

Lessons in disaster management

Disasters occur in a social context in which complex issues of power, politics, and longstanding vulnerability and poverty shape outcomes. Understanding this complexity and working with a range of actors to navigate it is fundamental to developing and implementing successful disaster management.

Following the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami, Sri Lanka's government began to update its disaster management plan and reorganize its disaster management agencies and policies to address the limitations exposed by the tsunami response. Oxfam America joined with the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) of Sri Lanka to assess those new policies and to better understand their possible impact on humanitarian efforts in the country. This study helped guide the government's thinking around the reorganization and planning, and it is a good example of how engaging a variety of stakeholders on an issue can lead to more effective outcomes.

Lessons learned from this research have implications far beyond Sri Lanka. These findings offer insights for the translation of national government policies into local practices, the role of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and the private sector, and the increasing importance of disaster risk reduction.

The long road from national policy to "the last mile"

International principles and protocols to guide disaster response and disaster risk reduction initiatives clearly outline the responsibilities of national governments to reduce the vulnerability of their citizens to the impact of disasters. Turning these international principles galvanized in Geneva and New York into practical tools that can be used by the most marginalized of people vulnerable to disasters—reaching the "last mile"—is the challenge.



Storing key documents in a portable bag can help prevent hazards like floods from destroying a family's long-term financial security. "We would all like to live in a safer place," says Thushari Damayanthi (above), whose village is vulnerable to flooding and landslides. "The problem is that we have no other place to work and earn money." *Atul Loke / Panos for Oxfam America*

Doing so requires commitment, skill, and resources at the national, local, and community levels. Domestic legislation and policies need to be created, responsibilities and budgets assigned, and civil society and the private sector engaged. Moreover, local government and community members must be trained, given adequate resources, and placed at the center of the response. The IPS research highlights some examples.

At the national level

Already a signatory to international disaster mitigation frameworks, the Sri Lankan government increased the urgency it placed on disaster management after the tsunami. It passed the Disaster Management Act in 2005, which established a National Council for Disaster Management, a top-level body headed by the country's president and prime minister. The act also established the Ministry of Disaster Management and Human Rights, which developed the country's Road Map to Disaster Preparedness, and laid out the path the government of Sri Lanka hoped to travel to be better prepared to deal with disasters of all kinds.

Key findings

- ❖ Countries facing multiple complex emergencies, like Sri Lanka, benefit by linking international principles and national disaster management policies to a fully participatory citizenry. Doing so, however, will require greater political will and closer coordination between government, civil society, and the private sector.
- ❖ Disaster mitigation and risk reduction are more cost-effective than preparedness and response, and communities are well placed to carry out such measures at the local level.

A champion of community-based disaster management



"The Disaster Management Act doesn't provide a mandate for grassroots-level officers. But intervening there to make this change could do some good." —Dr. Buddhadasa Weerasinghe, former director of training and public awareness, Disaster Management Center.
Atul Loke / Panos for Oxfam America

Dr. Buddhadasa Weerasinghe was an expert on environmental-impact assessments when the tsunami decimated the southern coast of Sri Lanka. In the aftermath of that disaster, the government of Sri Lanka approached him to be part of the team tasked to assess the damage.

He appreciated the time spent with communities. "I've always learned the most while listening to community members and sharing food with people in the villages," says Weerasinghe, who has spent a portion of his long career gathering community knowledge and using it to educate experts.

In 2006, he was put in charge of training and public awareness for the government's newly formed Disaster Management Center. His long-held belief that local expertise and local contexts are key to effective interventions, as well as his active involvement with the Disaster Management Center, made him an excellent candidate to advise the researchers conducting this study.

The research suggests that, for disaster management to be effective at all levels, it will require powerful, innovative, and committed people—people who listen closely to those most vulnerable to disasters and make sure their voices are heard. Dr. Weerasinghe is one such champion.

In addition, based in part on advocacy by Oxfam, the government took steps to end a confusing organizational duplication. "There was a lot of confusion around the roles of two governmental disaster-related agencies that had similar names," says Dr. Buddhadasa Weerasinghe, former director of training and public awareness at the Disaster Management Center. "International donors, for example, didn't know which of them to link to." Since then, one agency has been renamed and their roles have been clarified, he says.

