

Portuguese Red Cross Response to 2024 Wildfires



CVP volunteers discussing with cash recipients during implementation in 2024 ©CVP

DREF Operational Review

[MDRPT001](#)

Prepared by: Netherlands Red Cross (NLRC)

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The DREF review shows that the Portuguese Red Cross (CVP¹) effectively responded to the rural fires of 2024, mainly supporting a wide range of operational actors (firefighters, civil protection, police, etc.), with rapid mobilization of resources and strong logistical recognition. However, the DREF operational review identifies limitations in the collection and management of operational data and the use of systematized tools for assessing needs in the field. CVP was widely valued for its response to immediate needs and psychosocial support, although with less reach in medium and long-term needs.

The quantitative objectives of the DREF were achieved but the qualitative impact was limited. The effectiveness of the logistics model and the immediate response in supporting operational actors is highlighted, contrasting with weaknesses in post-fire community intervention. Administrative delays, insufficient human resources and short deadlines compromised the recovery of actions. Even so, the DREF operation strengthened the institutional capacity of the CVP and revealed the potential for integrated and multidisciplinary responses.

Key lessons learned from the implementation of the DREF operation are the observed limitations in the formal integration of the CVP in the civil protection system and the recognition of its operational role. Relevant innovations for CVP were tested during this operation, such as the pre-positioning of logistical assets on the ground, and the integrated approach that includes immediate response and recovery. Psychosocial support and assistance through cash stand out as strategic and differentiating areas, although structural problems persist in their implementation.

The review highlights the high impact of logistical, health and psychosocial support provided to the operational actors, considered essential for their well-being. Assistance through cash revealed planning weaknesses, delays and operational limitations, reducing its reach to a mostly elderly and vulnerable population. Psychosocial support faced constraints related to the profile of professionals. Despite the challenges, implementing this DREF operation significantly strengthened CVP's image, institutional integration and strategic capacity, promoting a shift to a more diverse and community-centred response.

There is generally a positive feeling of CVP work in the DREF operation but also some dissatisfaction related to failures of communication, coordination, and internal organization that generated frustration among employees and volunteers. Although there were no formal external complaints, difficulties were identified in the management of the cash programme, which were dealt with informally and at a high emotional cost to the teams of the CVP branch delegation. The absence of formal channels for complaint and incident reporting limited problem documentation and institutional learning.

The very positive impact of the DREF in strengthening and diversifying the CVP response to rural fires is highlighted, valuing existing capacities in the delegations. This is especially evident around the capacities acquired in social action, psychosocial support and assistance with monetary cards. There is a great potential for pre-positioning of logistical resources, specialized training in fire response and greater internal coordination between emergency and social action departments in CVP delegations. At the same time, the high vulnerability of local populations is highlighted, marked by recurrent fires, poor preparation and a sense of institutional emptiness. The review points to the strategic opportunity of the CVP to strengthen prevention, community preparedness and the organization of neighbourhood networks, in line with municipal emergency plans.

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Abbreviations / Acronyms

Abbv.	Description
CVP	Portuguese Red Cross
DREF	Disaster Response Emergency Fund
IFRC	International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies
PER	Preparedness for Emergency Response
ZCAP	ZCAP - Population Concentration and Support Zone

INTRODUCTION

Background

Between 15 and 20 September 2024, Portugal faced one of the most devastating rural wildfires in the last decade, with more than 1,000 fire outbreaks, mainly in the Central and Northern regions, especially in the district of Aveiro (notably in Albergaria-a-Velha, Sever do Vouga and Oliveira de Azeméis). Approximately 35,000 hectares of forest were burned, 9 people died, including 4 firefighters. About 175 people were injured while approximately 60 buildings were destroyed, including homes and rural infrastructure.

A state of calamity was declared in the worst-affected areas. More than 5,000 firefighters, 1,500 vehicles and air reinforcements were mobilized. There was support from the EU and neighbouring countries, including Spain, France, Italy, Greece and Morocco.

The Portuguese Red Cross (CVP) mobilized its largest team in the last five years to respond to rural wildfires, especially in the central and northern regions most affected by the fires. For the first time, CVP requested the IFRC's Emergency Disaster Response Fund (DREF) to support and expand its fire response operations.

Launched on 29 September 2024 with a total allocation of CHF 113,470, the [DREF operation](#) and was implemented over six months, ending on 31 March 2025. The operation targeted 2,197 people, of whom 2,078 people were reported as assisted by the end of the operation. Assistance was provided through logistical support to civil protection entities and direct support to affected populations, including evacuation, emergency shelter, livelihoods assistance, multipurpose cash transfers and psychological support in the affected regions of Aveiro.



CVP handing support kits to firefighters

Objectives and Results

Conducted from December 2025 to February 2026, the DREF Operational Review assessed timeliness of the DREF allocation and the agility of the DREF as a response tool in the Portugal Wildfires 2024 operation (MDRPT001). It also examined the efficiency, effectiveness, relevance and impact of the humanitarian actions implemented, and services provided as part of the operational strategy.

The review captured key lessons learned, including good practices and operational challenges, particularly in relation to needs assessment, information management, post-fire community engagement and recovery activities. It found that the operation contributed to strengthening CVP's institutional capacities, diversification of response modalities, and preparedness for future wildfire responses, while also highlighting areas requiring further consolidation to support medium- and long-term recovery and organizational learning.

Methodology

This review covers the activities related to DREF operation MDRPT001 carried out by the CVP in the places affected by rural wildfires in the Aveiro region. The review is focused on three components: 1) emergency and logistical support; 2) mental health and psychosocial support and 3) cash assistance, assessing the relevance and effectiveness of the response, the timing and speed of mobilization, the selection and inclusion of vulnerable groups, community satisfaction, and coordination with municipal authorities and local community organizations.

The review applied a qualitative, evidence-informed approach combining secondary data review, key informant interviews and field visits, covering the full implementation period of the DREF operation (September 2024 to March 2025). Primary data were collected through semi-structured interviews with CVP staff and volunteers at national and branch levels, operational actors involved in the wildfire response, representatives of local government, civil protection, local community organizations, including beneficiaries of assistance. The review team also visited the CVP Branch Delegation in Águeda involved in the response and conducted field visits to affected communities to complement interview findings and enable direct observation of operational practices and post-fire interventions.

