

Top of the class! Governments can reduce the risks of disasters through schools

Yasmin McDonnell and Jack Campbell, International Emergencies and Conflict Team, ActionAid

ON 8 OCTOBER 2005, 17 000 children died when 6 700 schools collapsed during morning classes in the earthquake that devastated the northern mountain region of Pakistan. In January earlier that year, 168 countries signed up to the Hyogo Framework for Action, to ‘build the resilience of nations and communities to disasters,’ at the World Conference on Disaster Reduction (WCDR) in Kobe. Never had there seemed a more timely and urgent commitment.

Of the five priorities for action in the Hyogo Framework, the third states that governments must “use knowledge, innovation and education to build a culture of safety and resilience at all levels.” This article focuses on this priority for action and is informed by a review commissioned by ActionAid to document good practice so far.¹ Its aim is to set out a core agenda to enable governments to focus on what they can practically do through education and knowledge to reduce the risks of hazards that their citizens face. The focus is on disaster risk reduction (DRR) through schools – a core priority for ActionAid – but the knowledge management and risk awareness opportunities outside formal education are also considered.

For governments to meet their commitment to the Hyogo Framework third priority for action, they should adopt a three-tiered core agenda:

- Risk and hazards in the national curriculum
- Physical safety and resilience of schools
- Promoting a ‘culture of safety’ through schools.

The elements of this agenda come from an analysis of current experience, gaps and opportunities. This agenda should guide the creation of national policy on DRR. In working to this agenda, governments will be able to integrate DRR into existing commitments – most notably the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and the Education For All (EFA) initiatives.

There is widespread agreement that education must play a central role in making development sustainable. An equal truth, increasingly irrefutable, is that development cannot be sustainable without

dealing head-on with the risk of disasters. The Hyogo Framework is perhaps the most important acknowledgement that DRR is an integral part of development – not just a specialists’ side issue.

Risk and hazards in the national curriculum

Governments signed up to the framework must consider how their own national curriculum can incorporate teaching on local hazards and reducing risk. Teaching in the classroom about hazards in the local environment is a cost-effective and concrete step governments can facilitate that will have long-term and far-reaching impacts. There can be few other public institutions with greater outreach and potential to educate whole communities than the school. What is more, we are not starting from scratch.

Many countries already benefit from a wide variety of methods for teaching about natural hazards, disaster preparedness and prevention. At the time of the Kobe WCDR, around 40 per cent of countries responding to a UN information survey were reporting some kind of disaster-related teaching in their curriculum.

In Cuba there is a strong history of reducing risk. The national curriculum covers disaster preparedness and response to hurricanes, the most significant local natural hazard. The Cuban Red Cross produces teaching materials and safety messages that are given to children in school, and these are reinforced by what parents hear in training courses and drills in the workplace. In South Africa, without specific reference to disasters or hazards in the curriculum, different initiatives – such as a board game concerning risk – have been developed for the classroom.

The methodology and quality of teaching in different countries on local risks and hazards is highly diverse. However, the foundations are there for sharing pedagogical practice and adapting curricula to use schools as a conduit for physical scientific knowledge to communities, to inform their practical actions for reducing the risks they face.

In Malawi, ActionAid’s DRR Through Schools project will galvanize the central Government to promote risk reduction in the school curriculum. The Malawi initiative is part of a pioneering multi-country project in which 15 000 children (and their parents) in 56 schools in high-risk areas will take part. This is a five-year project funded by DFID, and spanning seven countries (Malawi, Ghana, Kenya, Haiti, Nepal, Bangladesh and India).

The purpose of the project is to demonstrate how schools can be made safer so they can act as centres of awareness and action on local hazards and risk reduction. While reducing the vulnerability of the targeted communities themselves, the experience gained on the project will also be used to help institutionalize DRR in the education systems of participating countries, so success can be replicated in other schools and other countries. This project is ActionAid’s key initial contribution within the Hyogo Framework.

