

Promoting community self-help

Community participation conveys an active and functioning view of human interaction. People working together in groups, whether in an emergency or developmental setting, with helpers supporting the group's values, needs and aspirations, are less likely to suffer feelings of helplessness and dependency. In addition, community participation helps to establish community ownership of support or relief initiatives and may lead to more sustainable programmes.

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4-1

This module describes how to engage communities in their own recovery process, with the underlying beneficial effects on the psychological consequences of critical events. Community self-help is relevant to all relief operations and humanitarian interventions and therefore to all Red Cross - Red Crescent programmes. It is not a new approach, and has been used as part of methods relevant to Vulnerability and Capacity Assessment (VCA) and Participatory Rural Approach (PRA)¹²³ where the intention is to enable communities to identify their own vulnerabilities and capacities.

You are experiencing community participation in this course. The learning method used underlines participation by encouraging participants to take an active role in their own learning. Activities are primarily focused on communication and dialogue among participants, and on collaboration, using their own experiences, skills and capabilities to achieve joint goals.

Learning objectives

At the end of this module, participants should be able to:

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4-2

- Describe the factors that make a community supportive and healthy for its members
- Give details of how communities can be helped to use their own resources to solve problems
- Develop ideas and methods to engage people and achieve community participation.

4.1 Defining a community

A community can be defined as a group of people having a common identity relating to certain factors. An obvious example of aspects held in common might be geography, or in other words, a group of people who all live and work in the same area.

1- Anderson M B and Woodrow P J (1990) *Rising from the ashes: development strategies in times of disaster*, Westview Press: Colorado.

2- Von Kotze A and Holloway A (1996) *Reducing risks*. International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies and Dept. of Adult and Community Education, University of Natal.

3- Disaster Preparedness Department, *Toolbox for vulnerability and capacity assessment*, International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies.



Discussion point

To gain a broader understanding of the definition of community through exposure to the experience of others in different communities, ask the group to analyse those communities of which they are members in order to define key aspects held in common that make people members of that community.

Flipchart responses, and see if they add to the common aspects of community membership shown below.

The discussion may have discovered that a community can be defined as a group of people having a common identity relating to factors such as:

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4-3

- Geography
- Language
- Values
- Attitudes
- Behaviour patterns
- Interests, etc.

The group of participants on this course can thus be described as a community - they are likely to have language, values, attitudes and interests in common.

A community approach

Disasters vary from those affecting a single family to those affecting entire regions of the globe. In general, however, most disasters affect at least one or more communities of people who share many of the same resources and capacities. Therefore, interventions conducted at the community level can offer better results by making the most efficient use of local resources and capacities to support the recovery of the affected population.

An example:

A group of young people living with HIV/AIDS feel depressed about their futures. They express to the Red Cross - Red Crescent volunteers that they do not see themselves as having anything of value to offer in their community, that their lives have become meaningless, and that they are merely biding their time until the end arrives. One of them points out that he also sees his younger brothers and sisters becoming sexually active and beginning to face many of the same dangers that he and his friends did. Another of them shares that she feels less depressed since she began singing and dancing with members of a youth theatre in her community.

From this information the Red Cross - Red Crescent volunteer has assessed several things:

Needs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ A problem of depression among the HIV positive youth in these communities ■ Need for the HIV positive young people to feel useful in their communities ■ Need to prevent further infections among the young people of these communities.
Resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ HIV positive young people may have time, energy, and interest in contributing to their communities ■ HIV positive youth have valuable life experiences with which to make a contribution ■ Community youth theatre has much to offer the local communities.
Project	The Red Cross - Red Crescent volunteers serve to encourage the HIV positive young people to work with youth theatre groups to develop songs and short plays that inform the community in valuable ways about HIV and AIDS. They go on to perform their show to people of all ages throughout their communities.
Impact	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Provision of information and encouragement to younger people about preventing the further spread of the virus ■ Provision of information about living with HIV/AIDS ■ Provision of information and inspiration to other people living with HIV/AIDS ■ Reduction of stereotypes and stigma that surround HIV/AIDS ■ Attraction of other HIV positive youth who were too withdrawn to become involved in community action ■ Less depression and hopelessness now that the young people feel they contribute to their communities.

The scenario above may be a hypothetical example, but it does indicate ways and means, advantages and options inherent to a community approach.

Community participation

Community participation, here meaning self-help, assumes:

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4-4

- Basing projects on ideas developed by the concerned people themselves. They determine a common aim and work together to achieve it
- A planned process, where local groups participate in collective decisions about their needs as well as the development and implementation of strategies based on their collective strengths to meet those needs.⁴

4- Loughry M and Ager A (Eds) (2001) *The Refugee Experience*, Psychosocial Training Module (Rev. Ed.), Volume 1, University of Oxford.