Analysis focused on relevance, effectiveness, efficiency, impact, accountability and CVP capacity, using triangulation of documentary evidence and qualitative inputs. Findings and lessons learned were derived directly from documented evidence and interview data, without scoring, ranking or comparative benchmarking.

Limitations and Challenges

In this study, there were no significant limitations. The team had access to the CVP structures involved in the execution of the DREF-funded operation and the relevant documentation. The only challenge was to interview some of the beneficiaries of the cash assistance given the profile of the beneficiaries — elderly people living in isolation and in situations of exclusion and poverty. Memory of the details of assistance received may be less accurate, and some traumatic experiences may make it difficult to be willing to speak openly.

KEY FINDINGS AND LESSONS LEARNED

This section presents the findings and lessons learned identified during the review of the DREF. The section follows the structure presented in the terms of reference of the DREF review, aligns to the review criteria as well as answers the [key questions](#) associated with each criterion.



CVP emergency team surveying burned forest ©CVP

Relevance of the response

Overall, CVP demonstrated strong relevance in the early phase of the response through sustained command-post presence and close alignment with operational stakeholders, enabling efficient identification of operational actors' needs and delivery of critical logistical and welfare support. However, the lack of systematized assessment tools, limited information-management capacity, and weak community-level presence constrained a comprehensive understanding of medium- and long-term needs, particularly in isolated rural areas, resulting in post-fire community activities which, while relevant, were only partially aligned with the scale and complexity of community needs due to operational constraints and limited integration within the broader response system.

This assessment of relevance is examined below through two complementary lenses: (1) the extent to which needs were adequately assessed and translated into appropriate interventions, and (2) the degree to which planned activities remained aligned with evolving operational and community needs.

1. Assessment of needs, population capacities and alignment with the designed interventions.

- There was a strong presence of CVP responders in the command post, with a strategic alignment between the CVP and the other stakeholders in the theatre of operations. The needs of the operational actors efficiently identified, although the volume of data transmitted was very high and the CVP team in the operations room was not fully prepared to manage this scale. The needs of the operational actors were identified through direct observation and previous experience, without using systematized assessment tools.
- The assessment of needs in the communities affected by the fires was mainly based on official bulletins, direct observations from CVP staff and volunteers on the ground and media reports. The process of identifying needs allowed to CVP to understand the basic priorities on the ground and design the DREF intervention in a practical way. However, the limited presence of the CVP in the affected communities limited the rapid, real, and complete understanding of community needs, especially in the medium-and long-term components, such as psychosocial support and cash transfer programmes.
- The agility in collecting information in the theatre of operations contrasts with the intervention after the fires in more isolated rural communities. The CVP does not have a mapping of communities vulnerable to fires, structured channels of communication between communities and the nearest branch delegations, or trained personnel in the delegations to collect data in the communities, which makes it difficult to coordinate with city councils and other local community actors.
- The assessment of needs in the affected communities did not sufficiently capture the existing capacities, vulnerabilities and coping mechanisms of the population, particularly in isolated rural areas. The population interviewed perceived this fire as the most serious ever, reinforcing feelings of vulnerability, fear and exhaustion, especially among those with multiple previous fire experiences. In the most isolated villages, where access to civil protection means is limited, communities are often forced to engage directly in firefighting efforts, despite reporting that they do not feel adequately prepared to face recurrent fire events.
- Although fires occur cyclically (approximately every four years), there is no evidence of systematic preparedness, prevention or mitigation measures based on previous experiences, pointing to a gap in structured community-level risk reduction. At the same time, the people interviewed report a significant institutional gap in villages exposed to recurrent fires, frequently highlighting neighbour networks as key structures of support, response and solidarity.
- These elements were not systematically captured in the needs assessment process, limiting a comprehensive understanding of community dynamics and capacities. This highlights an opportunity for the CVP to strengthen its approach to community engagement and needs analysis, including expanding local branch contacts in fire-prone areas and using established methodologies within the Movement, such as Enhanced Capacity and Vulnerability Assessment (ECVA), to better align interventions with both the needs and capacities of affected populations.

2. Aligning planned activities with actual needs and context

- The work of the CVP was mainly designed to support operational actors with improvement of their working conditions, benefiting from quick coordination through liaison officers and efficient communication with the operation's commands.
- The CVP employees interviewed say that the CVP could have done more in terms of supporting operational actors, but other entities restricted its space of action. Several interviewees mention the fact that the CVP is currently not classified as a civil protection agent, which limits its full integration into the response system.
- It is stated in the interviews that resting facilities for the operational actors are often neglected. It should be noted that CVP's support with a fast, agile and integrated structure that ensures water, food, safety

and rest conditions for the operational actors involved in the response is highly valued. Several interviewees highlight the ability to quickly mobilize highly experienced volunteers, often with less bureaucracy than other entities.

- The operational actors widely value the logistical support provided by the CVP in the theatre of operations, including the assembly of ZCAP (Population Concentration and Support Zone) structures. It is also recognized that the CVP has a well-organized and permanently available structure, which contributed to the speed and effectiveness of the response.
- The activities carried out after the fires in the communities are considered relevant for the affected population, especially in psychological support and food assistance. However, there were significant operational difficulties in these areas (see lessons learned section) that highlight the lack of full alignment of post-fire activities with the real needs of the population.
- Many people affected by the fires lost all or most of their property, most of them in a situation of advanced age, poverty and helplessness. The affected people interviewed indicated that the situation required an urgent response but felt that the needs were not fully met by the municipal authorities or other public entities.
- Despite the feeling of institutional abandonment, those affected by the fires declare that the CVP had an effective response to the immediate and subsequent needs of the affected families. The water and electricity expenses covered by the CVP proved to be a quick action and oriented towards basic protection. CVP also played a significant role in administrative mediation, supporting the completion of forms for compensation and reconstruction, translating complex technical and legal language and facilitating access to available support.

