



International Strategy for Disaster Reduction

NGOs & Disaster Risk Reduction: A Preliminary Review of Initiatives And Progress Made

Background Paper for a Consultative Meeting on
*A “Global Network of NGOs for
Community Resilience to Disasters”*

Geneva, 25-26 October, 2006



United Nations

Context

Every year, more than 200 million people are affected by droughts, floods, cyclones, earthquakes, wildlandfires, and other hazards. In 2005 alone, 92,000 people died in 150 disasters that caused economic losses estimated at more than 220 billion US dollars¹. Triggered by the combination of natural hazards and vulnerabilities, the number of disasters is on the rise. Increased population densities, environmental degradation and global warming adding to poverty, make the situation even worse.

The Hyogo Framework for Action (HFA) 2005-2015, a 10-year action framework adopted by 168 Governments during the January 2005 World Conference on Disaster Reduction (WCDR) aims to assist the efforts of nations and communities to become more resilient to natural hazards. It offers guiding principles, priorities for action and practical means for achieving disaster resilience for vulnerable communities. Whilst placing the primary responsibility for achieving disaster resilience on national governments, the HFA also highlights the importance of involving the civil society, Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs), community organisations and voluntary groups in DRR processes, along with the scientific community and the private sector.

Indeed, as disaster risk reduction is a crosscutting issue that needs to be mainstreamed into development sectors, especially at community level, the role of NGOs is very crucial. The resilience of local communities to disasters lies on their capacity to prevent, prepare for and respond to natural hazards. A comprehensive approach to DRR requires a combination of changes at community level with changes to national and international policies and practices.

Towards a Global Network of NGOs

The ISDR secretariat attaches great importance to NGOs' increased engagement in different fronts of DRR and believes that building the resilience of nations and communities to disasters cannot be done without the active participation of NGOs. Furthermore, under its growing outreach and promotion capacity, and as a result of the major reform it is currently undergoing (for more information visit <http://www.unisdr.org/eng/isdr-system/In-a-nutshell.htm>), ISDR is determined to build a *Global Network of NGOs for Community Resilience to Disasters*, with the aim of addressing DRR issues at sub-national and community levels.

As a first step towards the establishment of the Global Network, the ISDR secretariat is conducting a preliminary review of initiatives and progress made by NGOs in the area of DRR over the past years, in order to identify existing gaps and better define the scope of the Global Network. Information and data have been gathered for this purpose from various articles, papers and case studies. Preliminary findings and some general observations are presented in this document, which is intended to serve as a background reading for the "Consultative Meeting on a Global Network of NGOs for Community Resilience to Disasters" scheduled on 25-26 October 2006.

During the consultative meeting, which will be attended by a small group of representatives of NGOs and NGO networks worldwide, participants will be discussing such issues as the potential scope of the Global Network, its intended

¹ Source: CRED - Center for Research on the Epidemiology of Disasters, 2005.

objectives, governance structure and coordination mechanisms. The meeting is expected to emerge with substantive comments and observations on the “Global Network of NGOs” concept, and a shared understanding of and commitment to the Global Network. Finally, as the process of developing the Global Network of NGOs will unfold, additional case studies, good practices and more detailed information on NGOs’ involvement in DRR activities will be identified, allowing for a more accurate and comprehensive picture of their role in the field.

The Role of NGOs in Disaster Risk Reduction

The key role which communities play in disaster management and disaster risk reduction is strongly acknowledged by the ISDR secretariat, whose vision is to “enable all communities to become resilient to the effects of natural hazards, technological and environmental disasters.” Experiences show that community-based approaches offer viable solutions for managing and reducing risks and ensuring sustainable development.

Today, an increasingly predominant view is that for risk reduction strategies to be truly effective in protecting lives and livelihoods, they need to be people centred. They need to build on people’s local knowledge and cultural practices, and apply tools and approaches that people can easily understand and integrate into their lives. Conversely, disaster reduction using top-down government and institutional interventions alone are often considered insufficient as they tend to have a lower understanding of community dynamics, perceptions and needs, and ignore the potential of local knowledge and capacities.

On many occasions, local people and organizations are the main actors in disaster risk reduction and disaster response. When a disaster strikes, immediate response (i.e., search and rescue and care for those injured, traumatized and homeless) is often carried out by family members, friends and neighbours and grassroots organizations. In the case of the many small-scale events triggered by natural hazards, there may be little or no external support at all, especially in countries where government capacity is limited.

