



Evacuees from Obrenovac, Serbia, shelter in a hall in Belgrade. Photo by Marko Djurica/Reuters, courtesy Trust.org.

# Serbia

## FLOOD EMERGENCY RESPONSE IN SERBIA FLOODS

<b>Disaster/conflict date:</b>	May 2014
<b>Project timescale:</b>	June 2014 – October 2014 (5 months)
<b>Houses damaged:</b>	19,000 homes partially damaged, over 420 destroyed
<b>Affected population:</b>	1.6 million people (22% of Serbian population)
<b>Target population:</b>	1,772 vulnerable households in Western and Central Serbia
<b>Modality:</b>	Cash transfer through post office
<b>Value of cash grant:</b>	US\$330 (shelter); US\$345 (agriculture)
<b>Project budget:</b>	US\$899,999 from the Office of U.S. Foreign Disaster Assistance and US\$100,000 in private funds from Catholic Relief Services



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## RESPONSE ANALYSIS

The devastating floods that affected the Balkans in May 2014 affected 1.6 million people, 22 percent of Serbia's population, and have set the country's economic development back decades. Catholic Relief Services (CRS) conducted rapid assessments on May 24 and 25 in 13 villages in the municipalities of Šabac, Valjevo, Ub, Kraljevo and Smederevska Palanka, finding significant damage to homes (including mud in houses), loss of furniture and destruction of household assets. Many families had lost their houses and land to flooding and related landslides. The level of damage varied and contamination was a major concern.

Based on identified needs and the local market context—as well as feasibility, protection and security, and beneficiary preferences—CRS chose a cash-based response.

### Shelter needs

Through community solidarity, government aid and humanitarian assistance, people were able to meet their immediate needs for water, food and shelter, but these were short-term solutions. Families whose houses had withstood the flooding without structural damage were eager to return home and start rebuilding their lives, but needed support to do so. This included essential information on how to clean, dry and disinfect homes following flooding, as well as basic furnishings and household goods.

The Serbian Government was expected to prioritize reconstruction of the country's infrastructure, but the scale of needs exceeded its capacity to respond. Many flood-affected households, especially in rural areas, were largely left to recover without government support. Central and South Serbia are the poorest

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# 1.6 million

PEOPLE AFFECTED BY THE FLOODS

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areas of the country; Kraljevo was particularly vulnerable as it included a large number of returnees from Kosovo who had settled on inhospitable land with little agricultural value and suffered disproportionately in the flood. Many families were also still recovering from the earthquake of 2010.

### Market context

Extensive agricultural losses were sustained in rural areas, including the loss of animals and standing crops. The flood came in the middle of the vegetable, corn and wheat season, on which agricultural households depended to meet winter food and income needs. Farmers reported a small window of time within which some vegetables and potentially corn could be cultivated for animal feed over the following two months, and they were eager to plant before winter. The government was expected to offer some support to agriculture, but it would focus on larger commercial farmers.

CRS assessments indicated that agricultural inputs were still widely available in local markets, despite the flooding. Supply markets for household items and shelter supplies had been largely unaffected by the floods, or vendors were able to return quickly to their trade in spite of flood damage. Assessment results indicated that these goods were available at normal and stable prices, and supply chains remained stable.

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## PROGRAM STRATEGY

CRS and its partners focused on poor rural villages to fill the gap left by the government response, building on existing emergency relief committee structures in most locations to ensure continued effective coordination of efforts at the local level. The Office of U.S. Foreign Disaster Assistance provided funding to implement both shelter and agricultural recovery interventions through cash grants. This was to enable affected households to start the process of rebuilding their livelihoods and to prepare for the cold Balkans winter by ensuring that shelters were in compliance with the [Humanitarian Charter and Minimum Standards in Humanitarian Response](#), the Sphere Handbook:

- **Safe:** Resilient to multiple disasters including earthquakes, typhoons and landslides.

- **Adequate:** With good ventilation and drainage, of a good size and gender-sensitive with appropriate privacy.
- **Durable:** Materials are strong and durable enough to last 18 to 24 months.