Effectiveness of implementation

CVP's response was effective in expanding the scope of intervention through the DREF, enabling activities (such as logistical support, psychosocial support and cash assistance), which would not have been possible with regular resources, and delivering timely, valued support to operational actors through agile logistics and pre-positioned assets. While numerical objectives were achieved and immediate operational support functioned well, effectiveness was uneven across components. Qualitative objectives, especially related to sustainable psychosocial support and post-fire community assistance, were only partially met due to procedural gaps, information-management limitations, funding and administrative delays, and insufficient preparation for integrated recovery activities, resulting in delays and reduced impact in medium- and long-term community response.

This assessment of effectiveness is analysed below through three complementary dimensions: (1) the extent to which objectives, indicators and targets were achieved, (2) the adequacy of tools, guidelines and methodologies supporting implementation, and (3) the sufficiency of timelines, resources and logistics to deliver the response effectively.

1. Achievement in the objectives, indicators and targets of the program

- While some interviewees consider that the objectives have been fully achieved, others assess that they have only been partially achieved, recognizing that the impact could have been greater.
- The DREF was decisive in expanding the scope of the CVP intervention, allowing to develop activities that would not have been possible with the organization's regular resources, namely psychosocial support and the attribution of cash to the affected population.
- The CVP's performance in the theatre of operations appears to be strongly dependent on the activation of Civil Protection and other operational actors first, with activations mostly oriented towards logistical

support (ambulances and rest spaces). There were differences in the field, where some local teams felt restrictions in their performance, even being inactive for long periods.

- Factors of inter-institutional coordination and decisions of a political nature conditioned, in some cases, the CVP's performance on the ground, limiting its response capacity despite the availability of the teams.
- The logistics model with pre-positioned resources proved to be highly effective and agile.
- As regards the DREF, while the numerical objectives have been achieved, the qualitative objectives, especially in the area of sustainable psychosocial support, have not been fully achieved. The initial strategy of training local professionals was not implemented, mainly due to the profile of the team, the high turnover of operational actors and the difficulty of articulating with local authorities. The focus ended up being on a direct, less sustainable and smaller-scale intervention, and the objective of creating peer support mechanisms was not achieved.
- The affected population interviewed recognizes the operational capability of the CVP's response as effective, since the CVP arrived equipped with essential goods, managing to immediately start activities and solve concrete problems of the affected population. They value the psychological recovery of the most vulnerable populations, such as the elderly and nursing home professionals who, despite not being classic emergency operators, faced high levels of stress in the context of rural fires.

2. Existence of appropriate and effective tools, guidelines, standard procedures and methodologies

- During the operation, there were significant limitations in terms of procedures and information management, which conditioned CVP ability to fully perform its role.
- Although the hierarchical structure and decision-making chain in the operating room were clear, there were shortcomings in the coordination and handling of information, the absence of a single focal point and the lack of structured methods for consolidating the state of play.
- The work methodology in post-fires activities can be improved. Needs assessment in affected communities, mapping of resources in branch delegations and contact with communities revealed important gaps.
- In the post-fire period, the capacity to set up long term and complex procedures was limited, especially in the cash component, which weakened the intervention. There were difficulties in accessing essential information on the ground (identification of beneficiaries, etc.), lack of clear interlocutors and methodologies to be followed in the provision of food cards, compounded by the fact that other authorities did not always recognize or understand the role of the FMC.
- In contrast, the psychosocial component had sound methodologies, adequate financial resources and a consistent technical framework, although its implementation was affected by operational limitations and the reduced proactivity of part of the team hired to implement.

3. Sufficiency of timelines, resources and logistics to implement the response

- In general, the deadlines and times defined in the DREF operation were considered adequate, but their application generated significant difficulties for CVP in the delivery of reports at the beginning of the operation.
- The delay in DREF funding transfer was associated with internal bureaucratic processes of the CVP, highlighting the lack of clear procedures and guidelines. Delays were also related to slow coordination within IFRC finance structures. Although funding delays remained a challenge, they were mitigated by CVP availability of internal resources. CVP demonstrated resilience by initiating operations with its own resources.
- CVP immediate support to actors in the operational theatre worked effectively, responding quickly when requested. Rapid coordination through liaison officers and efficient communication with the operation's commands were decisive factors, as well as the existence of an organized and always available structure.

- However, there were significant delays in the community post-fires response, caused by administrative, financial and human resources processes that were not previously planned and developed. In particular, assistance with food cards has been significantly delayed, undermining the effectiveness of a programme with a limited initial duration.
- Interviewees felt that the DREF time plan is insufficient for medium and long-term recovery activities in the affected communities. In general, it is concluded that the duration of the support was too short, although most of interviewees were aware that recovery activities must be financially sustained over time with other financial means. The interviewees highlight the need for greater continued intervention, especially in schools and other social institutions (homes and community day centres).
- The DREF shows that the CVP Águeda Branch Delegation has a good capacity to mobilize multipurpose brigades, capable of offering a diversified set of actions in the context of fire response. Emphasis was made on urgent support to operational actors, mobilization of ambulances, logistical support followed by recovery activities in the area of psychosocial support and distribution of cash cards.
- The DREF operation carried out by the CVP delegation of Águeda can be an effective example of an integrated use of emergency and social action resources, if they act in an articulated way from the beginning of the response to recovery activities with the community.
- The teams of the Águeda CVP Branch delegation had no prior knowledge of how integrated response should be implemented and spent considerable time in creating operational tools that already exist. This situation generated a widespread feeling of disorientation, overload and insecurity, with the perception that the work was being carried out without clear references or quality assurance.

Lessons learned

The DREF operation demonstrated that, beyond its financial value, it acted as a catalyst for organizational learning within CVP, notably through a lessons-learned workshop which supported reflection and procedural improvement. The response highlighted persistent structural challenges, including incomplete integration into formal civil protection systems, unclear role definition, uneven training of volunteers, and limited standardization, which affected safety, coordination and consistency. At the same time, psychosocial support emerged as a clear area of added value and differentiation for CVP, widely recognized by operational actors and communities, while gaps in national coordination, internal communication, human resources, and under-utilization of available tools constrained consolidation of this capacity and broader institutional impact.