Many members of local communities also represent the greatest potential source of local knowledge of hazardous conditions, and are the repositories of traditional coping mechanisms suited to their individual environment. Their awareness of historical risk scenarios is often stronger than that of other people.

NGOs’ involvement in DRR activities has proved beneficial for a number of reasons, including the following:

- *NGOs can operate at grassroots level* with communities and local organizations as partners, and take a participatory approach to development planning. This allows them to respond better to local people’s priorities and build on local capacities.
- *NGOs enjoy higher operational flexibility* as they are relatively free from bureaucratic structures and systems, and better able to respond and adapt quickly and easily.
- *NGOs often work with and on behalf of most needy groups:* the poorest and the most vulnerable.

In spite of the encouraging trend observed over the past decade, it should be noted that NGOs have found it hard at times to gain acceptance, both at national and international levels. They have sometimes been regarded as minor players, especially in countries whose governments have been hesitant to concede authority and resources to the civil society. As a matter of fact, some governments do not always welcome the growth of civil society, and may sometimes resist the expansion of its role, especially where this involves criticism of government policies or practice. Finally, NGOs' participation in high-level decision-making processes so far has also been rather limited.

This said, some NGOs are gaining growing recognition in the ongoing process of promoting DRR, and are becoming more actively involved in a number of different activities. Over the past years, some NGOs have committed themselves to advocate for policy changes. Others have been active in mainstreaming DRR into rehabilitation and recovery programmes. Many others have engaged actively in capacity building, knowledge transfer and public awareness in communities at risk. All these efforts have contributed to reducing the vulnerability of those living in disaster-prone areas and increasing their resilience through educational activities and capacity building.

Overall, the following broad areas of intervention have been identified as being the ones in which NGOs appear to be more actively involved:

- Policy and advocacy
- Knowledge and education
- Community-based risk and vulnerability assessment
- Community-based mitigation and preparedness

Major Initiatives Taken & Progress Made by NGOs

Policy & Advocacy

A number of NGOs have been very active in advocating for better DRR policies and practices at the international level. Some played a key role in lobbying at the January 2005 World Conference on Disaster Reduction in Kobe, Japan, as well as in the follow-up of and implementation mechanisms for the Conference's outcomes. As a result of these efforts, there is certainly an increased recognition today of the need to mainstream DRR into development planning.

Meanwhile, a lot of work still needs to be done to identify how such a mainstreaming can be achieved in practical terms. Some organizations have gone further, developing basic targets and indicators to help integrate and expand DRR initiatives into relief management and development planning (see case study below).

Despite a general advancement in this area, it should be noted that the most active organizations working on the policy and advocacy fronts do not always seem to be involved in the implementation of the projects and initiatives they advocate. The general impression is that a significant number of the initiatives carried out at the community level are implemented by national NGOs and regional and sub-regional organizations. In spite of the added value they bring, such initiatives are less visible

and less documented than the ones promoted at the international level. Further investigation and more concerted action would be required to understand better the nature of this gap, and break the existing barriers. South-North cooperation also seems to be lacking in this, as in other areas.

Mainstreaming Disaster Risk Reduction: A Tool for Development Organisations

Much has been done in recent years to raise the profile of disaster risk reduction within relief and development processes. However, much remains to be achieved before it attracts the level of attention and funding needed to reduce avoidable loss of life, livelihoods and property, and to safeguard development gains.

Tearfund has developed a practical tool to help development organisations mainstream disaster risk reduction into their relief and development planning and programming. Performance targets and indicators have been proposed by the organisation to assess, measure and monitor progress with DRR mainstreaming. Such targets and indicators outline the broad scope and progression of a policy and strategy to mainstream risk reduction. Six key areas, crucial to this process, are specifically addressed. These include: policy, strategy, geographical planning, project cycle management, external relations and institutional capacity.

Targets and indicators are intended to be used as 'templates' for measuring mainstreaming and adjusted as necessary to suit the specific conditions that prevail within any organisation. They should enable organisations:

1. To recognise where they are, or what stage they have reached, in mainstreaming risk reduction activities into their ongoing relief and development work.
2. To identify priority issues to be addressed and develop a mainstreaming strategy over a period of time, with definable, realistic and measurable goals.

