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Dealing with Disasters

Capacity Building Toolkit for National
Civil Society Organisation Platforms

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**Support for Dealing
with Disasters**



Support for Dealing with Disasters

Disaster preparedness, response and disaster risk reduction may be regarded as specialist topics. However disasters, large or small, affect the ability to pursue sustainable development in many different contexts. Understanding and acting to reduce their impact is important. This section provides a basic introduction to the topic.

What is a Disaster?

In considering any disaster, it is important to separate the *hazard* from the *disaster event*. There are many hazards, such as the emergence of a new disease, a landslide on a mountain, or a powerful storm, but these do not on their own constitute disasters.

A disaster occurs when people are *exposed* to a hazard and are *vulnerable* to its effects. For example, if a severe storm strikes properly built, storm-proof housing, the effects of the storm are limited. However, if it damages or destroys weak and insecure structures, resulting in homelessness, loss of assets and livelihoods, then a disaster is experienced.

Non-specialists often think of large-scale events such as earthquakes and typhoons as typifying

disasters. These events have a high impact and are known as 'intensive' disasters. There are many more small scale 'everyday' disasters, for example seasonal flooding of the streets in a city slum, or a fire destroying several houses. As these are less visible, they are less recorded or reported. In order to understand the nature of disasters we will look first at an intensive disaster which has affected most of us – the Coronavirus pandemic of 2020.

The virus itself is a *hazard*. However, the presence of the virus in a densely populated area, combined with little initial idea of its effects, created high *exposure* to a *vulnerable* population, resulting in the onset of a *disaster*. This grew in intensity as the scale of international travel magnified the exposure and vulnerability of global populations. All of this can be summed up in an equation which relates the *risk* of a *disaster* to the *hazard* itself, the degree of *exposure* to the hazard and the *vulnerability* of exposed populations.

Risk = Hazard x Exposure x Vulnerability ¹

No disaster is 'natural'. Vulnerability and exposure are socially determined. This idea is illustrated in a widely used model which looks more closely at the factors creating vulnerability to a hazard²:

Layers of vulnerability leading to a disaster, example of urban contexts

Progression of Vulnerability >				
Root Causes >	Dynamic Pressures >	Unsafe Conditions >	DISASTER	< Hazard
Inability to influence political and economic systems which create increasing exposure	Growth of cities and inward migration. Development of informal areas (shack and slum dwellings). Insecure and low wage employment. Poor infrastructure such as drainage. Weak local governance and disaster management.	Unsafe housing. Lack of emergency response systems. Poor hygiene. Poor and blocked drainage. Poor access. Crime.	Flooding, fires, damage and loss of housing and business premises, injury and death, illness, loss of livelihoods.	Typhoons, seasonal heavy rains, seismic events, fire, disease

The table above shows that vulnerability results not only from the *unsafe conditions* people face, but from *dynamic pressures*, such as increased urbanisation without effective planning and disaster preparedness measures. Underlying all of these are *root causes*, the systems which determine social and economic structures.

According to this model, a disaster results from vulnerability to a hazard, and it is necessary to tackle the dynamic pressures and root causes which lead to unsafe conditions resulting in vulnerability.

The disaster risk management cycle

When a disaster strikes, the sequence of events forms a *cycle*.

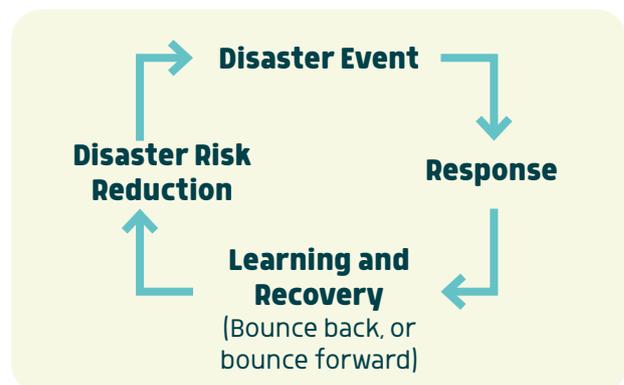
The first step is *response*. This is often urgent and large scale. Rescue activities, medical aid, provision of basic needs, such as food, are vital at this stage.

The impact of the disaster – on lives, livelihoods, loss of assets, disruption of local economies and infrastructure – is addressed in the *recovery*

phase, through social and economic rebuilding. This phase may be:

- *Reactive*, trying to return to the previous, pre-disaster state ('bounce back').
- *Adaptive*, making changes to reduce the chance of a re-occurrence or to cope better.
- *Transformative*, addressing dynamic pressures or root causes ('bounce forward' or 'build back better').

These steps form a cycle, in which 'disaster risk reduction' involves learning from the disaster event and addressing factors which have created vulnerability to the hazard³.



