

## Natural disasters: Thinking beyond immediate response

**Source:** Brookings-Bern Project on Internal Displacement

**Date:** 02 Oct 2009

Tsunami in Samoa, massive flooding in Manila, earthquake in Sumatra – if you think there are more catastrophic acts of nature these days, you're right. In fact, the number of natural disasters has doubled in the past twenty years. Last year some 400 natural disasters affected over 200 million people, killing 16,000 people and displacing close to 50 million from their homes. Natural disasters affect both rich and poor countries; while they generally produce higher economic losses in developed countries, casualties are higher in developing ones. And scientists tell us that disasters, particularly hydrometeorological disasters – flooding, cyclones, hurricanes, etc. – are likely to increase in both frequency and severity as a result of climate change.

The international system has a well-developed capacity to respond quickly to major disasters – to dispatch aircraft packed with food and water and to mobilize teams of doctors, rescue equipment, and sniffer dogs. But this takes time. Most of the lives saved in the immediate aftermath of a disaster are the result of local action – of neighbours pawing through rubble to rescue trapped earthquake victims, of local churches and mosques setting up systems to distribute food, of families opening up their homes to people whose houses are now under water. While most Western media attention focuses on the international response, much more should be done to support local communities to respond to disasters. More importantly, more should be done to support their efforts to reduce the risks of natural disasters.

Communities may not be able to prevent torrential floods or hurricanes, but there are clearly steps they can take to reduce the impact of such disasters on their communities. Compare the response of the Cuban and Haitian governments to the four devastating hurricanes that hit their countries last year: while 2 million Cubans were affected by the hurricanes, there were only 7 deaths. In Haiti, there were 423 deaths reported among the 800,000 people affected by the storms. The Cuban disaster response system is one of the strongest in the world, with early warning systems which reach deep into communities and evacuation plans in which local officials ensure that the most vulnerable members of communities are evacuated to safety. Hurricane awareness programs are mandatory in schools and citizens are taught how to board up their homes before leaving for shelters.

Mobilizing funds to support victims of natural disasters—at least the big natural disasters which make headlines in Western countries—is usually easier than raising money for long-term actions to prevent large-scale casualties. Some relief agencies have adopted policies that 10 percent (or more) of the funds they raise to respond to disasters will be dedicated to risk reduction—this is a good initiative which should become standard practice and communicated clearly to individual donors.

Reducing the risks of natural disasters saves lives as surely as sending in relief supplies after disaster has struck. Even as the international community springs into reaction to respond to these recent devastating disasters, we should be preparing for the disasters to come and planning on how to reduce their human casualties. The disasters will come. It's time to take disaster risk reduction seriously.