

# CAMEROON RED CROSS STRENGTHENS VISIBILITY THROUGH INTERAGENCY COORDINATION

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## Introduction

Cameroon Red Cross has gained many benefits from their active role in interagency coordination for community engagement and accountability. This includes building a much stronger relationship with the Government at both national and regional level, and this is helping them implement their activities countrywide. In addition, the National Society has been able to learn valuable lessons learned from other agencies, especially around what not to do in the area of community feedback mechanisms.



*A Cameroon Red Cross volunteer collects feedback from a community leader. ©IFRC 2024*

## Cameroon Red Cross’ role in interagency coordination for community engagement and accountability

### The National Health Promotion Working Group

Like many National Societies, Cameroon Red Cross’ first involvement in interagency coordination for community engagement and accountability came as part of the response to COVID-19 in 2020. The National Society joined the Government-led Directorate of Health Promotion Working group, who coordinate community engagement and risk communication activities in a health response. Fabrice A. Ewane, CEA Manager, with Cameroon Red Cross, remembers, “As a National Society it’s part of our role to mitigate the impact of epidemics in communities. And of course, we bring the community focus. Throughout COVID-19 we worked alongside the Ministry of Health Promotion and Ministry of Communications on the response and built a great working relationship.”

With the outbreak of cholera and then Mpox, Cameroon Red Cross was again working closely with the Health Promotion Working Group to help communities bring the outbreaks under control. The National Society organised a workshop with the Ministry of Health to develop and validate risk communication and community engagement materials and tools for Mpox. These tools have now

been rolled out country-wide for volunteers to use. Fabrice explains how this close working relationship is benefiting their work nation-wide, “Our engagement at the national level has made it much easier in the areas where we are implementing. For example, it was much easier for our volunteers to carry out activities such as focus group discussions or mobile cinemas, as the local authorities know this has all been agreed at the national level. Now it’s very easy for us to reach out to the local Ministry of Health experts and ask them to come and take part in our events.” More recently, this led to the Ministry of Health’s Deputy Director of Prevention and Community Action joining a Cameroon Red Cross training for volunteers organised as part of the global IFRC partnership with DG ECHO<sup>1</sup>. Fabrice adds, “The Deputy Director was very impressed with the training and said it showed the administration that the topics of community participation and community resilience are at the centre of our work and integrated in all National Society projects. He was also delighted to see that the training brought together volunteers from all parts of the country.”

### **The Accountability to Affected People Regional Working Group**

This positive experience in national interagency coordination prompted Fabrice to look for community engagement and accountability interagency coordination groups operating in the far north, where the National Society is implementing activities as part of a programmatic partnership with ECHO. Fabrice explains, “When I was on a mission to the far north with my colleague in charge of community feedback (Santana Nnang), we asked a Norwegian Refugee Council colleague if anything existed for community engagement coordination. He pointed me to UN OCHA who were leading a very active accountability to affected people (AAP) working group”. Fabrice and Santana joined the AAP working group, met all the different agencies engaged, and signed up to the WhatsApp group. They also linked in the National Society’s regional community engagement focal points, who now attend the working group calls alongside Fabrice and Santana.

Being part of this working group has helped Cameroon Red Cross learn from others’ experiences and mistakes. Fabrice explains, “The group has been great for sharing experiences with each other, from how to do trainings, to implementing activities, to community feedback. Another agency had set up a community feedback hotline and this was something we wanted to do, but we knew it was going to be difficult. They shared all their learning with us, especially challenges they had experienced managing all the languages spoken in the far north. This ended up influencing our approach and now we are making sure we have volunteers with a variety of language skills so they can answer calls in any language. We’re even investigating if we can route callers directly to the person who speaks their language.” Cameroon Red Cross is planning to present the feedback collected at the next meeting.

The AAP working group also helps agencies to prevent duplication. For example, the group is currently planning a survey as part of the flood response in the Far North of the country. Cameroon

<sup>1</sup> Result 5 of the DG ECHO Pilot Programmatic Partnership with IFRC (ECHO PPP) aims to strengthen National Society capacity in community engagement and accountability, including to take a stronger role in leading and supporting interagency coordination.

Red Cross will share the locations and findings from a perception survey the National Society already conducted in the region so that the new survey will not be conducted in the same areas.

## Lessons learned

### Benefits of interagency coordination

There have been many benefits from taking part in the interagency coordination meetings for community engagement, including:

- **Relationship with Government:** “The Administrative Authorities used to complain that they were not aware of what we were doing, or that we weren’t involved. Now we’re in all their reports, with details of all the activities we’re doing. We even invited them in a CEA training and want to involve them in the workshop we’re planning as part of ECHO PP to validate the National Society’s Community Engagement and Accountability Policy.”
- **Learning from others:** “We’ve managed to save a lot of time and mistakes by learning from what others are doing and we have a wide network of people we can reach out to for advice. This has helped us be better prepared and saved us having to produce everything ourselves from scratch. For example, Norwegian Refugee Council shared a great infographic to explain how community feedback mechanisms work, what to expect, and what is not acceptable, and now we can use this for our mechanism. We are also learning about the challenges of a joint community feedback mechanism, as some of the working group members are involved in running shared mechanisms.”
- **Avoiding duplication and frustration in the community:** “Being part of interagency coordination has really helped us know what other agencies are doing – so we don’t go and do the same things in the same areas. For example, in the far north we had plans to sensitise a community, but we found out through the working group another agency had already gone. If we had gone to the same community, they would have been frustrated and asked us why we are coming and doing the same thing again. So we were able to plan to go somewhere else instead.”

### Advice for other National Societies

Fabrice also has valuable advice to share with other National Societies interested in getting more involved in interagency coordination for community engagement and accountability:

- **Remember why you’re doing it:** “We should be part of interagency coordination because it improves the quality of what we provide to communities. Remember who we do this for.”
- **Be proactive:** “Don’t be afraid and don’t stay in the office. Go and look for other agencies who are working on community engagement, including the Government. Ask to be involved, or even take the lead and set up a working group yourself. I didn’t know what existed in the far

north, so I asked around, and I'm really glad I did as it's saved me a lot of time. Also, don't hesitate to ask your colleagues in other departments in the National Society as they can really help you and there may be working groups, they are in that you could join as well."

- **Be open and share:** "Do not hesitate to share what you are doing with the others in the group. In the Red Cross we do a lot, but we do not share enough what we are doing with others."
- **Share the responsibility to attend:** "So far, the time commitment has been manageable, but it really helps to involve our regional community engagement focal points. Then if I'm busy and can't attend, they can still be there. For example, one of our local CEA focal points attended a PSEA training with other organisations."
- **Leadership support matters:** "Get the leadership buy-in is important. It's easier to work in our National Society because we got it. Sometimes it would be great to have management come to the community engagement coordination meetings as well. This would make it easier to make quick decisions about what data we can share, within the rules of the organisation and data protection. "

## Contact information

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