Activity 4A: Defining community participation

Brainstorming. Ask the whole group to suggest the characteristics of community participation. Record responses on a flipchart. You might start them off with some characteristics such as:

- Grassroots level
- Collective action
- Democracy
- The right to self-determination.

Discuss any differences of opinion that may occur, and ask them to try to put the list of characteristics in a priority order.

Purpose of this Activity:

- To identify the main characteristics of community participation, using their own knowledge and experience
- To discuss in depth how important some of these characteristics are and whether any are more important than others.

4.2 Promoting self-help

Red Cross - Red Crescent volunteers are in a good position to promote the process of community self-help. In many instances they are part of the affected community, they share the same language and often cultural background, and as such are better able to provide support to affected people.⁵ Action that the volunteer takes must be guided and coordinated by the programme manager, but for the process to be successful it is crucial that the volunteer empowers community members to:

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4-5

- Define the community's role and responsibility to design and implement self-help strategies
- Define an acceptable role for the volunteer
- Assess their own problems based on community knowledge and values
- Initiate dialogue to share information leading to potential solutions.

The following are essential elements in the process of aiding community self-help:

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4-6

- Identification and involvement of community leaders or influential persons
- Establishment of a sense of ownership by the community
- Identification of community resources
- Promotion of psychological well-being
- Mobilization of resources
- Joint decision-making and consensus.

Identification and involvement of community leaders

All communities have leaders, official and otherwise. Trust in and respect for leaders is very important, since leaders represent their communities and should be seen to be working towards helping the community to achieve its collective goals. Therefore, involvement of respected leaders is an essential part of community participation.

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Some communities are more active than others and some members of a community participate more than others. One characteristic which influences community action is status. Status is found in all societies and

5- International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (2001). *Psychological support: Best practices from Red Cross and Red Crescent programmes*, IFRC.

seems to function as a guide to expected behaviour of members. For instance, we can expect some group members to participate in some activities but not others because of their status. Thus, understanding and respecting how a community views the status of its members can be of key importance in setting up any cooperative projects.

To give an example, a letter from the Red Cross - Red Crescent National Society requesting community members to participate in a project might be successful, because of the status of the organization. An anonymous letter is likely to be less successful. People respond, to a large extent, based on the status of who is making the appeal. So if the request is to be effective, it helps if people with sufficient status to influence other community members are prominently involved.

Activity 4B: Social structures and leadership

Small groups (3 or 4). In this activity, people belonging to the same community may usefully work together. Ask them to respond to the following questions:

In your main community:

- *How do you know about the social structures in the community?*
- *How are leaders identified?*
- *Is there a difference between formal leadership and informal leadership?*
- *How do you know that leaders use their power for the good of everyone in the community?*

Back in the main group, ask a representative from each small group to give a very brief overview of their responses.

Purpose of this Activity:

- *To discover common elements in the social structures of different communities*
- *To consider how social structures such as leadership are identified by community members*
- *To gain insight into how helpers might approach communities of different kinds.*

Establishment of a sense of ownership

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In working with people to promote community self-help, it is important to pay attention to the amount of ownership they feel for a particular issue or problem. Generally it can be stated that we tend to take better care of things we own. Think of household toilets as opposed to public toilets. Private toilets are often better maintained simply because their owners value them.

The same applies to community projects. When people feel ownership regarding community issues/problems, they are interested in solving these. When they feel the solution to their problems are their own solutions people are more likely to implement them.⁶

⁶- United States Agency for International Development and U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, *Communicating about health. A guide for facilitators.*



Identification of community resources

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Following critical events, social structures are often destabilized and traditional support mechanisms are weakened or sometimes lost. Thus, many affected people experience a temporary sense of loss of control over their lives. They miss things the way they were before, however imperfect that might have been.

In order to facilitate self-help and enhance coping mechanisms, knowledge about the traditional and cultural resources in the concerned community is important. Finding the answers to the following questions may ease the process:

- What are culturally appropriate ways of helping people in distress?
- Whom did people traditionally turn to for support and help?
- How can those people and structures be supported?

Repairing and re-establishing social structures also includes an understanding of the roles of the social networks, families, traditional leaders and others in the community. From the people concerned you will get first-hand information. It is important to talk to a large number of people to get a reliable picture and consistent information about the social structures in the community.

Promotion of psychological well-being

We know that there are certain protective factors in life that provide people with a psychological "cover" and therefore reduce the likelihood of severe psychological effects when encountering hardship or suffering. Some protective factors are:

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4-10

- Belonging to a caring family or community
- Maintaining traditions and cultures
- Having a strong religious belief or political ideology.

