

Disasters, My Government and Me

Disaster reduction through the eyes of a child

In January 2005, 168 countries committed to building the resilience of nations and communities to reduce the impact that disasters have on populations around the world.

This took place at the Kobe World Conference on Disaster Reduction and the agreement is called the Hyogo Framework for Action.

This is an interpretation of the HYOGO framework for children and young people.

Disasters are everyone's business - earthquakes, floods, hurricanes, tsunamis as well as droughts change all our lives. They destroy things that have taken a long time to build. It's only by working together that we can be ready for disasters and make sure that they do not destroy everything we have done to build a good life.

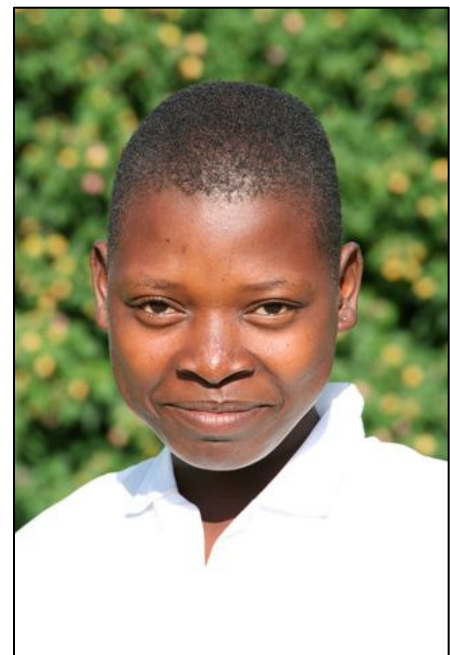
Young people, like everyone else, want to live in a country where politicians know how to prepare for the sort of disasters that happen everywhere. Leaders need to talk to one another about preparing for disasters. They can share information and agree who does what.

Disasters damage our homes, schools, farms, and roads. Lots of different people know about disasters and what to do about them. People like teachers, farmers, doctors, soldiers, policemen, businessmen and people who talk on the radio all have important views to share. All these people need to work with leaders to agree how to plan for disasters. And they should let everyone know their plans. Families need to know what will happen when disaster strikes, otherwise what is the point in having a plan?

"From October to December, we had heavy downpours with flooded rivers and streams," said fourteen-year-old Mupa Katsinye Masudi from Kenya. "We lost crops and buildings. A few people lost their lives as they tried to cross the flooded river and lots of people suffered from malaria and bilharzia," she said. "The people who suffered most were children and women. They looked helpless as they were forced to spend the night outside their broken houses."

In 2005 leaders agreed what could be done to make us ready for disasters. Now that the government knows what needs to be done, laws need to be passed to make sure houses, bridges and roads are safer.

Leaders should also make sure that there is enough money to make the disaster plans work. Some countries have special warning systems which tell people when a disaster is



Mupa Katsinye Masudi, 14

coming, and these aren't cheap. But money shouldn't be an issue when we are talking about people's lives!

Many people, like grandparents and young children, as well as people who are sick, are sometimes more scared of disasters than other people. Everyone needs to make sure that extra help is on hand for these people. Even small children should learn what to do when there is a disaster.

"We have learnt how to handle floods in school. We've been taught not to build houses near riverbanks, avoid crossing flooded rivers and to boil water before drinking," said Mupa Katsinye Masudi.

"I don't want my country to be affected by disasters. We need to prepare ourselves in advance."

I want to understand why disasters happen, where they will happen and when they will happen....and what I can do

Many people are very poor and live in simple houses that fall down easily. Some villagers live next to the sea and rivers, with lots of other people, which means that their houses and all the things inside get covered in water and sometimes people drown.

Most people who live in places like this don't know how or when the waters will rise. There is enough to worry about being poor, so everyone carries on the same, even if really simple things like sand banks could stop the damage.

Leaders could help villagers by making things called 'risk maps' which show where a disaster might happen and what it will do. If villages were pinpointed on the map, people would know where the dangerous places are to live are, and people could decide what to do.



Kassim Ali Bakari, 14

Disasters kill people or injure them very badly. They destroy homes and make it impossible for people to make money if crops are ruined. They can also take away their tools.

"Before the drought, my family have to grow food and store it. We need to harvest rainwater and store it in the water tanks for future use," said fourteen-year-old Kassim Ali Bankari from Kwale in Kenya.

"When the drought happens, women are forced to walk 10 to 15 km in search of water and children become weak and suffer malnutrition through lack of food.

"Absenteeism in school increases, leading to school drop outs and migration to wet land. My family tries to share with the community anything they have during the drought."

Most people don't have money in the bank, and if they lose farm tools, or fishing boats or market stalls they don't have anything left. The government should keep money for emergencies so that they can give this money to people who have lost everything in a disaster. Otherwise people will get poorer and poorer.

There should be ways of warning people when a disaster is going to happen and letting people know how bad it will be. There are lots of ways of doing this, such as the radio or television and using mobile telephones. Parents could send text messages to relatives in the next village to let them know there is a cyclone coming. Loud speakers or traditional instruments can also be played to make people listen. Everybody needs to hear the messages. People need to learn about the things that animals do when there is a disaster coming - chickens flying into trees and fish jumping out of water.

When the disaster warning happens, everyone needs to know what to do. People might need to have things ready to take with them, like birth certificates and important telephone numbers. Everyone needs a safe shelter in or near their village, or on higher land. There should be a team of people who know how to get to a safe place and make sure there is enough food, water and medicine for people until they can go home again.

"When disaster hits our area, we all come together and give assistance to the provincial administration, police, doctors and the community," said Mupa.

