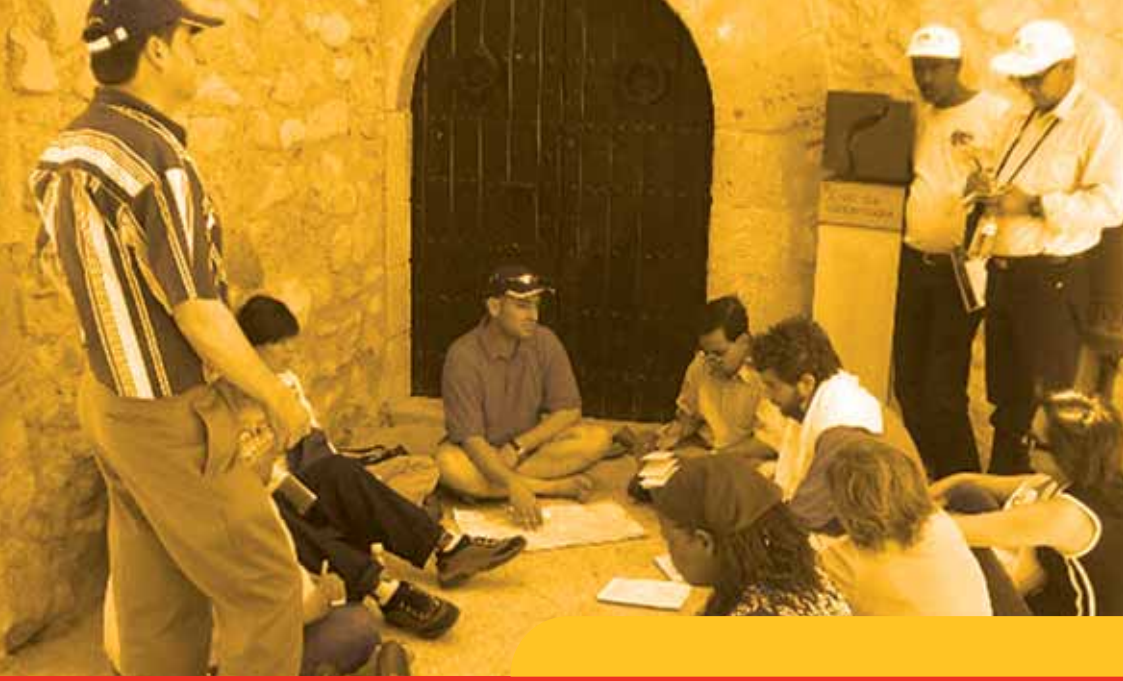

What is VCA?

An introduction to vulnerability and capacity assessment

International Federation
of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies

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

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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Contents

Abbreviations and acronyms 3
Acknowledgements 3
Introduction 4
Disasters and vulnerability 8
Disasters and development 13
Where are we with VCA? 17
The purpose of VCA 18
What does VCA involve? 29
What is the outcome of a VCA? 32
Definitions 33
Conclusion 42
Community-based activities in the Red Cross Red Crescent 42

Boxes

Box 1 About this booklet 7
Box 2 Disaster preparedness after Kobe 10
Box 3 Disasters and the Millennium Development Goals 14
Box 4 Integrated programming 19
Box 5 Linking VCA investigations to Red Cross Red Crescent values and mission 22
Box 6 VCA: Success brings new challenges for National Societies 28
Box 7 Six key questions about a VCA 30
Box 8 A process for VCA: Moving from investigation to action in 3 steps 31
Box 9 Regional cooperation 33

Box 10 Climate change and disasters 35
Box 11 Governance in disaster preparedness programmes in Indonesia 40
Box 12 Community-based approaches 44

Figures

Figure 1 "Crunch" pressure model 8
Figure 2 "Release" model 10
Figure 3 A model for sensitive change in VCA 24
Figure 4 The connection between existing Red Cross Red Crescent programmes and capacity building/vulnerability reduction 37

Case studies

Case study 1 Yemen: Unexpected outcomes 6
Case study 2 Nepal: Dealing with local hazards 22
Case study 3 VCA in the Solomon Islands – community based projects 34
Case study 4 The Caribbean's local priorities: Kitchens vs. strong roofs 39
Case study 5 Rwanda: Using local expertise 42

Abbreviations and acronyms

AIDS	Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome
BPI	Better Programming Initiative
CBDP	Community-Based Disaster Preparedness
CBFA	Community-Based First Aid
DP	Disaster Preparedness
HIV	Human Immunodeficiency Virus
MDGs	Millennium Development Goals
NGO	Non Governmental Organization
PCD	Participatory Community Development
PHAST	Participatory Hygiene and Sanitation Transformation
PRA	Participatory Rapid Appraisal
UN	United Nations
VCA	Vulnerability and Capacity Assessment
WPNS	Well-Prepared National Society

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Introduction

Dealing with disasters is a key part of the work of the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (the International Federation). Its global emergency response and humanitarian work is well-known, and has unfortunately become more prominent because of recent devastating events. Less well-known are the many hundreds of community-based activities being carried out around the world that are designed to reduce people's vulnerability to hazards.

Earthquakes are not predictable, and although we may have the capability to forecast hurricanes, floods and even tsunamis, we cannot stop these events from occurring. Furthermore, climate change will no doubt increase the frequency and intensity of weather-related disasters. The key question is how to prevent known hazards from producing disasters – and to focus on what we can do as an International Federation to lessen their impact on those most vulnerable.

Key message

"More effective prevention strategies would save not only tens of billions of dollars, but save tens of thousands of lives. (...) Building a culture of prevention is not easy. While the costs of prevention have to be paid in the present, its benefits lie in a distant future. Moreover, the benefits are not tangible; they are the disasters that did NOT happen."

Kofi Annan, United Nations Secretary-General [1]

This is where the process of "Vulnerability and Capacity Assessment" (VCA) comes into play. In a nutshell, VCA is concerned with collecting, analysing and systematising informa-

[1] United Nations. *Annual Report of the Secretary-General on the Work of the Organization of United Nations.* Document A/54/1. New York: United Nations, 1999.

tion on a given community's vulnerability to hazards in a structured and meaningful way. This information is then used to diagnose the key risks and existing capacities of the community, ultimately leading to activities aimed at reducing people's vulnerability to potential disasters and increasing their capacity to survive them and resume their lives.

This introductory guide to VCA draws on ten years of experience within the Movement, to show how the process can be effectively used by National Societies to reinforce disaster preparedness within their communities, whilst linking this with other programmes and activities into a mutually reinforcing whole – as part of Strategy 2010 and towards the goals of the "Federation of the Future".[2] It is accompanied by three other practical guides: How to do VCA, VCA toolbox and VCA training.

Key message

Very few National Societies that have carried out a VCA have come away at the end of the exercise thinking that VCA is "only" concerned with disaster management.

Our collective experience of VCA has shown us that there are interesting spin-offs from the process. One of these is how disaster management can be better integrated with other projects so that they support each other. This enables us to respond more effectively to people's local concerns – be they unsafe drinking water, exposure to malaria or traffic accidents – whilst pursuing disaster preparedness activities within the community.

Overall, this implies a more integrated approach to the idea of vulnerability.

[2] The Federation of the Future process, endorsed by the International Federation's General Assembly in November 2005, sets out ten areas of improvement for National Societies and the International Federation's governance and secretariat.

Case study 1

Yemen: Unexpected outcomes

In 2005, the Yemen Red Crescent Society carried out a VCA in two districts badly affected by flash floods. Yet, as a direct result of the assessment with these communities, the Yemen Red Crescent Society has now designed a very popular programme on road safety in order to reduce accidents, especially near schools. And statistics back up the communities' instinctive response: over the last 15 years, more people have been killed in transport accidents in Yemen than as a result of flooding.[3]

Many National Societies and their branches have noted another major benefit of the VCA process, which brings staff and volunteers into close contact with people at a grass-roots level. The outlook of volunteers and staff becomes much more positive as a result of working with people rather than simply *for* them, thereby increasing volunteers' enthusiasm and involvement, whilst enhancing the capacities of the National Society.

