

THE RED CROSS SOCIETY OF BOSNIA-HERZEGOVINA

OUR SELECTED EXPERIENCE PRACTICAL RESOURCE PACK

Our context

In May 2014, Bosnia and Herzegovina was hit by the heaviest flooding recorded in the last 120 years, leading the government to declare a state of emergency. Towns were heavily affected, with the floods leaving 21 people dead and thousands displaced and causing huge structural damage, estimated at 15% of the country's GDP.

In hard-hit Brcko District, where the Red Cross of Brcko District of Bosnia and Herzegovina (RC BDBiH) operates, around 2,300 people were forced to flee their homes, hundreds of houses were damaged or destroyed, and many villages were left completely under water. The financial impact there was estimated at more than 30 million euros.

This was the first time that staff and volunteers of the RC BDBiH had faced this kind of situation. They took part in rescue and evacuation operations, ran an evacuee accommodation centre and coordinated the distribution of food and other items.

How our acceptance, security and access were affected

As part of the rescue efforts, a team made of two rescuers and ten regular volunteers were sent to the village of Vucilovac, near Brcko, where the river was threatening to burst its banks. They worked in shifts to help protect the village from the rising waters.

On the night that they arrived, it rained heavily. The embankment broke and the Sava River overflowed, flooding the village and blocking all access. The RC BDBiH had not been told that the embankment was damaged. The team and the community were cut off from rescue teams outside the village, and the dark and wet conditions made evacuation impossible.

The team worked through the night with the community to reinforce the embankment with sand bags – a risky operation, given that people could easily have slipped in the dark on the muddy ground and fallen into the river. The Red Cross team had only one radio to communicate with their colleagues outside the village, so they decided to limit calls to one per hour to save the battery. Food supplies in the village were running low, and even though the team shared their food with the community, there still wasn't enough for everyone.

People were become increasingly fearful, including some of the volunteers, despite their training. However, two of the rescuers thanks to their significant experience, were able to calm everyone down by explaining that the rescue and civil protection services were doing everything in their power to reach the village.

At around 4am the next morning, before it was completely light, the civil protection services ordered the evacuation of the village. The break in the embankment had widened and the flooding was worsening. The team ran from house to house in the dark, frantically trying to get people to higher ground. Later that morning, rescue teams from different organizations finally gained access to the village and were able to evacuate everyone.



Relieved to have reached safety, one member of the Red Cross team said, “When the civil protection services came through on the radio, I thought, ‘That’s it. We’re not getting out of here.’”.

After the evacuation, the Red Cross team who had been trapped received immediate psychosocial support, and, once the state of emergency was over, we gave further psychosocial support to all Red Cross workers who had been part of the response during the floods.

What we did and learned

The incident showed that we needed to strengthen certain elements of our operational management to improve the safety and security of our staff and volunteers.

Context and risk assessment

Before the incident, we had a basic security assessment that only covered possible conflict situations. We have since set up a safety and security team, and it is now mandatory to perform comprehensive safety and security assessments before we take any action.

External communication and coordination

We are starting to communicate and coordinate with other disaster response organizations at the local level, such as the civil protection services, the fire services and different NGOs that also take part in rescue and protection operations. There have been joint simulations, meetings and tabletop exercises with both government and non-government actors in the field. This has given people within the system the opportunity to get to know each other outside of emergency situations and to work together better.

Internal communication and coordination

We need to strengthen communication and relations between our various branches and other organizations that face the same risks, so that we can get timely, accurate and relevant information from the people on the ground during disasters. This is especially important in a country with separate and overlapping jurisdictions that have several levels of political subdivision.

Operational risk and security management

The RC BDBiH, in cooperation with other organizations, provides training to help staff and volunteers deal with stressful situations and better prepare themselves for similar situations.

In addition, the rulebook on safety and security has been reviewed, and the new version incorporates the lessons learnt from the floods, taking operational risk into account.