These lessons are discussed below across three interrelated areas: organizational learning and coordination, clarity of roles and operational capacity in emergency response, and the consolidation and sustainability of psychosocial and technical support capacities.



Community member in his destroyed house ©CVP

- A lessons learnt workshop with the CVP Branch delegations involved in the response and recovery activities created a formal and valued space for reflection and continuous improvement of procedures.
- The integration of CVP into the formal structure of emergency response in rural fires is not yet complete. Despite its recurrent intervention, there is a lack of uniformity, automation and clear definition of responsibilities, which can lead to improvisation on the ground. Inter-institutional coordination is positive though, and the CVP is recognized as an actor that contributes positively to a more integrated response.
- CVP volunteers do not have sufficiently comprehensive training to act in the theatre of operations of rural fires. This highlights a high risk to the safety of volunteers and an ineffective response given the difficulty in following operational protocols. The latter amplifies the problem of lack of clear definition of the role of the CVP in the rural fire response operation.
- The great diversification of the CVP response in the DREF, although positive in terms of visibility, generates confusion among other civil protection agents, who do not always clearly understand the role, specialization and limits of intervention of the organization. This lack of definition makes it difficult to create standardized procedures, standardize the response and provide adequate training.
- Strong limitation in the collection of media content on the ground. The communication was mainly visual, with little narrative and contextualization of the impact, largely due to the lack of human resources, adequate profiles and photographic equipment. Although there is support from the national communication, it is mostly remote, and there is not enough reinforcement on the ground.
- The strong potential of psychosocial support in emergencies is highlighted as a differentiating area, where the CVP can assert itself as a national reference, filling existing gaps in the response by other national emergency actors. Psychosocial support stood out as one of the most relevant contributions of the DREF, being widely recognized as a necessary intervention, valued by operational actors, the affected population and local structures of the CVP. This lesson is strongly aligned with previous learnings, namely the experience of the 2017 fires.
- The response to rural fires in the year 2025, shows the need for a stronger focus on strengthening the emergency response capacities of CVP Branch delegations and their integration in municipal emergency plans. Progress is also being observed in cooperation with city councils, namely through the development of Population Concentration and Support Zones (ZCAP), which are beginning to be pre-defined and integrated into local planning.
- Despite this progress, structural problems persist, especially in terms of human resources. The area of psychosocial support appears to be particularly fragile: the absence of national coordination in 2025, the weak articulation with the emergency area and the excessive dependence on local branch delegation capacity compromised the recovery and consolidation of this competency. The lack of internal communication about the work carried out in 2024 contributed to the loss of institutional recognition, causing relevant efforts to be perceived as non-existent.
- Although some resources, methodologies and equipment are available, they have been underused, particularly in the case of drones, due to the lack of training of operational actors to interpret and use the information collected through this technology. None of the operational actors interviewed mentioned the use of CVP drones.
- The DREF was not only a financial mechanism, but also a catalyst for internal strategic reflection, promoting organizational learning processes, such as the lessons learned workshop, which involved different operational areas and made it possible to identify strengths and gaps.

Innovations

The DREF operation enabled CVP to pilot and consolidate several innovations that strengthened preparedness, broadened the temporal scope of response, and expanded community-level assistance modalities. These innovations reflect a shift from a predominantly reactive, acute-phase model toward a more anticipatory and integrated approach, combining preparedness, response and recovery.

The key innovations relate to (1) anticipatory logistics and preparedness, (2) a strategic reframing of disaster response across the full risk management cycle, and (3) the expansion of psychosocial and cash-based community assistance as institutional capabilities, further detailed below.



Community member in his destroyed house ©CVP

- The pre-positioning of resources close to the high-risk areas for wildfires allows anticipating needs, reducing response times and reinforcing the perception of CVP readiness among the authorities and the population. The DREF was decisive in making this model viable, by ensuring the necessary financial resources for pre-positioning stocks for the next wildfire season in 2026.
- The DREF represents a strategic shift by the CVP to recognize that disaster response is not limited to the acute phase, but must also integrate preparedness and prevention for the fire season, which unfortunately repeats itself every year, and in the post-fire recovery strategy at community level.
- Finally, the implementation of psychosocial support and assistance with food cards constituted, in itself, an innovation within the CVP, especially in the community, with great potential to expand in the future. CVP developed a national network of psychologists and social workers with around 200 active professionals in 2022, with high technical capacity and experience in multiple contexts, including support for refugees, that could be easily expanded and consolidated nationally. CVP has enormous potential to develop the area of community assistance through multi-purpose cards, cash and vouchers, in collaboration with social entities that already provide this type of support on a continuous basis.

Impact of the intervention

Overall, the DREF operation generated strong and tangible impact in supporting operational responders and significant institutional impact for CVP, strengthening its positioning, preparedness and diversification of response modalities. Psychosocial support emerged as a high-value intervention with strong acceptance, despite limitations in sustainability and scale. In contrast, the impact of cash-based assistance for basic expenses remained constrained by procedural delays and contextual mismatches with rural livelihoods. While the operation enhanced CVP's visibility, credibility and strategic direction, it also exposed risks related to human resource overload and staff well-being, underscoring the need for stronger institutional support systems to sustain impact over time.

The following subsections examine impact across four key domains: (1) support to operational entities, (2) food cards and payment of basic expenses, (3) psychosocial support, and (4) institutional impact on CVP.

1. Support to operational entities

- The well-being of operational actors (firefighters, etc.) often depends on the goodwill of communities, which reveals a lack of formal support structures. Thus, the need for an agile and integrated structure that ensures water, food, safety and resting conditions for the operational actors involved in the response becomes evident. It should be noted that the quick and logistical support to operational entities by CVP is highly valued, as it allows adequate rest and better management of well-being.
- The importance of direct support to firefighters in the health area, including physical rehabilitation, as well as the high value attributed to psychosocial support and the continuous monitoring of these operational actors, is highlighted.