In fact, very few National Societies have come away at the end of the exercise thinking that VCA is "only" concerned with disaster management. As an International Federation staff member noted: "The only predictable thing about VCA is that it is unpredictable."

Working with people at the grass-roots level enables a National Society to become aware of people's own priorities, leading to a greater cohesion in programming.

[3] Source: EM-DAT: The OFDA/CRED International Disaster Database, Université catholique de Louvain, Brussels, Belgium. Yemen country profile. Available at: http://www.em-dat.net/index.htm Accessed 18 January 2006.

Box 1 About this booklet

This booklet is a new edition of *VCA: a Federation Guide* and shows some of the progress made in the use of VCA since the guide was first published in 1999. It illustrates how programmes can be better integrated with other projects so that they support each other. It also demonstrates how, through closer involvement with the community, many National Societies have been inspired and found renewed enthusiasm in their work to achieve the International Federation's mission.

The booklet also summarizes and represents the experience of many National Societies from around the world. Information about their activities has been collected and shared by Red Cross Red Crescent staff and International Federation delegates over the past ten years. In particular, a review and evaluation of VCA has been underway at the Secretariat for the past two years to synthesize and learn from this information. In addition, several workshops and VCA Practitioner Forums were held in late 2005 to collect information on good practice and get feedback on this and the other documents. We are grateful to the support and efforts of many people from numerous National Societies in achieving this.

This booklet forms part of a set of publications that support the VCA process for National Societies. The others are:

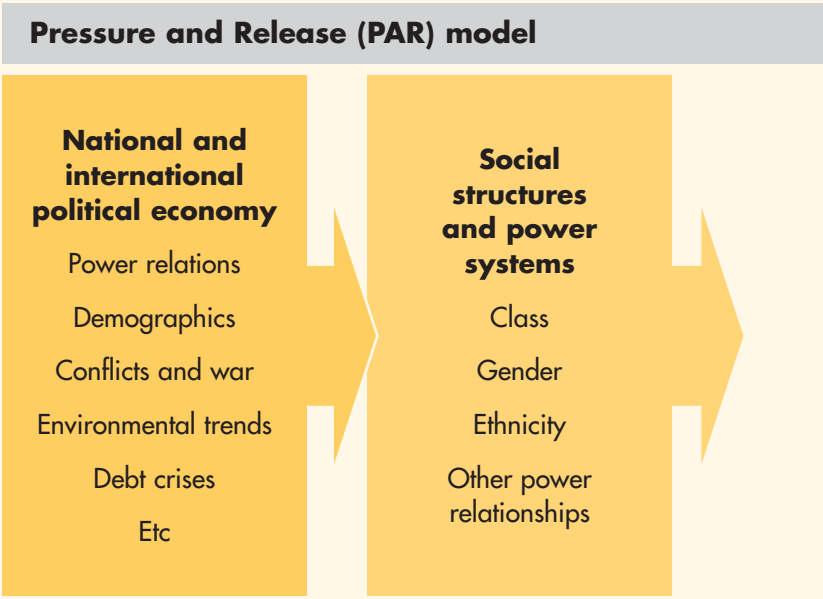
- *How to do VCA*
- *VCA toolbox*
- *VCA training.*

Disasters and vulnerability

Why are some people more vulnerable to disasters in some places and countries than in others? Obviously, natural hazards do not discriminate – and each life saved is as precious as the next. However, it is also true that poorer societies or segments of society are often the most vulnerable to the impact of disasters – because of where and under what conditions people live and work, and their more limited capacity to recover.

A disaster is the result of a natural hazard impacting on vulnerable people. People may differ in their exposure to risk as a result of their class, gender, ethnic or other identity, age, and other factors, as represented in **Figure 1**. Addressing such vulnerability

Figure 1 **"Crunch" pressure model**

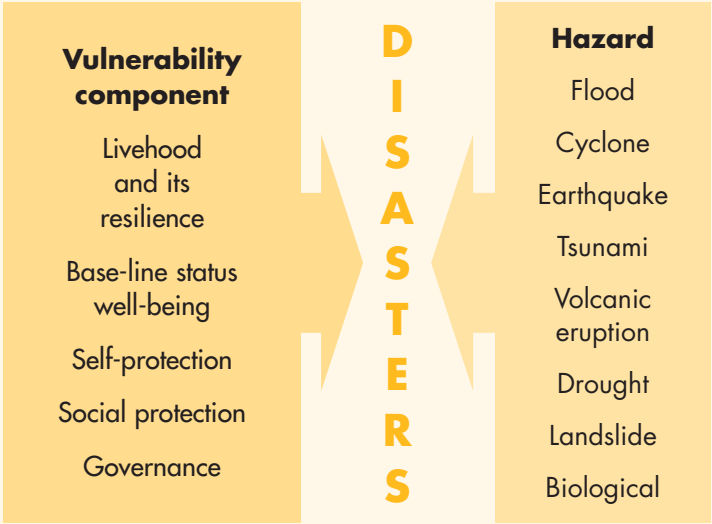


forms the basis of VCA (**see Figure 2** on page 10) and requires:

- reducing the impact of the hazard itself where possible (through mitigation, prediction and warning, and preparedness);
- building capacities that help reduce people's vulnerability;
- reducing the way in which people are affected by poor governance, discrimination, inequality and inadequate access to resources and livelihoods; and
- tackling the root causes that lead to systems of vulnerability.

Economic and political factors often determine people's level of vulnerability and the strength of their capacity to resist, cope and recover. Vulnerability is generally greater where poverty and/or inadequate social protection make people less capable of resisting hazards. Work on poverty reduction is, therefore, vital. In addition, disasters often undermine efforts at reducing poverty, and set back the progress already achieved.

Source: Ben Wisner, Piers Blaikie, Terry Cannon and Ian Davis. *At Risk: natural hazards, people's vulnerability and disasters.* London: Routledge, 2003 (2nd edition).
Chapters 1 to 3 are available at: http://www.unisdr.org/eng/library/lib-select-literature.htm



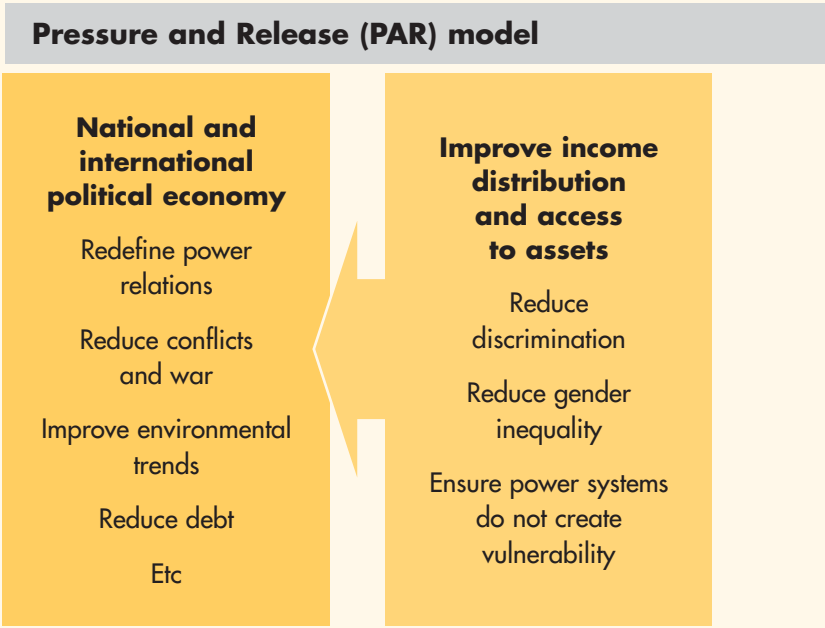
Box 2 Disaster preparedness after Kobe

In January 2005, the United Nations-sponsored World Conference on Disaster Reduction was hosted by the city of Kobe in Japan. The Kobe conference, and the Hyogo Framework for Action that emerged from it, provide a good basis for progress in disaster risk reduction. VCA and similar methods used by non-governmental organizations (NGOs) can provide the grass-roots foundations for making the framework successful.