If villages have a disaster team, they can help people to talk to local government officials as well as people like the Red Cross. In Bangladesh, where there are many cyclones, when there is a warning or an emergency, all the different village rescue groups can talk to each other through radio stations. This helps to save millions of lives every year. It is the government's job to be in charge when a disaster happens, so if there is a warning sign in the village, everyone knows which leader to talk to.

Everyone must be able to learn what to do

If people don't know what to do in a disaster, they cannot prepare themselves. If young people want to know more about what could happen where they live, about the land they live on and the weather - they could learn this at school.

Teachers can teach information about disasters in lessons like maths, science, history and geography. But teachers must know the right facts to teach, so they need special lessons too, and they must be paid properly so they come to school.

Everyone likes to tell their families about what they learn in school, so they will be safe too when a disaster happens.

"Recently, in my school we learnt how to handle disasters," said Kassim. "We learnt that to handle drought we must build storage tanks in advance, drill bore holes and dig earth dams. We should plant trees and grow a lot of food, keeping some in store for the future."

"Communities have conducted assessments and we have been able to come up with solutions," said seventeen-year-old Isaac Clement, from Nsanje district in Malawi.

"Some of the solutions involve de-silting the Thangadzi River to control flooding and to plant trees along the river banks. Our school is also in the process of forming natural resources clubs helping to look after the land."

But there are lots of children who don't go to school. So how will they learn about disasters? People who work with children who live on the street must tell them what they need to know.

Disaster plans will be different depending on the location of the school or village. Some people live by rivers, others may live on hills. So each school and village should have a separate disaster plan, and ways to teach it, which will help people make their own schools and villages safer. In schools, children should learn first aid and 'drills', so they know what to do if there is an earthquake, for example.



Isaac Clement, 17

Children need to be reminded about disasters so that they don't forget. Everyone learns best when they're having fun: when they're acting, singing, drawing, playing games and listening to stories. So think about how you can do this and have fun at the same time!

Some young people like reading or listening to the radio, others like watching television. So people can learn not only in school, but at home and at friends' houses too. Nobody likes long boring lessons so it's good to listen to the radio.

Village elders know a lot about what has happened in the past and everyone needs to listen to them, to plan for the future. Some elders know about diverting streams and planting trees, helping to protect crops, people and buildings.

Women and girls are not always as strong as men and boys. Their clothes and long hair can get caught or slow them down in a flood. Women also have to look after small children. So when we are planning for disasters, the special roles that women play, and the special things they might need, should be thought about.

"Sometimes when there's very little food because of droughts or floods, some parents may be so desperate they marry off their daughters at an early age to get bride price which they use for food," said fifteen-year-old Ellen Chinsomba from Nsanje, Malawi.

I want to live in a way that makes disasters less likely to happen



Ellen Chinsomba, 15

Often people are the cause of disasters so we may need to change the things we do, such as cutting down trees or building houses near rivers.

Cutting down trees means soil is washed away more easily, blocking up rivers and creating floods further downstream. Sometimes we have too many cattle, or plough up land for crops so often that the soil becomes tired and powdery and will not produce good crops.

So we all need to change the way we do things that may cause disasters. Our government and business leaders should set an example and use our country's land in a kind way that doesn't damage the environment.

"The Government is supposed to create awareness about disaster preparedness," said Kassim. "The leaders and politicians are giving support but their strength in terms of finance is low."

Rich countries have done a lot of damage to the environment, causing the earth to get warmer. This happens because of factories, cars and aeroplanes. All of these activities release gases which warm up the world.

Many people in rural areas have never seen a factory or an aeroplane, and nobody owns a car, but it is village people who will have to deal with the disasters caused by a warmer world.

Scientists are predicting there will be more flooding and storms, poorer crops and less water. So we have to change the way we live. One way is for families to grow crops which use less water and stoves using less wood and charcoal.

There will be lots of problems for people who grow their own food, because the way they have farmed the land will no longer be possible. We need help to learn different ways of growing and storing food which doesn't waste water or ruin the soil, like harvesting rainwater, storage tanks and cereal banks.

If we run out of food, we should not have to sell everything and be left with nothing. If that happens, government leaders should have enough money to help us every month until we get back on our feet, so that people are not forced to beg on the street.

"The government should work hard to implement land law," said Kassim. "This will help many people to own land and grow food in plenty to assist them during hungry times."

Buildings, roads and the places where electricity and water is stored should be made strong so they are not destroyed if there is a disaster. Schools and hospitals should be very safe. There should laws to make sure that new buildings do not fall down.

When a disaster is over, it's a good time to prepare. That's because we can see what we could have done better. We can start to rebuild better houses, schools and hospitals so that people are safer. People who have survived the disaster should have their stories recorded, because these stories may teach important lessons. New safe houses must be built near schools and jobs so that people will want to live there. There are many things that can be done in towns to make them stronger, like better drains and cleaner streets.

We must always be ready

We may be young now, but one day we will be grown-up with our own children. Everyone today must think about the children we will have in the future, and the world that they will live in.



Isaac and Ellen

We know disasters will happen more and more and we need to prepare for them and become better at protecting ourselves. This means practising our drills and making sure we have everything we need if a disaster happens. It also means learning lessons from previous disasters so that we don't make the same mistakes twice.

"We need to build permanent structures, avoid crossing rivers during floods, sleep under mosquito nets to protect children against malaria," said Mupa. "And we need to hold the government responsible for repairing the roads, to ensure we have transport."

At the same time, everyone needs to work together to think about what can be done to make our villages and towns safer places, to protect the lives of children in the future.

To find out more about ActionAid's work on disaster reduction, visit http://www.actionaid.org.uk/100261/disaster_risk_reduction.html

To find out more about the HYOGO framework, and what governments have promised, visit www.unisdr.org