Some protective factors for children are:

- Stable emotional relationship with adults
- Social support both within and from outside the family.⁷

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4-11

Red Cross - Red Crescent volunteers can help strengthen these protective factors by empowering people and giving them a sense of control and predictability over their lives. This is mainly done by acknowledging that people are not helpless and by setting up structures that allow people to participate in community activities. In other words, it can be done by building on or strengthening resources in the communities.

People are social beings with a natural wish to belong to and contribute to a larger social group, whether that is their family or community. Things people do together, such as religious ceremonies, social gatherings, meeting over tea, playing games or simply exchanging news, serve as important ways of coping with a critical event. Engagement, whether it is in daily activities, recreational or educational activities, helps promote psychological well-being. More specifically the benefits are:

- Helping people to meet basic needs
- Regaining a feeling of control over some aspects of life
- Supporting a feeling of belonging
- Serving as an outlet for tension
- Providing opportunities to be distracted from more uncomfortable matters
- Providing chances to feel useful.

Mobilization of resources

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Once the Red Cross - Red Crescent volunteers have assisted in identifying the resources in a given community, the next step is to mobilize those resources and strengthen the community's own capacities.

People who have an interest or concern in common can easily mobilize their resources and capacity, and take action for a desirable change or development (as illustrated earlier in the example of young people who are HIV positive). Mobilization of resources can, however, only be done in a positive way if people are motivated or see the value in participating.

In order to enable Red Cross - Red Crescent volunteers to become facilitators in this process, the volunteers' role or position has to be explained clearly to everyone. When key people in the community (both resourceful and vulnerable people) have been identified, the facilitator must take the time to listen to and understand what people are most concerned about. The facilitator's main concern is to help meet the needs of the whole community in realistic ways that yield tangible results and that address mutual interests.

Thus, the role of the facilitator is:

- To support community initiatives
- To assist with the process of transforming needs and goals into action.

Every new activity starts with somebody sharing a vision with others. The likely success of the activity depends on how many people share the vision and their commitment to making it a reality. The basic premise is that a group of people together identify a problem, share a vision and believe that change is desirable and possible.

Steps in activity planning

The following indicate the questions to be asked in the process of planning:

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4-13

- What is the vision or goal (the aim or end towards which the activity is directed)?
- What are the objectives (what we intend to achieve)?
- What are the ways of achieving these objectives (what we intend to do)?
- What are the advantages and disadvantages of these ways? How many resources do we have (time, money, human resources)?
- Which plan do we accept? Do we all accept it?
- Who will do what, when, where, and how?
- At what point do we need to evaluate?⁸



Joint decision-making and consensus

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Decision-making is a key element. It is, however, not always a smooth process. People are likely to have differences of opinion, and might have difficulty deciding on a common goal. Facilitators must be aware of early signs of conflict or tension, and bring their observation to the attention of the concerned group. This should be done with a view to finding mutually acceptable ways of resolving the tension. In bringing observations to the group, avoid pointing out individuals, but rather assist the group in recognizing its responsibility to the whole community.⁹

In conclusion, the goal of the community self-help approach is to reintegrate individuals and families within their communities, and identify and restore natural community networks and coping strategies. This is only done through a continuous community dialogue, with the affected people, local counterparts, and health and social representatives.

Activity 4C: Planning action

Small groups (4). Role-play. Ask participants to imagine the following situation and to divide between them the roles of:

- Community leader
- Concerned parent 1
- Concerned parent 2
- Red Cross - Red Crescent facilitator.

Ask them to imagine themselves at a meeting discussing the following situation:

Ethnic violence in the Visalia region has included the burning of several local schools. This has led to fear and dread among school-aged children in the affected community. A group of citizens is now meeting to discuss ways to help the children cope with the situation.

The Red Cross - Red Crescent facilitator should try to use the information in the session and to make an effective contribution.

Give 10 minutes for this discussion, and then a further 10 minutes for the group to suggest what the facilitator might do, or might attempt to do.

Purpose of this Activity:

- To gain insight into how an Action Plan might be prepared for a specific community
- To practise facilitation skills in a simulated situation
- To share in a response that would be appropriate for the given situation.

Discussion point

Ask the whole group to share some of the insights that have come from the last activity, and then to go on to look at situations where people were coerced rather than encouraged to participate as a community. Discuss what the main difference, in both approach and consequences, might be. With the benefit of their own experience of participatory methods, ask participants to share either positive or negative experiences with the rest of the group, and to analyse why some programmes are more successful than others.

Review and revision: Taking action

Provide handout resource material in the form of thumbnail versions of your slides. These will serve as a summary of the session's main points, while acting as triggers for any areas which participants would like to review.

Invite participants to ask questions, make comments or give feedback.

Give participants the opportunity to follow up the discussion in the way they find most appropriate. For example, ask participants to note some of the major or key issues that have come from the session, and put down some ideas to remind them to focus on the promotion of community self-help in future work.



