**Remembering Human Rights, Justice and Equity amidst Disasters and Climate Change*—***

**Tools for Empowerment and Resilience**

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**Problem Identification**

Much of the humanitarian crises and environmental disasters of the world are caused by a complicated interaction of poor natural resource management, lack of protection and fulfillment of human rights, and poor integration of disaster relief and sustainable development initiatives. Historically, much of the world’s stance on hazards as well as ecological degradation has been one of a reactive nature, such that funds and resources are not deployed until the aftermath of a disaster or extended degradation. However, such an imbalanced approach is cost-inefficient, socially and ecologically irresponsible, and unsustainable. Issues of poverty and wealth inequalities, poor resource management, and human rights abuses further exacerbate physical, social and ecological vulnerabilities to disasters. Climate change will also intensify disaster risks by potentially increasing the unpredictability, severity and intensity of weather and climate hazards, as well as increasing the vulnerability of communities to natural hazards through ecosystem degradation, reductions in water and food availability, causing displacement and migration, and altering livelihoods (UN MDGs, 2010). The issue of vulnerability to disasters and climate change is a global one, affecting poorer countries and populations disproportionately with higher levels of social, economic and ecological losses.

Although there is building theoretical and political support for integrated collaborative approaches to disaster risk reduction (DRR), there is still poor understanding of how to implement these frameworks and strategies at regional and local levels. Despite the evidence that long-term preventive adaptation, mitigation and preparedness measures are financially, socially and ecologically more effective than reactive disaster relief, there is still a disparity between the voiced political leverage and the actual financial, political and legislative support provided to sustain integrated disaster resilience projects.

**Human Rights Framework**

### Critical to preventing, mitigating and adapting to crises, are the upholding of basic human rights as set forth in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, including the right to life, liberty and security of person (Article 3) the right to a standard of living adequate for health and well-being (Article 25), the right to education (Article 26), with local empowerment and dignity-building involvement as the basis for all activities (Articles 1, 22, 23) (UN, 1948). International human rights law can serve as an ethical foundation for risk-reducing development strategies, promoting equity and offering protection and fulfillment of basic rights and needs. However, a critical gap is the failure of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) to explicitly mention the need to reduce human and environmental vulnerability to natural hazards, disasters or the impacts of climate change. The one Millennium Development Goal that approaches, in part, the complicated issue of reducing disaster risk to vulnerable populations and ecosystems is Goal 7, Ensure Environmental Sustainability, Target 7.A: Integrate the principles of sustainable development into country policies and programmes and reverse the loss of environmental resources(UN MDGs, 2010).

Thus, it is critical to address this gap and engage in a more equitable and effective approach that focuses on reducing vulnerability of populations and the environment with the goal of furthering social, economic and ecological equity and justice. This approach is supported by the *Strategic Environmental Framework* (SEF) and the *Hyogo Framework for Action* (HFA)*,* which support the implementation of DRR projects and policies, and which also complement the *MDGs* (UNISDR, 2005; UNISDR, 2008; UN, 2010) now the Sustainable Development Goals. The SEF was developed by the United Nations Environment Program (UNEP) and the United Nations International Strategy for Disaster Reduction (UNISDR), and consists of a five-dimensional framework linking the local environment with disaster risk management and reduction (UNISDR, 2008). The UNISDR oversees the coordination of international disaster reduction activities and synergies, via the Global Platform for DRR and the Hyogo Declaration and the Hyogo Framework for Action 2005-2015 (UNISDR, 2005). Working in tandem with the SEF, the HFA *2005-2015: Building the Resilience of Nations and Communities to Disasters* is an international policy and knowledge collection & dissemination framework with the shared goal to markedly reduce global disaster risk and track tandem progress made within other policy frameworks such as the MDGs (UNISDR, 2007).

Key challenges to mainstreaming and implementing DRR efforts include committed financial, institutional and legislative support from governing bodies. DRR serves as a conceptual framework of elements considered with the possibilities to minimize vulnerabilities and disaster risks throughout a society, to avoid (prevention) or to limit (mitigation and preparedness) the adverse impacts of hazards, within the broad context of sustainable development (UNISDR, 2004). The HFA recognized that “*disaster risk reduction is a cross-cutting issue in the context of sustainable development and therefore an important element for the achievement of internally agreed development goals, including those contained in the Millennium Declaration”* (UNISDR, 2005). To address this issue, the HFA called for nation states and the international community to ensure that DRR is a national and local priority with a strong institutional basis for implementation, identifying legislation as a critical component in moving towards a comprehensive and mainstreamed DRR approach(UNISDR, 2008).

