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STEP 4.1: DEVELOP A COMMUNITY EARLY WARNING SYSTEM (CEWS) ACTION PLAN

Step 4.1: Develop a community early warning system (CEWS) action plan

If one of the activities included in the community resilience plan of action is to set up a community early warning system (CEWS), use it to include clearly identified early actions within the CEWS. For more details on how to choose early actions, please refer to chapter '07. Select Early Actions' in this manual.

As a first step towards the CEWS, run aCEWS workshop with the aim to develop a CEWS Action Plan, a single table that documents priority hazard, vulnerable groups, indicators to monitor, trigger, source of information, warning message, communication channel, early actions, and responsibilities. You build it with a selected group of community members over a short (around three-day) workshop, one part at a time. It is not a one-off event but part of your ongoing engagement, and it is strength-based: your role is to draw out local knowledge, not to teach from the top down. Keep the agenda flexible and adapt it to the community's context. Below are some tips on the CEWS workshop, for more guidance please consult the IFRC Community Early Warning Systems (CEWS) Training Toolkit – Field Guide (link in the toolbox).



Additional tips for running a CEWS workshop

Prepare before you start: Ensure facilitators have completed the CEWS Training-of-Trainers and adapted the sessions to the local context. Depending on the hazards, involve relevant technical stakeholders, such as health workers for epidemics or agriculture extension workers. Together with the community, select around 25–30 participants, aiming for a 50:50 balance of women and men, including disaster committee members and volunteers, youth and elderly, people with disabilities and minority groups, as well as established and emerging leaders. Prioritize those willing to support the CEWS system. Gather relevant EVCA findings, national Public Awareness and Public Education (PAPE) hazard messages, and any s/EAPs or government anticipatory action plans covering the community.

Open the workshop and set the scene: Explain that the goal is to develop the community's own CEWS Action Plan and agree on expectations and objectives. Use a game, for example 'Before the Storm', to introduce early warning concepts, followed by a group discussion on the four components of an early warning system.

Identify hazards and vulnerabilities within the community: Review and validate the EVCA findings or develop a hazard list based on the community's lived experience. For each priority hazard, agree who is most at risk and why.

Agree on indicators and triggers: For each hazard, identify two or three indicators to monitor and define the trigger that signals when action should be taken. Note the lead time provided and the source of information.

Develop warning messages and identify communication channels: Develop clear messages covering what, where, when, how severe, what to do. Build on PAPE messages where they exist, and identify trusted, inclusive channels that reach everyone, including vulnerable and hard-to-reach people.

Agree on early actions: For each trigger, decide the early actions the community will take and the resources needed. Where relevant, link them to existing s/EAPs of the National Society or government anticipatory action plans.

Agree on governance, partnerships and funding: Clarify roles and responsibilities and identify partners, such as the meteorological service, local government, your RCRC branch or others, that can support and sustain the system. Make sure to identify suitable funding options. Early actions should be affordable and sustainable, including low-cost or no-cost options where possible. For unavoidable costs, explore locally available funding, such as government disaster risk reduction funds, local authorities, community savings schemes or local partners.

Document the CEWS Action Plan: Present the draft plan or do a 'gallery walk' and review it against the expectations shared at the start. Write the CEWS Action Plan by clearly documenting the triggers, actions, roles and responsibilities, including a backup for each key role, and the required resources. When defining roles and responsibilities, specify what happens once the trigger is reached. This can include who confirms and communicates the early warning, who mobilizes people and resources, and who carries out the agreed early actions. Where appropriate, National Society branches and volunteers can take on specific roles as well. Keep a safe second copy, agree how the plan will be updated, and note any resource gaps to advocate for.

Please find an example of a CEWS Action Plan in the toolbox below.

After the CEWS Plan of Action has been developed, test it with a simulation. For guidance on how to conduct a simulation for

community early warning systems please consult the Cima Foundations Guidelines for simulation exercises on early warning systems for weather induced risks (link in the toolbox).

To avoid fragmenting the community's tools, integrate the CEWS Action Plan into the community's contingency plan, where such a plan is available or is being developed.

Case study: From community early warning to early action in Dominica

In Dominica, the Dominica Red Cross Society worked with communities to establish Community Early Warning Systems (CEWS) for floods and other hazards. Vulnerability and Capacity Assessments helped identify communities at risk and informed the design of the systems. Community members were then trained to monitor rainfall and river levels, communicate warnings and take action when conditions became dangerous.

In Marigot, this system demonstrated how locally managed early warning can lead directly to early action. During a period of heavy rainfall, a trained community member monitoring the system identified an imminent flood risk and alerted people living near the river. One particularly exposed resident was warned and evacuated to a designated shelter before flooding occurred.

The experience highlights the importance of connecting risk assessments, locally monitored warning signs, clearly assigned responsibilities and agreed actions. It also shows why CEWS should be developed with communities and linked to local authorities and national warning systems, rather than operating as stand-alone mechanisms.

Key lesson: A community early warning system becomes an anticipatory action mechanism when a warning is connected to agreed actions that can be implemented before the hazard causes severe impacts.

Source: adjusted and shortened from Global Disaster Preparedness Center (2024), "Dominica Building Resilience Through Community Early Warning Systems" (link in the toolbox).



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