

Vulnerability and capacity assessment in Europe

by Lena Sallin

Background

The Swedish Red Cross initiative to organize a workshop to exchange experience on vulnerability and capacity assessment in Europe and discuss the feasibility of conducting the assessment in a consistent manner was sparked by the report of the *Working Group on the Implementation of the Strategic Work Plan for Europe* (formed at the Fourth European Regional Conference in The Hague, in May 1992), which recommends that the European National Societies *proceed with identifying vulnerable groups in their respective countries and initiate a discussion on future cooperation on vulnerability and capacity assessment.*

The workshop, which was held at Gripsholm, the Swedish Red Cross Folk College in Mariefred, on 20-21 April 1994, was attended by 32 participants representing 16 European National Red Cross Societies (Albania, Belgium, Canada, Croatia, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Great Britain, Iceland, Lithuania, the Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, Sweden and Ukraine), the Canadian Red Cross and the Federation.

Introduction

The Strategic Work Plan is to be implemented at a time when Western Europe is facing increasing poverty and social exclusion and Eastern Europe is battling with collapsing economies, war and internal conflict.

The increase of vulnerable communities in Europe has placed new demands on the European National Societies and raised the question whether today's Red Cross activities are geared towards the right groups.

Who *are* the most vulnerable? How should this group be identified? What methods should be used? Is it desirable, or, indeed, possible, to conduct the vulnerability and capacity assessment in Europe in a consistent manner?

If so, what would the obligatory components be? If not, what are the most important areas for future cooperation on vulnerability studies? Is there a need for future cooperation or not? In what way? What is the role of the Federation in this process? What support should the National Societies provide?

What is the role of the national versus the local level? Who is responsible for vulnerability and capacity assessment, activity planning and implementation? Is the national level to decide what groups are to be targeted? What is the role of the local level? How should vulnerable groups be involved in the process? Finally, what is the need in terms of support and training and how is the process to be evaluated?

Proceedings of the workshop

By first focusing on the experience of the various National Societies in implementing the Strategic Work Plan and opening a general discussion on vulnerability and capacity assessment, the workshop identified the following issues for further discussion:

- dissemination of the Strategic Work Plan;
- role of a national study/national framework;
- organizational change;
- a “tool-box” of methods for the local level;
- capacity for needs assessment at the local level;
- capacity to work *with* the vulnerable;
- relations with other local organizations;
- evaluation.

The findings and discussions are summarized below.

1. Dissemination of the Strategic Work Plan

All National Societies present were at some level of dissemination and/or implementation of the Strategic Work Plan — some were already encouraging needs assessment at the local level, while others were still discussing strategy at the national level. None felt that they had come very far.

It was generally agreed that working on behalf of the vulnerable requires much more emphasis on *advocacy* and that the Red Cross should join the political debate in order to influence humanitarian issues. This triggered a discussion of the principle of neutrality and its impact on activities at the local level where, it was felt, neutrality is sometimes used as an excuse not to engage in new activities. It was emphasized that neutrality does not mean that the Red Cross is excluded from influencing political issues, but that the Red Cross should not be linked to any political party, ideology or movement.

2. Role of a national study

Social Pulse, the Norwegian national study

The Norwegian Red Cross (NRC) is, to date, the only National Society in Europe which has carried out a comprehensive national study.

The purpose of the study was to make sure that NRC is targeting the right groups, to create a solid base for influencing the authorities to do something about social conditions, to show that Red Cross activities in Norway are up to date and that NRC is committed to bringing about a change.

NRC commissioned a well-known research institute, FAFO, to do the study, and an NRC working group followed the researchers closely through the year-long process. Data was collected through questionnaires sent to a representative sample of 1,000 individuals and Red Cross people in key local positions; interviews with local council decision-makers in health and social work; and by linking and matching the findings with official national data.

The study, *Social Pulse*, was released at the October 1993 NRC National Assembly, to which several political parties in Norway were invited and challenged as to what they were going to do about the changing social reality revealed by the study. This started a media debate which highlighted the findings of *Social Pulse*, Norwegian Red Cross activities and FAFO.

Local branches in Norway subsequently engaged in thorough discussions and some local pilot projects are now under way.

The workshop agreed that the *role of a national study* is to create awareness of vulnerable groups in society; suggest priorities for the National Societies and be a tool for advocacy; start the process of vulnerability and capacity assessment at the local level, generate ideas for pilot projects in vulnerability and capacity assessment; and provide a basis for “tool-box” guidelines. The national study should lead to a clear national statement of objectives, a framework which in turn should yield local assessment.

The significance of using a well-known research institute for the national study was debated, but since the capacity to fund such a study differs widely between National Societies, low-cost alternatives to engaging a research institute were proposed.

