A G20 Interfaith Policy Brief
POLICY AREA: Planet

Religious Dimensions of Reducing Risk, Strengthening Resilience, and Responding to Disasters

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Abstract

Increased extreme weather disasters are an expected long-term effect of climate change. Already, changes occurring globally have increased the intensity and duration of heat waves, drought incidents, flooding frequency and severity, and the power of storms. *The Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015-2030* (Sendai Framework) adopted by UN member States in 2015 offers a framework for reducing disaster risk and losses. Action to reduce disaster risk and increase resiliency as outlined in this Framework, and by experts in the field, is an integral part of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

As local civil society actors in some of the world's most vulnerable areas, religious and faith-inspired organizations are consistently at the forefront of attending to the physical and spiritual needs of communities affected by disasters. At transnational levels many religious actors are leading advocates for action to address both response and mitigation.

This brief calls upon G20 Leaders to promote robust partnerships across disciplines and sectors to mitigate the hazards of climate change, and specifically to reduce risk, build long-term resilience, and limit future costs of increasingly severe disasters. A specific focus on religious roles in assessing, communicating, and meeting local needs can increase the reach and impact of government and development planning, policies, and programs for disaster risk reduction (DRR).

The Challenge

Various forms of disaster are increasing in severity, with large costs to life, natural environments, businesses, and nations.

Between 1998 and 2017 climate-related disasters killed 1.3 million people and an additional 4.4 billion were injured, displaced, or required emergency assistance.[1] Over the same period, countries affected by disasters experienced direct losses valued at US$2,908 billion. Climate-related disasters comprised 77 per cent of the total reported losses.[2] Large coastal cities could face combined annual losses of US$1 trillion from severe floods and storms by mid-century.[3] Better mitigation and preparedness strategies can help prevent

[1] https://www.unisdr.org/we/inform/publications/61119.
[2] Ibid.
[3] http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/762871468148506173/pdf/826480WP0v10Bu0130Box379862000OUO090.pdf.

natural hazards and other risks from becoming costly disasters that destroy communities and require years or decades for them to achieve full economic recovery. Climate change and environmental degradation combined with poverty and poorly planned development drive the increasing magnitude of disasters and their effects on health, livelihood, and inequality in every country.

Disasters pose a particularly severe risk to those who lack the resources to prepare or respond.

Low- and middle-income countries bear the greatest burden in terms of mortality and yearly average economic loss relative to GDP. Future disasters represent an existential threat to many small island developing countries, particularly given rising sea levels predicted as a result of global warming within the next century. If current trends continue, there could be as many as 325 million people trapped in poverty and vulnerable to weather-related events in sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia within the next decade.[4] Planning and risk-informed investment needs to be translated into action. Mobilizing or diverting funds for recovery and reconstruction post-disaster should not overshadow the need for greater understanding and investment in reducing vulnerabilities related to risk reduction, but preparedness and rapid, effective response are nonetheless essential and can reduce loss and suffering.

Examples of costly devastation caused by disasters highlight the need for systemic action at global and local levels.

Hazards identified by the *2019 Global Assessment Report on Disaster Risk Reduction* (GAR) include earthquakes, tsunamis, landslides, flooding, wildfires, technological and biological risks, and environmental risks including climate change and air pollution. Many of these risks are linked. Increasing global temperatures lead to wildfires, which threaten local populations and the biodiversity of affected areas. Tree cover loss means the loss of safe, natural capture and storage of GHG emissions, exacerbating the rate of global warming. In 2018, fires burned 766,439 ha in California alone, causing more than US$3.5 billion in damages.[5] Higher temperatures are also correlated with prolonged droughts. In 2010-2011 a drought in the Horn of Africa caused up to a quarter million deaths, and left over 13 million people dependent on humanitarian aid.[6] In 2013-2015 droughts affected eastern Brazil and the Midwestern regions of the United States. Reported losses were US$5billion and US$3.6 billion respectively, primarily reflecting direct agricultural damage.[7]

A recent example of the costly impact of disasters is Cyclone Idai, the strongest cyclone on record in the Southern Hemisphere.[8] Idai made landfall in March 2019 and caused severe flooding in Mozambique, Malawi, and Zimbabwe. Immediate impacts include the

[4] http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/762871468148506173/pdf/826480WP0v10Bu0130Box379862000OUO090.pdf.
[5] https://gar.unisdr.org/sites/default/files/reports/2019-05/full_gar_report.pdf.
[6] Ibid.
[7] Ibid.
[8] https://www.worldvision.org/disaster-relief-news-stories/2019-cyclone-idai-facts.

deaths of more than 840 people, 3 million people (including 1.5 million children) affected, nearly one million acres of crops damaged, and an estimated US$1billion in infrastructure damages.[9] In addition to immediate assistance for those who have lost their homes or been displaced, long-term impacts such as food insecurity and the spread of disease should be central to disaster response efforts. Developing more robust long-term infrastructure is needed, particularly in coastal hubs with widespread poverty. Global action is needed to achieve the vision of the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda, and DRR is central to these Goals. Risk mitigation and resilience programs should consult and work closely with local actors in planning and implementation.

Unexpected disasters test the moral fiber of communities, including core premises of faith.

