



G20 Interfaith Forum 2021

Policy Brief: Faith Action to Reduce Risk, Strengthen Resilience, and Respond to Disasters (August 16, 2021)

Highlights

Rising numbers and severity of extreme weather disasters are an expected long-term effect of climate change. Changes already perceptible in different world regions include intensity and duration of heat waves, more frequent and more severe 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. Actions aimed to prevent, protect, and reduce disaster risk and increase resiliency outlined in this Framework, and by experts in the field, are 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 as well as responders.

This brief urges G20 Leaders to promote more 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. More specific focus on religious roles in assessing, communicating, and meeting local needs can increase the reach and impact of planning, policies, and programs for disaster risk reduction (DRR).

Recommendations

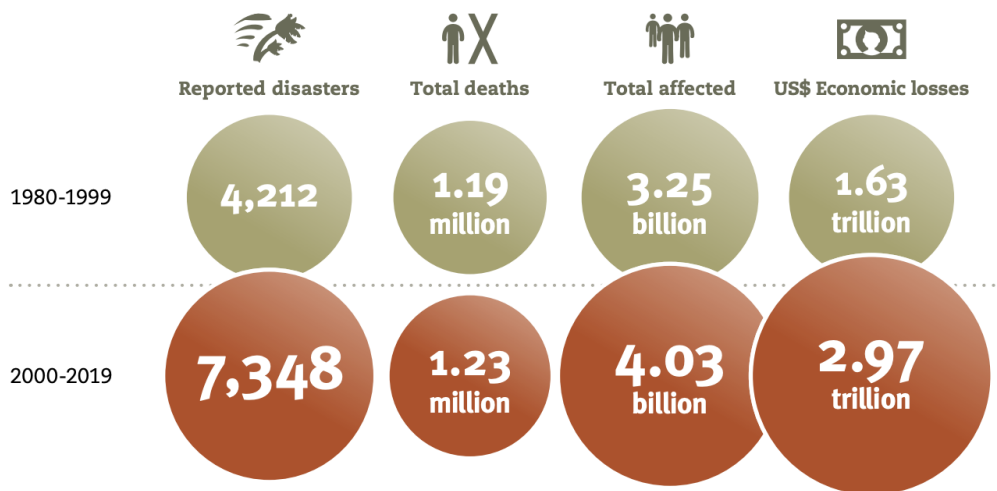
- Devise and improve national and local DRR strategies in G20 countries in partnership with local faith communities.
- Support such strategies in non-G20 countries and especially the V-20 nations (Vulnerable)
- Develop and assure consistent, well prepared and tuned, and reliable information flows between governments and religious/faith groups whose focus is response to disasters both globally and very locally.
- Establish and implement robust frameworks for coordination and sharing of best practices with religious networks, organizations, and actors to increase the efficacy of DRR strategies and mitigate impending risks and development losses.

The Challenge

Various forms of disaster have large costs to human life, natural environments, businesses, and nations.

The recent Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) Report, *Climate Change 2021: the Physical Science Basis*, confirmed that changes observed in the climate are unprecedented in thousands, hundreds of thousands, or millions of years, and drew clear links between global warming and specific severe weather events.¹ Climate change and environmental degradation combined with conditions of poverty and poorly planned development investments drive the increasing magnitude of disasters and their effects on health, livelihood, and inequality in every country.

In the period 2000 to 2019, 7,348 major disaster events were recorded, claiming an estimated 1.23 million lives, affecting 4.2 billion people, and resulting in approximately US\$2.97 trillion in global economic losses. This is a sharp increase over the previous twenty years. Between 1980 and 1999, 4,212 disasters were linked to natural hazards worldwide, claiming approximately 1.19 million lives, affecting 3.25 billion people, and resulting in approximately US\$1.63 trillion in economic losses.²



