass on the information to others – leading to a chain of shared knowledge.

National Societies should be more imaginative and less tradition-bound when seeking partnerships. The leadership in some National Societies tends to have an exaggerated sense of its own importance, believing their National Society does not need partnerships. This stifles the National Society's development. As the Iraqi Red Crescent Society noted in its interim 2005 report: "No institution alone can meet the human and material capacities needed to deal effectively with disaster. All institutions should be united and work towards many goals, most important of which is to build the capacity of the local community...".

Bringing in relevant local university departments – especially those with expertise in fields such as seismic risk or flood preparedness – is often very helpful. It could also encourage students and staff to become volunteers.

The PCD process uses a nine-step sequence of stages and encourages people to think about the needs of each part of the activities. VCA might benefit from a similar approach. However, the steps should be a guide and not simply a checklist.

The way language is used is very important. Words and ideas may not translate easily. Participants sometimes misunderstand a word like "tool", which they may comprehend only as an implement but not as a means.

The tools used in the participatory methods can be very confusing for local people and Red Cross Red Crescent staff and volunteers. Most have never taken part in such a process.

Thorough training is therefore very important – and nothing should be taken for granted.

The practitioners' forums were successful in sharing experiences and should be encouraged in other regions in the future. But they should operate on the basis of a single language rather than rely on translation, which loses meaning and slows down the process.

### How to deal with problems in conducting VCA

Whilst these lessons learned are intended to inform National Society practice, it is important for community groups to be involved in resolving problems that may arise when implementing VCA. Such problems commonly include:

- lack of commitment from certain parts of the community;
- domination of the VCA process by community authorities.

Both of these problems point to the importance of finding a balance between a bottom-up and a top-down approach. While in the past a purely bottom-up approach was considered best, it has now been recognized that the two approaches are interdependent and that involving both grass-roots community members and the authorities at all levels is key to a successful VCA.

Here are some ways to counter potential difficulties:

- increase the participation of all sectors of the community to create a genuine sense of ownership by all;
- approach VCA as a “learning by doing” exercise for all community members rather than as the training of elite groups;
- use the “living through time” model to gain a better understanding of how beliefs, values and attitudes shape our capacities and behaviours in our living environment;
- encourage the community to manage the selection of VCA team members from all of its different ethnic and social components;
- involve local community leaders from the beginning as members of the team rather than to lead it;



- accept that, for practical or cultural reasons, it may not be possible to engage all the community groups you would wish to involve. Instead, aim for the broadest level of participation acceptable;
- use practical examples of community action taken to reduce dividers and increase connectors, such as in the Solomon Islands;
- always begin with sensitization processes that engage community members and their leaders together through transformative learning activities such as “living through time”.
- identify the different donor groups involved in community support and invite them to be part of the learning-by-doing VCA exercise so that their subsequent actions are based on joint assessment;
- consult and gain the assistance of other influential actors in community life from the very moment you start to think about doing a VCA and throughout the sensitization, learning, planning, doing, monitoring and evaluation stages.



VCA learning by doing: the living-through-time model in action to create sensitive change.

