

# PANAMANIAN RED CROSS COORDINATION WITH GOVERNMENT LEADS TO BETTER RESPONSES

Panamanian Red Cross support to the Government to adopt more participatory approaches during emergency response is helping to better meet the needs of communities

## Introduction

Like many National Societies, the Panamanian Red Cross Society is an auxiliary to its Government, providing support during emergencies and on social development. The National Society is capitalising on this auxiliary role and its presence in Government coordination forums, such as the Risk Management Cabinet, to influence national policy, strategy, and humanitarian response. Although there is no dedicated community engagement and accountability (CEA) interagency coordination group, the National Society is using its role in coordination and relationship with key Government departments, to ensure disaster responses are more participatory, accountable, and effective. In return, the National Society has benefited from additional training and resources for its programmes and operations.



*Panamanian Red Cross conducts a knowledge, attitudes and practices survey to understand the populations' beliefs, behaviours and misconceptions. ©Panamanian Red Cross 2023*

## Coordinating Community Engagement and Accountability in Panama

The Panamanian Red Cross has undertaken advocacy efforts with various institutional actors on issues related to feedback and community participation. For example, of these initiatives is the engagement of the National Society's CEA focal point with Panama's Office Ombudsman, where discussions have been held on how to coordinate and forward the information gathered through the community feedback mechanism to each institution. This aims to ensure that the Panamanian Red Cross establishes a strong and effective community participation process.

The National Society also works closely with the Ministry of Health during health emergencies. For example, during the current dengue outbreak, the Ministry of Health provided training to the National Society on how to strengthen the capacity of volunteers in dengue management. This included information on dengue symptoms, transmission, and prevention, among other topics. In return, the National Society helps to improve the effectiveness of the response by sharing

information gathered through its feedback mechanism and focus group discussion to shape the content used in Government trainings on dengue.

The Panamanian Red Cross also helps to strengthen the capacity of the authorities. For example, the National Society delivered a CEA in Emergencies training to Government staff and other inter-institutional actors in September 2024. This training was immediately put into practice the following month when the country faced a red alert for floods. Thanks to the training from the Red Cross, the Government adopted a different approach to the response and first consulted people on their needs before providing assistance. Through this the authorities identified that people needed information, more than aid items such as mattresses or blankets. This change in approach was noticed by the community, with one person commenting, “this time they asked us first, and are giving us what we need”.

## Lessons learned

### Benefits of interagency coordination for Panamanian Red Cross

- **Better meeting the needs of communities:** By providing CEA training to local authorities, Panamanian Red Cross has managed to ensure that emergency responses better meet the needs of the community – even when they’re not the ones providing assistance. Thanks to the training, Government responders and other inter-institutional actors have realized they need to gather evidence on the needs of communities before making decisions about how to respond. This is something that did not happen before, when response decisions were mainly made with community consultation.
- **Improved reputation for Panamanian Red Cross:** The close coordination with the Government, including helping to build their capacity, has improved the reputation of the National Society not only with Government, but also with other humanitarian organizations and donors. This collaboration has even been noticed by the population, increasing the National Society’s acceptance in communities.
- **A more coordinated response:** The close collaboration between the Panamanian Red Cross and the Government has helped lead to a more coordinated response across all actors. For example, during the flood response, some mayors wanted to provide humanitarian assistance independently of the Government-led response. This could have led to duplication and a conflict of interest. However, thanks to the CEA in Emergencies training provided by the Panamanian Red Cross, all parties were able to agree that all support should be coordinated through the National Civil Protection System and validated by the National Society. This helped to make the response more efficient and less confusing for the community.
- **Sharing resources:** Coordination with partners can help the National Society to access the resources needed to reach communities. For example, for recent community meetings as part

of the flood response, the National Society had vehicles and volunteers, and the Government provided fuel and food. These meetings were critical in ensuring community participation in identifying who should receive cash transfers in the community<sup>1</sup>. Thanks to the meetings the community were able to identify themselves who was most vulnerable and who should be helped, using the Red Cross principles of humanity and impartiality. This was a cost effective and efficient way to ensure the response engaged communities in decisions.

### Lessons learned about interagency coordination

Strengthening the collaboration with Government has also led to many lessons learned which could benefit other National Societies looking to scale up their coordination with local authorities.

- **Importance of trained volunteers and strong policies:** It is important to keep volunteers trained in key cross-cutting skills such as CEA and PGI so they can implement these approaches during emergency responses – and be able to recognise when there might be needs in these areas that need to be raised with Government and partners. The Panamanian Red Cross has policies in place to support good accountability and safeguarding. For example, the National Society has Policies on Community Engagement and Accountability, Policy for the Prevention of Sexual Exploitation and other abuses; a Protection Policy; and a Policy for the Prevention Fraud. These policies are disseminated and explained to all staff and volunteers and even to communities.
- **Use the Red Cross Red Crescent fundamental principles:** Working closely with Government can lead to concerns about political issues affecting the Red Cross' impartiality and neutrality. To address this, Panamanian Red Cross has disseminated and explained the seven fundamental principles to all external partners. This helps guide decision-making and the National Society has a rule that if the Red Cross is participating, the seven fundamental principles must be present.
- **Be honest about capacity:** The National Society must be very open and honest about its capacities and limitations, what its own needs are, and what it can offer in the coordination space. For example, if the National Society can provide vehicles and personnel, but does not have the capacity to provide fuel, it should be clear about this and ensure this support is provided by other partners.
- **Don't focus only on the capital:** A key challenge has been expanding coordination beyond the capital to the provinces. While some provinces have implemented CEA actions, tools and

---

<sup>1</sup> These actions are carried out as part of a request made by the Panamanian Red Cross to the Emergency Fund (DREF) in response to the impacts of the floods.

advocacy, there are others where there is very little coordination space, and decision-making is political, rather than evidence-based humanitarian decisions that benefit the communities.

### **Panamanian Red Cross future plans for CEA interagency coordination**

A future aim for Panamanian Red Cross is to scale up and lead interagency coordination on community engagement working alongside the Government and other inter-institutional actors. However, the National Society recognizes this will require internal investment in strengthening and institutionalizing CEA. For example, through hiring a dedicated CEA position, rolling out CEA training to all staff and volunteers, and continuing to embed accountability and participation in policies, programmes and emergency operations. This will ensure the National Society has a strong approach to accountability, underpinned by robust policies, which reinforces its auxiliary role with the Government and its reputation with other humanitarian actors.

### **Contact information**

For more information on this case study please contact:

**Panamanian Red Cross:** Yovani Gutierrez, O CEA Officer, [Yovani.gutierrez@cruzroja.org.pa](mailto:Yovani.gutierrez@cruzroja.org.pa)

**IFRC Central America:** Carolina Cortes, CEA Officer, [carolina.cortes@ifrc.org](mailto:carolina.cortes@ifrc.org)

**IFRC Regional:** Carla Guananga, Senior CEA Officer, [carla.guananga@ifrc.org](mailto:carla.guananga@ifrc.org)