Key priorities for action in the Hyogo Framework are:

- Ensure that disaster risk reduction is a national and local priority with a strong institutional basis for implementation.
- Identify, assess and monitor disaster risks and enhance early warning.

Figure 2 "Release" model

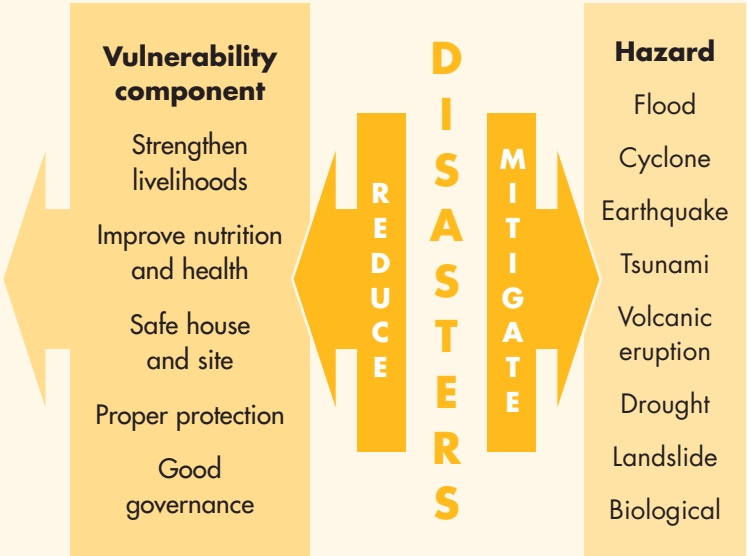


- Use knowledge, innovation and education to build a culture of safety and resilience at all levels.
- Reduce the underlying risk factors.
- Strengthen disaster preparedness for effective response at all levels.

These priorities are also linked in the Hyogo Framework for Action to four cross-cutting issues that are clearly assisted by the VCA approach (in fact, it is difficult to imagine that they could be achieved without the type of grass-roots approach of VCA and similar tools):

- Multi-hazard approach.
- Gender perspective and cultural diversity.
- Community and volunteer participation.
- Capacity building and technology transfer.

Source: Ben Wisner, Piers Blaikie, Terry Cannon and Ian Davis. *At Risk: natural hazards, people's vulnerability and disasters.* London: Routledge, 2003 (2nd edition).
Chapters 1 to 3 are available at: http://www.unisdr.org/eng/library/lib-select-literature.htm



Although poverty reduction as such is not the main focus of Red Cross Red Crescent work, specific attempts to reduce people's vulnerability and explicit policies to help build their capacities to resist disasters are most certainly an important component of what we do.

It is in such situations that the often limited resources available to the Red Cross Red Crescent can best be used. In other words, a special effort can be made to reduce vulnerability and improve people's capacity alongside (and as an integral part of) what is normally called "development".

The Red Cross Red Crescent can advocate for the establishment of building codes so that houses are better able to withstand disasters.

Disasters and development

Development is undermined every time a disaster strikes. For example, despite the unprecedented international emergency aid after the Indian Ocean tsunami, it will take many years for people to recover their livelihoods. In Central America, many lives are still disrupted due to the impact of Hurricane Mitch, which struck the area in 1998.

Data collected are reviewed and validated.

Box 3 Disasters and the Millennium Development Goals

After Hurricane Mitch struck Central America in 1998, Carlos Flores, the president of Honduras, said: "We lost in 72 hours what we have taken more than 50 years to build, bit by bit."

Disasters are a very significant factor in generating new poverty and worsening the predicament of those who are already poor. In a major report in 2004, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) emphasized: "Natural disasters (...) pose a significant threat to prospects for achieving the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) – in particular, the overarching target of halving extreme poverty by 2015."[4]

The MDGs do not at present include any specific targets relating to hazards and disasters. Some NGOs are trying to bring about their inclusion, since the problems identified in the MDGs are either strongly related to disasters as causes of vulnerability or are affected by hazards and worsen when people are not able to resist them.

The eight MDGs are:

- Eradicate extreme poverty and hunger.
- Achieve universal primary education.
- Promote gender equality and empower women.
- Reduce child mortality.
- Improve maternal health.
- Combat HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases.
- Ensure environmental sustainability.
- Develop a global partnership for development.

[4] United Nations International Strategy for Disaster Reduction (ISDR). *Reducing Disaster Risk: a challenge for development.* Geneva: ISDR, 2005.

This crucial connection between disasters and development is now much more widely acknowledged. Too often, development work has not taken proper account of the need to protect people and their livelihoods from hazards, yet disasters often erase the progress achieved by years of investment in development projects, and eradicate the livelihoods of those who were intended to benefit from them.

Key message

"…today's poverty is yesterday's unaddressed vulnerability."[5]

Within the International Federation, there is also a need to ensure that our own programmes are better integrated. For example, water and sanitation projects need to take account of potential hazards, so that they are not subsequently destroyed by floods or hurricanes. What VCA does is to tap into communities' knowledge of local needs and risks in order to build such resilience into project design.

Whether the work is in first aid, food security, community care or health, these activities can be mutually reinforcing and linked to disaster preparedness. Actions carried out with the involvement of people at the grass-roots level through the use of community-based investigations such as VCA provide a strong impetus for change. This approach may also bring to light some of the inevitable gaps and limitations in Red Cross Red Crescent work, which can then be addressed through more effective partnerships with other organizations.

[5] Yamin, Farhana, Atiq Rahman and Saleemul Huq. "Vulnerability, adaptation and climate disasters: a conceptual overview", *IDS Bulletin,* 36:4, October 2005.

The lessons learned from using VCA over the past ten years clearly demonstrate the benefits of such people-based involvement by National Societies around the world. Because VCA is intrinsically linked to the way in which people live, it is potentially a powerful basis for designing disaster preparedness measures at the local level and supporting the creation of wider mitigation measures.

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

Where are we with VCA?

Since 1999, when the first version of this guide was published, the International Federation has gained immense experience in using VCA and related tools to increase people's preparedness for disasters.

National Societies in more than 80 countries have carried out some form of VCA, many of them in remote and rural communities. The International Federation has helped to train VCA investigators in many countries, which has in turn enabled many National Societies to design better disaster preparedness programmes.

At the International Federation, a VCA review has been under way since 2003, drawing on the experience of National Society leaders and Secretariat staff at all levels in order to clarify and improve the system. A better integration of VCA with other programmes has been achieved through consultations with those working in these priority areas. In particular, different sets of tools, which until now have been used separately by different sections of the Secretariat, are being harmonized. As a result, tools will no longer be linked to specific programmes (i.e. disaster preparedness, disaster management, health and care, and organizational development), but will provide a generic means of information-gathering and problem diagnosis applicable across all areas of Red Cross Red Crescent activity.

The purpose of VCA

Our experience over the last ten years has demonstrated many positive outcomes from the use of VCA. But there has also been confusion about what VCA is for and what it can and cannot achieve. This guide and the other VCA publications in this series are intended to clarify some of these issues and to make VCA more straightforward, easier to understand and more useful for the VCA practitioner.

What VCA is not...

Let us examine first of all what it is not.

