



CHILD PLAY ACTIVITIES AS PART OF FLOOD RESPONSE

Cruz Vermelha de Timor-Leste

CASE STUDY

Photo description: Child participants and volunteer during child play activities organized by Cruz Vermelha de Timor-Leste
Photo credit: Cruz Vermelha de Timor-Leste

Background

Psychosocial support (PSS) plays an important role in helping individuals, families, and communities cope with crises and recover from difficult experiences. It focuses on strengthening resilience and supporting people to adapt to challenging situations that may have long-term emotional, social, and psychological impacts. In disaster-prone and crisis-affected contexts such as Timor-Leste, psychosocial support is essential to ensure that affected populations, particularly vulnerable groups such as children receive appropriate care and protection.

The work of Cruz Vermelha de Timor-Leste (CVTL) reflects this commitment. The importance of psychosocial support is clearly recognized in the CVTL Strategic Plan 2020–2024, the Emergency Response Standard Operating Procedures (SOP), and the PGI Minimum Standards in Emergencies. These guiding documents identify psychosocial support as an essential component of humanitarian response and emphasize the need to ensure safe, inclusive, and dignified assistance for affected populations.

Under **Objective 2: Save lives and support recovery from disaster and crises**, CVTL aims to support vulnerable and affected communities through integrated assistance, including cash-based interventions, shelter, essential goods, and psychosocial support. In addition, **Objective 1: Strengthen the resilience of communities and respond to the needs of the most vulnerable people** emphasizes increasing knowledge and capacity in physical and psychological first aid among communities to ensure people are better prepared to respond to emergencies.

CVTL had an overwhelming experience in 2021 because of double disasters. Timor-Leste had its first local transmission of COVID-19, by March 25th there was 257 active cases. As a member of the Government of Timor-Leste's COVID-19 Taskforce, CVTL was able to contribute significantly to the national response. CVTL was heavily engaged in mobilizing volunteers for taking care of COVID-19 affected people in quarantine centers and creating awareness in communities and supporting vaccinations. In addition, CVTL provided water and sanitation facilities to the public and transported dead bodies from isolation centers for cremation. Fortunately, CVTL did not lose any of its staff or volunteers due to COVID-19.

Almost concurrently Timor-Leste experienced massive flooding in April 2021 in 11 out of thirteen districts, caused by Cyclone Seroja. CVTL started flood response immediately after the disaster and it continued until the end of December 2021. Key activities managed by CVTL were: evacuation of people at risk, distribution of non-food and food items, distribution of tents, water trucking, emergency toilets, agriculture tools and seeds. The CVTL response was well recognized by the beneficiaries, media and the Government of Timor-Leste.

During emergency response operations, psychosocial support was provided alongside emergency assistance. Staff and volunteers supported affected individuals and families through active listening, emotional support, and referrals when needed. The emergency response demonstrated the importance of combining material assistance with psychosocial care, particularly for people who had lost their homes, livelihoods, or family members.

Following the emergency response, four CVTL staff members participated in specialized training and practical response activities. The four staff members with direct experience in psychosocial support (PSS) were Ms. Juliana Fatima Rebelo, Ms. Elisabeth Glorita, Mr. Orlando Carvalho, and Ms. Meliana Cardoso. These staff members shared their experiences and lessons learned through presentations and internal discussions within CVTL.

One of the activities they conducted was facilitating PSS sessions for staff and volunteers in 2023, following the completion of their PSS training in 2022. The methodology they used involved distributing questionnaires to staff and volunteers to identify the challenges and issues they were facing. After collecting the questionnaires, participants were divided into small groups. The facilitators then guided the participants in

sharing their experiences and discussing the issues they were facing in the office. The purpose of these PSS sessions was to help minimize stress and pressure among staff and volunteers.

Within this broader psychosocial support framework, Child-Friendly Spaces (CFS) have become an important approach for supporting children affected by emergencies and disasters. Child-Friendly Spaces provide safe and supportive environments where children can participate in structured activities, receive psychosocial support, interact with peers, and regain a sense of normalcy after distressing events. In Timor-Leste, these spaces contribute to promoting children's well-being, protection, emotional recovery, and resilience, while also strengthening community awareness of children's psychosocial needs.