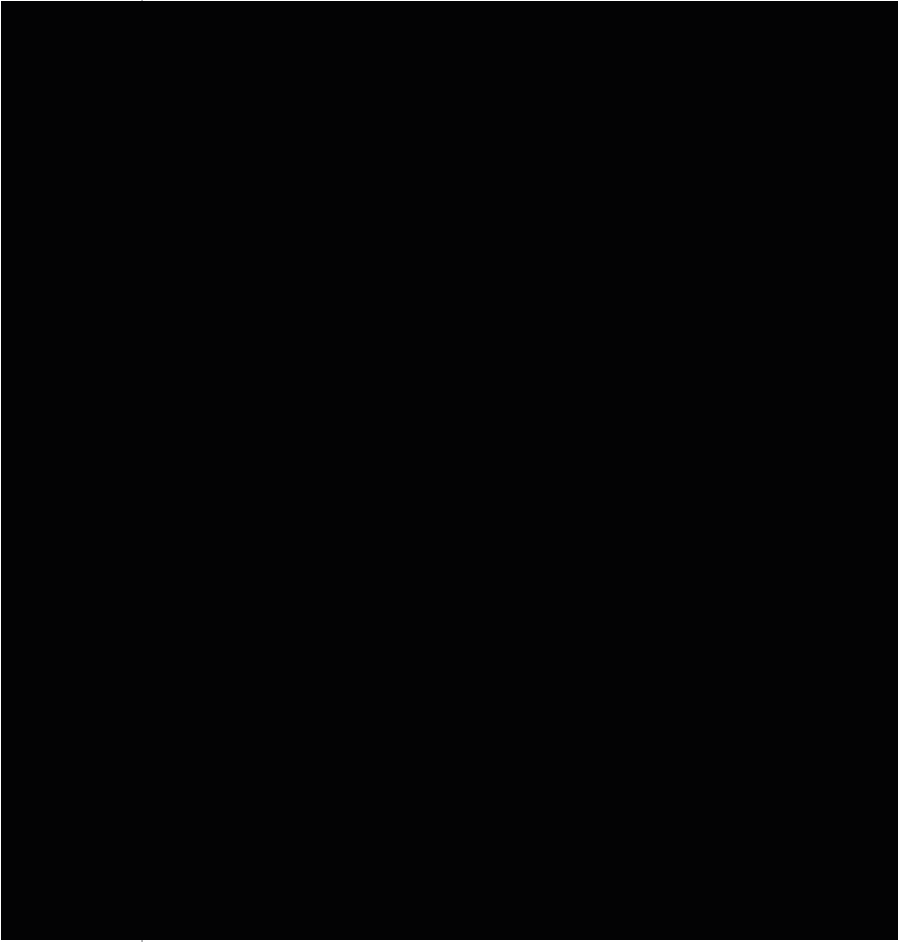
# Conclusion

National Societies are convinced of the value of International Federation support for the VCA methodology. VCA is evolving in a dynamic and creative way between practitioners in National Societies, regional delegations and the secretariat, with ideas about the methodology and related disaster preparedness and risk reduction activities being shared among them. Practical, innovative publications have been developed in the regions based on lessons learned in regional workshops. The secretariat has incorporated their conclusions and ideas in its new VCA publications.

New thinking is emerging on the problems of linking VCA with national-level strategies for the Red Cross Red Crescent not only in disaster preparedness but in the integration of programmes that support “community living”.



*Focus groups allow for in-depth discussion on a particular theme.*



*Livelihood assessment is essential to understanding a community's vulnerability.*

# The Fundamental Principles of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement

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## **Humanity**

The International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, born of a desire to bring assistance without discrimination to the wounded on the battlefield, endeavours, in its international and national capacity, to prevent and alleviate human suffering wherever it may be found. Its purpose is to protect life and health and to ensure respect for the human being. It promotes mutual understanding, friendship, cooperation and lasting peace amongst all peoples.

## **Impartiality**

It makes no discrimination as to nationality, race, religious beliefs, class or political opinions. It endeavours to relieve the suffering of individuals, being guided solely by their needs, and to give priority to the most urgent cases of distress.

## **Neutrality**

In order to enjoy the confidence of all, the Movement may not take sides in hostilities or engage at any time in controversies of a political, racial, religious or ideological nature.

## **Independence**

The Movement is independent. The National Societies, while auxiliaries in the humanitarian services of their governments and subject to the laws of their respective countries, must always maintain their autonomy so that they may be able at all times to act in accordance with the principles of the Movement.

## **Voluntary Service**

It is a voluntary relief movement not prompted in any manner by desire for gain.

## **Unity**

There can be only one Red Cross or Red Crescent Society in any one country. It must be open to all. It must carry on its humanitarian work throughout its territory.

## **Universality**

The International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, in which all societies have equal status and share equal responsibilities and duties in helping each other, is worldwide.

PROTECTING **HUMAN** DIGNITY 



The International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies promotes the humanitarian activities of National Societies among vulnerable people.

By coordinating international disaster relief and encouraging development support it seeks to prevent and alleviate human suffering.

The International Federation, the National Societies and the International Committee of the Red Cross together constitute the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement.