

Global Assessment Report  
on Disaster Risk Reduction



Seeing a disaster as an opportunity, harnessing  
the energy of disaster survivors for change

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2010



## SEEING A DISASTER AS AN OPPORTUNITY – HARNESSING THE ENERGY OF DISASTER SURVIVORS FOR CHANGE

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### **Abstract**

*Disasters have tragic consequences, and those with the least resources at hand to rebuild their lives are often the worst affected. The traditional response to disasters is to provide immediate relief, without considering how the process of rebuilding lives and communities can be a positive opportunity for change. This opportunity can be facilitated in two ways: firstly, by having a clear understanding of how disaster survivors are not victims but agents for change, and secondly, by providing the tools and techniques to facilitate the change process. Case studies from Asia demonstrate how disaster-affected communities have rebuilt not only their homes, but also their livelihoods, and been empowered as a result.*

### **Introduction**

The poor are always the worst hit by disasters: their rights, which are already weak, will be further weakened as a result, putting them even further at the margins of society. Sometimes, disasters can push previously not-so-poor people into the poor category. If these disaster victims were not organized as a collective before the disaster, they may lack the necessary social linkages to help them recover from the catastrophe. Therefore, the response to the disaster should not only be to provide short term relief, but also the necessary assistance and tools so that longer-term change and improvement can be achieved, by the people themselves. To provide the appropriate assistance, it is necessary to understand how the disaster can be viewed as opportunity to make positive structural change.

Disasters always bring tragedy with them, but they also open up an opportunity for change in the affected communities. Disasters offer a chance to turn a negative and desperate situation into a possible longer term positive outcome. Having a clear understanding of the opportunities that arise as a result of a disaster, and how to make the most of them through the rebuilding process, leads to a greater ability to provide support and prevention that can be undertaken in future.

This paper therefore has two key messages: firstly, the survivors of disasters should be looked at in a new way – they should not be viewed just as helpless and dependent victims. Rather, they should be regarded as agents for change in rebuilding their lives and their communities. Secondly, with the right knowledge and techniques, outsiders can help the survivors to harness their energy positively, to empower themselves through the stages of emergency relief and rehabilitation. This “how to” aspect is where development agencies often stumble – they struggle at designing and employing the tools of support in order to create a platform so that this energy can be developed and used. There is much room for improvement in international knowledge about how to intervene in and support

the change process in affected communities. This paper will use case studies to illustrate how with the right support, survivor communities can rebuild their lives for the better in a post-disaster situation.

### **A process of change, not just relief**

The appropriate response in a post-disaster situation is not simply a question of providing financial and physical resources. It is also a question of unlocking and organising the energy of the survivors, so that they can rebuild their lives together. A collectivity of people in a similar situation will have a lot of potential to achieve change, by making use of their power, and in a post-disaster situation, this potential will be heightened by need. Even with only very limited funds, the collective energy can make the financial resources provided as relief go much further. The resources can go beyond rebuilding housing, to chicken farming, boat building, organizing a community development fund, or other needs that people have thought about in rebuilding their lives. Giving survivors the capacity to manage their communal needs, development and rehabilitation through the provision of flexible financial resources will gradually release their energy, compounded by their need to survive following the disaster.

The most important role that relief and development agencies can play in a post-disaster situation is understanding the importance of creating a space for the affected people to come together to make change. They need a platform where they can link up to other similarly affected groups, to rebuild their lives and their communities as soon as possible, with secure livelihoods, and where they can re-establish their rights and form new relationships within the local system. A post-disaster situation encompasses many issues, not just the question of rebuilding houses – it also brings up the question of human rights and social and political relationship change. Thus, there are many different dimensions to rebuilding in a post-disaster scenario, which goes beyond individual households receiving starter kits. Livelihoods need to be revived, and local communities need to be re-established.

This opportunity can be seized right from the earliest stage of relief efforts, in the relief camps. If the affected persons have a chance to talk and discuss with each other, as is possible in a relief camp where all the victims are regrouped, then they can think together and express their ideas of what they want to do to recover from the disaster. The discussion process itself is vital, as through it they form a belief in and gain increasing confidence in what they want to do, and they can achieve this themselves – people are the agents of change. As relationships begin to form, things will start to change. If the people who escaped death are linked together, as a group they have an incredible energy to work for their survival, and this energy can be harnessed to improve their situation. In fact, giving the survivors the reins to rebuild their lives is crucial and can serve as a form of therapy as people are kept busy, rather than having everything done for them by the relief agencies who may view affected people merely as pitiful and passive recipients. A top-down attitude can be disempowering for people who have already lost everything. After the initial shock of the disaster, the will of the people to survive will come through, creating an incredible development force with huge energy, which should be harnessed as

a new force for change. Of course, the fewer the concept of collective action is to the affected communities, the more fragile it is – and programs such as cash-for-work schemes can break up communities by creating competition between households.

One of the simplest ways to get the survivors involved in their reconstruction is to set up working groups on different aspects, such as housing, livelihoods, welfare, children, collecting donations, and so on, and linking all the groups to form part of the wider process. Power can grow through the process of participating in changing their life and community. Starting with a small space for communal action, can lead to it becoming a bigger space with stronger power, as survivors take control over the rebuilding of their lives. Letting the survivors take charge of their future can start right from the beginning of relief efforts, in relief camps. For example, in Thailand, the Bang Muang camp housed 850 families in the aftermath of the tsunami. This camp was managed by the tsunami victims themselves, who organized themselves into committees dealing with issues such as cooking, camp hygiene, water supply, medical care and children's activities, and tents were set up in an arrangement of 10-family groups and 3-group zones, each zone with its own leader. Every evening, camp-wide meetings were held to discuss camp management, in a fully transparent process. This collective management system from the very beginning helps to prepare the survivors for the longer-term tasks of negotiating for secure land and rebuilding their communities and livelihoods (ACHR, August 2005:33).

### **From one-to-one assistance to more collective support**

Relief assistance in a post-disaster situation is usually provided on a supply-side basis: survivors are provided with emergency supplies and relief kits, on a one-size-fits-all basis. This assistance is provided on a one-to-one level, and this individual approach brings out competitiveness between survivors, as each person feels they are the most deserving of assistance. The survivors have no control over this supply-side approach and will take whatever they are given. In this situation, collective energy cannot be harnessed. Supporting the process of harnessing the energy of the survivors should be done through a collective approach, so as to ensure that power remains on the demand side, that is, with the survivors.

The problems with a bilateral aid response, as government and NGO aid often is, is that it requires the aid provider to try and define who is the most deserving, who is the poorest. Setting criteria such as this is difficult at the best of times, not to mention for the very complex situation that arises out of a disaster. It is simpler to let the affected persons group together and decide amongst themselves, setting their criteria and way to work from their own particular context and situation how to use the money, who is the most needy, and how they as a collective can help each other. When funds are put in collective control with clear simple account seen by all, trust in their collective group and process will gradually be developed. It is often the case that people will realize that there are others more in need than themselves, and as a group they will ensure that the neediest are supported and that everybody can be fairly reached through this communal support.

The right balance has to be found between achieving a rapid response, and ensuring that an outcome that will be sustainable in the long term can be reached. For example, in India, following the earthquake in Gujarat, India, in 2001, the response of the authorities was to give each affected family a sum of money to build a new home – and this money was put directly in each household’s bank account. Abhiyan, a local NGO, encourages “owner-driven reconstruction” (ODR) and is pushing for this to become a national policy. Providing money directly to affected households cuts out the risk of corruption eating up cash flows, as well as solving the problem of contractors being unable to construct enough homes rapidly, nor of a high-enough quality – following the earthquake, 200,000 homes were needed. This was beyond the government’s capacity to provide.