Organisations can apply the targets and indicators to themselves (perhaps with the involvement of an external facilitator/s) to measure their progress with mainstreaming and take charge of their own development. Alternatively, to apply independent checks and balances, an external body such as an NGO, audit office or parliamentary committee can use the targets and indicators to assess and monitor an organisation's progress.

Source: Tearfund - www.tearfund.org

Knowledge & Education

As the January 2005 World Conference on Disaster Reduction concluded, "disasters can be substantially reduced if people are well informed and motivated towards a culture of disaster prevention and resilience, which in turn requires the collection, compilation and dissemination of relevant knowledge and information on hazards, vulnerabilities and capacities". There is indeed a strong recommendation that DRR knowledge should be introduced into school curricula and that other formal and informal channels should be used to reach youth and children.

Several NGOs have played a key role in this area. Many of them have developed their own programmes and projects to educate local communities about the potential impact of natural hazards, and assist them in identifying possible ways to minimize their adverse consequences through collective and preventive action. In the past two years, this has been especially true in all of the tsunami-affected countries, where more attention is now being paid to disaster preparedness and risk reduction. Some organizations have been particularly active in working with children, recognizing their role and capacity in DRR activities.

Substantial efforts have also been put into integrating disaster preparedness into school curricula and related textbooks, in collaboration with international organizations and government institutions. A considerable number of booklets, brochures, videos and other awareness material has been produced in local languages for this purpose, and distributed among local communities to help them cope with future disasters.

However, as some practitioners have pointed out, knowledge should be presented in a way that relates to local conditions and customs. Even though this has long been accepted as a cardinal principle in sustainable development, it has not always been integrated adequately in risk reduction strategies. Accordingly, some NGOs have focused their efforts on building upon local skills and resources (generally referred to as “indigenous knowledge”). Indeed, natural hazards are not new to people who have been living in hazard-prone areas for centuries, and who have devised their own methods for protecting themselves and their livelihoods. Several studies have been conducted in this area, and pilot projects have been developed accordingly.

Gujarat School Safety Initiative, India

A devastating earthquake hit Gujarat in western India in 2001. The tragedy was marked with a very high number of casualties among school children. Many school buildings collapsed, trapping children and teachers under the rubble. Extensive rehabilitation programmes followed the earthquake. The Gujarat State Disaster Management Authority (GSDMA) and the national NGO SEEDS took up the Gujarat School Safety Initiative, a first of its kind in the region.

The project addresses two issues:

1. Understanding and preparedness amongst school children, teachers and parents to reduce disaster risk in schools and to be prepared to act appropriately in an emergency
2. Disaster management appreciation amongst teachers so that they are able to impart disaster education to children more effectively

The project follows a process wherein individual schools are targeted by the project team to sensitize the school administrators and seek their participation. This is followed by a series of activities to orient the students, teachers, administrators and parents on disaster management issues relevant to school communities. Students play an active role in assessing the risks and preparing their School Disaster Management Plan. The project activities are carried out using a variety of child friendly educational tools. These include working models, board games, flash card games, activity books, and demonstration kits. Formal and non-formal tools are being used in parallel, and text books for formal education within the school curricula have also been prepared.

The Gujarat School Safety Initiative has piloted a methodology of school safety, and has demonstrated how it can be upscaled and mainstreamed into the education sector. The interest and involvement of the state government has ensured that this pilot project turns into state practice. So far, the project has directly benefited about 105,000 students across 175 schools.

Source: SEEDS India - www.seedsindia.org

Community-Based Vulnerability & Risk Assessment

As mentioned earlier, a broad consensus is emerging in favour of community-based DRR approaches, since it is at community level that physical, social and economic risks can be adequately assessed and managed. Over the last decade, growing recognition of the necessity of enhanced community participation for sustainable

disaster reduction has often been translated into some actions to carry out community-based vulnerability and risk assessments.

A good example of NGO involvement in this area is the development of specific toolkits for participatory vulnerability and risk assessment² and similar activities. These tools are aimed at assisting field workers and communities to analyze people's vulnerability, draw up action plans, mobilise resources and enact appropriate policies, laws and strategies to reduce community vulnerability to disasters.