When it was first used, VCA was the subject of some misunderstanding, especially in terms of the scale on which it should be applied. Some National Societies began by applying VCA at the country level and treated it as a sort of national-scale evaluation process. The "capacity" part of VCA got confused with institutional strengthening or organizational development at the national level. These are important needs, but practical experience shows that VCA is not suited to the analysis of a National Society's "vulnerability and capacity".[6]

Others, understandably, saw it as an opportunity to seek external funding. However, this risked distorting VCA's purpose, since donors' priorities do not always fit with the actual vulnerabilities and needs that are uncovered by a VCA. Furthermore, the definition of vulnerability used in VCAs was at times vague and did not relate to natural hazards. Instead, pre-defined groups were identified as being "vulnerable" and requiring some form of welfare provision (examples included the unemployed or poor; sick or elderly; hungry or addicted; bullied or abused).

[6] Other International Federation assessment methods, such as the well-prepared National Society (WPNS) framework and the better programming initiative (BPI), are more appropriate ways of dealing with assessments at this larger scale.

Such groups are indeed worthy of Red Cross Red Crescent support and in some cases, these investigations did lead to excellent programmes.[7]

There are major challenges - which many National Societies have succeeded in turning into opportunities. One is that local people have a different perception of risk and may not give priority to the more conventional hazards associated with natural disasters on a larger scale (e.g., earthquakes, hurricanes/cyclones, floods, etc.). As a result, many VCAs gave more prominence to grass-roots problems such as unsafe drinking water, health risks such as malaria, or traffic accidents.

Box 4 Integrated programming

A number of National Societies have found ways to respond to the challenge of connecting local concerns with actual disaster preparedness by using VCA as an entry point to:

- diagnose community needs in all areas of risk and vulnerability;
- integrate existing programmes in order to work with local people in a more effective way;
- identify areas in which partnerships with other organizations can be developed to fill the gaps where the Red Cross Red Crescent cannot work; and
- advocate for other stakeholders, including government, to fulfil or initiate activities to remedy other risks and vulnerabilities.

This made us realise that people are often more concerned about the risks of every day life than they are about the prospect of some large-scale natural disaster. We have learned that people's own assessment of the risks they face needs to be valued if working with them is to succeed. Nevertheless, for VCA to fulfil its primary objective, the issue of vulnerability to hazards still needed to be addressed in the context of disaster preparedness.

[7] One such example is the RespectEd campaign run by the Canadian Red Cross Society which has been successful in reducing conflict and violence involving children, couples and families.

This highlights a crucial difference between the work of National Societies and other organizations, especially NGOs. Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies are founded on the idea that they operate as national organizations. They have to be ready to respond anywhere in their country to disasters, including those triggered by factors other than natural hazards. This is why our disaster management has in the past focused mainly on disaster preparedness and emergency relief – rather than on prevention and mitigation.

Indeed, many hazards do need to be assessed on a scale that is larger than the local community – given the wide-spread impact of disasters such as earthquakes or tsunamis, for example. It was therefore important for us to recognise that VCA **could not** be used to map hazards in every single community – simply because it is impossible to conduct VCAs everywhere.

There is however a link: based on national and sub-national mapping, high-risk communities can be identified for more detailed investigation through community VCAs.

What VCA is...

Unlike hazard mapping, which can be computerized using geographic information systems or even satellite images, vulnerability cannot be seen from above. Vulnerability changes constantly, reflecting prevailing social, economic, cultural and political circumstances. Yet this same vulnerability can dramatically intensify the effects of a disaster. Similarly, the capacities of communities to cope with hazards and disasters will vary according to local conditions and perceptions.

Our common experience over the past ten years has therefore led us to a clearer understanding of what VCA actually is:

- VCA is an investigation that uses various participatory tools in order to understand the level of people's exposure to (and capacity to resist) natural hazards at the grass-roots level.

- It is an integral part (but not the only part) of disaster preparedness and can contribute to the creation of community-based disaster preparedness programmes at the rural and urban grass-roots level.
- As part of the process, it allows the people to identify and understand the risk they consider should have priority, even if these are not the natural hazards
- It is a tool which enables local priorities to be identified and leads to the design of actions that contribute to disaster reduction – as well as the design and development of programmes in each of the International Federation's priority areas that are mutually supportive and responsive to the needs identified by people at the grass-roots level.

Key message

"Before, we used to do things for people. Now we do things with the people – they are fully engaged in the investigation, and are full participants in creating the solutions. This has changed the branches and the National Society."

Member of a National Society after carrying out a VCA

With VCA, local people and communities become the focus – not only as recipients of funding, but ideally as active participants in the development initiative. When applied to disaster preparedness, such methods can encourage participation, so that the people become more completely involved in the identification of risks and in the design of programmes and actions to prepare for disasters.

Case study 2

Nepal: Dealing with local hazards

In Nepal, local VCA-type investigations have enabled the National Society to work with villagers to create community-based disaster preparedness (CBDP) programmes, which enable them to deal with hazards such as local flooding. Because of its participatory nature and with the help of the National Society, the very process of enabling people to see that they can make a difference to flooding through their own actions has led them to realize that disasters are something that they can influence, and they have become less fatalistic about risk.

What the reformed VCA system offers therefore is a much clearer focus on disaster preparedness as a programme for reducing vulnerability and increasing capacity before a disaster happens. In addition, it underlines people's own priorities, enabling National Societies to respond to local needs and develop more integrated programming.

Box 5 Linking VCA investigations to Red Cross Red Crescent values and mission

When we carry out investigations using VCA methods with people at the grass roots level, some crucial things must be kept in mind. This is because we are carrying out a process that brings "outsiders" into contact with "insiders" – especially when the National Society has not been very involved in the community before.

Firstly, the Red Cross Red Crescent has its own values and mission to fulfil, which ideally should match the goals of the local people. But this cannot be taken for granted, and it should be acknowledged that there may be differences that need to be negotiated. Also, as we have often seen in VCAs, the priorities of the people often do not match those of the "outsider".

The model presented in **Figure 3** (on page 24) has been used in VCA training and in actual VCA and Participatory Community Development (PCD) investigations as a way of making these differences more open. This means that the National Society, the VCA team, and the local people themselves become aware of the differences in outlook.

It can also help to harmonise progress towards the goals and do so in a culturally sensitive way. Specifically, it allows volunteers to consider a community's perspective linked to its cultural identity, beliefs and values and encourages respect for its capabilities and behaviours within this environment (natural, social, political). In this sense, it serves as an important quality and accountability tool which promotes ethical practice and the Red Cross and Red Crescent principles.