Disasters (and the disruption and destruction of their aftermaths) challenge world-views. In addition to physical re-building, individuals and communities face the difficult task of reconstructing meaning and purpose. Religion and faith influence vulnerability and resilience, and how people perceive disaster risk, respond to disaster, and recover from their impacts. These mobilizations and response are widespread and complex but poorly mapped. Religious communities and organizations raise and confront moral challenges, and are often at the frontlines of providing disaster relief. Consistent, reliable information flows are needed between governments and religious/faith groups that respond to disasters globally and very locally.

A wide range of institutions and programs whose inspiration and/or organizational links are religious have disaster response as a primary mission or respond to unexpected crises out of compassion.

Religious networks are both global, with the ability to mass mobilize resources and aid in the wake of a disaster, and deeply embedded in local communities. Far-reaching religious networks and large faith-inspired organizations have substantial capacities to mobilize aid, services, and volunteers. When disasters occur, religious infrastructure is often used to shelter those who have been displaced. As examples, on the night of March 15th, as the sea level in Beira, Mozambique, rose by 4 meters due to Cyclone Idai and destroyed 90 per cent of the town, The Community of Sant'Egidio provided refuge to 400 people in their health center and started handing out life-saving drugs the following morning. They are now engaged, alongside WHO, UNICEF and the Mozambican Ministry of Health in a vaccination campaign to prevent the spread of cholera.[10] Following Hurricane Katrina in the United States, the CRCC found that over 500,000 volunteers from faith-based organizations were mobilized to rebuild or repair destroyed homes.[11] In 2017 alone, World Vision served over 13.8 million disaster survivors,[12] Islamic Relief provided emergency aid to over 3 million affected by natural disasters,[13] and the Adventist Development and Relief Agency (ADRA) assisted over 1.3 million with emergency preparedness and

[9] Ibid.; https://www.cfr.org/article/cyclone-idai-reveals-africas-vulnerabilities.
[10] https://www.santegidio.org/pageID/34064/langID/en/Cyclone-Idai--Mozambique--Malawi.html.
[11] https://psmag.com/news/the-complicated-role-churches-play-in-disaster-relief.
[12] https://www.worldvision.org/our-work.
[13] https://www.islamic-relief.org/annual-reports/.

response.[14] These organizations are examples (among thousands) of faith-inspired organizations, both global and local, that are veterans in mobilizing their networks for disaster response.

Pathways Forward

Devise, implement, and improve national and local DRR strategies in G20 countries.

The Sendai Framework serves as a global guide, outlining the priorities for prevention and mitigation of natural and man-made hazards and risks. Target (e), "substantially increase the number of countries with national and local disaster risk reduction strategies by 2020," is a pressing task and serves as the foundation for six global targets to be achieved by 2030.[15]

G20 governments can take immediate action to establish or improve national platforms for DRR, and to ensure that those platforms are effectively building resilient communities that leave no one behind. Comprehensive, integrated, and inclusive national DRR strategies require engagement and partnership at every level of society, particularly with those disproportionately vulnerable to disasters. Religious networks can provide a crucial link to these communities and individuals and deserve explicit attention.

To reduce costly destruction in the wake of disasters, G20 governments can lead on investing in strategies and greater resiliency where risks are highest globally. The greatest vulnerabilities are often where sufficient financial, technical, and institutional implementation capacities are lacking. Early warning systems and pilot climate and disaster resiliency measures have proven in many countries to be cost effective, save human lives, and protect public and private investments.[16] These measures ensure effective recovery and rehabilitation post-disaster, and simultaneously drive innovation, growth and job creation in areas where such development is critical.

A robust response to disaster risk requires addressing root causes such as climate change, poor development action, and governance, through a sharp focus on meeting the goals of the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda and commitments of the Paris Agreement. Bold actions are needed in the next decade to make progress on the interrelated challenges of DRR, Sustainable Development, and environmental degradation.

Better knowledge of the faith disaster response network and deliberate efforts to strengthen partnerships with religious actors should be part of disaster response strategies and action. Pertinent faith actors bring knowledge, links to vast communities, and often robust response capacity; notable examples are the large faith-inspired organizations like Caritas, Tzu Chi, Islamic Relief, ADRA, LDS Charities, and World Vision. Organizations operate at global, regional, national, and local levels. Religious

[14] https://adra.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/ADRA-2017-Annual-Report.pdf.
[15] https://www.unisdr.org/files/43291_sendaiframeworkfordrren.pdf.
[16] http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/762871468148506173/pdf/826480WP0v10Bu0130Box37986200OUO090.pdf.

networks are deeply embedded locally, often with access to those living in remote or particularly vulnerable situations. With local knowledge key in identifying vulnerabilities and risks, religious actors are positioned to communicate to communities both hope and determination, and to monitor, gather, and share the knowledge necessary to plan for resilience. This opportunity to reach at-risk communities and involve them in DRR activities and decision-making is vital for ensuring relevant measures are included in national strategies. **Establishing and implementing a robust framework for coordination and sharing of best practices with religious networks, organizations, and actors would increase the efficacy of DRR strategies and mitigate impending risks and development losses.**

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