Such approaches are based on the idea that communities know their own situations best and that any analysis should be built on their knowledge of local conditions. The approaches seek to use the outputs of local-level analysis to inform national and international level action and policies. Ideally, they should also empower communities to take charge of their own efforts to identify and address vulnerability, and enable them to find opportunities to enhance their resilience to natural hazards.

As mentioned earlier, evidence on the number and type of initiatives such as the one described above is less extensive, as are their exact outcomes and results.

The Community Risk Assessment (CRA) Toolkit

A Community Risk Assessment (CRA) toolkit has recently been developed by ProVention Consortium. The CRA Toolkit aims to document and analyse existing hazard, vulnerability and capacity assessment methods and applications in order to improve current practice and inform decision making on risk reduction at the national and sub-national levels. It contains methodological resources from many different organisations and case studies.

The goal of this project is to reduce the socio-economic impacts of natural hazards on vulnerable populations through improving participatory analysis of hazards, vulnerabilities and capacities and action planning at the community level.

The following outcomes are expected as a result of this project:

1. A review of current tools for community risk assessment, definition of elements of 'good practice' and identification of gaps
2. A web-based collection of community risk assessment methodologies and case studies, supported by guidance notes
3. The development of an active network of CRA practitioners and researchers
4. The dissemination of the project outputs in order to promote risk reduction activities which are developed, implemented and sustained by at-risk communities in developing countries

Intended users of the Toolkit are international NGOs and their partner organisations, local government staff, risk researchers and community based organisations, active in developmental and/or humanitarian work.

Source: ProVention Consortium – www.proventionconsortium.org

² Often referred to as Hazard Risk Vulnerability Assessment (HRV), Capacity and Vulnerability Assessment (CVA), Participatory Vulnerability Analysis (PVA), Participatory Vulnerability and Capacity Assessment (PVCA), etc.

Community-Based Mitigation & Preparedness

Pioneering initiatives in community-based disaster mitigation (and preparedness) have been developed as of the 1980s to advocate for an alternative approach to disaster management. Good practices in community-based approaches to disaster mitigation and preparedness (DMP) highlight key success factors such as applying best practice methodologies of community development to community-based DMP, respecting traditional organizational structures and mechanisms (including formal and informal community leaders), and undertaking capability building activities with community disaster committees and volunteers³.

Over the past years, NGOs have played a significant role in DMP, and shown a growing interest in incorporating DMP measures into their projects. However, as it is the case with community-based vulnerability and risk assessment activities, there is still a limited body of documentation available in this area of work, and little information on the scale and nature of such activities. The present preliminary review confirms that NGOs are involved in a diverse range of DMP initiatives although a number of them are not necessarily labelled as such and are not sufficiently documented. As a result, evidence of the demonstrable benefits of community-based DMP is also relatively poor. There are, however, indications of momentum for change.

Development Strategies for Disaster Preparedness, Bangladesh

The Development Strategies for Disaster Preparedness Programme (DSDPP) in Bangladesh is an emergency preparedness programme which involves building the capacity of 25 local organisations and two government districts to work with communities to lessen their vulnerability and to mitigate the effects of flooding, which is a regular occurrence in the areas these agencies work in.

The DSDPP is considered a good example of the creation of a disaster response system that builds on local capacities and resources and has great potential for replication and sustainability. It identifies an explicit disaster preparedness strategy, which centralises capacity building as an approach and seeks to target and set up preparedness systems in areas which have been neglected by other agencies. It seeks to cater for preparedness needs of vulnerable communities in many areas in an efficient, economic and effective way.

Source: Concern, *Development Strategies for Disaster Preparedness – Bangladesh*, Concern Worldwide Capacity Building Case Study Series

Preliminary Observations

This preliminary review reveals that community-based DRR processes and actions are still mostly focused on concepts, but less on practice. Nonetheless, significant progress has been made in this area over the last decades, and there is growing evidence that community-based DRR initiatives can substantially contribute to building the resilience of communities to disasters.

Evidence also demonstrates that NGOs involved in DRR activities are still primarily focused on advocacy and public awareness and disaster response, less on implementing concrete disaster reduction and development measures. A growing

³ Similar considerations apply to community-based and community-operated early warning systems.

number of organizations are seeking to encourage a shift in emphasis from emergency disaster response to comprehensive community-based disaster risk reduction. However, while emphasis on advocacy is certainly important, more efforts should be dedicated now to developing and promoting DRR tools, methods and approaches for community resilience, based on constructive and open reflection. Evidence suggests that NGO initiatives in this area are on the rise.