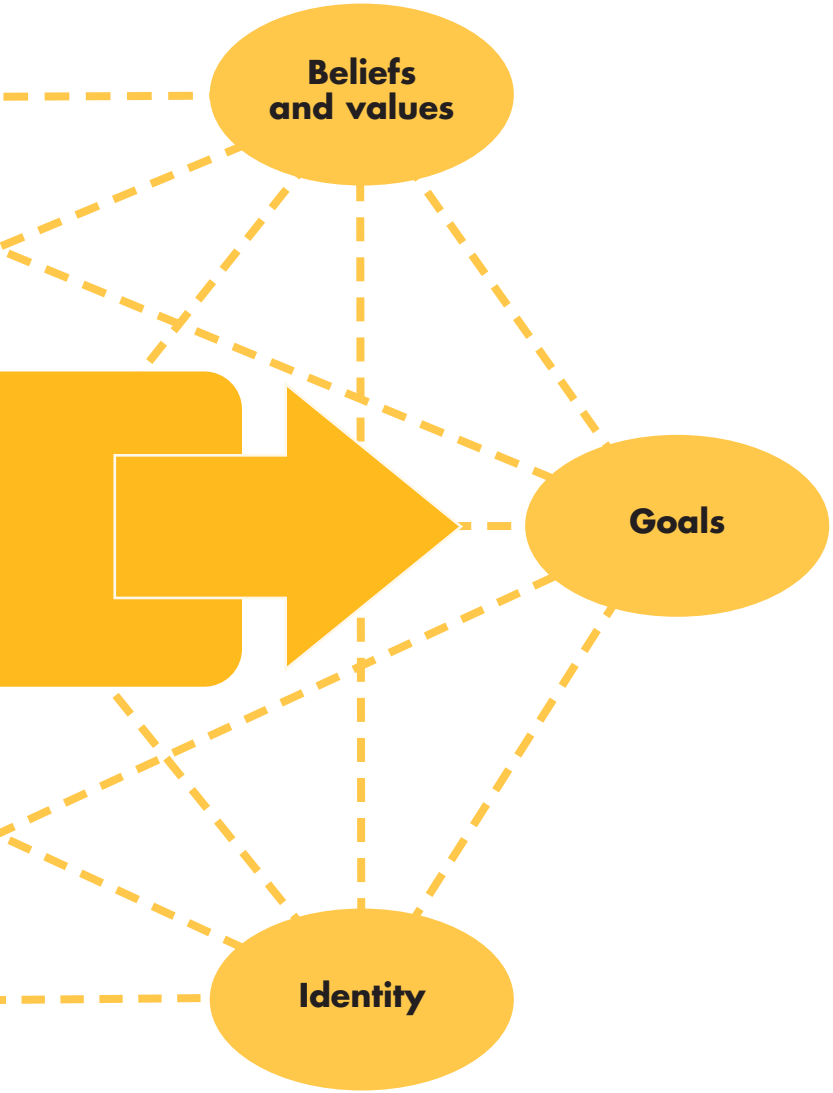
The idea is to use the arrow of "Living through time" as a focus for discussions between volunteers and the community. It helps to improve listening by all sides and validates the information gathered. The arrow represents time in the sense that the VCA process intends to guide participants and communities (in the context of their past) from the present towards a future common goal.

The six points arranged around the arrow represent different contexts or viewpoints in which we all "live through time". It allows the different people involved in the VCA to acknowledge that they may have different perspectives on each of these. Changes in any one of the six will result in changes in the other five viewpoints (because in real life they are all interconnected). The model can be used in any language and culture.

Evidence from evaluation of the methodology indicates that as new understanding is gained, participants are able to examine how changes in one level create changes in the others. These transformed perspectives encourage change, opening the door to enhanced preparedness and risk reduction within the community.

Figure 3 A model for sensitive change in VCA[8]

[8] Betts-Symonds (2006) derived from a model by Robert Dilts (1991).


Beliefs and values
Goals
Identity

Added benefits...

The greater our experience with VCA, the more we have come to understand and value some of the secondary effects of carrying out such grass-roots assessments.

Undertaking a VCA may make a significant difference to the activities, programmes and even the broader outlook of a National Society – as highlighted in the recent International Federation evaluation of the VCA process.

For some National Societies, this was the first time they had been actively involved in grass-roots or community-based investigations. They became aware of the more active role that the National Society could play in disaster preparedness by having such close contact with people. A welcome by-product of VCA has been an intensification of purpose and boosting of morale within National Societies.

Undertaking a VCA is also about making a difference. It is not just a box to tick in the effort to fulfil the various evaluations that are encouraged by the International Federation. We have learned that there are a number of ways in which a VCA can affect what a National Society does:

- There is great scope for National Societies to share their experience and data. As the programmes for National Societies become more attuned to working with communities, the potential for partnerships and collaboration with other organizations that work at the local rather than the national level, will increase.
- Carrying out a VCA raises the expectations of the people who become involved. They are being asked to define the risks they face and to join with the Red Cross Red Crescent staff and volunteers to identify their capacities and vulnerabilities. Inevitably, people will expect activities to be developed and resources provided to help them in dealing with the problems identified. Fortunately, as our VCA experience shows, the very

act of engaging with local people to conduct an investigation can motivate the community to act together.

- Because VCA and other grass-roots investigations tend to help transform the outlook and activities of National Societies, they can also serve to reinvigorate branches and inspire volunteers – in a virtuous circle of participatory work.

A community debates VCA findings and becomes empowered, part of the process illustrated in Figure 3.

Box 6 VCA: Success brings new challenges for National Societies

VCA is a method of working with people in rural and urban communities that is similar to the participatory approaches used for many years by many Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) in their development work. VCA came late, but it has "filled the participatory gap" that was missing in the work of National Societies. But, as a new way of doing things, it brings its own challenges.

Feedback from the National Societies that have been active in VCA shows that it is often both challenging and rewarding for the organization:

- Community-level work seems to encourage new volunteers. But they are often a new type of volunteer, who does not fit into the standard pattern (i.e., trained in first aid, search and rescue, etc.). They want to be involved and to support their own community. Many National Societies have pointed out that they need training and support, and that the VCA process must take into account the "development" of the volunteers, as well as that of the communities. In Latin America, such "all-purpose" volunteers have been recognized for some years and are called "social volunteers".
- Experience from a number of VCAs shows that the VCA structure must not be a traditional "top-down" vertical management system. Real benefits emerge when the structure is more horizontal and branches are incorporated into the planning process of the first round of VCAs. In this way, a "chain reaction" can be set up, in which branches involved in VCA train and inspire the next round, and so on. Simply carrying out a VCA often revitalizes branches.
- If a VCA is to succeed, National Societies – at both national and local levels – need to forge partnerships and cooperate with other institutions (e.g., government, NGOs, donors, etc.). For many, this requires developing new skills in advocacy. Some have suggested that training in advocacy would be as useful adjunct to training in carrying out VCAs.

What does VCA involve?

The enthusiasm generated by VCA has sometimes led us to confuse its participatory method with its purpose. It is important to be clear that the tools for conducting a VCA are just that: a method of investigation.

But it is an investigation that implies a commitment.

Indeed, when a VCA is carried out, it should be treated as the prelude to programmes and activities, and not just as an investigation. This means that attention must be given to the allocation of resources for carrying some of the activities highlighted by the VCA process.

Before undertaking a VCA within one or more communities, a National Society must therefore give serious thought to the following considerations (**see Boxes 7 and 8**):

- Understanding the process and demands on resources, as well as the potential implications for programmes;
- Clearly identifying a framework for the investigation: its goal and purpose, its terms of reference, choice of locations and method of sampling, selection of tools and participatory methods for use in communities;
- Obtaining support from the government, where necessary;
- Entering into partnerships with other organizations where relevant, to share experience and data, and with which to become potential collaborators in the emerging activities;
- Training personnel (staff and/or volunteers) to conduct VCAs and to design the resulting activities with the local communities;
- Allocating staff capable of analysing and interpreting the results, and of designing programmes and activities with the people concerned;
- Developing CBDP activities in the localities concerned, with external funding where required;

- Collaborating within the National Society to extend the information from the VCA to other programme areas, in order to better integrate the National Society's activities;
- Linking local community-based investigations to risk mapping of hazards that extend beyond the locality and exceed the capacity of local communities.

It is clear that, in order to carry out a VCA properly, a considerable commitment in terms of effort and resources will be required on the part of the National Society. Some National Societies have understandably considered the VCA process too complex and costly – not just financially, but in terms of staff resources and on-going inputs.

Box 7 Six key questions about a VCA

Why	Why is it being proposed? Are there reasons that are not obvious or fully admitted?
What	What does it involve? What is it for?
Who	Who is involved in doing it? Who is it for?
How	How will it be done? With what resources?
When	When will projects begin? What is the timescale?
Where	Where will the VCA be carried out?

This guide and associated publications are intended to demystify the process, and assist National Societies in making an informed decision on when or even whether to proceed. Expectations within local population will inevitably be raised when a VCA is conducted and the capacity to undertake follow-up activities must therefore form part of the overall planning.

However, if increased enthusiasm and participation are anything to go by, then such raised expectations are very positive outcomes – as long as the approach continues to fully involve the local people in finding solutions to their vulnerabilities.