At the local level

In Sri Lanka, as in many countries, the passage of legislation does not guarantee its implementation throughout the country. More than 20 agencies are responsible for managing their part of a disaster recovery process, and the researchers found that coordination among them is difficult. The researchers observed that the administrative officials responsible for local disaster management lack adequate budgets, decision-making power, and skills to properly implement disaster management policies.

The researchers also pointed out that nationally elected legislators are not responsible for the local delivery of disaster management programs and, therefore, have little incentive to implement the legislation.

"Although the appointed district secretary holds responsibility in terms of central authority, it is

the elected officials who are really connected and accountable to the people," explains Dr. Weerasinghe. "Until they become the force of activity and the champions for more effective disaster management, there's not much that can happen."

At the community level

Even then, little can be accomplished without the active participation of affected communities and their governmental and nongovernmental supporters. Upon evaluating a survey of 600 households in the hard-hit south and east, and interviewing local officials in 14 administrative divisions, researchers found little evidence of such grassroots involvement in government-led disaster management.

If the government were to involve grassroots organizers, it could tap into community knowledge that would increase the effectiveness of disaster management plans.

For example, the researchers found that community members are more plagued by familiar disasters—including floods, droughts, cyclones, landslides, insect infestations, and escalating civil war—than they are by the threat of another tsunami. Armed with this analysis, the researchers consequently recommended that the government design an emergency response plan that uses a multiple-hazard approach that can be adapted to the specific circumstances of any kind of disaster.

Many poor families also view more common hazards such as insect infestations, elephant attacks, and epidemics as potentially disastrous for their families. By taking steps now to build resilience into the livelihoods of these families, and by extension reducing their poverty, the government can reduce these families' vulnerability to disasters.

Local input can help disaster responders ensure that they strengthen existing resilience of a community rather than undermine it. For example, the researchers noted that the elders in one district have successfully predicted floods based on changes in the sound of a waterfall several miles away or by the rising water level on a bridge abutment. When they detect these signs of imminent flooding, they sound the alarm so people can seek shelter. Local disaster management plans could benefit greatly by incorporating customary mechanisms like these.

Finally, deeper community consultation can result in more effective disaster management, say researchers. The researchers were surprised to learn that two years after the tsunami, despite numerous community-level disaster management training sessions, 21 percent of people polled said they had no idea what to do in the case of another disaster. When asked why, some people said that sessions were scheduled at times when many people were working, so they could not attend. Others said that people who attended a training session did not always convey the information to other members of their households. Identifying these community-level gaps is the first step toward bridging them and making sure this knowledge is shared with everyone.

Increasing the role of NGOs and the private sector

NGOs and the private sector have joined the government, military, local administrative authorities, and communities themselves in responding to natural disasters. However, the researchers found that aid organizations and the private sector failed to coordinate their efforts with one another or with local government officials after the tsunami. This led to spotty coverage and duplication of effort.

To solve these problems, the researchers recommended that the central government put resources into coordinating the emergency interventions of NGOs and other groups in the private sector. They also recommended that businesses be mobilized to play a key supporting role across the whole spectrum of



Using participatory techniques, Oxfam-funded researchers in Sri Lanka are helping survivors assess the impact of a deadly landslide caused by over-harvesting trees on a hillside. Residents also created a plan to reduce future risks. "The main thing is to protect your environment," says 16-year-old Mahesh Vithanage. *Atul Loke / Panos for Oxfam America*

disaster management, including preparedness (telecommunications and media companies), mitigation (insurance companies), and response and recovery efforts (banking and insurance companies). Like NGOs, these private actors also need to be integrated into a government framework, says IPS, with clear "rules of the game" to regulate their operations.

However, in Sri Lanka's highly politicized environment, it is hard for aid providers to demonstrate neutrality, and they are often accused of favoring one side or the other. Trust must be built between the government and the private sector in order for a disaster response model like the one advocated by IPS to be effective.

