

PROVENTION CONSORTIUM FORUM 2008

From Grassroots to Global: People-Centered Disaster Risk Reduction

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Concept note

The disaster risk reduction (DRR) agenda continues to build momentum, spurred by tragic catastrophes, active lobbying, and global attention garnered by the issue of climate change. The past couple of years have witnessed important developments related to global policy and support for DRR, including the creation or revision of DRR policies in several bilateral donor agencies and international financial institutions (IFIs), the establishment of the World Bank's Global Facility for Disaster Reduction and Recovery (GFDRR), structural changes to strengthen the United Nations International Strategy for Disaster Reduction (UN/ISDR) system, and the adoption of the Bali Action Plan at COP-13. A critical challenge remains to translate these global commitments into changes on the ground.

There is a growing perception that although there has been progress made within the macro-level public policy domain; the current system is not as yet bringing about the required change at the sub-national and local level. While all agree that time is needed for these global efforts to filter down, the lesson of waiting decades for "trickle down economics" to alleviate poverty should teach us that waiting is not enough. The effectiveness of these DRR investments and efforts at the higher spatial levels will ultimately need to be measured by noticeable changes in terms of lives saved, people protected, losses avoided and livelihoods secured in a local context. Since the early nineties, the global number of disaster fatalities has gradually decreased mainly due to enhanced disaster preparedness and early warning in a number of high-risk countries such as Bangladesh and drought-prone African states. However, over the last decade the total number of people affected and the economic losses as a result of disasters continue to increase (CRED, 2008). These impacts fall overwhelmingly on the poor.

Some observers highlight that the lack of progress in terms of vulnerability reduction is partly due to the limited resources allocated and policy attention paid to more people-centered DRR approaches. They identify three substantial flaws in the current DRR strategies:

1. One flaw is a strong focus on system and institution building with no clear evidence yet that this is being translated into the improvement of safety and protection levels of at-risk communities. While the creation of frameworks, platforms and networks may provide more conceptual cohesion and facilitate knowledge exchange among different constituencies there is a risk that the systems and frameworks become a goal by themselves. Reference to and compliance with frameworks are no guarantee for effective DRR. Legal frameworks, if not enforced, do not necessarily lead to better protection. Risk assessments, if not followed by concrete risk reduction measures, have limited effectiveness. Awareness raising campaigns if not translated into behavioral change may only have marginal effects on people's safety. The current input oriented approach that assesses compliance with frameworks needs to be shifted towards a more output or results oriented assessment of the effectiveness of all the current system building efforts.
2. While governmental and intergovernmental actors undoubtedly play an important role in vulnerability and risk reduction, the challenges ahead compounded by a changing climate will require the involvement of all segments of society on an equal footing. A multi-stakeholder and even multi-role approach to DRR is absolutely required to address disaster risks in an efficient, integrated and sustainable manner. From grassroots to policymakers, each player has an essential role in managing risk. And while traditionally-conceived roles are a good starting point, expanded and overlapping roles are needed to accelerate DRR. For example, the media's role in communicating risk issues to the general public is critical. But they can support accelerated DRR if they were to also serve as watchdogs and advocates. Academics could also support these efforts by being more than neutral observers of risk. Many NGOs are expanding their traditional role of supporting awareness raising and advocacy, undertaking excellent research, and

field testing innovative development and DRR strategies. Donors play a key role in resource development and capacity building, but could do more to assert the primacy of human rights and pressure national governments to live up to their commitments. National governments can create the enabling conditions for DRR through the development of legislative frameworks, plans and budgets. Yet without national governments promoting popular participation in these processes the national role is not complete. Local authorities also need to promote population participation in its decisions. Finally, in many countries, the private sector is going beyond their conventional role of protecting its work force--adopting schools for seismic retrofit, controlling mosquito breeding in the communities surrounding the factory, etc. Thus, institutions and groups should be encouraged to re-think and expand their roles for effective implementation of DRR, particularly in countries where the commitment of governmental actors is limited, their resources and capacities are insufficient, or they are struggling with conflict, economic crisis, etc.

3. A third flaw is too strong a focus on physical measures aimed at protecting buildings, infrastructure and critical facilities with limited attention to "people-centered" social vulnerability and livelihood issues. Participatory disaster risk assessments at the local level show that vulnerability can vary substantially within communities and that context specific solutions need to be sought. These assessments also show that people, despite their vulnerability, often also possess remarkable skills, capacities and local knowledge on which local DRR initiatives need to build. Thus a multi and inter-disciplinary approach is essential in which technical and physical interventions are merged with social and culturally sensitive approaches.

Civil society has a unique contribution to make towards developing these people-centered approaches and building safer, more resilient communities for a number of reasons:

- Local people and locally-based organizations are the main immediate and proximate actors in disaster reduction, response and recovery.
- Grassroots organizations have an established presence in affected areas, relevant experience and expertise based on an understanding of the local context.
- They often have the working relationships with and access to poor people that are essential to ensure that the needs and priorities of the most vulnerable and marginalised are taken into account.
- Grassroots organizations have an ability to mobilize communities and harness indigenous knowledge and resources (including access to a strong volunteer base).

However, there are also significant limitations and challenges to working with civil society groups related to such issues as diversity and fragmentation of the sector, the relative small size of local actors, low absorption capacities, limited financial resources, weak management structures, accountability and representation issues.

A more people-centered approach to DRR should therefore not be seen as the sole responsibility of civil society but as a collective responsibility of all actors in the DRR system. ProVention has over the last years substantially increased its involvement and support for local risk reduction work. It is developing a Community Disaster Resilience Fund, which is being piloted in India and aims to provide small grants directly to at risk communities. The Consortium also has strong links with GROOTS, a global network of grassroots women organizations. It is an active member of the Global Network of Civil Society Organizations for DRR and is collaborating with the development of the Global Alliance for DRR.

At the Panamá Forum each session is looking at ways to promote people-centered DRR approaches. The **climate and DRR** session will discuss how local perspectives can be integrated more effectively in global and national policy making on disaster and climate risk. The session on **grassroots and indigenous women** will look at ways to build upon women's skills and indigenous knowledge when developing DRR strategies. The **communicating risk** session will explore ways to use participatory video to directly engage communities in awareness raising and risk assessment. The **upscaling grassroots efforts** session will discuss issues of scale and sustainability of civil society DRR initiatives. The **youth** session will look at different ways to engage young people in the DRR debate. The **risk financing** session will discuss the role of Public Private Partnerships to bring together different sets of stakeholders to address resource and economic gaps affecting risk reduction decision-making. The **urban risk charrette**, finally, will include field visits to informal settlements in Panama City and discussions with at-risk communities.

Giving local people a voice in the global DRR processes, however, needs to go beyond inviting grassroots representatives to global meetings or developing good practice CBDRM case studies. For the current DRR system to make a real difference on the ground, a stronger representation of civil society representatives in key decision making bodies, an important shift in the current resource flows and significant investments in DRR capacity building at the local level will be required.