

ZIMBABWE RED CROSS SOCIETY

OUR SELECTED EXPERIENCE

PRACTICAL RESOURCE PACK

Our context

In 2012, the Zimbabwe Red Cross Society elected a new governance structure. A new secretary general was appointed and we developed and began to implement a recovery plan, which created a stable and harmonious working environment for the National Society.

Meanwhile, owing to a complex combination of socio-economic and political factors, including a drastic fall in Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and life expectancy, the humanitarian situation in Zimbabwe had deteriorated. With tensions increasing and elections due in 2013, we needed to prepare for every possible scenario.

Although, fortunately, the anticipated violence did not occur, preparing for this eventuality and dealing with those issues that did arise provided a useful insight into what we have to do as a National Society to meet needs in difficult and potentially dangerous circumstances.

How our acceptance, safety and access were affected

During the elections, the activities of many humanitarian actors were restricted or banned. The operating environment was generally unstable. Despite having a clear humanitarian purpose, our staff and volunteers faced certain challenges to their acceptance, security and access, mainly stemming from misperceptions of the Zimbabwe Red Cross or a poor understanding of its operational mandate.

Identification was an issue in some areas. Some officials demanded accreditation cards, while our Red Cross uniforms conflicted with the promotional or identification insignia of other organizations, compromising our distinct visibility. In a few cases, our Action Team members were denied access to a polling station because officials

claimed they had not received prior notification of the intended visit.

There were also problems related to perceived non-adherence by volunteers to the Fundamental Principles. In one instance, a volunteer was reported by law enforcement to be an active member of a political party, which, despite being dealt with rapidly, compromised perceptions of the neutrality of other volunteers and the National Society as a whole. One aspiring candidate even used the National Society's first-aid services as a campaign tool, by advertising them as "free medical services".

We realized that political tension can easily upset the status quo. People and institutions that had previously been well disposed towards us and held our values and work in high regard would now deliberately disrupt our operations. We were surprised by these intentional acts of sabotage, which created an atmosphere of fear and uncertainty within the National Society. The cost in terms of safety and security had suddenly become very high: for us "*operating in such an environment was like attempting to cross a crocodile-infested flooded river*".



What we did

Prior to the elections, we developed a Movement contingency plan. We set up special Action Teams and informed the authorities and political parties of the role of the Zimbabwe Red Cross in order to gain their acceptance and support. We also identified those areas likely to experience violence or insecurity and ensured that Action Teams were strategically placed there.

In order to raise awareness of our humanitarian mandate and activities, we conducted public dissemination sessions targeting specific influential groups from both the public and private sector. Internally, we promoted the adoption of the Safer Access Framework actions and measures at all levels of the National Society, to ensure coherent and consistent application of standardized knowledge and learning.

Thanks to these preparations and despite the difficulties described above, we were able to provide first aid to 10,115 people during the elections. Those suffering from minor ailments such as headaches, cuts, stomach pains, dizziness, fatigue or fainting received on-the-spot treatment, while those with more serious conditions or in need of further medical attention were evacuated to the nearest health centre/hospital. We covered more than 100 campaign rallies staged by different political parties and were present at 448 polling stations located in the identified high-risk areas. In addition, we provided 2,000 volunteers with insurance. Of these, 1,439 were skilled first-aiders deployed to provide emergency first aid nationwide.

The first-aid coverage we provided, with the support of Movement partners, during the referendum on a new constitution, during the run-up to the general election and on polling day became a success story and a real turning point in the history of the Zimbabwe Red Cross. Compliance with the Fundamental Principles added great value to the once faded visibility, credibility, public image and perception of the National Society.

What we learned

We learned some valuable lessons from this experience, including:

Context and risk assessment

- ▶ The need to prepare in advance to respond to situations of tension or violence cannot be overemphasized.
- ▶ Based on the context and risk assessment, the necessary resources need to be mobilized, emergency equipment/material maintained, and functional response teams (Action Teams) established.
- ▶ Identifying high-risk areas and positioning our teams in close proximity meant we were well placed to respond in the event of violence.

Acceptance of the organization

- ▶ Networking and dialogue with key authorities, political parties and law enforcement agencies helped us gain acceptance of and support for our National Society and contributed to greater security and access for our Action Teams.
- ▶ Volunteer and equipment databases should be established and maintained at every level of the organization.

Acceptance of the individual

- ▶ The actions of Zimbabwe Red Cross staff and volunteers in their private, social and political lives will always influence, either positively or negatively, perceptions of the National Society. They may also compromise its image and reputation as an impartial, neutral and independent organization, and thus potentially affect its acceptance, security and access.
- ▶ There is a clear need for improvements in volunteer recruitment, training, organization, retention and management.
- ▶ Screening of volunteers and staff members prior to their deployment in sensitive or insecure contexts therefore needs to be improved.

Internal and external communication

- ▶ It is important to clearly communicate our policies, working methods and proposed activities to all external audiences before engaging in an emergency response.
- ▶ Staff at all levels, including members of governance and senior management, as well as volunteers need to be versed in the Safer Access Framework to ensure coherence in our actions.

Operational security risk management

- ▶ In order to ensure the safety and security of our staff and volunteers, we developed some Do's and Don'ts, which helped direct our actions and activities.

Adherence to the Fundamental Principles

- ▶ By conducting ourselves in an impartial, neutral and independent manner and by providing first-aid services nationwide, we gained the appreciation of and enhanced our credibility on all sides.
- ▶ It is not an easy task to achieve and maintain acceptance, security and access in sensitive and insecure contexts. The special characteristic of the Movement's work can be described as "*an apolitical fish swimming in political waters*". In a politicized situation such as during an election, therefore, the challenge for the National Society is to deliver its services to alleviate human suffering according to its mandate, without being swayed or coerced into compromising the Fundamental Principles. This in turn will greatly contribute to our acceptance, security and access to those in need.