



**OI Humanitarian Policy Note on Disaster Risk Reduction:**

**Overview: Oxfam International’s position on Disaster risk Reduction:**

Disasters are increasing in both their frequency and ferocity. Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR) is essential if lives are not to be lost unnecessarily and developmental gains are to be secured.

The international community has recognised the importance of reducing disaster risk, and moving away from relying solely on current disaster response mechanisms, yet there has so far been a failure to systematically integrate DRR into humanitarian and development policies, plans and programmes.

**Key Recommendations:**

- DRR programmes should be based on thorough analysis and understanding of the vulnerabilities of people living in disaster prone areas.
- Communities should be supported to assess the risks they face, and their capacities to deal with them, leading to a community driven agenda for change
- Governments must address the underlying factors leading to vulnerability, in addition to meeting their citizens’ needs in emergencies
- Governments should take steps to actively implement the Hyogo Framework for Action
- Donors should make available new funding for DRR, which bridges the gap between development and relief work

**1 Background**

**1.1 What is DRR?**

Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR) is the broad range of humanitarian and development action to reduce the risk posed by natural disasters to individuals and communities. It is *humanitarian* in that it helps to save lives, and *developmental* in increasing communities’ resilience to hazards and shocks, as a prerequisite for sustainable development and pro-poor economic growth.

More fully, Oxfam uses the UN’s definition that “The concept and practice of reducing disaster risks through systematic efforts to analyse and manage the causal factors of disasters, including through reduced exposure to hazards, lessened vulnerability of people and property, wise management of land and the environment, and improved preparedness for adverse events”<sup>1</sup>

**1.2 Why DRR is important:**

Climate related disasters are increasing in both frequency and ferocity. Each year, around 70,000 people are killed and over 250 million people are affected, and these numbers are set to grow substantially as a result of climate change and other factors.<sup>2</sup> Their impact goes far beyond the immediate loss of life, eroding developmental gains and undermining communities’ resilience to future shocks.

<sup>1</sup> This is a definition developed by the UNISDR, and available here: <http://www.unisdr.org/eng/terminology/terminology-2009-eng.html>

<sup>2</sup> These figures are derived from the CRED em-dat. [www.emdat.be](http://www.emdat.be)

Changes in the climate are leading to an increase, for instance, in the frequency of the most powerful hurricanes.<sup>3</sup> Multiple medium-scale disaster events are overwhelming current defences, and, as in Haiti in 2008, breaking down communities' resilience to withstand them. The world's rapidly growing population and unplanned urbanization (often to coastal cities) are placing more and more people at risk, while environmental degradation such as the destruction of mangrove swamps or deforestation are limiting the ability of the earth to naturally absorb extreme weather. What these and many other factors show is that disasters are not 'natural', but the result of failures to prioritise, adapt, prepare, and respond to a wide variety of risks, many of them created by human actions. Appropriate DRR can help communities limit those risks and become more resilient to inevitable shocks.

They disproportionately affect poor countries and communities. Between 1991 and 2000, there were 23 deaths per disaster in the world's richest countries, compared with 1,052 deaths per disaster in the poorest.<sup>4</sup> In 2001, major tremors, of broadly similar force, struck Gujarat in India, El Salvador, and Seattle in the United States. In India, around 20,000 people were killed in Gujarat, partly because building codes had not been properly enforced. In El Salvador, around 600 people died as mudslides swept away the homes of newly urbanized families who had nowhere else to live but the steep, deforested slopes of ravines. Meanwhile in Seattle there were no fatalities.

There is no one action that would have prevented the loss of life in India or El Salvador, but with appropriate funding, concerted political will, and a coherent approach to DRR through all relevant policies, the risks could have been mitigated, and disaster preparedness measures could have increased the ability to respond in a timely and effective manner.<sup>5</sup> The failure to do that, in all affected countries, not only leads to avoidable death and suffering; it is also extremely wasteful. Effective DRR programmes are more affordable than repairing the damage and responding to human needs after a major disaster. Community-based DRR can cost relatively little in comparison; in the Dhemaji district of Assam, Oxfam's partner Rural Volunteers Centre has demonstrated that community-based disaster-preparedness costs just 2 per cent of estimated post-flood relief.<sup>6</sup>

### 1.3 Efforts to promote DRR

Although the 1990s were declared by the UN to be the 'International Decade for Natural Disaster Reduction', it was not until 2005, at the second World Conference on Natural Disaster Reduction in Hyogo, Japan, that 168 governments agreed to adopt a 10-year plan designed to take effective action. The Hyogo Framework for Action is based around five priorities for action at every level of government,<sup>7</sup> to:

1. Ensure that disaster risk reduction is a national and a local priority, implemented by strong institutions,
2. Identify, assess and monitor disaster risks and enhance early warning of them,
3. Use knowledge, innovation and education to build a culture of safety and resilience,
4. Reduce the underlying risks, and
5. Strengthen disaster preparedness for effective response.

The Hyogo framework acknowledged that DRR must be systematically integrated into policies, plans and programmes for development and poverty reduction. But as a voluntary agreement without targets and only recently with measurable indicators, it has done less to stimulate the

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<sup>3</sup> Pew Centre on Global Climate Change (2008) 'Hurricanes and Global Warming FAQs', [www.pewclimate.org/hurricanes.cfm#2008](http://www.pewclimate.org/hurricanes.cfm#2008) (accessed September 2008).