Box 8 A process for VCA: Moving from investigation to action in 12 steps

Level one *National Society support*

1. Understanding why VCA is being proposed.
2. Sensitizing (of National Society leadership, branches, partners).
3. Setting up a management structure for the VCA.
4. Setting the VCA objectives.

Level two *From assessment to planning*

5. Planning the VCA.
6. Preparation phase.
7. Using the investigation tools with the community.
8. Systematizing, analysing and interpreting the data.
9. Returning information to the community and deciding priorities and actions for transformation.

Level three *From planning to action*

10. Turn vulnerabilities into capacities through practical actions.
11. Recommendations and report writing for local authorities, donors and partners.
12. Programme implementation: risk reduction projects with the community.

Over the past ten years, many National Societies have been able to carry out very valuable VCA exercises. It has become clear that the best VCAs are those fully "owned" by the National Society – those who were committed from the outset in participating both in the assessment and able to ensure its follow-up.

What is the outcome of a VCA?

What will a National Society do differently after a VCA?

For one thing, it will have a great deal more information about the chosen localities. Its staff and volunteers may also be more enthusiastic and motivated. Local people may participate more willingly in developing activities to build their capacities and reduce their vulnerabilities.

The process of conducting the VCA may also bring the National Society into closer contact with other organizations, both national and international. Once the VCA results give a better idea of vulnerabilities, it may be easier to obtain donor funding for activities to build capacities and reduce vulnerabilities.

In some parts of the world, such as Latin America and East Africa (**see Box 9**), VCA-type activities have been brought together to create regional disaster preparedness activities.

Indeed, as mentioned earlier, local-level VCA should be linked to regional or national risk mapping, since some hazards affect wide areas of a country or region. This linkage helps to ensure that the Red Cross Red Crescent is prepared to respond to the hazards, even if the local population did not class them as "high-risk" disasters.

Communities turn their observations into understandable data.

Box 9 Regional cooperation

In a number of regions, National Societies have come together to create collaborative projects with the support of the Red Cross Red Crescent. These regional collaborations aim to respond to situations where hazards (e.g., floods in the River Plate basin) and/or conflict issues (as in East Africa) affect more than one country, and where cooperation is essential.

In Latin America, the Camelote Programme (involving the National Societies of Argentina, Paraguay and Uruguay) works with vulnerable people living in the River Plate Basin.

In East Africa, the VCA process undertaken by 11 National Societies in the Great Lakes region helped them to define programmes that operate across international boundaries. A crucial component of the project has been the recognition that livelihoods are a key aspect of building people's resilience to various types of risk. Another significant aspect has been the support of the Swedish Red Cross and its commitment from the start to fund projects identified by the VCAs – thereby avoiding the problem of raising communities' expectations without being able to fulfil them due to funding constraints.

The outcomes of VCAs are therefore potentially much greater than at first appears to be the case from small-scale local investigations. But at a minimum, a VCA should lead to the design of a CBDP plan that engages local people in strategies to reduce their vulnerability to specific natural hazards by mitigating the hazard itself where possible, and building up the people's capacities to resist and recover from a hazard impact.

Definitions

In carrying out VCAs in the past, confusion arose about which risks were being dealt with and what vulnerability meant. One of the main sources of difficulty had been the "lumping together" of different sorts of risk: natural hazards; diseases and epidemics;

technological, industrial and transport accidents; and civil conflicts and wars. Each of these types of risk is quite different in terms of their root causes, how they affect people, and the policies required to deal with them.

Case study 3

VCA in the Solomon Islands – community based projects

In 2004 the Solomon Islands Red Cross carried out its first ever VCA in three communities. The people of the Solomon Islands face a number of hazards, including tropical cyclones and especially sea level rise (both probably worsened by climate change). But the main problems identified in the VCA were related to health issues, especially malaria, diarrhoea, and malnutrition. One location had experienced serious conflict between two neighbouring ethnic groups, and a positive outcome of the VCA was that it managed to bring them together in a very constructive way, so reducing the tension between them.

The outcome of the VCA was to extend health projects (including training for Community Based First Aid), improved sanitation and drainage, safe water supply and health awareness campaigns. Seasonal flooding was also reduced through co-operation made possible by the community effort. It was mostly people from the communities themselves who carried out the necessary work, and the projects were all deliberately short term so that results would be quickly apparent.

"It was important that the projects didn't just solve the problems identified in the VCA, but that they also empowered communities. It was considered vital that communities have a sense of ownership of the projects."

Solomon Islands, from risk assessment to community actions, International Federation, 2005, p. 11.

A major goal of this revision of VCA is to clarify how to best use VCA and make it relevant to different purposes, without undermining its significance for disaster preparedness. This requires careful understanding of its role and of how it fits in with other areas of Red Cross Red Crescent work and priorities.

Crucial to this is the need to accept that the types of risk uncovered by a VCA represent the real concerns of people within their communities – even if these do not include natural hazards. As we have seen, people are normally more concerned by their daily survival problems (e.g. traffic accidents), often making no mention of earthquakes or floods. In many cases, people (and National Societies) are also unaware of the increased risks from climate change. Indeed, a VCA carried out in the tsunami-affected areas of the Indian Ocean on the day before the disaster would likely not have indicated tsunamis as a significant risk.

Box 10 Climate change and disasters

The global climate is changing, mainly due to the burning of fossil fuels and the increased effects of the resulting "greenhouse gases". This involves a rise in average global temperatures, changes in rainfall patterns, sea level rise, and also changes in extreme weather events. This results in more floods, landslides, droughts, heat waves, and more intense storms and cyclones. All of these changes directly affect the work of the Red Cross Red Crescent, particularly in disaster response and disaster preparedness.

In a number of countries, the Red Cross Red Crescent has initiated activities to assess and address the increasing disaster risks due to global climate change. Many of these activities are supported by the Red Cross Red Crescent Centre on Climate Change and Disaster Preparedness (the Climate Centre). The Climate Centre is based in the Netherlands but serves the entire International Red Cross Red Crescent Movement. It brings together scientific knowledge on climate change and operational experience from the humanitarian field, in order

to improve disaster risk reduction, especially for those people that are most vulnerable to climate change and extreme weather events.