The program provided assistance in cleaning and drying the structure of damaged but structurally sound homes. CRS provided cash grants to replace essential household items (especially bedding materials) that could not be salvaged and to ensure that families were able to winterize their homes as needed. CRS incorporated disaster risk reduction measures through verbal instruction and advice to everyone the project team interacted with; they also distributed brochures and flyers to beneficiary households on disaster risk reduction strategies relating to best flood mitigation practices and the adequate drying, cleaning and disinfecting of homes.

## Program goals and objectives

1. Flood-affected households live in safe and dignified shelters (1,360 households):
  - Households and communities clean, dry and disinfect affected homes.
  - Households replace priority household items to restore dignified and safe living conditions.
  - Municipalities implement locally appropriate solutions for those permanently displaced by flooding or related landslides.
2. Flood-affected households resume agriculture-based livelihood activities (500 households):
  - Households rehabilitate their fields and productive infrastructure.
  - Households redeem vouchers for priority agricultural inputs.

## PLANNING AND IMPLEMENTATION

### Partnership

CRS worked with local partners Philanthropy (a charitable foundation of the Serbian Orthodox Church that implemented 80 percent of the project over 10 municipalities) and Caritas Serbia (in Valjevo and Lajkovac).

### Beneficiary selection

CRS targeted the most severely flood-affected households in Central Serbia for shelter cash grant assistance through an open call for flood-affected households, based on vulnerability criteria including damage levels (according to government certificates), low-income households (below a set amount of 25,000 Serbian dinars or US\$270), and households with disabled members. Cash benefits or child support were an ideal proxy indicator of the vulnerability of applicant families due to strict restrictions on eligibility for government entitlements and because their monetary amounts were very low. Priority households were those living in single-story housing, elderly households, single-headed households, and those with three or more children.

CRS used community panels to select beneficiaries for agricultural livelihoods support and rural communities formed representative panels to select the most vulnerable in their communities. Beneficiaries received agricultural cash grants for properties of up to 3 hectares that had lost crops or experienced damage to croplands.

### Value of cash grant

The value of the cash grant for shelter was set at US\$330 in coordination with Mercy Corps, the other OFDA recipient working in the country,

which paid the same amount for similar types of cash grants to avoid differences between communities covered by each organization. The value of cash grants for agriculture was either US\$175 or US\$345, depending on land size.

### Cash distribution

CRS transferred funds to beneficiaries through the post office, which has branches even in the smallest and most remote villages and towns of Serbia. After extensive negotiations between the post office, local government ministries, CRS and partners, the usual charge of 700 dinars in taxes and transfer fees for any given transfer amount was waived for humanitarian aid.