However, psychosocial support in emergencies is not limited to children. CVTL also recognizes the importance of addressing the needs of other vulnerable groups, including women, older persons, people with disabilities, pregnant and lactating women, survivors of violence, and individuals with pre-existing health or psychosocial conditions. Each of these groups may experience emergencies differently and may require specific forms of support and protection.

For women and survivors of violence, psychosocial support activities include safe spaces, confidential listening, emotional support, and referral to appropriate protection or health services. Older persons may require assistance to reduce isolation, anxiety, and stress, while people with disabilities need accessible and inclusive support services that take into account their physical, communication, and mobility needs. Pregnant and lactating women may require additional emotional support and information because of increased stress and concerns related to their own wellbeing and that of their children.

To address these diverse needs, CVTL promotes an inclusive psychosocial support approach in line with the PGI Minimum Standards in Emergencies. This means that all psychosocial support activities, including Child-Friendly Spaces, group discussions, Psychological First Aid, and community outreach, should be age-appropriate, gender-sensitive, accessible, and adapted to the specific needs of different vulnerable groups. By doing so, psychosocial support contributes not only to emotional recovery, but also to the protection, dignity, and inclusion of all people affected by emergencies.

Who was Supported and How

During the heavy rains and floods across Timor-Leste from 4 April 2021, all thirteen municipalities were affected, with Dili and surrounding low-lying areas hardest hit. The disaster resulted in forty-one fatalities (including nine missing), 28,734 affected households (90% in Dili), 4,546 houses destroyed or damaged, and extensive damage to rice and maize crops, particularly in Manatuto municipality.

CVTL as a core partner of the Ministry of Interior and the National Disaster Management Directorate (NDMD), deployed ninety-seven national and branch disaster response team members and board members to assist with evacuation, emergency assessment, and the distribution of relief items. CVTL also managed seven evacuation centres to support displaced families.

Successes

Psychosocial support (PSS) was provided in six centres, in collaboration with UNICEF, Aloia Foundation, Maluku Timor, and Catholic Youth Group. Activities included child-friendly games, painting, sports, and counselling, supporting emotional recovery and resilience among children, families, and other vulnerable groups. The objective was to help affected populations cope with stress, rebuild resilience, and recover emotionally in the aftermath of the emergency.

Water, sanitation, and hygiene interventions included the provision of three water tanks, 90,000 litres of safe water, construction of toilets, and promotion of hygiene practices. Protection, gender, and inclusion (PGI)

measures improved safety for women and girls in evacuation centres through lighting, baby kits, and women's kits.

Challenges and Difficulties

In 2021, CVTL faced significant challenges due to the simultaneous impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and the Seroja Cyclone floods. During the COVID-19 crisis, CVTL mobilized volunteers to support affected individuals in quarantine centers, raise community awareness, assist with vaccination campaigns, provide WASH facilities, and transport bodies for cremation—all while ensuring no staff or volunteer infections.

The floods in April 2021 affected ten out of thirteen districts, requiring rapid evacuation, distribution of food, non-food items, tents, water, emergency toilets, and agricultural support. These dual emergencies coincided with a period of management transition, including the onboarding of a new Secretary General and replacement of senior staff, which added complexity to the response.

Financial constraints further compounded the challenges, as donor funding was stretched due to widespread demand, creating funding gaps for CVTL's operations. Despite these difficulties, CVTL's resilience, strong commitment from staff, volunteers, board members, and ongoing support from government and partners allowed the organization to continue providing critical assistance and learn valuable lessons for future responses.

Lessons Learned

1. CVTL programming on PSS with children was one part of its broader flood response which was designed to be multisectoral. The **multisectoral approach allowed better overall response** to children's needs.
2. Although it faced challenges, with **leadership support and commitment across sectors**, the CVTL was able to reach children in multiple ways with a focus on PSS.
3. **Partnerships** with local and international agencies enhanced the reach and service menu of PSS activities with children.