Hyogo Framework: Priority for Action 3

- Use knowledge, innovation and education to build a culture of safety and resilience at all levels, incorporating:
- Information sharing and cooperation
 - Networks and dialogue across disciplines and regions
 - Use of standard DRR terminology
 - Inclusion of DRR in formal (school curricula) and informal education
 - Training and learning on DRR in communities, local authorities, targeted sectors, with equal access for all
 - Research capacity
 - Public awareness and media

Governments must make commitments to teacher training and curriculum development to support large-scale teaching of DRR. In centralized state education systems, teaching on locally relevant hazards could be incorporated into existing subjects such as earth science or geography. In decentralized state systems, community-based vulnerability analysis tools can be used to develop teaching methods on hazards and risk from the bottom up – centralized systems should also learn from these tools. Partnerships with non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and the private sector will be key to provide training, resources and learning networks.

Physical safety and resilience of schools

It is the right of every child to be safe in school, just as it is for their parent to be safe at the public library. It is therefore the responsibility of governments to ensure the physical safety and resilience of school buildings. This is not a question of cost analysis: safe schools should be a given.

This can and is being done in some places. The Iranian Parliament recently announced a new bill (after years of campaigning) that will see the improvement in seismic safety (through retrofitting and reconstruction) of 39 per cent of its school buildings with a budget of USD4 billion. This was based on a countrywide review of school safety.²

But the startling statistics that emerged from the 2005 Pakistan earthquake expose the urgent need for all governments to face up to their responsibility to ensure disaster risk factors are systematically incorporated into new school building design and location, and in the retrofitting of existing buildings. This, as in Iran, may well require widespread reviews of school safety in the context of local hazards.

The death toll of children in schools in Pakistan is an extreme example, but other cases where poor design or location decisions killed children are too numerous. In Italy in 2002, 26 children were killed when a school collapsed during a moderate earthquake. In Turkey in 2003, it did not take a powerful earthquake to kill 83 children in their building. In the Philippines in February 2006, 200 children perished when a mudslide engulfed their building.

Lessons should and can be learnt. History tells us that they have – albeit sporadically. In the US, a 1908 school fire killed 172 children in Ohio when they were trapped behind inward opening exit doors. This led directly to a Government ruling on mandatory outward opening doors and ‘panic-bar’ latches on schools and all public buildings – an excellent example of how governments can take a lead in changing practice to save lives.

The MDG and other education initiatives have implications for the number of new school buildings. No special attention is given in these initiatives to disaster preparedness. One estimate proposes that if all EFA initiatives are successful in the 20 most earthquake-prone countries, an extra 34 million children could be exposed to risk while attending school – illustration enough of the need to integrate DRR into existing commitments.

Research finds that simple, cheap changes in building practice would save lives in disasters. But the technical know-how rarely reaches the people. This core agenda not only recommends that governments play a lead role in school building regulation and retrofitting, but also in disseminating public safety messages and bridging the gap between scientific knowledge and practical reality. Policy change and high-tech early warning systems at the national level are one thing; practice change and dissemination of information on the ground is the ‘last mile’ in disaster risk reduction.³

Governments should seek to develop a legal and institutional framework for systematically implementing, monitoring and evaluating school protection. This process should involve stakeholders from all levels.

Promoting a culture of safety through schools

A culture of safety is an environment where everyone is aware of their local hazards and is active in reducing the resulting risks – behavioural change must happen at all levels. Governments must demonstrate commitment and leadership in promoting a culture of safety.

Schools can play an important role in instilling values of safety in community life. Children in the classroom can act as a route for



Children must learn about local hazards and reducing risks in the classroom. They can be a route for taking risk reduction messages to parents and whole communities

Photo: Liba Taylor / ActionAid

information to families at home. To build a culture of safety at the community level, governments should look to their education system to disseminate knowledge and information.

Furthermore, disaster risk analysis is not an activity that should be led from the office meeting room. Assessment must happen ‘on location’ where the risks are faced: in the community. This core agenda suggests the classroom as a prime location for community vulnerability assessment. Participatory vulnerability tools are now numerous,⁴ and ActionAid’s Participatory Vulnerability Analysis (PVA) tool is one example.⁵

Aside from schoolteachers, local and district civil servants are on the front-line of any ‘culture of safety’ drive. Governments must consider the training needs of their local and district offices, and must develop an ongoing training programme that will cope with the reality of high staff turnover. The successful completion of the ‘last mile’ of DRR will rely on this.