2. Food cards and payment of basic expenses

- Financial support for basic expenses (water, electricity and gas) had limited impact, due to the difficulty of many beneficiaries in presenting receipts, which resulted in the non-use of part of the available funds.
- The implementation of the activity was significantly delayed, starting only in November 2024, due to the lack of clear internal procedures to operationalize this type of support.
- The beneficiary population was mostly elderly, rural and socioeconomically vulnerable, which made it difficult to use the support, since many did not have formal receipts (e.g. households have gas cylinders, water wells, and they are not connected to official gas grid or water network).
- The mechanism of prepaid cards for food presented weaknesses in the initial phase, including delays, cards distributed without activation and validation failures, which affected the efficiency of the response and generated a loss of credibility within the target population.
- Despite the initial difficulties, the distribution phase of the cards took place properly, showing that the problems were mainly related to the planning and preparation of the process.
- The scope of the support could have been broader, as operational and administrative limitations prevented the inclusion of a larger number of beneficiaries.

3. Psychosocial support

- There were operational difficulties that limited the impact of this component of the DREF. The objectives and goals of the DREF were not fully achieved, both in terms of individual support, but above all, with regards to the implementation of a peer support system by trained local professionals.
- Even so, there was a high overall satisfaction of the beneficiaries; good acceptance with the firefighters and police (especially where there was favourable leadership); and absence of unanswered critical situations.
- The hired professionals did not have the most appropriate skills to respond to the complexity of the context. The young professional profile limited the relationship with the municipalities.
- The shift rotation in the firefighters prevented the maintenance of stable psychological support groups and reaching the most needy groups such as volunteer firefighters.

4. Impact on the Portuguese Red Cross (CVP)

- Employees and volunteers demonstrated an overall positive feeling, resulting from direct contact with the population and the perception of the concrete impact of their work.
- The image of the CVP was significantly strengthened on the ground, especially by the fact that, at an early stage, it was the only organization present, which increased recognition and trust by the population and other actors. The relationship with the authorities and the formal integration in emergencies has increased significantly, consolidating the CVP as a central actor in disaster management.
- The impact of the DREF extended beyond the 2024 operation, allowing for stock replenishment, the reinforcement of warehouses and greater institutional preparedness in 2025. As of 2024, the CVP has

consolidated itself as a natural partner of the authorities, indicating greater institutional trust and formal integration in emergency responses.

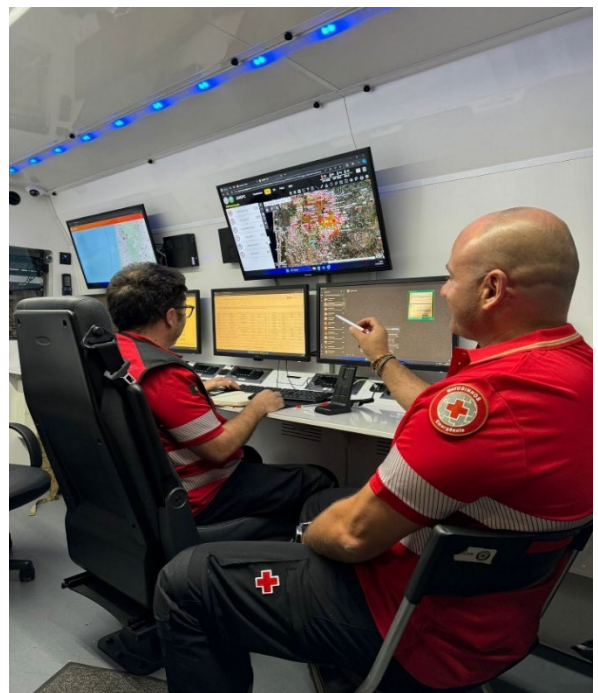
- The DREF allowed for a more efficient response during fires and increased the visibility of post-fire work. This visibility facilitated the partnership with private companies in 2025, favouring donations that ensured the recovery of the new, more diversified approach to rural fire response.
- The DREF also represents a paradigm shift in the performance of the CVP, by reducing the exclusive focus on ambulances and encouraging the development of new areas of intervention at the branch delegation level, demonstrating the potential of a more diversified and integrated response. CVP evolves from a reactive response to a more preventive and proactive strategy, focused on community vulnerability.
- Some interviewees mention that the DREF represents a break with the traditional view that emergency is exclusively associated with ambulances and logistical support. The branch delegations have diversified human resources, especially in the social area, which can and should be mobilized in an emergency context.
- Middle managers have taken on an excessive burden of responsibilities and work, which has increased the risk of exhaustion and error.
- Emotional management was particularly demanding for some employees and volunteers, who accumulated tasks, received constant contacts and had difficulty switching off after work. There was no structured psychological support after the operation for the most exposed elements, despite the evident emotional impact.

Accountability and transparency

Accountability and transparency during the DREF operation relied heavily on informal practices, personal commitment and direct engagement, which enabled swift problem resolution and helped maintain trust with communities. However, the absence of formal feedback, complaint and incident reporting mechanisms, combined with weaknesses in internal communication and risk documentation, limited transparency, learning and systematic accountability. Strengthening formal accountability systems (while preserving the strong field-level responsiveness observed) would be essential to reduce staff burden, improve risk management and enhance organizational learning in future operations.

The findings below highlight accountability and transparency practices in relation to internal communication, volunteer management, risk management, and feedback and complaints handling.

- There were complaints and dissatisfaction mainly internally from CVP employees and volunteers, especially related to failures of information, communication and coordination between the operations room and the teams in the field.
- The initial model of direct and simultaneous reporting to the operating room proved to be ineffective, contributing to information overload and coordination failures. The subsequent introduction of liaison officers was a significant improvement, creating a single channel of communication and better organization of operational data.