4.3 Summary

- Community participation and self-help is relevant to all relief operations and humanitarian interventions. It implies an active and functioning view of human interaction.
- A community is defined as a group of people with some kind of common identity, such as geography, language, values, and interests.
- The community approach requires the volunteer to assess needs and resources, and help to put into action projects which meet those needs and use those resources. Community participation means basing projects on ideas developed by the affected people.
- Volunteers play a vital role in helping to promote the process of community self-help. The following elements are essential:
 - Identification and involvement of community leaders or influential persons
 - Establishment of a sense of ownership by the community
 - Identification of community resources
 - Promotion of psychological well-being
 - Mobilization of resources
 - Joint decision-making and consensus.



Promoting community self-help

Promoting community self-help

- Community participation = active and functioning view of human interaction
- Groups within the community work together in their own recovery process
- Community self-help relevant to all relief operations and humanitarian interventions





Promoting community self-help

Learning objectives

- Describe the factors that make a community supportive and healthy for its members
- Give details of how communities can be helped to use their own resources to solve problems
- Develop ideas and methods to engage people and achieve community participation





Promoting community self-help

Defining a community

Common identity factors

- Geography
- Language
- Values
- Attitudes
- Behaviour patterns
- Interests



Promoting community self-help

Community participation

- Base projects on ideas developed by the concerned people themselves
- People determine a common aim and work together to achieve it
- Local groups make collective decisions, and work together on development and implementation
- Action based on collective strengths and abilities to meet needs



Promoting community self-help

Community self-help

- Volunteers must be guided and coordinated by the programme manager



Promoting community self-help

Empower community members to:

- Define the community's role and responsibility to design and implement self-help strategies
- Define acceptable partnership roles for Red Cross - Red Crescent volunteers in their community
- Assess their own problems based on community knowledge and values
- Initiate dialogue to share information leading to solutions





Promoting community self-help

Aiding community self-help

- Identify and involve community leaders or influential persons
- Establish a sense of ownership by the community
- Identify community resources
- Promote psychological well-being
- Mobilize resources
- Encourage joint decision-making and consensus





Promoting community self-help

Identify and involve community leaders

- Involvement of local leaders is an essential part of community participation
- Identify leaders who:
 - Are locally accepted, trusted and respected
 - Accurately represent their communities
 - Will work towards helping the community to achieve its collective goals
 - Have sufficient status to attract other members to be involved





Promoting community self-help

Establish a sense of ownership

- Successful community programmes require a local sense of ownership
- Solutions which come from the community are more likely to be implemented





Promoting community self-help

Identify community resources

- Knowledge of traditional and cultural resources in the community is important. Need to find out:
 - Roles of social networks, families, traditional leaders etc.
 - Culturally appropriate ways of helping those in distress
- Identify best way of supporting those people and structures



Promoting community self-help

Factors promoting psychological well-being

- Belonging to a caring family or community
- Maintaining traditions and cultures
- Having a strong religious belief or political ideology



Promoting community self-help

Protective factors for children

- Stable emotional relationship with adults
- Social support both within and from outside the family





Promoting community self-help

Promoting psychological well-being Red Cross - Red Crescent volunteers can:

- Empower people with a sense of control and predictability over their lives
- Encourage people to do familiar things together





Promoting community self-help

Mobilize resources

Strengthen the community's capacities

- Role of volunteer as facilitator needs careful explanation
- Listen and understand concerns of community members
- Support community initiatives
- Assist with transforming needs and goals into action



Promoting community self-help

Steps in activity planning

- Identify vision or goal and define objectives
- Identify ways of achieving these objectives
- Identify advantages and disadvantages of possible ways
- Check resources (time, money, human resources)
- Establish an acceptable plan
- Establish who will do what, when, where and how
- Establish a timeframe and criteria for programme evaluation



Promoting community self-help

Encourage joint decision-making

- Decision-making is a key element
- Differences of opinion may obstruct achievement of a common goal
- Be aware of conflict or tension
- Find mutually acceptable solutions



Promoting community self-help

Summary 1/2

- Community participation and self-help is relevant to all relief operations and humanitarian interventions. It implies an active and functioning view of human interaction.
- A community is defined as a group of people with some kind of common identity, such as geography, language, values, and interests.
- The community approach requires the volunteer to assess needs and resources, and help to put into action projects which meet those needs and use those resources. Community participation means basing projects on ideas developed by the affected people.

Promoting community self-help

Summary 2/2

- Volunteers play a vital role in helping to promote the process of community self-help. The following elements are essential:
 - Identification and involvement of community leaders or influential persons
 - Establishment of a sense of ownership by the community
 - Identification of community resources
 - Promotion of psychological well-being
 - Mobilization of resources
 - Joint decision-making and consensus.



