

The Right to Survive

The humanitarian challenge for the twenty-first century

Summary

Each year, on average, almost 250 million people are affected by ‘natural’ disasters. In a typical year between 1998 and 2007, 98 per cent of them suffered from climate-related disasters such as droughts and floods rather than, for example, devastating but relatively rare events such as earthquakes. New research for this report projects that by 2015, this number could grow by more than 50 per cent to an average of over 375 million people affected by climate-related disasters each year.¹

Any such projection is not an exact science, but what is clear is that substantially more people may be affected by disasters in the very near future, as climate change and environmental mismanagement create a proliferation of droughts, floods and other disasters. And more people will be vulnerable to disasters because of their poverty or location.

Some of these environmental changes will also increase the threat of new conflicts, which will mean more people displaced, and more need for humanitarian aid. One recent report estimated that 46 countries will face a ‘high risk of violent conflict’ when climate change exacerbates traditional security threats.² Already, there is evidence that the number of conflicts is again on the rise.

In short, new and existing conflicts, added to the growth in climate-related disasters, are likely to create, by 2015, an unprecedented level of need for humanitarian assistance that could overwhelm the world’s current humanitarian capacity.

Already, many governments fail to act quickly or effectively enough in response to storms, earthquakes, and other such events, or to take preventative action to reduce unnecessary deaths and suffering. In January 2009, the UN said that many of the 235,000 people killed by disasters in 2008 could have been saved by better government action.³ Indeed, the very actions of some governments place marginalised people at risk from disasters by discriminating against them, like those forced to live in flimsy slum housing so easily destroyed by floods and landslips.

At the same time, international humanitarian assistance is often too slow or inappropriate, and the UN-led reforms since 2005 to improve it have only begun to make a difference.

Challenge

Governments, aid agencies, and others must act to improve the quality and quantity of humanitarian aid. Even in daunting economic times, the world can afford to meet the humanitarian needs of every person struggling to survive a disaster.

It is possible to reduce the threats from climate-related catastrophes. It is possible for governments to provide good-quality aid to their citizens. And it will cost a tiny fraction of what rich countries have spent on the global financial crisis since 2008 to provide decent humanitarian assistance to all of those men, women, and children who, by 2015, may need it. In 2008, European governments found \$2.3 trillion to provide guarantees for their financial sectors. Decent aid, for every person in need, would be a bargain by comparison.

Rich governments must also take the lead in mitigating the impact of climate change – a key factor in driving the increased threat of disaster. They must lead in cutting their emissions so that warming stays as far below 2°C as possible, and provide at least \$50bn per year to help poor countries adapt to climate change. But the governments of developing countries must also take greater responsibility for responding to disasters and reducing people’s vulnerability to them, and help enable regional authorities and civil society to respond effectively.

More vulnerable people

For millions of women and men worldwide it is their vulnerability – who they are, where they live, and how they make a living – and not the threats they face per se that will determine whether they survive. Vulnerability – to threats such as conflict or environmental hazards like floods and earthquakes – is a result of poverty; the political choices, corruption, and greed that cause it, and the political indifference that allows it to endure.

In 2008, in the devastated Haitian city of Gonaïves, Ogè Léandre, a 45-year-old father of six, had a lucky escape:

The water started to rise, and it did not stop ... the water was already so high and strong that I could not hold on to one of my children and the water swept her away. Luckily someone was there to grab her. We got to the roof-top of the [hurricane] shelter, and, about an hour later, watched as our entire house was washed away.

The tropical storms of 2008 wreaked havoc in Haiti. In Gonaïves alone, up to a quarter of the population were forced from their homes, as tens of thousands of poorly constructed slum houses were swept away. Everywhere, poor people are the most vulnerable to being killed or made destitute by disasters. In rich countries, an average of 23 people die in any given disaster; in the least-developed countries 1,052. Some groups – women and girls, chronically sick and elderly people and others – are even more vulnerable, their ability to cope limited by discrimination, inequality, or their physical health. In both conflict and natural disaster, women’s and girls’ vulnerability to sexual violence increases as communities and families are broken up, and local authorities lose control of law and order.