CVP command post unit

- Some complaints came from the volunteers themselves, especially when they were mobilized but not authorized to intervene in the theatre of operations, which generated frustration, emotional exhaustion and difficulties in managing expectations.
- Some of the people interviewed say that failures in decision-making and risk management were identified, with situations in which volunteers and CVP staff were exposed to high risks during critical periods of the fire. These failures are not officially documented or recorded.
- The perception of the people interviewed was largely positive, with no formal complaints registered; on the contrary, the work of the CVP has always been praised.
- CVP officials have directly received many complaints related to eligibility, criteria for access to cash cards. Several cases of fraud by beneficiaries were identified, which led to correct, but difficult to communicate, exclusions.
- Complaints were dealt with mainly verbally (phone calls, face-to-face meetings), without a formal registration system, but with strong direct involvement of the team and great emotional cost. The CVP teams showed great availability, going to the field and even to shopping areas to solve practical situations, such as inactivated cards. Subsequent contact with the affected people made it possible to confirm the resolution of the problems and strengthen the relationship of trust, despite the initial difficulties.
- There were no formal complaints recorded, but not because of the lack of problems, but due to the lack of formal complaint channels and a culture of incident reporting, which limits organizational learning.

Contribution to CVP Capacity strengthening

The DREF operation made a substantial contribution to strengthening CVP's institutional, operational and preparedness capacities. Beyond immediate response outcomes, it supported diversification of CVP's intervention model, reinforced branch-level capabilities and accelerated organizational learning and alignment with IFRC preparedness frameworks. The contribution was particularly evident in logistics, social action, cash-based assistance, psychosocial support and internal coordination across functions.

The elements below illustrate how the DREF contributed to capacity strengthening at branch and national levels, with implications for future fire responses and other emergency contexts.

- The DREF had a very positive impact, allowing to diversify and qualify the response capacity to rural fires, going beyond traditional emergency support and highlighting existing capacities in the CVP branch delegations in the area of social action that can be mobilized in early stages of response and that are relevant in the post-fire recovery phase.
- The operation showed important advances in the structuring of logistics capacities to respond to the needs of operational actors, with potential for future replication.
- The DREF has highlighted the potential that CVP branch delegations can have in the area of assistance with cash. Although CVP already had experience in the use of cards and in field intervention, the DREF shows the potential of this support mechanism in the context of fire response.
- CVP delegations with consolidated departments in the area of social action could easily structure agreements with partners (e.g. SONAE company) that guarantee the continuous availability of cards and funds, allowing an immediate response without depending on lengthy administrative processes. Pre-positioning cards can represent a relevant advance in preparation, allowing a faster and more effective response to the population in future emergency situations.
- The DREF also shows that the integration of psychosocial support into post-fire recovery activities was a novelty and required strong internal support, namely in the creation of local contact networks.

- CVP delegations in areas exposed to cyclical fires can invest in specific training for social workers and psychologists in an emergency context, enhancing their mobilization in situations of fires and other disasters.
- The DREF highlights the need to create internal coordination mechanisms between emergency, social action and psychosocial support, ensuring an integrated response from the first hours of the occurrence of fires.
- Importantly, the DREF operation acted as a trigger for organizational development, leading to the adoption of preparedness frameworks (Preparedness for Emergency Response, PER), stronger engagement with IFRC support structures, and a clearer focus on improving monitoring and data collection systems. The lessons learned workshop played a crucial role in translating operational experience into concrete preparedness actions and future planning.
- In the eyes of IFRC interviewees, the greatest long-term value of the operation may lie not only in the immediate response but in strengthening the CVP preparedness systems, institutional learning, and engagement with IFRC tools and frameworks.



CVP volunteers ready to provide pre-hospital support during the wildfires

RECOMMENDATIONS AND OPPORTUNITIES

This section provides a summary of recommendations and opportunities related to each review criterion/research area and the operational and technical sectors. The table includes a column that identifies who should track the execution of the recommendation or the exploration of the opportunity. [Annex 1](#) provides more detailed actions which can be implemented for each recommendation.

No.	Review criterion / Research area	Recommendation	Opportunity	Responsible Ops/technical teams
1	Relevance – Needs Assessment	Systematise community-based needs assessment through trained volunteers, participatory methods, and pre-disaster vulnerability analysis, ensuring that direct community information complements institutional sources.	Strengthen trust and access to rural and dispersed communities through permanent local focal points and community networks established before emergencies.	Lead: CVP Headquarters (Preparedness & Emergency) Support: Branch Delegations
2	Relevance – Alignment of Activities with Needs	Prioritise elderly people, people in poverty and those without support networks in post-fire assistance, aligning emergency social support mechanisms (housing, cash, essential goods) with identified needs.	Expand and operationalise agreements with local social action entities to deliver more comprehensive and coordinated responses to vulnerable populations.	Co-leads: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recommendation: CVP Social Action & Psychosocial Units • Opportunity: CVP Headquarters with support from Municipal Partners
3	Effectiveness – Achievement of Goals and Objectives	Consolidate the pre-positioned logistics model and strengthen CVP’s capacity for direct population engagement to improve speed, reach and effectiveness of response.	Adapt psychosocial interventions to operational realities (high turnover, shifts) using brief, replicable and peer-support-oriented formats.	Co-leads: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recommendation: CVP Emergency & Logistics Units • Opportunity: CVP Psychosocial Support Coordination
4	Effectiveness – Tools, Strategies and Methodologies	Establish standardised tools and protocols for information management, needs assessment, resource mapping and coordination, with clear focal points linking field and operations room.	Strengthen CVP institutional recognition on the operational scene by clarifying roles and demonstrating added value through structured coordination and rapid response tools.	Co-leads: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recommendation: CVP Operations Management Opportunity: CVP Leadership & External Relations

