

Colombian Red Cross “Building the country” mental health programme

Contact information

Colombian Red Cross

Av 68 # 66-31

Bogota, D.C.

Colombia

Tel.: + 571 437 6385

Fax: + 571 437 6384

E-mail: salud@andinet.com

Background/history

Over the past 20 years, Colombia has been affected by a number of natural disasters and armed conflict has been on the rise. The Colombian Red Cross (CRC) has always been active in providing care for victims and in implementing projects aimed at prevention. The society is the only entity allowed access to communities in certain parts of the country where, for a number of reasons, the state does not go.

The CRC first became involved in mental health following the Armero disaster in 1985. Activities lasted about one year and were mainly intended to help volunteers who survived the disaster and to provide preventive care for staff who had been involved.

In 1997, the CRC set up the national mental health team made up of three mental health professionals. Based on the International Federation Reference Centre's psychological first aid programme and with the financial support of the French Red Cross, the team set up the “Building the country” programme to train relief workers, youth members and volunteers in stress management. Some 90 people were trained in the first courses organized in Sincelejo and Montería. The experience gained at these sessions led to some changes being made to the programme and, since then, training courses have been held in eight cities which have recently been affected by disaster.

Objectives

- To help CRC staff cope better with the stress inherent in working in disaster situations and to prevent the appearance of post-traumatic stress syndrome.
- To provide volunteers with basic training to enable them to help and counsel victims in the first instance and, if necessary, to refer them to health professionals.
- To strengthen the national mental health team and set up departmental teams.
- To publish a training kit for the basic mental health programme.
- To build up local capacities so that local people can provide basic psychological support to victims in the immediate aftermath of disaster.

Brief description of activities

- Training of CRC volunteers and staff in basic aspects of mental health. The “Building the country” programme aims in the short term to train at least 150 people and to provide further training for those who have completed first-level training.
- Following up on the evolution of the programme by holding meetings twice a year with people involved to assess activities and establish plans of action.
- Using radio programmes to reach a large number of people and to increase their awareness of stress-related problems in post-disaster situations.

Main elements of the programme

Response to the January 1999 earthquake in the Eje Cafetero area provided the opportunity to make the mental health programme operational for the first time. Both CRC staff and volunteers and community members were involved. Experience in this operation showed that the content of the “Building the country” training was correct and emphasized the importance of good communication, particularly the use of radio, with the communities affected. Using radio allows teams to reach a wider population more easily, facilitating group work. Well-prepared broadcasts can be used to inform and to reassure the distressed population.

The “Building the country” team, in cooperation with Colombia’s National University and National University Radio, prepared a series of 12 radio broadcasts on the topic of mental health and psychosocial care in situations of natural disaster. The project, which was completed in October 2000, provides public community radios with 30-minute broadcasts which talk about how people affected by disaster react and familiarize the community with the work of psychologists. The programmes are entitled:

- What happened?
- And now what is happening to us?
- How do we react to what happened?
- How are we confronting the situation?
- I am overwhelmed by distress
- I am on the verge of falling apart
- It’s all my fault (feelings of guilt)
- Sadness and sorrow
- Saying goodbye
- For young people
- For those who help
- We’re still alive

The programmes will be systematically reviewed and changed as necessary as the disaster situation evolves.

Partnership and alliances

The psychology department at the National University of Colombia advises on approach and gives technical support, and the Japanese Red Cross and the *Saldarriaga Concha* Foundation (a national private entity) provide financial support.

Monitoring and evaluation

The Colombian Red Cross General Health Directorate makes visits to assess and evaluate the activities carried out in the branches.

The branches where the programme is being implemented send a descriptive report on what was done at the end of each intervention.

The future

By the end of 2001, it is hoped that at least 50 per cent of CRC branches will have implemented the “Building the country” programme and appointed a coordinator.

Lessons learned

- The original programme, initiated by the National Relief Directorate, intended to enable CRC staff to provide preliminary psychological support. After discussion with volunteers about the conditions they encountered working in disaster situations, the programme’s objectives were altered to give a greater emphasis to preventive activities.
- In the aftermath of disaster, CRC staff and volunteers work for long periods of time in often extremely difficult conditions. They experience tension and stress, which may affect their actions. They, and the public, often find this “frailty” difficult to accept, due to the myth of invulnerability which is part of the organizational culture. CRC research has shown that volunteers and staff who have been involved in disaster or conflict zones suffer from a variety of symptoms: insomnia, irritability, withdrawal and absence from the society to avoid memories, poorly defined pain, outburst of tears and sadness, and post-traumatic stress. Prevention, therefore, must be a priority in any psychological support programme. It is also very important to train and assist staff and volunteers to face their anxiety and depression, and to make them feel that their services contribute in a positive way to the alleviation of suffering.
- It is imperative to have mental health professionals working with the society. Psychiatrists, psychologists and social workers are necessary to provide counselling and support for people coming back from mission in disaster and conflict areas.
- Better information should be available to the volunteers’ family and friends. They need to know about the projects and activities that the volunteers are involved in. This will help them to be more supportive and to respect the work volunteers carry out for the community.
- Regular training sessions must be held for volunteers – one course alone is not enough to enable them to cope adequately with the difficulties they may have to face. Training also reinforces the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement’s Fundamental Principles and the volunteers’ esteem for themselves and the work they do.
- Action speaks louder than words. Relief and support provided by the CRC have earned the respect of the communities they work with.
- Well-prepared radio broadcasts about psychosocial issues in situations of crisis and disaster are very useful in getting reliable information to a large number of people across a wide geographical area. Knowing what is going on helps reassure the affected population.