Looking to the future, the point is this: for many of the world’s poor people, vulnerability to disaster may increase, and there are four trends that may drive this. First, there are far more people living in urban slums built on precarious land. Second, the increasing pressure on rural land, caused by drought, population density, and increasing demand for meat and dairy products, means that more people will find it difficult to get enough to eat. Third, climate change, environmental degradation, and conflict may

drive more people from their homes, stripping them of their livelihoods and assets. Some estimates suggest that up to one billion people will be forced to move from their homes by 2050. Finally, the global economic crisis since 2008 may increase unemployment and undermine social safety nets, which in some countries may contribute to increased humanitarian needs.

Choosing to act

There are positive trends as well. Not everyone has become more vulnerable to the rising number of disasters. In some countries, the proportion of people living in poverty has fallen, allowing more people to have secure homes and livelihoods, and to build up savings that help them recover from shocks. In many countries, the death toll from disasters has been drastically reduced, not because there have been fewer disastrous events, but because governments have taken action to prepare for them. Cyclone Sidr killed around 3,000 people in Bangladesh in 2007, a tiny fraction of the numbers killed by Cyclone Bhola in 1972 or even by Cyclone Gorky in 1991, storms of similar strength. In countries like India, where new legislation has created 900 million person-days of employment for rural poor people, the advent of ‘social protection’ mechanisms offers at least the hope that the cycle of disaster and poverty can be broken. In Chile in May 2008, the eruption of Mount Chaitén was met with a speedy response, including the evacuation of 8,000 people.

State responsibility

The impetus to make states deliver better assistance is often the action of citizens holding their governments to account. In Indonesia, Oxfam works with FIRD, a local organisation working in disaster management and response. Their mediation between local villages and the district government has helped transform the delivery of aid. In Georgia, up to 130,000 people were displaced in August 2008, in and around the disputed regions of South Ossetia and Abkhazia. Organisations like the Georgian Young Lawyers Association played a vital role in ensuring that those affected knew what help they were entitled to, and that the national authorities provided it.

Many displaced people do not know how to register, nor do they know of their rights... We are giving legal aid and providing legal representation to people affected.

Besarion Boxasvili (GYLA)

For every government that acts to protect lives in the face of threats such as storms and conflict, there are far too many that fail. Sometimes this is because they are overwhelmed; even Cuba, one of the countries best prepared for disasters, failed to prevent tropical storm-related deaths in 2008, following four successive hurricanes. Others blame their failure to invest in disaster preparedness on economic constraints. But the fact that some poor states have implemented successful measures to reduce the risk of disasters shows that this is no adequate excuse.

Some governments actively abuse their own citizens or those of occupied territories. Others, as well as non-state actors, are complicit in the deliberate manipulation and denial of humanitarian aid. In 2007, UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon reported that conflict was limiting or preventing humanitarian access to over 18 million people in countries like Iraq, Somalia, Sudan, and Afghanistan, either due to general insecurity or deliberate obstruction.

International assistance

International aid organisations play a crucial role in saving lives directly and in working to support governments that choose to act responsibly. Humanitarian organisations, local and international, demonstrate enormous skill, commitment, and courage in delivering aid to those who need it most, from Chad to Burma/Myanmar. In 2007, more than 43 million people benefited from humanitarian assistance provided under UN appeals. In November 2008, Oxfam was directly assisting 3.3 million people with humanitarian needs.

But too often, international humanitarian agencies pay scant regard to working with national or local governments (or with local civil-society organisations, such as national Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies). In providing assistance directly, international organisations too often give the impression that they are absolving governments of their obligations. That is not to say that international humanitarian organisations should never act directly to save lives – rather, that working through government and civil-society partners is preferable where it is feasible.

Too much humanitarian aid is still inappropriate and poorly targeted. Too often, humanitarian assistance does not take account of the specific needs of different groups, like women and men for instance. The vulnerability of women and girls to sexual violence, for example, may actually be increased by poorly designed aid projects. Nor is the humanitarian system well set up to deal with the increasing number of local climate disasters. In the past, traditional responses to large-scale catastrophes have often been centralised, logistics-heavy interventions. In the future, humanitarian organisations will need to focus more on building local capacity to help prevent, prepare for, and respond to this proliferation of climate-related shocks.

The current level of humanitarian funding is still far too low to meet even today's humanitarian needs. The world spent more on video games in 2006 than it did on international humanitarian assistance. If all the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) governments simply gave as much (per head of their population) as the OECD's ten most generous countries did in 2006, global humanitarian aid would increase to a total of \$42bn. The significant amount of aid already coming from non-OECD humanitarian donors, from the Middle East and elsewhere, should also of course be increased.