### Disaster risk reduction

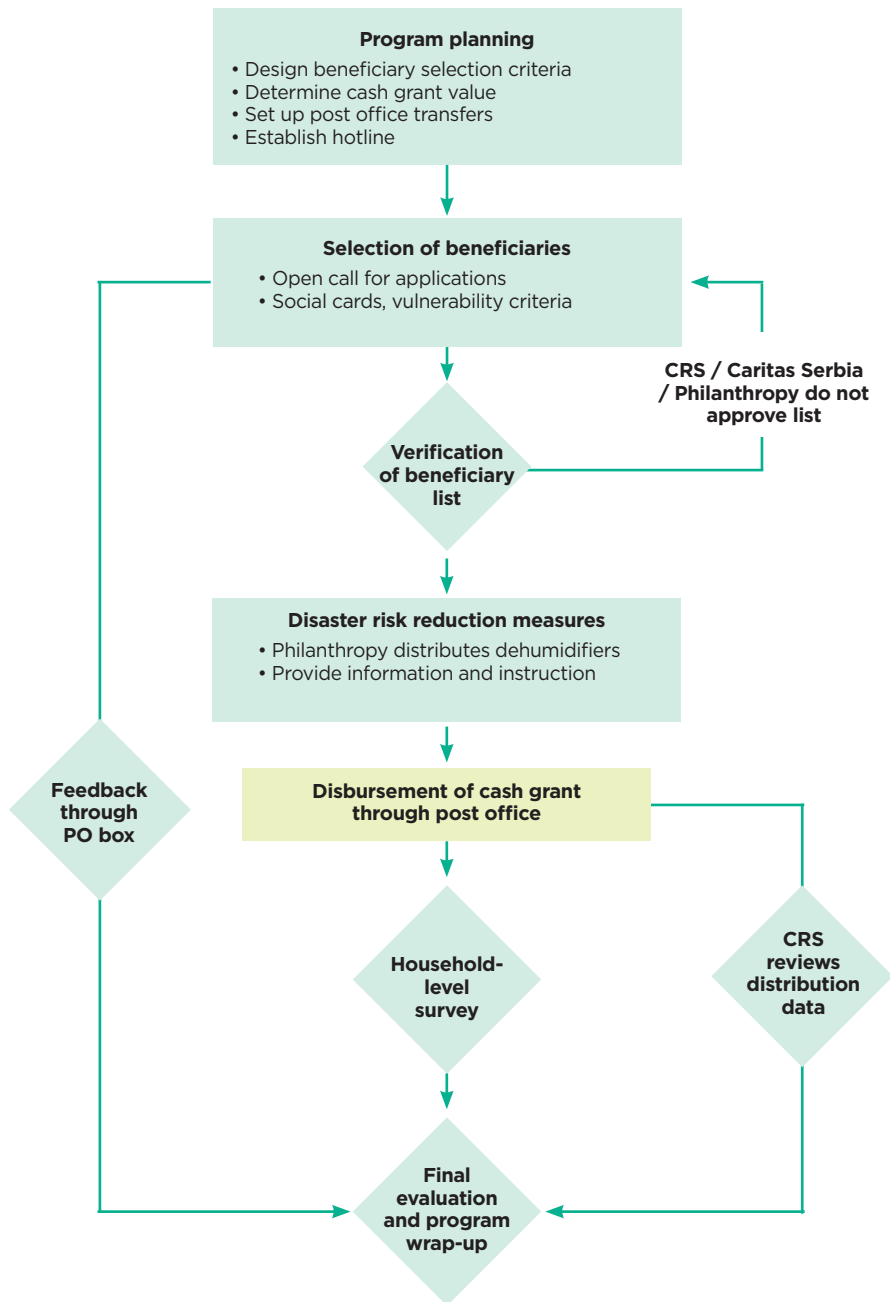
Philanthropy distributed dehumidifiers to beneficiaries to assist them in the drying and repair of damaged homes. The program distributed flyers and brochures to beneficiaries with information about how to use dehumidifiers and how to make home repairs.

### Protection

The program targeted the most vulnerable, and approximately 50 percent of beneficiaries were women. CRS introduced a post office box address as a channel of communication for beneficiaries for suggestions and grievances, alongside existing phone hotlines. CRS encouraged feedback related to specific cases as well as aspects of project design. CRS and partners reviewed the feedback and partners responded to each sender.

## Process

The chart below illustrates the process of implementation.



## MONITORING AND EVALUATION

CRS used the following monitoring and evaluation mechanisms:

- Reviewed distribution logs, vendor receipts, registration lists and cash transfer receipts after every distribution.
- Reviewed cash transfer receipts at every distribution, looking at the total number and value of cash grants distributed.
- Counted the total U.S. dollar amount transferred to beneficiaries at every distribution.
- Conducted reviews of distribution logs after every distribution to monitor the number of shelters incorporating disaster risk reduction measures.
- Actively tracked progress via weekly activity and progress reports.
- Conducted a pretest of beneficiaries at every distribution, with a posttest two months later, to monitor the percentage of people retaining shelter and settlement disaster risk reduction knowledge.
- Conducted a household-level survey at the end of the project to establish the percentage of households that replaced damaged assets or bedding materials, and the relevance and appropriateness of assistance.

## RESULTS

CRS conducted a household-level survey at the end of the project, which found that a total of 1,913 households had received cash grants for shelter or agriculture. Of the individuals directly served by cash grants, 52 percent were female, 16 percent were children, 14 percent were elderly, 5 percent were people with disabilities and 7 percent were refugees or displaced people.