While this direct financial assistance allowed a rapid response in letting affected families rebuilding homes by themselves simultaneously, some questions may still remain, such as compensation to tenants, compared to home-owners; was compensation related to the size of the family? There may be more complex family conditions and status to be determined by simple financial support for each family. While the Bhuj case demonstrates one of the efficient ways to provide relief via finance direct to affected families– putting money directly into bank accounts cuts out middlemen - it also emphasizes individuality: each household built their new house as they wished. However, there is still potential here: had the community cultivated strong linkages as a collectivity, they could have benefited, for example from buying materials in bulk, and from sharing each other’s skills in construction, from carpentry to masonry. This happened in some of the more organized villages. As Abhiyan maintains, “external aid always brings with it the danger of weakening in people the spirit of self-reliance, especially after a major disaster. Abhiyan is committed to leveraging available resources to catalyse a reconstruction development process which further strengthens the innate force of the community, so that its members emerge from a disaster stronger and richer in experience of cooperation” (ACHR, 2006:13).

In the case of Myanmar, following Cyclone Nargis, the victims received assistance from outside NGOs in the reconstruction of their homes. Community leaders, when questioned, said that they were very pleased that the NGOs gave houses to the people. However, when they were asked whether they would prefer to decide themselves how to use this money to build their houses, or let an outside NGO come in and build their homes, they all preferred to retain control over the construction: "We'd much prefer to have the money and build ourselves. We can work out all the details and build the houses ourselves together. It would be much easier to manage the rebuilding that way and we can clear up all budget and spending properly". With the pool of money, the collective can assess whether each house needs just repairs or to be rebuilt completely: there are shades of reconstruction, and it is best for the affected community to define this together.

Therefore, the collectivity is important. Individually, the force of the people is not strong enough, especially in the aftermath of a disaster, when every family is weak and in need of support. If the families come together, they will have a stronger power to participate and make demands. Additionally, as a group, they will find comfort from each other, being in the same situation. Therefore, rather than going for the usual bilateral approach

to supplying aid, one-on-one between the aid donor and the survivor, which allows room for manipulation and corruption, with power lying on the giver's side, an alternative approach is to pool the individual survivors together, giving the relief support to the group, and allowing the group to decide amongst its members how this relief should be shared out. Of course, the success of the collectivity depends on the understanding of its facilitators as well as its quality, which also depends on the quality of the leadership and the existence of a culture of working together.

### **Flexible Finance**

Once a clear understanding is achieved of the need to let the communities of survivors be at the core of their recovery and rehabilitation in a post-disaster situation, then outsiders can support this process by employing the right techniques. One of these techniques is the provision of flexible finance – while funds are necessary to facilitate the process, they also need to be flexible enough to give the power to the survivors to collectively work out their particular development needs. If the allocation and use of funds is too strictly controlled, if the poor do not have the power to access the funds, then desirable change in affected families through reconstruction may not be achieved. On the other hand, it is usual for some community leaders to be stronger than others – communities are not free of power politics – and so the post-disaster situation could be worsened if the management of money is inappropriate, as certain persons with more power put themselves first. It is undesirable for this instinct to dominate the collectivity, therefore it is important to build a collective spirit from the beginning of the reconstruction period, with good coordination with the various sub-groups involved in relief and rehabilitation needs. This building of collective spirit can start with discussions to increase understanding of each other, and to start thinking of the solution process by which funds can be used to solve problems.

Ideally, a revolving fund system would provide a longer-term and more sustainable financial solution, though it is more difficult to achieve and manage in the short run or in those very early stages of disaster. However, the essential is having something communal for people to work on and protect collectively. Giving away money as grants sometimes brings out competition between individuals, whereas a collective fund can solve communal problems through communal decision-making. The fund can function as a tool to make people dialogue amongst themselves. The discussions regarding a revolving fund and its implementation lead to the strengthening of the community process which can be turned into a system, a new culture and way of doing things. Thus, it can function as a platform for harmonizing the different survivors into a stronger collective community.

There should be different funds for different needs. Keeping separate fund accounts for various functions allows them to be managed by different sets of needy people, thus balancing out power within the community, especially in case the former leaders hold too much power. This also helps to link different groups to work actively together through a larger communal process – and improves the transparency of donations and contributions to the fund. Ideally everyone should have a say in how the funds should be used.