A thriving culture of safety cannot rely only on government actions. All children and communities should learn about local hazards and what to do about them, and sometimes schools will not be the most effective way of reaching the most vulnerable. Non-formal education and the role that the media has to play must be considered simultaneously.

On the global scale, the media can set agendas, push debate and spark political will. Governments and NGOs have an ongoing challenge to work with the mainstream media to find the story in disaster prevention and risk reduction, not just response. There are some excellent efforts already. Reuters established AlertNet⁶ and has set the benchmark for publishing humanitarian stories and communicating DRR to a wider audience. The key role of local media must not be overlooked. In focusing on reducing hazards and risks in a local context, governments must look to existing local communication channels to disseminate messages.

Governments should establish working groups that link up journalists, academics and NGOs to create a regular exchange of information and resources that bring all to a common understanding of the nature of hazards, the ways different actors can reduce risk and how to communicate this to the public. The public engagement opportunity in times of high-profile response must be better exploited to communicate messages on DRR.



Photo: Gideon Mendel / Corbis / ActionAid

Schools, both new and existing, must be designed and located to be resilient to disaster. Children have the right to be safe at school

No easy challenge

The ‘last mile’ is really tough. There are several hurdles that stand between the current situation and the finish line where schools are safe and playing a role in a culture of safety in the community. One major obstacle is political will – with many competing priorities, the case for dedicating resources to DRR must be carefully presented. Another challenge is coordination, or lack thereof, between key stakeholders. Most obviously, work done at policy level – for example the Hyogo Framework for Action – must be put into practice on the ground.

The most vulnerable communities are so often the poorest and least accessible, and the most overlooked. The finish line will have been crossed only when any DRR strategy has reached the most vulnerable. And it is the teachers in these communities who, with their poor working conditions, low pay and lack of support, will be expected to lead any widespread programme on DRR through schools.

Governments have made their commitment to the Hyogo Framework. Now it is time to put words into practice. With this core agenda as a starting point, governments must draw up their own DRR policy agenda and implementation strategy.

This will first mean a revision of the national curriculum at primary and secondary level. Issues of hazards and reducing risk in the local reality must feature in the curriculum in order to reduce the vulnerability of whole communities to disasters. This is not a blank slate – around the world, there is a wealth of experience in teaching practice to draw on, and initiatives such as ActionAid’s DRR in Schools project will reinforce the efforts of governments.

Children have the right to be safe in school, and governments are obliged to make systematic efforts to improve the safety and resilience of schools. A safe school can be a safe haven in disasters for entire communities. Building standards for school buildings – both new and existing – must be government-regulated and relevant to local hazards.

A safe school can be used to instil a culture of safety in a community. Governments should take responsibility for promoting a culture of safety and show leadership. Schools can act as centres for children and parents to assess their vulnerability to local hazards. As is set out in the Hyogo Framework, a culture of safety permeates all levels of society, and is reliant also on local and district government and the media. The training and support of local and district public servants and teachers is fundamental.

Governments are lucky: the steps toward integrating DRR into existing commitments are clearly marked out. The disastrous effects of earthquakes, floods and other natural phenomena will only be reduced once DRR moves into the mainstream public agenda. Reducing risk through education and knowledge – with schools at the centre – is a manageable, tangible way for governments to start. With this core agenda as a foundation that addresses the curriculum, building safety and a culture of safety, governments can now negotiate their own specific targets and objectives with their civil society.

Yasmin McDonnell is Policy Analyst and Jack Campbell is Communications Officer on ActionAid’s International Emergencies and Conflict Team.

ActionAid is an international development agency with its headquarters in Johannesburg. Our new five-year rights-based strategy, “Rights to End Poverty”, tackles head-on the unacceptable truth that poverty and injustice remain deeply entrenched in many parts of the globe. As part of this strategy, ActionAid works in emergency and conflict situations with a long-term development perspective, and is a leading voice on Disaster Risk Reduction.

For more information visit
http://www.actionaid.org.uk/100261/disaster_risk_reduction.html