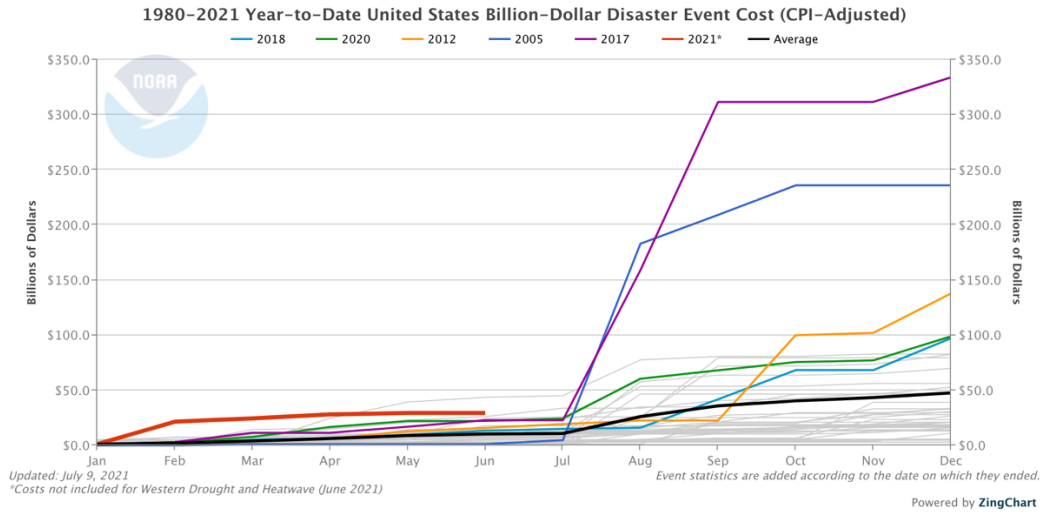
Taken from: UNDRR. "Human cost of disasters." UNDRR report (2019). <https://www.undrr.org/sites/default/files/inline-files/Human%20Cost%20of%20Disasters%202000-2019%20FINAL.pdf>

In the United States alone, there have been 298 weather and climate disasters since 1980 where overall damages/costs reached or exceeded \$1 billion. The total cost of these events exceeds \$1.975 trillion with significant long-term economic effects on the areas impacted.³

¹ <https://www.ipcc.ch/report/sixth-assessment-report-working-group-i/>

² <https://www.undrr.org/publication/human-cost-disasters-2000-2019>

³ <https://www.ncdc.noaa.gov/billions/>



Taken from: NOAA National Centers for Environmental Information (NCEI) U.S. Billion-Dollar Weather and Climate Disasters (2021). <https://www.ncdc.noaa.gov/billions/>

Better mitigation and preparedness strategies can help prevent natural hazards and other risks from becoming costly disasters that destroy communities and require years or decades for them to achieve full economic recovery. The sharp increase in loss of life and economic cost between the periods 1980-1999 and 2000-2019 is primarily driven by a rise in climate-related disasters, including extreme weather events such as major floods and storms.⁴

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. For example, 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 hectares in California alone, causing more than US\$3.5 billion in damages.⁵ In the summer of 2021, wildfires have already burned more than 917,000 acres across California this year, a 233% increase over the same period last year, which went on to become the state's worst wildfire year on record.⁶ It is too soon to assess long-term damages. Meanwhile, more than 2,000 people on the Greek island of Evia were forced to evacuate by boat over the weekend due to wildfires, which were triggered by the country's worst heat in 30 years, and Russia is fighting more than 190 forest fires in Siberia that have forced widespread evacuations.⁷ Overall, July 2021 was the world's worst July for wildfires since records began in 2003.⁸

⁴ <https://www.undrr.org/publication/human-cost-disasters-2000-2019>

⁵ https://gar.unisdr.org/sites/default/files/reports/2019-05/full_gar_report.pdf

⁶ <https://www.cnn.com/2021/08/10/weather/dixie-wildfire-tuesday/index.html>

⁷ <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2021/08/09/greece-wildfires-evia-residents-evacuate/>;
<https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2021/08/11/siberia-fires-russia-climate/>

⁸ Ibid.

