



PRC staff doing house-to-house visits at Brgy. San Rafael, Itbayat, Batanes. Cover photo by Maria Roxanne Nicolas.

# COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT AND ACCOUNTABILITY IN EMERGENCY

## Introduction

This case study sums up the experiences of Philippine Red Cross (PRC) in engaging the affected communities of the Batanes Earthquake.

It features the key role of Community Engagement and Accountability (CEA) in emergency operations to enhance community acceptance.

## Issue

On July 27, 2019, a series of earthquakes hit the Municipality of Itbayat, Batanes. Philippine Institute of Volcanology and Seismology reported that the strongest intensity reached Intensity VII, rated as destructive, which severely damaged some houses, schools, and health facilities in the area.

## Response

PRC conducted impact assessment and immediately provided food items, tarpaulins, psychological first-aid, and set-up a water station in the said island.

Also, PRC provided multi-purpose cash grants, shelter tool kits, and safe shelter awareness sessions to the earthquake-affected communities through the support of the International Federation of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC).

## Community Engagement and Accountability at a glance: Philippines Red Cross

Formed in 1947, the Philippine Red Cross (PRC) is the leading humanitarian organization in the country, committed to provide quality life-saving services which protect the life and dignity especially of indigent Filipinos in vulnerable situations. At present, the PRC provides six major services: Blood Services, Disaster Management Services, Safety Services, Health Services, Red Cross Youth/Volunteer Services, and Welfare Services.

Trusted and preferred channels of communication in the Philippines include radio, newspaper, hotline, SMS, social media, help desks, and printed materials. PRC utilizes these multiple channels to ensure that the affected people had access to information. Other trusted communication channels include community focus groups, notice boards, social media, and *barangay* committees.



as supported by:



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PRC provided information about the assistance the community will be receiving as well as the process of selecting the people to receive aid.



Discussion of earthquake key messages at Brgy. Sta. Maria, Itbayat Batanes.



PRC conducts child friendly spaces activity at Mayan Elementary School in Brgy. San Rafael, Itbayat, Batanes.



PRC staff assists community people in identifying some possible eligible people to receive assistance.

## CEA Best Practices

**Identifying CEA information needs:** To share information effectively, mapping out the existing community information sharing behaviors and determining the post-disaster immediate information needs are essential. With this, PRC gathered necessary data to analyze the appropriate communication platforms and relevant key messages. Assessment results reflect that English and Tagalog are the preferred language of communication over the local dialect. Also, during different community assemblies, it was noticeable how some attendees articulate their thoughts in English. Considering these factors, key messages were developed and disseminated in these languages.

An introduction about the tenets of the Red Cross and operations to every involved stakeholder has been a practice in every PRC operations. This action has been an effective entry point of the organization in various communities. Additionally, the operations team also ensured that selection criteria were understood and agreed with the partner communities. These initiatives were key to ensure acceptance from the community.

One of the pressing concerns of the community is their lack of awareness about earthquakes. Their island is vulnerable to strong typhoons but some of the villagers speak that it is their first time to experience an earthquake in their lifetime. They were traumatized and fear the mild aftershocks felt in their locale. As such, the PRC discussed and posted details about apt actions to take before, during, and after earthquakes.

**Providing psychosocial support (PSS) for the affected communities:** As mentioned earlier, some people still manifest stress reaction brought by the situation. To help communities cope better with stress caused by the earthquake, PRC deployed their PSS team to conduct and set-up psychological first-aid for the adults and child friendly spaces for children. Through coordination with the local authorities, the team was able to identify people needing intervention. The house-to-house visits and the PSS given to some elderlies and persons with disabilities (PWD) suggest that they still feel helpless whenever aftershocks are sensed in their area. The team also implemented child friendly spaces activities targeting elementary and high school students.

**Involving the community in decision making:** PRC recognizes that communities are experts of their own locale and are knowledgeable of their specific needs to recover promptly. In relation with this, PRC ensured that selection of people who will be receiving assistance will be done in a consultative, transparent, and equitable manner. These CEA efforts were key to ensure community's acceptance of PRC activities.

**Giving opportunity for feedback:** Managing community feedback for the Red Cross is yet to be institutionalized within the organization. For this operation, PRC used open-data kit (ODK) to input each community feedback. Each data gathered were uploaded and consolidated, and discussed within the operations team.

## Impact

The disaster affected community is at the core of the Red Cross humanitarian response. Throughout the operations, PRC established an engaging and enabling environment, and empowering links with the community and various stakeholders. It is the fundamental right of the community to be involved in every decision that affects them. With this, participation and two-way communication were strengthened between communities and the Red Cross ensuring people's acceptance and ownership.

## Lessons Learned

PRC ensured that CEA activities were mainstreamed and documented in this emergency operations. These attempts were valuable to guarantee trust from the community, as well as, to advocate central ideals of CEA internally or externally. Some of the key lessons learned were;

**Collaboration with communities is proven effective;** Some people from the operations view participatory techniques as tedious and trivial especially during emergency operations wherein rapid response is required. Yet, collaboration from the community has its privileges as well. As said earlier, active engagement of affected population builds community's confidence to the organization which can later serve as a foundation for future community actions and development. It has been proven in various operations that community acceptance paves way to a smooth-running implementation of activities. As such, it is recommended for future operations to ensure that participatory approaches are explored and executed if appropriate in any given context.

**Information as aid;** Providing accurate and appropriate information to communities might seem easy for some but in reality, it ought to be developed and implemented strategically. Choosing the communication channels in harmony to certain community context must be always observed. It is highly encouraged for every operation to review the information flow in each community and take time to deliberate on what key messages to share and when to disseminate such relevant information.

**Volunteers are key for community engagement;** PRC recognizes that volunteer engagement in its operations adds to the impact and, later on, to the sustainability of each program. During the peak of the emergency operations, the Chapter has been striving to recruit and retain community volunteers. As such, CEA activities were executed with very minimal volunteer participation. It is suggested, that each chapter should create and capacitate a pool of volunteers on CEA fundamentals. \*\*\*

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