The joint management of fund for disaster rehabilitation can also build collective or coalition for various development organizations to work and link and collaborate together. In Sri Lanka, NGOs and community organizations have been collaborating, through the creation of CLAPNET Fund, a coalition of local organizations which assisted communities following the disaster. CLAPNET encourages cooperation between organizations, and arose after the different groups helping tsunami victims met to discuss experiences and problems, and create a common platform to link their work. A joint fund was set up, managed by all the groups, including community representatives from Women Bank and other community networks, with a seed fund of US\$ 100,000 from ACHR (supported from Misereor/Homeless International), and it has now evolved into a central fund for both disaster situations and to meet other needs of poor communities. The coalition allows for collaboration between the organizations and sharing of expertise, for instance, all the affected communities to be supported by the CLAPNET Fund had received the assistance from Women Bank to help organize into savings activities and link to Women Bank support structure. The fund has been used to support pilot projects that can encourage change through new ways of doing things, ranging from income generation grants to land purchase loans, housing improvement, all the while linking with larger community network and local government.

Sometimes, the survivors are also able to add their own finances to donor contributions. For example, in the Philippines, the Homeless People's Federation (HPFP) regularly is the first to reach disaster-struck communities and encourages long-term community rebuilding processes which communities can manage themselves. This involves starting savings programs if they don't already exist, so that the survivors organize themselves and start managing finances and activities together collectively. These savings groups succeed even where people have lost everything – in three municipalities affected by two successive typhoons as well as the Mount Mayon volcano eruption in November 2006, the newly established savings groups had collectively saved over US\$20,500 within a year of the disaster (ACHR, 2008:8). Having their own funds gives the survivors a measure of independence, and they can use their savings as down payments for receiving loans to buy land on which to build new homes, as was the case in the Philippines. This meant that they had the flexibility to look beyond the government's offers of "free land" which did not seem to be secure in the longer term. The HPFP also organized exposure visits for leaders from affected communities, as well as local government officials, to go learn from other disaster-affected communities and their community savings activities and housing initiatives that resulted from this.

Communities can also come up with imaginative methods when money is limited, with solutions tailored to individual need. In Myanmar, the Khawmu network of 18 villages with houses damaged by cyclone Nargis received financial support from the ACCA (Asian Coalition for Community Action) program and Selavip, totaling US\$ 60,000, for the reconstruction and repair of homes. However, with 700 homes affected, there were too many for the limited financial support, and too many to pick a few beneficiaries. So the village committees together sat down and examined the scale of housing need, prioritizing the most urgent cases and agreeing as a village who would get what kind of support. All construction work was done by the villagers, who bought materials and built

collectively, keeping costs so low that they were able to repair or rebuild all homes. Each family received the financial support as a loan, but instead of this loan being repaid in cash, they developed a system of repayment by rice, into the newly-established community rice bank, further increasing the villages' self-sufficiency (ACHR, 2009:42). A typical response from a relief agency would have been to build the same house for every family, in a rigid top-down manner, and at a much higher cost. The community-led response allowed for everyone's needs to be taken care of through a much more flexible method, by taking into account the different scale of damage to each house. The quality and design of the houses built by the community residents through this process also varies in accordance to each family's needs, leaving room for lively local designs.

### **Addressing structural issues**

There are two sides to any disaster relief situation: the supply side (the government and relief agencies such as development agencies, international or national), and the demand side (the survivors). In order for the supply side to respond adequately to the needs of the survivors, they need to be aware of and willing to listen to, their affected community demands. The demand side must make sure it is sufficiently visible – therefore, building a well-balanced two way process means building space for people to speak what they need, and having the ability to move forwards themselves, as demonstrated above. The supply side, needs to learn how to listen to people's needs, rather than taking all the decisions from above and showering the survivors with the usual relief kits without opening the opportunity for the people's opportunity to change their life. Too many procedures and steps for approval, and too many organizations involved, means that the response may be too slow at the crucial post-disaster stage, leading survivors to take up looting and other desperate measures. Disaster leads to huge flows of finance into a country – if there are no checks and balances, this creates problems, as everyone wants the money, and this leads to even more delays and politicking. All too often, the current system of assistance means that resources always flow to the “system”, either international or national, and this system is not always efficient nor speedy in its response, as multiple bureaucratic procedures are needed or ministries compete for control.