Higher temperatures due to intensifying global warming are also correlated with severe heatwaves, prolonged droughts, and floods. 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. In 2013-2015 droughts affected eastern Brazil and the Midwestern regions of the United States. Reported losses were US\$5 billion and US\$3.6 billion respectively.⁹ In 2021, blistering heat waves have killed hundreds of people in the United States and Canada and floods have devastated Germany and China.¹⁰ The most affected country by extreme seasonal weather (in total number of people affected) is China. They have experienced an average of 20 floods per year, which affected a total of 900 million people in China between 2000 and 2019.¹¹ In 2020, rivers across the country reached historic levels, affecting 63 million people and causing at least US\$26 billion in economic losses.¹² In 2021, more than 300 people were killed by floods and mudslides.¹³

The costly impact of disasters is exemplified by the experience of Cyclone Idai, the strongest cyclone on record in the Southern Hemisphere.¹⁴ Idai made landfall in March 2019 causing severe flooding in Mozambique, Malawi, and Zimbabwe. More than 840 people died and 146,000 people were displaced; some 3 million people (including 1.5 million children) were affected, nearly one million acres of crops damaged, with an estimated US\$1 billion in infrastructure damages.¹⁵

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 increasingly frequent extreme sea level events predicted as a result of global warming within the next century.¹⁶ If current trends continue, as many as 325 million people may be trapped in poverty, vulnerable to weather-related events, in sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia within the next decade.¹⁷ More than 34 million people worldwide already face emergency levels of acute food insecurity, meaning that they are on the brink of starvation.¹⁸

Increasingly frequent and intense weather events caused by climate change are also a clear driver of forced migration, causing millions of people each year to confront uniquely

⁹ https://gar.unisdr.org/sites/default/files/reports/2019-05/full_gar_report.pdf.

¹⁰ <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/08/09/climate/climate-change-report-ipcc-un.html>

¹¹ <https://www.undrr.org/publication/human-cost-disasters-2000-2019>

¹² <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/08/21/world/asia/china-flooding-sichuan-chongqing.html>;

<https://www.theatlantic.com/photo/2020/08/photos-chinas-summer-of-floods/615661/>

¹³ <https://apnews.com/article/china-floods-d315e416eadd0c7e16a57e8b1c0ca7ae>

¹⁴ <https://www.worldvision.org/disaster-relief-news-stories/2019-cyclone-idai-facts>

¹⁵ <https://www.cfr.org/article/cyclone-idai-reveals-africas-vulnerabilities>;

<https://www.brookings.edu/research/the-climate-crisis-migration-and-refugees/>

¹⁶ <https://www.ipcc.ch/2021/08/09/ar6-wg1-20210809-pr/>

¹⁷ <http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/762871468148506173/pdf/826480WP0v10Bu0130Box379862000U090.pdf>

¹⁸ <https://news.un.org/en/story/2021/03/1088022> ; <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2021/apr/20/millions-at-risk-of-famine-without-urgent-help-governments-warned>

vulnerable and unstable living conditions.¹⁹ In 2017 alone, 68.5 million people were forcibly displaced; approximately one-third of these were displaced by flooding, forest fires, and storms.²⁰ The Institute for Economics and Peace (IEP), an Australian international think tank, predicts that at least [1.2 billion people](#) could be displaced by climate-related disasters by 2050.²¹ Many people who are already living as refugees or internally displaced persons (IDPs) are located in climate “hotspots” and lack the resources to adapt due to their already precarious living situation. Climate change acts as a threat multiplier – it exacerbates existing tensions and adds to the potential for future conflict and violence.²²

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.

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 disruptions and destruction in 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, specifically, how people perceive disaster risk, respond to disaster, and recover from their impacts. These mobilizations and responses are widespread and complex but poorly mapped. Religious communities and organizations raise and confront moral challenges. They are often at the frontlines of providing disaster relief – both tangible and intangible.

The COVID-19 pandemic highlights vividly how the broad global crisis intersects with the deeply personal. Google searches for “prayer” in the immediate period after the pandemic began rose to the highest levels ever recorded.²³ There are tangible links: a recently published study (conducted in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic) surveying 38 OECD member states found that any 1 percent increase in the number of residents with strong religious identities is correlated with reduction in mortality rates by about a third.²⁴

¹⁹ <https://www.unhcr.org/en-us/climate-change-and-disasters.html>

²⁰ <https://www.brookings.edu/research/the-climate-crisis-migration-and-refugees/>

²¹ <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2021/06/climate-refugees-the-world-s-forgotten-victims/>

²² <https://www.brookings.edu/research/the-climate-crisis-migration-and-refugees/>

²³ https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=3615587

²⁴ <https://www.jpost.com/international/will-god-rescue-israel-from-the-fourth-covid-19-wave-675857>

Because of numerous if complex interactions between crisis, response, and faith, religious actors often have valuable insights into community needs in preparation for and in the aftermath of disasters.