The issue is not just one of quantity, however. Too much money, from OECD and non-OECD donors alike, is allocated according to the political or security interests of governments – or according to whichever disaster is on the television screens of each country – rather than impartially on the basis of humanitarian need. Comparing the global response to the Indian Ocean tsunami in 2004 with the response to the conflict in Chad in the same year, the 500,000 people assisted after the tsunami received an average of \$1,241 each in official aid, while the 700,000 recipients of aid in Chad received just \$23 each.

Building a safer future

The humanitarian challenge of the twenty-first century is this: an increasing total of largely local catastrophic events, increasing numbers of people vulnerable to them, too many governments failing to prevent or respond to them, and an international humanitarian system unable to cope. In the face of that, disaster-affected people need:

- A far greater focus on building national governments' capacity to respond to disasters – and, where needed, challenging those governments to use it;
- A far greater focus on helping people, and national governments, to become less vulnerable to disasters; and
- An international humanitarian system that acts quickly and impartially to provide effective and accountable assistance – complementing national capacity, and sometimes providing the aid that national governments fail to.

That will require the following:

Building state responsibility and empowering affected people

- Governments must reinforce national and local capacity to respond and reduce people's vulnerability (with increased donor government support to do so);
- Communities must be empowered to demand that governments fulfil their obligations, as well as to respond to and prepare for disasters themselves; and
- The international community must use mediation and diplomacy far more robustly to press states to assist their own citizens.

Reducing vulnerability

- National governments must:
 - Adopt disaster risk-reduction measures combining early warning, preparedness plans, and grassroots mobilisation;
 - Invest in sustainable livelihoods so that people have secure incomes and food;
 - Improve urban planning so that people living in slums are housed in disaster-resistant dwellings and in areas less subject to environmental risks; and
 - Invest in public services and infrastructure to reduce public-health risks.
- Rich governments must lead in cutting global emissions so that global warming stays as far below 2°C as possible, and provide at least \$50bn per year to help least-developed countries adapt to climate change. (Please see the Oxfam Briefing Paper, 'Climate Wrongs and Human Rights' for detailed recommendations)⁴ and
- All parties must take assertive and effective action to reduce conflicts. (Please see the Oxfam report, 'For a Safer Tomorrow' for detailed recommendations).⁵

Improving international assistance

- Governments, donors, the UN, and humanitarian agencies must ensure that needs are properly assessed; and that aid is implemented impartially, according to need, to appropriate international standards, accountable to their beneficiaries, sensitive to particular vulnerabilities (including by gender, age, and disability), and supporting local capacity wherever possible;

- Donor governments must substantially increase their support to developing country governments to reduce vulnerability to disasters;
- Non-OECD donors must follow the same standards as OECD ones, to provide aid in the above way;
- UN agencies must provide better leadership of the international humanitarian response. NGO and UN organisations must support a more co-ordinated response, supportive of national authorities, while preserving their independence; and
- Donors must work much more closely together to ensure that there is adequate funding to support timely, effective, and good-quality humanitarian action. Increasing humanitarian aid to \$42bn a year would be a vital first step.

Notes

¹ For further details, please see the chart on p24 of the full report *The Right to Survive*, available to download at www.oxfam.org, and 'Forecasting numbers of people affected annually by natural disasters up to 2015', internal Oxfam study, April 2009, available at www.oxfam.org [complete address].

² D. Smith and J. Vivekananda (2007) 'A Climate of Conflict: the Links between Climate Change, Peace and War', London: International Alert, www.international-alert.org/climate_change.php

³ United Nations International Strategy for Disaster Reduction, UNISDR (2009) 'Deaths and economic losses jump in 2008', see <http://www.unisdr.org/eng/media-room/press-release/2009/pr-2009-01-disaster-figures-2008.pdf> (last accessed 26 January 2009).

⁴ Oxfam International (2008) 'Climate Wrongs and Human Rights: Putting People at the Heart of Climate Change Policy', Oxford: Oxfam International.

⁵ Oxfam International (2008) 'For a Safer Tomorrow: Protecting Civilians in a Multipolar World', Oxford: Oxfam International.