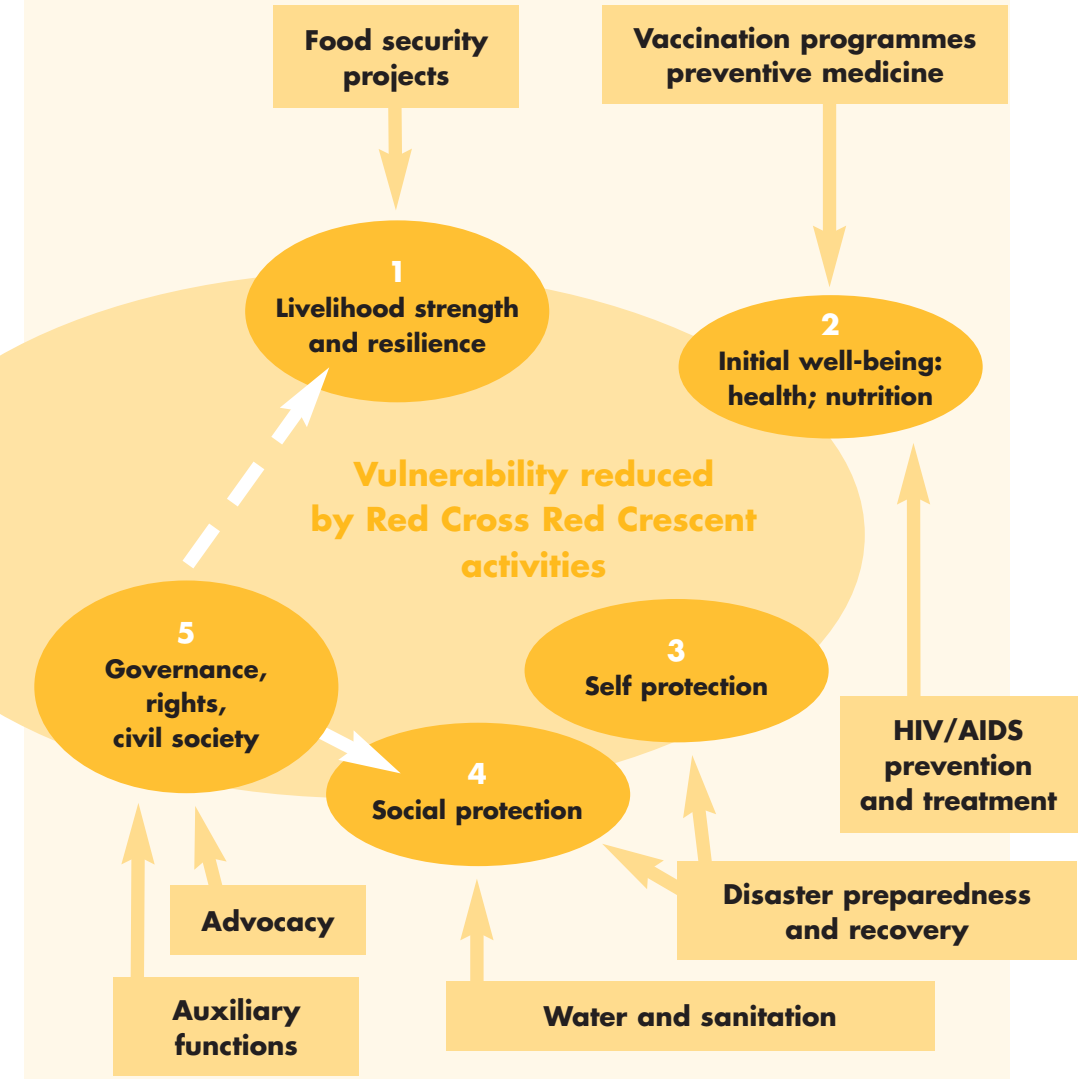
Climate change means that VCAs have to pay special attention to trends: during the collection and analysis of secondary data; while discussing hazards with the community; and during the analysis of the information obtained from the community.

For further information, see "Preparedness for climate change", International Federation and the Netherlands Red Cross, 2003, or http://www.climatecentre.org.

The VCA process has therefore to respect local needs and everyday risks, while finding a way to engage with the community about the larger-scale disasters they could face. Generally, people's vulnerability can be identified in relation to five components that embody most aspects of people's exposure to a given natural hazard. Each of these five components of vulnerability can be tied in with existing Red Cross Red Crescent activities and priorities, as illustrated by **Figure 4**:

- **Livelihood and its resilience** determines well-being and concerns income-generation, which in turn dictates whether people can live in a safe house and location (self-protection). Although poverty reduction and asset protection are not specific areas of Red Cross Red Crescent activity, many VCAs show that in order to reduce people's vulnerability one must protect and strengthen their livelihoods. Tracing, for example, can have a positive effect on livelihoods, by assisting in returning much-needed labour to a household or enabling better access to lost assets (as well as raising morale and mental well-being).
- **People's well-being** in terms of health (including mental health) and nutrition, is crucial to their resilience, especially in the case of disasters that result in reduced food intake and health risks (for example, from contaminated water). It relates to Red Cross Red Crescent activities in vaccination and other aspects of preventive medicine (including programmes in HIV/AIDS), food security and nutrition, first aid, and water and sanitation.

Figure 4 **The connection between existing Red Cross Red Crescent programmes and capacity building/vulnerability reduction**



- **Self-protection** is linked to having an adequate livelihood, so as to afford the protection of home and assets. The capacity to build a house that will withstand local hazards (e.g., earthquakes, hurricanes) depends in part on adequate income, although cultural and behavioural factors can also affect the priority given to protection from infrequent hazards. Assistance is often needed in terms of necessary skills and techniques, and to encourage compliance with protective measures.
- **Social protection** is generally provided by local institutions (e.g. self-help groups, local government, NGOs, etc.) and involves precautions that people cannot manage on their own, such as flood protection, or ensuring compliance with building codes. This is reflected in Red Cross Red Crescent activities such as hazard mitigation (e.g. cyclone shelters in Bangladesh, community flood precautions in Nepal and the Solomon Islands).
- **Governance** reflects the way in which power operates to determine how resources and incomes are allocated and whether a civil society exists and is active (for example, in open media discussions about risks; existence of organizations that can press for adequate social protection for vulnerable people). This ties in to the Red Cross Red Crescent's role in advocacy and as an auxiliary to government.

The linkages between these components are important. For instance, the strength of a household's livelihood determines the well-being of that family – including their food status, health and morale. This is highly relevant to their capacity to cope with and rebound from a disaster: if well-fed and healthy, they are less likely to succumb to disease. The type of livelihood is crucial, too: if land is washed away in a flood, or a fishing boat and nets are wrecked in a storm or tsunami, then it is unlikely that the household can easily recover.

Another linkage is crucial in disasters. The strength of the livelihood will also affect how much the household can invest in protecting themselves from hazards. Of course, there is no guarantee that people will spend their money on building a house that is safe from

hurricanes, nor on a site that is out of harm's way in floods. Many people are too poor to provide self-protection. Others give priority to issues that are more pressing on a day-to-day basis: where to get water; how to eat enough; how to pay for medicines or school fees.

That is where the need for social protection comes in. Where people cannot provide their own security, or where they need to be encouraged to overcome "cultural" resistance to action, then social protection is needed with support from an organization at a higher level (including local or national governments, and/or the Red Cross Red Crescent).

Case study 4

The Caribbean's local priorities: Kitchens vs strong roofs

In a number of Caribbean countries, a programme to strengthen house roofs to better withstand hurricanes was carried out. Many of the intended beneficiaries, however, gave a higher priority to having a better kitchen. This might seem like courting disaster to outsiders, who would have put hurricane risks at the top of their list. But for local people, the daily struggle to cook and do household chores was more pressing than the hurricane that might not arrive for many years. The National Societies agreed to help local people improve both their kitchens and their roofs.

Governance is also a crucial link in reducing vulnerability. Governance, as defined by the World Bank report, *Governance and Development*,[9] is "the manner in which power is exercised in the management of a country's economic and social resources for development".

[9] The World Bank Group. *Governance and Development*. Washington DC: World Bank, 1992.

It is, therefore, relevant to vulnerability in two key ways. Firstly, the type of governance in a country has a profound effect on people's income and on the access that various groups of people have to resources and assets for their livelihoods. Secondly, the quality of governance will affect the amount and quality of social protection: flood preparedness, warning systems for tropical cyclones and tsunami, building codes for earthquake protection, etc. – these all depend on governance.

Box 11

Governance in disaster preparedness programmes in Indonesia

An example of the importance of governance is shown by the disaster preparedness (DP)/CBDP programme (phase 1, 2003–2008) jointly run by the Indonesian Red Cross Society and the Danish Red Cross: [10]

"The programme will, through cooperation with the provincial government, advocate for the DP/CBDP concept. The programme will take every opportunity to promote the rights of the primary target group, especially the poorer sector, at all relevant institutions – local as well as national. Every opportunity will be taken to involve the media in promoting programme activities. In close cooperation with the public relations division, a video will be produced following the programme from the very beginning." (p. 20)

"Social awareness: The current programme gives high priority to building capacities in communities. However, PMI recognizes that there is a need in many areas of Indonesia to pay special attention to the social environment in which these activities will take place. Though it is not the role of PMI to act as a mediator in local disputes and/or in conflicts, it is necessary for the Indonesian Red Cross Society to pay attention to the risks involved if CBDP programmes are carried out in areas marked by social disparities. The first step is to move away from the idea that social tension prevention and reduction is a separate

[10] Palang Merah Indonesia (PMI – Indonesian Red Cross Society)/Danish Red Cross (DRC). *Disaster Preparedness (DP)/CBDP Programme Phase 1 (2003–2008).* Jakarta: PMI//DRC, undated.

programme. If CBDP is implemented in the right way it should contribute to social cohesion by reducing the vulnerability of the community, which has an impact on the risk of tensions and potential conflict. At the same time the programme will make risk reduction more specific by internalising such aspects as early-awareness, social analysis, transparency and increasing coping mechanisms." (p. 21)

Once VCA has been linked to these components of vulnerability and the relationships between them are understood, it becomes much easier to identify the related capacities that need to be strengthened. It is also possible to see how existing Red Cross Red Crescent programmes that are not specifically related to disaster preparedness are actually contributing to vulnerability reduction and capacity building at the grass-roots level. This enables better integration of programmes and new ways of working hand-in-hand with communities to make Red Cross Red Crescent activities more effective.