Disasters and development

Growing experience over the last three decades has revealed that disasters and development are closely linked. Ignoring the impact of disasters makes it more difficult to pursue sustainable development. This has led to the concept of 'risk informed development' which emphasises the need to take account of risks which development might create. For example, allowing large scale industrial development on low-lying land might reduce the carrying capacity of the area to absorb heavy rainfall without flooding.

It has also been found that much of the negative impact on sustainable livelihoods comes not from large, 'intensive' disasters, but from many smaller, 'everyday' disasters. Smaller scale and slower onset disasters have more impact on development overall than larger scale events, but are often 'invisible'.

Invisible Disasters

90% of disasters prioritised by respondents in GNDR's 'Frontline' study are 'everyday'. UNDRR found that 99% of disaster records are attributed to such risks, which account for 13% of total mortality and 42% of economic losses.⁴

Everyday disasters are very diverse. In many cities, regular seasonal floods affect the poorest living on low-lying land. In conflict zones, people migrate to high-risk urban areas. In rural areas, climate change results in more frequent extreme weather events, such as heavy rains and droughts, leading to mudslides or to increasing drought and famine. Disaster risk reduction, disaster response and disaster recovery enable development to be sustainable in the face of these many challenges.

National Civil Society Organisation Platforms and disasters

National CSO Platforms (NCPs) and their members play an important role in responding to disasters, as well as in advocacy to change underlying policies. They often understand the needs of local populations better than government officials and have gained trust through their work. They assist in the management of resources and in enlisting members to take action and to deliver supplies at the front line.

Localised, small scale, and slow onset disasters need to be made visible. NCPs and their members, connected right down to local level, are key to this. Rather than waiting for disaster to strike and then responding, they can engage in disaster risk reduction. This is based on understanding the hazards to which people are vulnerable, identifying ways of reducing these, and communicating this knowledge for local action and for government support.

At local level, the starting point for this is often 'Community Based Disaster Risk Reduction'.⁵ This depends on gathering local knowledge through mapping the threats people face. Tools for this include 'Vulnerability and Capacity Assessments'⁶ and Views from the Frontline⁷ participative surveys. NCPs play an important part in supporting the local gathering of risk knowledge and sharing it. They can also coordinate and connect the expertise of different CSOs in order to address risk more effectively.

Integrated action

This Toolkit is based on the experience of many CSOs, platforms, and networks. It highlights the need to address intensive and everyday disasters through disaster risk reduction and response. It makes it clear that action to deal with disasters must be integrated with overall work to pursue sustainable development.

Support for dealing with disasters: Action Points

- Gather data on the wide range of disasters that impact peoples' lives and livelihoods, as many disasters, sometimes small scale and 'invisible', impact peoples' lives in different ways.
- Integrate action on Disaster Risk Reduction, addressing the disasters people experience, into work on sustainable development and climate change adaptation, as disasters - large and small - can negate the development gains of these activities.
- Consider methods of data gathering, ranging from local vulnerability and capacity assessments to wider surveys (such as the methodology developed for the Views from the Frontline programme of the GNDR.)
- Consider ways of supporting member organisations in mobilising communities to strengthen their resilience to disasters, large and small, for example by sharing experience, learning, and resources between CSOs on developing community based disaster risk management (and see resources at www.cbdrm.org).
- Engage with governments and use data to drive the case for more integrated disaster management which is proactive in reducing risk, rather than just responding to emergencies.

FOOTNOTES

¹ See the UNDRR explanation of disaster risk at <https://www.preventionweb.net/risk/disaster-risk>

² Wisner, B., Blaikie, P., Cannon, T., and Davis, I. (2004) *At Risk: Natural Hazards, People's Vulnerability and Disasters*. Routledge.

³ This is a very simplified framework reflecting the key elements of more sophisticated Disaster Risk Management (DRM) cycles. Examples and case studies in this toolkit show that there are often multiple causes and multiple consequences, particularly in everyday disasters and in protracted disasters such as conflict. See for example the Swiss Red Cross framework: <https://www.redcross.ch/de/file/23874/download> and the ELRHA framework: <https://higuide.elrha.org/humanitarian-parameters/disaster-management-cycle/>

⁴ Everyday Disasters and Everyday Heroes p.4 <https://www.gndr.org/programmes/item/1460-everyday-disasters-everyday-heroes.html>

⁵ See GNDR resources: www.cbdrm.org

⁶ See, for example, the Oxfam 'Participatory Capacity and Vulnerability Analysis': <https://policy-practice.oxfam.org.uk/publications/participatory-capacity-and-vulnerability-analysis-a-practitioners-guide-232411>

⁷ <https://www.gndr.org/programmes/views-from-the-frontline/vfl-2019.html>

See Case Studies 2 and 5 for examples of support for dealing with disasters.