Financial and legislative investments in DRR can yield long-term benefits, including progress on the MDGs (UN MDGs, 2010). A report on the progress of the MDGs showed that “experiences from (various) countries has shown that investments in DRR produce long-term benefits—from reduced future losses and avoided reconstruction to co-benefits such as more robust livelihoods, resilient communities, and protective and productive ecosystems” (*ibid*). This includes countries such as Bangladesh, Cuba, Vietnam and Madagascar that have reduced severe weather hazards through improved early warning systems and other DRR measures; in Peru, incorporation of DRR into development initiatives has led to benefits that exceeded costs by as much as 37 times (*ibid*). In support of the HFA and the MDGs, Pacific regional disaster managers developed a planning framework entitled “An Investment for Sustainable Development in Pacific Island Countries DRR and Disaster Management” offering principles for a comprehensive risk management strategy in Pacific communities (UNISDR, 2008). Pacific Island communities are among the most vulnerable to existing natural hazards and climate change, and have developed place-based knowledge systems, social institutions and embedded learning processes that link societies and ecosystems and enable them to survive, adapt to, and thrive amidst socio-ecological transformations.

**Looking Forward as a Youth**

As future leaders of their communities and nations, children and youth possess the power to think creatively, challenge old schools of thought, and approach difficult problems with energy, ingenuity and imagination. In order to shift social paradigms and catalyze change, it is critical to get youth involved in various capacities in the proposed solutions in the following section. Such capacities include: serving as volunteers and leaders of community disaster education and awareness initiatives to encourage disaster preparedness and coping capacity; engaging in traditional ecological knowledge sharing activities to foster intergenerational environmental stewardship and sustainable resource management; and participating in community-building programs that enable youth to engage community and motivate families and individuals to be proactive participants in reducing their community’s vulnerability to disasters and climate change. Examples of such initiatives can be seen around the world. In Brazil, social movements fighting for small land holder and landless worker rights empower youth to be involved in raising community awareness of issues of poverty, education, health and human rights abuses through the creative activities of theatre, dance and community outreach, ultimately mobilizing community members and stakeholders to collectively address these issues. In Pacific Islands, youth are involved in traditional ecological knowledge transfer programs, engaging with knowledgeable elders of their communities to share socio-cultural environmental management practices that encourage resilience to natural hazards and climate change. In the United States, there are many disaster preparedness education programs, through Fire and Police Departments, the American Red Cross among others, that target youth in order to raise awareness and preparedness of disasters for these individuals and their families in order to reduce overall disaster risk. Such novel approaches to addressing the complex issue of reducing socio-ecological vulnerability to disasters and climate change can be modeled and implemented throughout the world, drawing upon youth as the conduit for learning, sharing and addressing such critical social and environmental issues now and into the future.

**Conclusion**

The World Conference on Disaster Reduction “Hyogo Framework for Action 2005—2015” defines disaster resilience in the following declaration: “the starting point for reducing disaster risk and promoting a culture of disaster resilience lies in the knowledge of the hazards and the physical, social, economic and environmental vulnerabilities to disasters that most societies face” (Birkmann, 2006; UN ISDR, 2008b). Reducing vulnerability depends on understanding sustainable livelihoods and the capacities, assets, and activities that lead to sustainability. Therefore, in addition to the fields of natural resource management, agro‐ecology and hydrology, disaster resilience research, plans and policy must carefully measure and develop the socioeconomic, or social, cultural, livelihood, and other related factors in collaboration with the communities affected. National, regional and local DRR legislature, policies and programs should draw from and offer support for international strategies such as the SEF, HFA and MDGs, including: engaging in effective interdisciplinary community-based participatory research, monitoring and analysis; promoting risk reduction awareness and education; engage youth in community-building, DRR and environmental awareness activities; sharing information and best practices; developing early warning systems; protecting ecosystems; and developing socio-economic adaptation and coping capacity.

Due to themultiplicative nature of disastervulnerability, human and environmental security, it is critical to use human rights frameworks, tools and collaborative strategies to measure and reduce the impacts of chronic and acute hazards. The guiding principles of DRR must be to protect, respect and fulfill the universal human rights owed to all human beings, through reducing the incidence and severity of humanitarian crises that in turn create or exacerbate situations of environmental degradation, resource scarcity, conflict, population displacement and hunger. Beyond the fulfillment of basic human rights, however, the ultimate goal should be not only to reduce vulnerability but to enhance the resilience and well-being of communities and the environment. In addition, to improve upon disparities in justice and equity, efforts must prioritize the more vulnerable populations and regions, such as indigenous groups, children and youth, the elderly, disenfranchised and marginalized persons, island and landlocked states, as well as the more degraded and critical ecosystems. Communities, scientists, natural resource managers, planners, policy makers and disaster managers working vulnerable communities and ecosystems have the unique challenge of integrating indigenous, local and scientific knowledge and applying various disciplines and sectors, in order to create ecologically sound, socially-appropriate and economically-sustainable disaster resilience laws, policies and programs. Human rights, justice and equity must be integrated as minimum standards for measuring and evaluating success at achieving human and environmental resilience, and implemented as guiding benchmarks for the HFA and other international frameworks and policies.

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