5	Effectiveness – Deadlines and Resources	Invest in pre-identified, trained and rapidly deployable teams (emergency, psychosocial, cash assistance), supported by clear timelines, practical guides and sustained follow-up beyond the immediate phase.	Scale joint action models that link emergency response to recovery (e.g. Águeda model), documenting and disseminating them as institutional good practice.	Co-leads: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recommendation: CVP Headquarters with Branch Delegations support • Opportunity: CVP Knowledge Management
6	Lessons Learned	Integrate prevention, preparedness and mitigation into CVP's role in fire-prone areas through community preparedness plans, training and post-fire reflection mechanisms.	Adapt assistance mechanisms (e.g. cash, cards, in-kind) to socio-economic realities of ageing and impoverished populations, increasing accessibility and relevance.	Co-leads: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recommendation: CVP Preparedness with Branch Delegations support • Opportunity: CVP Social Action and Ops teams
7	Impact on Communities	Ensure psychosocial and community support addresses both material and emotional impacts of fires, including structured post-event follow-up and community reflection	Position CVP as a trusted reference actor by strengthening visibility, partnerships (including private sector) and communication of results and impacts.	Co-leads: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recommendation: CVP Psychosocial and Social Action • Opportunity: CVP Leadership and Communications
8	Impact on CVP	Protect and support volunteers and staff through psychosocial support, risk management, safety training and confidential reporting mechanisms.	Use recognition, liaison officer models and systematic learning to reinforce CVP cohesion, credibility and operational effectiveness.	Co-leads: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recommendation: CVP Human resources and Ops teams • Opportunity: CVP Leadership
9	Transparency and Accountability	Strengthen accountability through clear procedures for cash and card assistance, structured agreements with partners, and systematic follow-up of DREF-funded actions.	Improve integrated coordination between emergency, social action and psychosocial components from the first hours of response.	Co-leads: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recommendation: CVP Finance and Emergency Management teams • Opportunity: CVP Ops Coordination
10	CVP Capacity Strengthening	Invest in specialised training for emergency coordinators, volunteers, social workers and psychologists to strengthen CVP's emergency-specific capabilities.	Align CVP preparedness, training and prevention actions with municipal emergency plans to reinforce complementarity and relevance.	Co-leads: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recommendation: CVP Training & Capacity Development • Opportunity: CVP Headquarters with support from Municipal Authorities

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the implementation of the 2024 rural wildfires DREF operation confirmed CVP's capacity to deliver a rapid, effective and well-recognized emergency response, especially with regards to logistics, health services and psychosocial support to the operational actors. While quantitative objectives were achieved, the operation revealed persistent weaknesses in data collection (information management), internal coordination and in the articulation of medium and long-term community intervention. These gaps ultimately limited the qualitative depth and sustainability of the intervention outcomes at community-level.

Despite these limitations, the DREF operation contributed to strengthening CVPs institutional visibility, reinforcing its strategic integration within the national emergency response system, and demonstrating its potential to deliver more integrated and community-centred responses. The review thus highlights the importance of consolidating learning, strengthening internal and external coordination mechanisms and investing more systematically in prevention and community preparedness as key strategic priorities for future responses, especially in the context of wildfires.



CVP visiting a home destroyed by wildfires

Annexes

Annex 1: Detailed list of recommendations per criterion

Relevance – needs assessment
<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Train volunteers and collaborators in community needs assessment, participatory methodologies and social mapping techniques.2. Establish community networks, local focal points and regular contacts with rural and dispersed areas to improve relations and trust.3. Invest in training, protocols, and tools for managing large volumes of information and interinstitutional coordination.4. Carry out prior diagnoses of living conditions and vulnerabilities before disasters, allowing for faster and more appropriate responses.5. Maintain and deepen collaboration with city councils, Civil Protection and security forces, but balancing it with first-hand information.
Relevance – alignment of activities with needs
<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Strengthening emergency social support mechanisms: temporary housing, financial support and replacement of essential goods seem to be the main needs mentioned by those affected by the fires.2. Prioritize elderly people, in poverty or without a support network, in continued support activities after fires.3. Expand and operationalize existing agreements with local social action entities to work with vulnerable populations, ensuring more aligned and comprehensive responses.4. Establish clear cooperation frameworks with the operational entities that act in the response to fires to reduce barriers and avoid limiting the operational performance of the CVP.5. Establish stable protocols that clarify responsibilities and take advantage of CVP operational speed. Establish joint routines of action with the entities of the theatre of operations.
Effectiveness/achievement of goals and objectives
<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Replicate and expand the pre-positioned logistics model. Consolidate this model as a good practice, given its positive impact on the agility and effectiveness of the response.2. Strengthen the capacity for direct intervention with the population and create mechanisms that allow the CVP to reach the communities affected by the fires.3. Develop more effective psychosocial action strategies for contact and training of social workers and psychologists already existing in local institutions.4. Adapt interventions to the high turnover of operational actors, favouring brief, replicable formats focused on peer support.
Effectiveness / existence of tools
<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Create clear methods, unique focal points and structured tools for collecting, analysing and sharing information in the operating room.2. Develop standardized protocols for needs assessment, mapping of local resources, and direct communication with affected communities.3. Ensure greater articulation between the emergency area (ambulances, logistics, support to operational actors) and psychosocial support, promoting a more integrated approach in the initial phase of response to fires.4. Strengthen the institutional recognition of the CVP by actors involved in the operational theatre, ensuring that requests for support effectively reflect existing needs on the ground.5. Review the management model for food cards and other cash support modalities, clarifying responsibilities and ensuring continuous monitoring.
Effectiveness / Deadlines and resources

1. Strengthen the training and mobilization of emergency and social action teams in delegations near areas vulnerable to fires, taking advantage of their versatility.
2. Create mechanisms for early mobilization of psychologists and other technicians in the area of social action, avoiding delays in the start of activities.
3. Align the timeline of post-fire recovery programme with the actual recovery times of families. It is logical to extend the follow-up to at least one year when possible.
4. Invest in dedicated and pre-identified teams for rapid response in the area of psychosocial and assistance with cash and cards.
5. Provide simple and practical technical guides that serve as an immediate reference at the start of operations.
6. Encourage models of joint action from the initial phase to community recovery, similar to the case of Águeda CVP Branch Delegation. Document and disseminate the experience of the Águeda branch delegation as a reference for future operations.
7. Use multipurpose emergency and social action brigades as a key tool for rapid need assessment. Ensure that the emergency response is linked to medium and long-term actions in the affected communities.

