A typical example of where community action comes first =
heat waves through Europe in summer 2003

Judith Bourgeois - French Red Cross
What happened?

Summer 2003:
The worst heat wave since 500 years hit western Europe, and caused, in less than two weeks, about 22,000 deaths (maybe 35,000), mostly in big cities, 2/3 of them aged over 75.

= more than the Algerian 2003 earthquake, more than 9/11, almost as much as Bam…

Similar disasters happen also regularly in USA, and in other rich, so-called “developed” countries, causing more deaths than all their floods, tornadoes, earthquakes and hurricanes combined.
How come?

- Slow on-set disaster, striking invisibly, silently
- No early warning system, no clear indicators
- No awareness of danger for victims (ex: elderly do not feel thirsty)
- Summer holidays: northern cities empty, except for those who don’t have holidays…
- People in north part of Europe are not used to heat and not prepared nor equipped, as where southern inhabitants have traditional coping mechanisms
- Fragility of community links (ex: Chicago) tending to put elderly out of sight
What was done first?

Ex. in France : 750 RC volunteers were activated

- Making people drink, putting wet towels, helping to cool down, visiting isolated and/or disabled elderly

= very simple, basic things that anyone could do, for someone else, but also for himself

A typical community-type of response!

Had people at grass-root level been aware in time, their action could have made the difference!
Lessons learned

Actions taken

- **NEED FOR BETTER PREPAREDNESS**

  *the following year:*
  - contingency plans in place,
  - early warning system created,
  - Heat wave committees ready to be activated,
  - obligation made to have an air-conditioned room for all institutes accommodating elderly…

- **NEED FOR MORE CARE FOR ELDERLY** and other vulnerable groups
  - More awareness? More solidarity?
Most of all:

- Everyone can be helpful in case of disaster
- Sometimes, one single person at grass-root level, without any technical skills, can do more than any professional team and big relief operations.

GIVE INFORMATION AND MEANS TO PEOPLE, AND THEY WILL PUT IT INTO ACTION!

(even in developed countries…)
THANK YOU
FOR YOUR ATTENTION!