CRS and partners distributed 1,241 cash grants for shelter improvements, reaching 3,681 individuals—of these, 1,745 were male (47 percent) and 1,936 were female (53 percent). The survey found that households allocated 40 percent of funds to fixing flood damaged houses, 9 percent to replacing damaged household assets, and 28 percent to everyday expenses; 23 percent remained unspent as of September 30, 2014.

At the end of the project, 120 households had been disinfected, dehumidified and had received

instructional brochures on cleaning, disinfecting and drying; 1,380 households had received information and instructions on cleaning, disinfecting and drying.

There were 2,128 individuals (677 households) who benefited from seed systems or agricultural input activities; 1,050 were male (49 percent) and 1,078 were female (51 percent).

The household-level survey showed that 62 percent of beneficiaries found the assistance relevant, 83 percent found it appropriate, and 52 percent found assistance both relevant and appropriate; Ninety percent of beneficiaries preferred cash assistance to in-kind assistance. On a scale of 1 (least satisfied) to 5 (most satisfied), beneficiaries rated the project at 3.7 for availability of information, 3.9 for clarity of selection criteria, 4.9 for speed of decision on their application and 4.9 for ease of accessing the cash.

## ADVANTAGES AND CHALLENGES

Advantages	Challenges and risks	Actions and recommendations
The partners cooperated with local crisis committees to obtain information on potential beneficiaries, levels of vulnerability and the extent to which the disaster had affected them.	Initial data collection was difficult. Local crisis committees formed in every municipality lacked comprehensive and accurate data and generally underperformed.	Partners triangulated data from primary and secondary sources, such as traditional and social media announcements, police reports, crisis committee data and anecdotal evidence.
	The government certificate for damage assessment did not use common standards across municipalities. There was concern that lists of potential beneficiaries would not be comprehensive.	CRS defined the applicable levels of damage for eligibility for assistance, and worked closely with the government to ensure that selected households received relevant documentation.

Advantages	Challenges and risks	Actions and recommendations
<p>The partners cooperated with local crisis committees to obtain information on potential beneficiaries, levels of vulnerability and the extent to which the disaster had affected them.</p>	<p>Partners had no access to reliable data, and specific beneficiary households were difficult to identify.</p>	<p>Caritas suggested that crisis committees should consolidate data using clear procedures, linking local and national data more easily. Caritas created beneficiary profiles to clarify eligibility for assistance.</p>
	<p>Local officials did not immediately embrace household targeting; they were in favor of blanket assistance.</p>	<p>CRS developed targeting criteria in less-than-ideal circumstances. Despite initial frustration with imperfections, they were operational, transparent and just.</p>
<p>Cash grants provided flexibility for beneficiaries to meet specific needs.</p>	<p>Beneficiaries could spend the cash as they desired, which could include expenditures unintended by the project.</p>	<p>Monitoring data showed that beneficiaries used the cash grants as intended.</p>
	<p>An initial assumption was that households needed mattresses, bedding and other household items. By the time assistance was deployed, needs had changed.</p>	<p>Project partners did their best to accommodate changing needs. The cost of anticipated items served as a basis for the cash grant amount; however, beneficiaries could use the cash grant as they wished.</p>
	<p>Grant levels were fixed and communicated to the public in the local currency. The dinar had a rapid decline against the dollar, one of the most significant devaluations in years. For example, a US\$330 grant decreased in value to US\$300 by the end of project.</p>	<p>The currency devaluation had a negligible effect on the real value of the grants because the project was short in duration. However, the expectation of inflation may have affected spending habits of recipients, some of whom chose to convert the cash to hard currency (such as euros) or spend the grants rapidly.</p>
	<p>Premature rehabilitation activities damaged floors and walls. Beneficiaries started work before homes were dry, often declining to use dehumidifiers due to fear of increased electricity bills.</p>	<p>Disaster risk reduction standards were in place, and partners distributed brochures and flyers to beneficiary households on the best flood mitigation practices and the cleaning, disinfecting and drying of homes. However, this did not serve the intended purpose, as few households implemented the recommended strategies.</p>
<p>Social cards, like beneficiary profiles, allowed Caritas to clearly identify vulnerable people in need of assistance and establish beneficiary lists.</p>	<p>Domestic law required the erasure of beneficiary databases as soon as they had served their humanitarian purposes. However, OFDA requested that beneficiary data remain available for three years for reporting and accountability.</p>	<p>Philanthropy secured the cooperation of the Serbian Freedom of Information Act Commissioner and adjusted its own procedures. Future programs should establish a policy on personal data archiving and eventual deletion.</p>
	<p>In most municipalities, the program posted personal information on a community board where everyone could see it.</p>	<p>CRS is committed to only posting the most necessary information with beneficiaries' approval for transparency purposes. The Cash Learning Partnership (CaLP), Electronic voucher Learning Action Network (ELAN) and other actors are working to develop operating procedures for use and sharing of personal data in emergencies. However, this is still ongoing and is not yet well implemented. Guidance should include verification mechanisms to destroy data once it has fulfilled its purpose.</p>