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

Conclusion

Community-based activities in the Red Cross Red Crescent

Many National Societies and International Federation delegations have developed a host of community-based activities over the past 15–20 years. These programmes may not necessarily be related to disasters as such, but they are the result of an awareness of the need to work at the grass-roots level in a different way.

Case study 5

Rwanda: Using local expertise

In looking to respond to problems of food insecurity, the Rwanda Red Cross took full advantage of local expertise by sharing out VCA-led topics of discussion, as follows:

- the elderly worked on history, with special emphasis on problems relating to food security;
- the women's representatives focused on the seasonal calendar and the daily routine;
- the young people produced a map of the sector showing community development achievements.

The group of women started by drawing up a seasonal calendar of work, in order to share their collective experience. In Rwanda, women are the ones who usually tend the fields and take care of the crops and the family's children. They know a great deal about their land and the daily difficulties and obstacles that they face.

The discussion focused on what were the best crops to grow and revealed that, for example, production of coffee had slowed after several dry seasons – despite the fact that income generated from coffee production was far higher than that obtained from growing vegetables.

The group highlighted the need for washing stations, so that the coffee beans could be properly treated and sold at current market prices – as one way of reducing the community's vulnerability to food insecurity.

"We had never thought in this way about how we live and grow food, we had never taken the time to visit our neighbors, even if they didn't live nearby, to ask them. When, why and how do you do that? We grow this variety rather than that one because…".

VCA participant

The reasons are clear. As with VCA, working with people at community level brings a much deeper connection between the Red Cross Red Crescent and the vulnerable people who are at the centre of the Red Cross Red Crescent's mission. This in turn has influenced the outlook of leaders in National Societies and their branches, as well as at the secretariat. It has also provided opportunities for the Red Cross Red Crescent to create new ways of working with partners, government, donors and participating National Societies.

As we reach the end of the guide, it has become apparent that a key issue for the Red Cross Red Crescent is increasing preparedness for disasters (using VCA as a major method), whilst reducing vulnerability and increasing capacity in all ways possible. Achieving this does not always mean carrying out projects that are specifically concerned with hazards themselves. There is a wider awareness of the vital need for the Red Cross Red Crescent to work with people in a participatory way and in the community more generally.

An emerging convergence of different community-based approaches to investigation, diagnosis and programming has brought together a range of methodologies from various parts of the world.

The PCD approach used in Central Europe is one of these, but the Red Cross Red Crescent has developed a number of other methods for working at community level (**see Box 11**).

Box 12 Community-based approaches

- **Participatory Community Development** (PCD) has been used in Central Europe, where many National Societies faced particular difficulties after the collapse of the communist regimes, which left them with less state funding. At the same time, poverty had increased among some groups. In 2000, nine societies began using a methodology called Participatory Community Development as a way to revitalise their work. PCD is a way to investigate people's problems in their localities. It has many similarities with VCA, though it is not specifically aimed at working on natural hazards. National Societies work with people at the grassroots level to help rebuild their communities, and reduce vulnerability. It uses PRA (participatory rapid appraisal) tools like those in VCA to conduct the investigations, and this leads to activities to assist particular groups.
- **Integrated community programming** is a method of working at the grass-roots level, which began in Latin America (not specifically related to hazards). It involves community participation leading to broader development (and not simply assistance and relief) – focusing on service delivery to fill gaps in a community's basic needs so as to improve the quality of life of vulnerable people. It is integrated in the sense that it promotes internal collaboration between sectors of a National Society, works both with and within communities (rather than for and to them), and promotes partnerships with local and national government, religious institutions and NGOs.
- **Community-Based Disaster Preparedness** (CBDP) and management is an approach for participatory disaster mitigation used in a number of National Societies. The idea is to involve the local community in its own systems of preparedness (e.g., with local stockpiles of grain in case of emergencies). In some cases, the Red Cross Red

Crescent involvement leads people to engage in hazard mitigation activities at the local level. CBDP can also lead to advocacy for other forms of mitigation and preparedness, and for greater involvement of the relevant authorities in disaster preparedness. CBDP is sometimes carried out as a distinct intervention on its own, and at other times as the outcome of VCA (i.e., VCA investigation leads to CBDP as the logical outcome to reduce vulnerability and build capacity).

- **Community-Based First Aid** (CBFA) takes first aid and health initiatives into localities on the basis of working with people rather than on the basis of delivering a service to people. CBFA includes using a number of community investigatory activities similar to some of those used in VCA to ensure it reflects both a minimum package and the priorities of a given community. Sometimes, a VCA can highlight health-related needs which may then be passed to the health departments for action, rather than ignoring or repeating a useful data set (see case study 3).
- **Participatory hygiene and sanitation transformation** (PHAST) is a participatory approach for water and sanitation projects. It aims to promote hygiene, better sanitation and community management of water and sanitation facilities. Community groups become "involved in discovering the routes of water-borne diseases, analysing their own behaviours in light of this information and then planning how to block contamination routes". The participatory methods encourage people from all social backgrounds to take part in a group process and make decision-making easy and fun. Participants learn from each other and develop respect for each other's knowledge and skills. More information on PHAST can be found on the International Federation's web site at: http://www.ifrc.org/what/health/water/phast.asp

To help bring these processes together, and to avoid the impression that VCA is "only" an approach to be used in disaster preparedness, the Secretariat has supported a process of harmonization.

This has led to a "harmonized toolbox", which includes a wide range of community investigation tools that are already in use. The toolbox will be available to National Societies and the International Federation delegations in due course. The idea is to show that working with communities begins with an investigation, which leads to the diagnosis of the issues that the people would like to solve, and the design of projects and programmes to be carried out by and with the people themselves.

Many people in National Societies and the International Federation think of VCA as being related only to disaster preparedness. However, all over the world, VCA often ends up leading to projects that are not hazard-related. This does not matter, as long as VCA and other community-based approaches ultimately lead to the strengthening people's resilience, livelihoods and capacities, and a re-generation of National Societies, their branches and volunteers.[11]

All of this contributes to a general reduction in vulnerability. Greater trust and participation emerge because of community-based activities, together with improved partnerships and cooperation with other organizations. In conjunction with risk mapping at the national and sub-national levels, VCA and other community approaches can build powerful links between the Red Cross Red Crescent and communities at the grass-roots level, further strengthened through more effective partnerships and collaboration with government and other organizations.

[11] The International Federation publishes the *World Disasters Report* every year. The 2004 report focused specifically on community resilience. A summary of the *World Disasters Report 2004* (and indications on how to order the full report) is available on the International Federation's web site at: http://www.ifrc.org/publicat/wdr2004/contents.asp

Key message

"The International Federation works to improve the lives of vulnerable people by mobilizing the power of humanity."

International Federation's mission statement, Strategy 2010

This in turn ensures that disaster preparedness is rooted in a strong framework that has meaning and practical value in reducing vulnerability in the face of both disasters and the risks of everyday life.

VCA learning by doing: The living-through-time model in action (Figure 3) to create sensitive change.

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

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 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.

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.

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