<sup>4</sup> IFRC (2007) 'Climate Change and the International Federation', background note distributed to IFRC national societies.

<sup>5</sup> This example is adapted from: D. Green (2008) *From Poverty to Power: How Active Citizens and Effective States Can Change the World*, Oxford: Oxfam International.

<sup>6</sup> Oxfam International (2008) 'Rethinking Disasters', New Delhi: Oxfam International

<sup>7</sup> For more information see: [www.unisdr.org/eng/hfa/hfa.htm](http://www.unisdr.org/eng/hfa/hfa.htm)

action needed. Few of the 168 governments have made sufficient progress in implementing what they agreed.

The production of the forthcoming 'Global Assessment Report'<sup>8</sup>, and the preliminary feedback from the 'Views from the frontline' initiative<sup>9</sup>, offer an opportunity to measure progress within the Hyogo Framework at the Global Platform for Disaster Risk Reduction in June 2009.

Where some have failed to act at all, other government have opted for large-scale, centralised and technically demanding projects such as India's controversial River Interlinking Project or Bangladesh's Flood Action Programme. Even if large infrastructure projects are carried out successfully, unless there is appropriate integration of action across the five priorities above, which meaningfully interacts at a community level, such projects' ability to reduce vulnerability will be limited.

DRR instead must constitute a comprehensive approach that integrates efforts to reduce vulnerability to hazards and promote all aspects of resilience across government and society, and must be mainstreamed into all existing and future humanitarian and development efforts.

## **2. Oxfam's approach to DRR:**

All of Oxfam's work is influenced by the belief that poverty and suffering are not inevitable features of our world. Poverty makes people, and especially women, more vulnerable, both to disasters and conflict. Based on its decades of responding to the needs of those affected by disasters, Oxfam believes that poverty-induced vulnerability represents an unacceptable level of injustice and inequality, and that integrated, thorough, and accountable DRR is key to addressing this imbalance and offering sustainable futures free from poverty.

Oxfam's works to achieve its aims through the three inter-linking strategies – development, humanitarian response and campaigns – together these constitute Oxfam's global programme. In order to achieve lasting change, and to contribute to the alleviation of poverty and suffering, these strategies need to be implemented together, and Oxfam aims to pursue the three areas of it work with an integrated DRR approach.

For Oxfam, taking a DRR approach means ensuring our development, humanitarian & campaigning work incorporates an analysis of disaster risk and seeks to reduce it. Where development, humanitarian, and advocacy action integrates an understanding of disaster risk it is more likely to enhance peoples' resilience to disasters, raising their voice and enabling them to protect their lives and livelihoods.

## **3. Recommendations:**

The primary responsibility for the implementation of DRR policies and practices lies with national governments. Having said this, it must be recognised that other actors – from the community to the intergovernmental level - have vital roles to play in promoting and implementing risk reduction strategies. A coordinated and coherent approach from all actors, from the smallest Community Based Organisation, to large NGOs and International Organisations, is key to increasing disaster resilience. In light of this, Oxfam recommends:

### **Locally:**

- Vulnerability and capacity should be assessed at the community level, leading to a community driven agenda for change

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<sup>8</sup> The Global Assessment Report (GAR) was commissioned by UNISDR and comprised of governmental submissions on progress against the HFA. For more information on the Global Assessment Report see: <http://www.preventionweb.net/english/hyogo/gar/>

<sup>9</sup> The Global Network of Civil Society Organisations has convened around the VFF initiative to provide a 'grassroots' perspective on progress against the HFA

- DRR should involve making marginalised people aware of their rights and able to put pressure on the state to deliver them
- Knowledge and information should be shared proactively between stakeholders, including at a community level. Such measures should specifically include groups at risk of isolation and marginalisation
- 'Local' should not be taken to mean rural. All actors should recognise that vulnerability must increasingly be addressed in urban setting as well.
- Local governments should be given appropriate funding for DRR activities, used in a measurable and accountable fashion.

**Nationally:**

- People affected by disasters have the right to receive, timely, appropriate and impartial assistance if they are effected by disasters, and national governments must strive to deliver prepared and coordinated assistance in a manner that seeks to address underlying vulnerability and promote resilience
- All governments should take meaningful steps to implement the Hyogo Framework for Action, and make measurable, timebound commitments in subsequent international negotiations.
- Risk management should be systematically integrated across governments, with DRR and climate change adaptation at the core of relevant policy debates (such as agricultural policy, development strategies, public health etc.). DRR should be prominent across all relevant ministries, and not ghettoised within a single ministry or programme; in addition budgeting should be accountable and transparent

**Globally:**

- Where states cannot or will not provide assistance to those affected by disasters, the international community must mobilise resources to provide timely, appropriate and impartial humanitarian assistance. Donors and agency must also acknowledge that humanitarian responses must reduce future risks, and form part of wider DRR activities
- Donors should make the availability of development and humanitarian funding contingent on the development and implementation of comprehensive DRR strategies within developing states
- Additional funding should be made available for disaster risk reduction activities. This money should be new and not merely a transfer of development or humanitarian funds
- Donors must act to bridge the gap between relief activities and longer-term development work, as DRR funding can often fall between the two. Implementing agencies also have a responsibility to address this in their programme design.