

RELIEF WORK

Components of a disaster...

UNSAFE CONDITIONS

- Fragile physical environment
 - dangerous locations
 - dangerous buildings and infrastructure
 - deforestation upriver
- Fragile local economy
 - livelihoods at risk
 - low income levels

DISASTER

NATURAL EVENT

- earthquake
- high wind
- flooding
- volcanic eruption
- landslide
- drought

NATURAL EVENTS such as earthquakes and floods are part of God's creative work. For example, earthquakes are natural events that help to form the landscape. Hurricanes move water from warm seas to fall as rain over land. Floods provide irrigation and fertilise the land by leaving silt. Natural events should not be seen as always negative – they are part of God's creation.

Natural events only become potential hazards when they threaten people or property. An earthquake will cause little damage if it takes place in an empty desert. It may also cause little damage if it takes place in a city like San Francisco, where people can afford to be well protected. A natural event only causes serious damage when it affects an area where the people are at risk and poorly protected. Disasters occur when these two factors are brought together...

- people living in unsafe conditions
- a natural hazard such as a flood, hurricane or earthquake.

Minimising disaster...

SAFER CONDITIONS

- Protected environment
 - safe locations for buildings
 - strong, safe buildings
 - reforestation
- Strong local economy
 - increase low incomes

CONTROLLED SITUATION

- no loss of life
- no casualties
- restricted damage

REDUCED RISKS

- early warning systems
- wind-breaks to protect housing
- flood control
- irrigation

WHAT MAKES A DISASTER?

by Ian Davis



THE RECOVERY PROCESS

Relief

Once a disaster has taken place, the first concern is effective relief – helping all those affected to recover from the immediate effects of the disaster. This is known as *relief work* and includes providing food, clothing, shelter and medical care to the victims. Relief work takes place immediately after the disaster – usually for several weeks. With disasters such as droughts, it may last several months or even years.

Restoration

This phase involves helping to restore the basic services which the people need so that they can return to the pattern of life which they had before the disaster. For example: providing seeds for farmers or helping businesses to restart.

Rebuilding

This is linked to restoration. It involves the rebuilding of homes and businesses. Safety is important in the design of stronger buildings, able to withstand future disasters.

THE PROTECTION PROCESS

IT IS NOT SIMPLY ENOUGH to respond to the immediate disaster. Attention needs to be given to preparing for any future disasters. This process is known as *protection* – enabling the community to protect itself. All protection measures need to be available to those most at risk – the poorest in the community.

Risk reduction

This phase follows on from rebuilding. It describes things which will help to reduce the risks of damage from similar events in the future. For example, this phase could include the building of walls to prevent flooding or including safety features into houses to strengthen them against collapse during future earthquakes. It could include building grain stores to store surplus food during good years. Many actions in development programmes could also be thought of as risk reduction.

Some practical measures...

Tropical storm

- plant wind-breaks of trees and bushes
- tie roofs down with ropes and heavy weights
- build strong buildings

Floods

- water storage measures
- overflow channels
- sandbags in door
- build farm stores on high ground
- don't put electric sockets at ground level
- plan escape route through roof
- plant flood-tolerant crops eg: sorghum

Earthquake

- strengthen all new buildings – tie roofs, walls and foundations together with metal or timber bars
- build strong churches – people often gather in churches for protection – also schools
- build square buildings

Drought

- irrigation
- soil erosion measures
- water-harvesting measures
- grain stores

CASE STUDY

In the Rimac Valley, Peru, a group known as PIEVAR has encouraged community groups to build river defences and to prevent deforestation, overgrazing and soil erosion in the upper valleys of rivers. People are now more effectively protected from mudslides (*huacos*) and flooding – which previously caused much damage and loss of life.

Preparedness

There is a close link between risk reduction and *preparedness*. Risk reduction involves helping to reduce the risks faced by the community. Preparedness helps the community to be able to cope better should another difficult situation develop. Preparedness includes planning measures such as making an evacuation plan for a community living near a possible source of flooding. It could include leadership training or community participation in planting windbreaks.

There is often a tendency for Christian groups to offer help just at the relief phase. However, the disaster cycle shows that the various phases are linked together and are all important in responding to a disaster. Unfortunately, many groups do not enter the disaster cycle until the disaster has occurred. If these groups had started instead at the risk reduction phase, they could have been working together to reduce the harmful effects of a disaster even before it happened. In a similar way, it is better to use health education to prevent ill health from developing, instead of waiting until serious illness develops. Prevention is better than cure.



This article is adapted from material in the manual *Christian Perspectives on Disaster Management*. Ian Davis is the Managing Director of the Oxford Centre for Disaster Studies – PO Box 137, Oxford, UK – with 20 years' experience in disaster management, disaster shelter and in training and consultancy work.