Sri Lanka's disaster profile

Sri Lanka is a disaster-prone developing country. As a small island, it suffers from ocean storms, tidal waves, flooding, and landslides, while some parts of the country also face recurring drought. The graph below highlights five of the 10 major disasters in Sri Lanka's recent history, ranked by number of people affected. This clearly shows that, while some disasters might not take as many lives as the tsunami, they can have widespread disastrous effects.

Disaster Type	Date(s)	No. of People Killed	No. of People Affected
Drought	1982, 1983, 1987, 1989, and 2001	Not available	7,806,000
Conflict	Ongoing since 1983	65,000	4,000,000
Tsunami	Dec. 26, 2004	35,399	1,019,306
Windstorm	Nov. 24, 1978	740	1,005,000
Flood/Landslide	May 17, 2003	235	695,000

Source: OFDA/CRED International Disaster Database, www.emdat.be (2008).

Points of interest for aid providers

- > **Community ownership:** Communities need to be at the center of any disaster management plan. By putting more resources and effort into strengthening community capacity and reducing vulnerability to disasters, government and humanitarian aid agencies will help reduce the impact of natural hazards and ensure a more effective disaster response.
- > **Flexibility and breadth:** Recurring and ongoing disasters often affect more people than out-of-the-blue tragedy. Successful disaster management efforts should be broad and flexible enough to address the root causes of people's vulnerability to civil conflict, droughts, landslides, floods, and epidemics—in addition to another tsunami.
- > **Champions:** Weak political will, poor coordination, and lack of available resources at all levels hamper the implementation of national policies on disaster management. Overcoming such obstacles requires the active participation of people in government, the private sector, NGOs, and local communities who are committed to reducing risks and providing an effective response to future disasters.
- > **Clear lines of authority and stronger coordination:** Because many public and private agencies are often involved in responding to disasters, clear delineation of roles and responsibilities is crucial to their effectiveness. Governments should play a strong role in coordinating the activities of NGOs, communities, and private companies.
- > **Role of local participants:** Local governments at the district and village levels can play a larger role in disaster management, since they often are best positioned to assess needs and monitor the impact of aid. A political mandate that brings disaster management under the purview of locally elected officials, who are more accountable to the people, would jump-start the process.

Oxfam's humanitarian field studies

This brief is one in a series of reports that summarize research Oxfam began with its partners in India and Sri Lanka after the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami to study the impact of the disaster and the response. The goals of Oxfam's humanitarian field studies program are to help strengthen the disaster response and risk reduction programs of Oxfam and other humanitarian aid providers and to improve accountability to those we aim to help.

To read more about Oxfam's humanitarian field studies program, please visit www.oxfamamerica.org/fieldstudies.



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Mitigation and prevention

Finally, the IPS researchers suggested that the Disaster Management Act of 2005 should focus more attention on disaster mitigation and prevention and not focus only on response. "In the long run, disaster risk reduction activities help to tackle the root causes of people's vulnerability," says Russell Miles, tsunami research program manager for Oxfam America. "While disaster response training and other preparedness techniques are incredibly useful, in the end they only address the symptoms."

Investment in preventative measures, like the harvesting of rainwater for drought or the protection of natural coastal buffers, for example, can limit the vulnerabilities of people and prevent natural hazards from becoming disasters. In addition, with proper guidance, mitigation and prevention activities that are identified and implemented by affected

communities can save more lives and assets and can prove more cost-effective than top-down approaches, researchers say.

Conclusion

A government rightly has a major role to play in ensuring the safety of its citizens, and NGOs, businesses, and community groups have the knowledge and resources to help. Successful disaster management requires clear delineation of roles and responsibilities among these actors and strong coordination. It also requires trust. In many countries, such as Sri Lanka, that are faced with recurring disasters and divided by long-term civil conflict, effective coordination will require champions in each sector who are willing to work across boundaries with a diverse range of actors. Disaster management plans will also need to build upon the existing resilience of community members to ensure better prevention of, and responses to, future emergencies.

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