Advantages	Challenges and risks	Actions and recommendations
The usual post office charge of 700 dinars in taxes and transfer fees for any given transfer amount was waived for humanitarian aid.	There were delays and difficulties working with the post office. It took a long time to authorize the waiver.	In the meantime, Philanthropy made payments to individuals who already had a bank account in order to minimize delays.
	To claim tax exemption, beneficiaries needed a government certificate proving they had suffered damage in the flood. The government issued almost no certificates for flooded land or destroyed crops, and it was almost impossible to obtain these later because of the difficulty of verifying damage on land.	CRS and partners convinced local governments to issue certificates to everyone on the beneficiary lists. Because representative community panels selected beneficiaries for livelihood grants, local governments were confident the lists accurately represented flood damage in affected communities.
The project addressed beneficiary needs where there were gaps in government assistance.	There was a lack of clarity on prospective government assistance. Potential beneficiaries were uncertain and apprehensive that this project might become subject to deductions from future government assistance.	International nongovernmental organizations asked the Serbian government's Flood Coordination Office to clarify and communicate their plans better. CRS' local partners also worked with local governments in the flood-affected areas to further the same goal.

## WHAT WE LEARNED

Cash grants are well suited to emergency relief, as local officials and mechanisms may be willing but unable to deliver assistance. Cash grants ensure flexibility in circumstances such as flood relief when people need basic household items but may be receiving assistance from other sources.

**A streamlined approach can be sufficient for targeting.** Partners were accustomed to working in development contexts, where there is usually sufficient time to design a project and verify beneficiary needs. It was therefore challenging to adopt a “good enough” approach in this emergency context. Clear and transparent target criteria can relieve tensions, but coordinating and achieving consensus about the target criteria among partners and other OFDA grantees may have caused delays and skewed beneficiary selection. The program could ensure timeliness by decreasing over-reliance on formal criteria, improving skills for rapid assessment, and continuing engagement with communities to ensure solidarity and coherence.

**Pre-positioning relationships with partners can make response more efficient.** Continued engagement with national and local actors is important, but it may also be helpful to establish principles of cooperation before the outbreak of a disaster. CRS was open and inclusive throughout the process, soliciting and valuing partners' views and inputs, and implementing a partner-

led monitoring and evaluation system—this empowered partners and enabled them to improve their emergency response capacities. In the future, CRS could consider other investments in partner capacity building, such as working with information systems and managing large amounts of data, which could be very useful in emergencies.

**Minimized staff turnover maximizes program effectiveness.** Less turnover of leadership during the project would maintain momentum and increase the timeliness of assistance. Setting aside time for reflection and appreciation of good effort and results through a formal reflection event was seen as a positive development.

**Communication with beneficiaries is key.** Communication with households on the implementation of projects in emergencies is very important, especially when there are few reliable sources, and access to media is limited. Beneficiaries may have faced uncertainty about the aims of the project, as well as its effect on future government assistance.

**Cash transfers must take into account fluctuations in the exchange rate.** The devaluation of the dinar led to changes in the value of the cash grant offered to beneficiaries. The effect was negligible because the project was short, but the effects or expectation of inflation could affect the spending habits of beneficiaries.