Questionnaires, perhaps prepared in cooperation with national academic circles on a voluntary basis, could for example be distributed to and processed by local Red Cross units. Returned questionnaires could then be compared with national statistics, and the result analysed. To guarantee attention from the public and the media, the analysis could be carried out in cooperation with a national “high profile personality”. The analysis could be complemented with case studies for subsequent distribution to local units and media.

It was stressed over and over again that the role of the national level is to *raise awareness* of the intentions in the Strategic Work Plan and the national framework, *provide encouragement, motivation and support* for professionals and volunteers at the local level, and *leave the local units to do their own vulnerability and capacity assessments within the national framework*.

This requires skilful dissemination of the objectives of the national study, and strong support for local-level activities.

3. Organizational change

The Red Cross should meet changes in society, such as increasing poverty, social exclusion, xenophobia and violence, by adopting new methods and devising new ways of organizing activities. Adaptation to the new realities is necessary not only to meet the new demands, but also to stimulate awareness and attract new volunteers.

There were marked differences between the National Societies of Eastern and Western Europe. While the Eastern European Societies felt that today's massive external pressure (war, internal conflict, economic decline) guarantees that organizational change takes place, the Western European Societies felt that, in the West, new ideas do not come automatically but have to be induced.

4. A “tool-box” of methods for the local level

Common questions from active Red Cross workers are: “How do we initiate a discussion on vulnerability and capacity assessment? How do we go about it? What is appropriate for the Red Cross?”. This underscores the need for guidelines.

The workshop concluded, however, that a common methodology for assessment of vulnerability and capacity is hardly feasible, even in Europe. Rather, there is a need for a “tool-box”, a *collection* of methods and case-studies, “tools” to pick and choose from, adapt and improve until they fit local conditions.

There should be a “tool-box” for each country, and the contents could be shared between National Societies with the assistance of the Federation. These “tool-boxes” should have a common approach spelt out in a national framework to facilitate comparison.

5. Capacity for needs assessment at the local level

The importance of a framework for needs assessment set by the national level was again stressed. Effective activities at the local level were considered possible only if a consensus — including all levels of the National Society — on the national framework was reached. The ideas in the national framework must have credibility among facilitators and volunteers.

Training is a necessary precondition, and the goal should be to create awareness and motivation for change and development. The process needs to be facilitated by the national/regional level, integrating volunteers, who often have more credibility at the local level than paid staff.

In the process of assessment the following should be taken into account: existing Red Cross national activities and planning; existing Red Cross local services planning and procedures; activities of other NGOs and local authorities; and a realistic view of the capacities and methods of the Red Cross.

The consensus was that local capacity for assessment exists but depends on many local factors. There is a need, however, to motivate local units to use their resources. Organizational conservatism could be alleviated by the perspective of gaining new volunteers for and from new activities.

6. Capacity to work *with* vulnerable groups

To work with vulnerable groups and individuals was regarded as a major challenge to the organizations and methods of the Movement today.

The negative attitudes to change which are held by many volunteers, members and staff should not be underestimated. To work *with* the vulnerable, there is a need for the “right” people at the local level as well as at other levels.

The local level needs support, training and methods to do its own assessment and to be prepared to engage not only in “clean” social work, for instance with the elderly, but also in “dirty” social work, such as with AIDS victims, the homeless, street children and drug addicts.

7. Relations with other local organizations

Cooperating with other organizations would give the Red Cross access to more information and more human and economic resources and is a precondition for good work *with* vulnerable groups instead of *for* them.

That the Red Cross is active in many different areas is a strength. The principle of neutrality allows the Red Cross to take the initiative in bringing different organizations together. Unfortunately, there are also examples where local branches have avoided cooperation by invoking the principle of neutrality.

8. Evaluation

It was stressed that a cycle of assessment, evaluation and adjustment must be a regular and permanent feature of the process of vulnerability and capacity assessment in order to keep in touch with new developments, adapt to changes and avoid developing unnecessary long-term services.

The evaluations should answer the question whether the method meets the needs of the beneficiaries and is implemented in accordance with the Fundamental Principles.

Follow up

1. A *follow-up workshop* should be held in 12-18 months, and case studies with practical examples should be provided. The meeting should be for both Eastern and Western Europe and held in Eastern Europe.

2. The various national departments should strengthen *cooperation* on the issue of vulnerability and capacity assessment.

3. Some kind of a *network* for an exchange of information between the National Societies should be created. All National Societies should contribute ideas and case studies to the Federation Secretariat. Once a

month these could either be summarized and collected into a newsletter or copied and distributed.

This type of network requires a focal point in each National Society and a firm commitment by the Federation to keep the Societies informed and to summarize and distribute documentation.

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