Lessons learned

General:

1. To make known, in advance, the added value, specialization and limits of action of the CVP to authorities and communities.
2. Clearly define areas of action following rural fire response with consistent procedures, training and communication.
3. Select two to three strategic areas of intervention where the CVP has greater added value and invest in technical expertise, training and visibility in these areas, avoiding dispersion of efforts.
4. Train volunteers in meteorological interpretation, fire behaviour and risk analysis.
5. Train CVP branch delegation emergency coordinators not only in emergency response, but also in preparedness, mitigation, and recovery.
6. Define a focal point from the beginning of the operation, a single main channel, and structured methods of information management.
7. Create dedicated operational communication teams, with photographers, adequate equipment and regular presence on the ground.
8. Systematically communicate the results and impacts of interventions, avoiding loss of institutional memory.
9. Whenever possible, extend the duration of interventions (e.g. psychosocial support) beyond the immediate phase, ensuring greater effectiveness and sustainable impact in the medium and long term.
10. Make lessons learned workshops a systematic practice after major operations, ensuring that the resulting recommendations are formalized, followed up and implemented.

Psychosocial support and assistance with money and food:

1. Recreate a national coordination for psychosocial support, reactivate the network of psychologists, define clear procedures for action and integrate this component in a systematic way in the response to emergencies.
2. Explicitly include social and psychosocial action teams in response plans for fires and other emergencies, defining roles, responsibilities and activation mechanisms.
3. Leverage existing resources to expand psychosocial support capacities in emergencies. Social action teams already carry out interventions in critical situations, such as emergency social transport, which demonstrates that they have transferable skills for contexts of fires and other disasters.
4. Implement flexible formats in the psychosocial component (brief, modular or individual sessions) that adjust to the work dynamics of firefighters and other operational actors working in shifts.
5. Address the emotional impact of losses by offering psychological and community support in cooperation with municipal social workers, strengthening the local psychosocial support network.
6. Assess the degree of commitment and capacity of municipalities and local entities before implementing projects.

7. To better communicate the impact of this area, positioning CVP as a reference in psychosocial support in emergencies.
Impact on communities
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Expand the role of CVP delegations in the prevention and mitigation of fires in highly vulnerable areas where fires occur in a cyclical manner. Develop community fire preparedness plans, implement simple and participatory plans for self-protection, evacuation and initial response, adapted to the local reality and tested through periodic exercises. 2. Promote regular training and information actions on fire prevention, safe behaviour, first aid and risk management, reinforcing trust and community response capacity. 3. Adapt support mechanisms to the socio-economic realities of the target population, considering alternatives to formal receipts (e.g., simplified declarations, vouchers or in-kind support) for aging and poverty populations. 4. Create clear and standardized guidelines for the execution of financial support and cards, avoiding delays and improvisations in future operations. 5. Hold moments of community reflection after each fire, identifying lessons learned and concrete measures to be implemented before the next critical season.
Impact on CVP
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Recognize the emotional impact of the work performed and ensure spaces for support, monitoring and appreciation of employees and volunteers after operations. 2. Use positive recognition on the ground to strengthen relationships with local authorities, partners and communities, promoting CVP as a reference actor in emergency response. 3. Continue to strengthen partnerships with private companies and explore other sources of funding to ensure the continuation of a more integrated and community-centred approach to rural fire response. 4. Maintain and improve the visibility of CVP actions, both internal and external, to strengthen public trust and institutional recognition. 5. Ensure that CVP stakeholders themselves have access to psychosocial support, recognizing the emotional impact of their exposure in emergency contexts.
Transparency and accountability
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Implement clear, accessible and confidential mechanisms for volunteers, staff and beneficiaries to report problems, risks or incidents, promoting organisational learning. 2. Consolidate the liaison officer model as standard practice, ensuring a single channel of communication between the field and the operations room, with clear reporting and recording responsibilities. 3. Ensure sufficient teams and adequate information management systems, avoiding situations of overload and response failures. 4. Combat the normalization of risk in fires through training, safety briefings and post-operation reviews that encourage the identification and correction of dangerous situations. 5. Work with authorities to reduce operational roadblocks and ensure that policy decisions do not compromise the effectiveness and safety of teams in the field.
Capabilities
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Follow up on the actions initiated under the DREF, in particular with regard to the use of cash cards as a support mechanism in the context of fire response. E.g.: structuring agreements with partners and pre-positioning cards. 2. Integrate fire prevention, preparedness and training actions, in line with municipal emergency plans and with the performance of the CVP. 3. Create internal coordination mechanisms between emergency, social action and psychosocial support, ensuring an integrated response from the first hours of the occurrence. 4. Invest in specific training for social workers and psychologists in an emergency context, enhancing their mobilization in situations of fires and other disasters.

Annex 2. Research questions (per ToR)

Assess the relevance of the response

- Was the intervention appropriate to the needs of the affected population?
- Did the planned activities match the real needs and context?

Evaluate the effectiveness of implementation

- Were objectives and indicators achieved?
- Was the timeline respected? Were the resources (human, financial, material) well managed?
- Were tools, guidance, and methodologies used in the response suitable and applicable to the context?

Capture lessons learned

- What worked well? What didn't?
- How challenging/easy was the DREF application process for a first time user?
- Were there innovations or good practices that should be replicated?
- What should be improved in future DREF operations for Wildfires in Europe?
- How can other EU NS benefit from the CVP experience and use of DREF?

Understand the impact on the community

- Did the intervention bring positive change to the targeted people?
- Was there feedback from communities? Were they satisfied?
- Were complaints managed? If so, how?
- Were staff and volunteer well-being needs addressed, and were referral pathways to specialized care available where necessary?

Support accountability and transparency

- To what extent has the programme demonstrated to donors and stakeholders the appropriate and effective use of funds?
- Did the learnings from the DREF operation contribute to the shaping of the National Society's wildfire response during the summer of 2025?

Contribute to capacity strengthening

- How did the operation inform CVP's strategies for expanding preparedness and response activities?
- To what extent has the programme strengthened CVP's readiness for future emergency response?
- Did the DREF operation strengthen the visibility and positioning of the Portuguese Red Cross on the national level?