A wide range of faith-inspired institutions and programs have disaster response as a primary mission or respond to unexpected crises out of compassion.

Religious networks are both global, able to mobilize large and varied 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 often serves to shelter those who have been displaced. As examples, when the sea level in Beira, Mozambique, rose by 4 meters due to Cyclone Idai and destroyed 90% 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. An immediate vaccination campaign prevented the spread of cholera.²⁵ 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.²⁶ In 2017 alone, World Vision served over 13.8 million disaster survivors,²⁷ Islamic Relief provided emergency aid to over 3 million affected by natural disasters,²⁸ and the Adventist Development and Relief Agency (ADRA) assisted over 1.3 million with emergency preparedness and response.²⁹ Other faith-inspired organizations that mobilize in response to disaster include Catholic Charities, Caritas, Episcopal Relief & Development, LDS Charities, Lutheran Disaster Response, Mennonite Disaster Service, NECHAMA (Jewish Response to Disaster), Nazarene Compassionate Ministries, Presbyterian Disaster Assistance, United Sikhs, and Tzu Chi. 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 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 2030.³⁰

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

²⁵ <https://www.santegidio.org/pageID/34064/langID/en/Cyclone-Idai--Mozambique--Malawi.html>

²⁶ <https://psmag.com/news/the-complicated-role-churches-play-in-disaster-relief>.

²⁷ <https://www.worldvision.org/our-work>

²⁸ <https://www.islamic-relief.org/annual-reports/>

²⁹ <https://adra.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/ADRA-2017-Annual-Report.pdf>

³⁰ https://www.unisdr.org/files/43291_sendaiframeworkfordrren.pdf

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.³¹ 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/exceeding the goals of the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda and commitments of the Paris Agreement. There is increasing focus on cross-cutting partnerships but far more is needed.

Bold actions are needed in the next decade to progress on the interrelated challenges of DRR, Sustainable Development, and environmental degradation. Faith leaders use their influence and “moral voice” to put pressure on world leaders, notably through bodies including the Interfaith Summit on Climate Change and G20 Interfaith Forum. Pope Francis consistently supports the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction, the Paris Agreement, and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development: they are “all profoundly interrelated and significant for the future of humanity.”³² In the United States, faith actors called on President Biden to step-up his commitments when he re-entered the Paris Agreement in January 2021.³³ Pressure also came from both secular environmental advocates (often working in partnership with faith-inspired environmental advocacy groups) and a group of 300 corporations that signed an open letter calling on the administration to cut emissions in half by 2030 — double the goal set by President Obama when the Paris Agreement was negotiated in 2015.³⁴ In April 2021, the Biden administration announced a target of a 50-52 percent reduction from 2005 levels in economy-wide net greenhouse gas pollution by 2030.

Better knowledge of faith disaster response networks and deliberate efforts to strengthen partnerships with religious actors should be part of disaster response strategies and action.

Large faith-inspired organizations bring knowledge, links to vast communities, and robust response capacity to DRR efforts. Faith-inspired organizations operate at global, regional, national, and local levels. Religious 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

³¹ <http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/762871468148506173/pdf/826480WP0v10Bu0130Box37986200OU090.pdf>

³² <https://www.undrr.org/news/vatican-supports-sendai-framework-implementation>

³³ <https://sojo.net/articles/rejoining-climate-agreement-first-step-repentance-say-faith-leaders>

³⁴ <https://www.npr.org/2021/04/13/986776264/hundreds-of-companies-call-for-u-s-to-slash-carbon-emissions>

communities both hope and determination, and to monitor, gather, and share the knowledge necessary to plan for resilience. Religious institutions (e.g. churches, temples, and mosques) can also be important centers of coordination and communication, and places of refuge. Channeling aid and preparatory activities through religious organizations can optimize dissemination, and help ensure that relevant information is translated appropriately for each group. Opportunities 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. Religious actors can be strategic partners with emergency managers and public health emergency agencies in building and sustaining disaster resilient communities. This partnership should encompass all phases of the disaster lifecycle: mitigation, preparedness and planning, as well as short-term response and long-term recovery.

Establishing and implementing robust frameworks 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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