Several governments may see disasters as an opportunity to start over from an urban planning perspective, laying down new development regulations. Whether or not this is well-intentioned or an opportunistic land grab for more profitable developments, this creates problems similar to eviction for communities previously on the site. After the tsunami, with Coastal Regulation Zones were declared in India, Indonesia, Sri Lanka and Thailand, with heavy implications for many of mostly fishermen villages affected, which could not return to their livelihoods. In New Orleans, following Hurricane Katrina, swathes of land were reserved for new mixed developments. These are examples of governments imposing top-down initiatives without consulting those affected by them, who consequently suffer hardship. In these cases, a well organized community has higher chances of succeeding in land disputes than individual households on their own. In the case of New Orleans, the hurricane survivors were shipped out and scattered around the States, and thus were not able to regroup to face down government plans, and as a consequence many are still displaced. By comparison, in Aceh following the tsunami, the



displaced villagers returned to their land and started rebuilding their homes, putting them in a stronger position for the ensuing negotiations with the government. As a collective, the survivors have more power to make reasonable demands of the state, to negotiate for alternatives to top-down impositions. By pooling their funds, they can collectively purchase land, or they can negotiate with the state to provide them with free or cheap land for lease. In these cases, existing networks of communities can give the affected communities the moral and strategic backing they need, supporting communities that decide to go back and rebuild and then negotiate for recognition.

Existing networks of communities can facilitate the disaster recovery process, through a people-centered approach, as the HPFP has done. In Thailand, this network-support approach was first used following the tsunami, when a network of communities in Southern Thailand sent teams of volunteers from their communities to help build temporary housing and set up the relief camp. As well as the physical aspects, the network helped survivor communities to organize in their fight against eviction, organizing exchange visits and other processes of horizontal learning. After floods hit Northern Thailand in 2005 and 2006, community networks sent volunteers to help with the clean up and rebuilding process, as well as reintroducing indigenous ways of preventing floods. Thus, peer-to-peer support for disaster rehabilitation through community networks can be very effective in rebuilding affected communities and probably in disaster prevention.

## **Conclusion**

While disasters hit everyone without discriminating, they affect the poor far more strongly than those with resources to recover and security such as insurance. However, it is possible for the poor to rely on their fellow community members to act collectively to rebuild their homes and continue with their lives. And if the process is properly managed to make the most of the opportunity, victims of disaster may end up in a better position following a disaster, particularly if they are able to negotiate tenure and build better homes. Thus, disasters provide a prime starting point arising out of desperation for further community action, as people find themselves in a situation of urgent need and will do whatever they can to meet that need. Community-led responses to disaster ultimately prove the most sustainable, as those who are affected are the ones who should know best what they need.

The facilitation of community-led rebuilding can strengthen communities and set them on the right path for further collective action for the benefit of all community members. Even if the affected community did not yet have an established community group or savings group before the disaster, the affected groups often manage to establish possible ties based on their common need. The act of starting savings activities can also give the traumatized community residents a clear goal and regular activities to focus on. Community members can play an important role in all stages of a post-disaster situation, from immediate relief, surveying of affected areas, regaining their livelihoods, rebuilding their homes, and implementing effective disaster-prevention processes for the future.

The usual scenario in a post-disaster situation is that one has to start from zero or even a “minus” situation, as people have lost so much, taking the necessary steps to provide the victims with temporary or very simple permanent housing as the outcome. Yet, all too often, the response may be quick but the outcome is unsustainable – the housing may not adequately meet people’s needs, it may not be livable, communities may be divided or being evicted. However, with an understanding of the chances that are presented as a result of a disaster, then new possibilities for innovation are opened up, and so the process is different. The starting point is no longer zero, because there is an understanding of the opportunity to be seized as a result, to hand power to the affected communities so that they can achieve better change for themselves.

**Photos:**

Myanmar reconstruction

Philippines

Thailand relief camp

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