Another important challenge to be addressed is to “scale up” the most successful initiatives, and understand what approaches work most effectively and under what conditions. For many years, this has been a pressing issue for development NGOs, and there are many approaches to this problem in development work. Overall, high priority should be given to information sharing and organizational learning. Better networking, in its broadest connotation, is therefore essential and increasingly needed.

Networking can improve access to and exchange of information and knowledge, and support the development of partnerships among different organizations. The proliferation of development and emergency networks suggests that many organizations have recognised their value. However, institutions working in the field of DRR have been slower in doing so, even though a number of regional and global initiatives have been established both in NGO and academic circles (see Appendix I). There have also been a number of national initiatives, usually focusing on particular risk reduction initiatives or hazards, such as droughts, early warning and others.

However, monitoring of the sustainability and impact of such initiatives (i.e., outputs produced by these networks, level of participation, etc.) has been limited. What evidence suggests is that these networks face a number of common problems and practical challenges - such as lack of clear objectives, disparity of membership, lack of resources and others - which need to be handled carefully to ensure their success.

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Appendix I - Disaster Risk Reduction Networks ⁴

Asian Disaster Reduction & Response Network (ADRRN): In February 2002, the Asian Disaster Reduction Centre (ADRC) and the United Nations Office for Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UN-OCHA) in Kobe, with the assistance of the ASEAN⁵ Foundation, brought together more than 30 NGOs from all over Asia to discuss the need for a network of NGOs for Disaster Reduction & Response in Asia. As a result, the Asian Disaster Reduction & Response Network (ADRRN) was formed. This body of NGOs was consolidated in December 2003 and in June 2004. The major aim of the ADRRN is “to promote coordination and collaboration among NGOs and other stakeholders for effective and efficient disaster reduction and response in the Asia-Pacific region”.

BOND Disaster Risk Reduction Group: The Group is a network of representatives from different UK NGOs from both the emergency and development sectors. The purpose of the Group is to share information on an informal basis, exchange experiences and knowledge, explore opportunities for closer coordination and collaboration, and advance common issues. The Group meets 3-4 times a year and meetings are hosted alternately by member NGOs. Current members include: Action Aid, Action against Hunger UK, British Red Cross, CAFOD (Catholic Fund for Overseas Development), CARE UK, Christian Aid, HelpAge International, Islamic Relief, ITDG (Intermediate Technology Development Group), Oxfam, Save the Children Fund, and Tearfund.

Duryog Nivaran: Duryog Nivaran is a research, training and advocacy network committed to promoting disaster risk reduction in South Asia at policy and community level. It strives to build the knowledge base of stakeholders by sharing research findings, information, experiences and insights on emerging issues of disaster management in the countries and among the communities of the region.

Emergency Capacity Building Project (ECB): The Emergency Capacity Building Project (ECB) is a collaborative effort of seven humanitarian agencies (i.e., Oxfam-GB, Save the Children-US, World Vision International, Catholic Relief Services, the International Rescue Committee, CARE International, and Mercy Corps) that are jointly tackling common problems in emergency response and preparedness. Over a two-year period, these agencies and their strategic partners are addressing issues pertaining to staff capacity, accountability (primarily to affected populations), impact measurement, risk reduction, and the use of information and technology in emergencies. While seeking to improve the way the seven agencies respond to humanitarian crises, ECB is deeply committed to contributing to reform in the humanitarian sector as a whole.

Periperi: Periperi stands for “Partners Enhancing Resilience for People Exposed to Risks”. In 1997, the Overseas Development Administration of the British Government approved funding to South Africa’s University of Cape Town, DiMP, to establish a network of organizations committed to strengthening disaster mitigation research, training, education and practice. The process engaged 16 different organizations

⁴ The list is intended for information purpose, and only includes NGO networks participating in the consultative meeting.

⁵ ASEAN: Association of South East Asian Nations

from five southern African countries, representing development agencies, public health practitioners, partners involved in rural water supplies, urban planners and university researchers. The initial consultation resulted in the establishment of “Periperi”, a network of partners committed to risk reduction in southern Africa. Periperi members are from NGOs, universities and government departments across southern Africa.