



## **Julia Vadala Taft**

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Julia Vadala Taft is President and Chief Executive Officer of InterAction, the American Council for Voluntary International Action. InterAction is a membership association of US private voluntary organizations engaged in international humanitarian efforts including relief, development, refugee assistance, environment, population, public policy and global education.

Ms. Taft has served as the Director of the Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance, US Agency for International Development. She has also served as Director of Refugee Programmes and Acting US Refugee Coordinator at the Department of State; and Deputy Assistant Secretary of Health, Education and Welfare.

In addition, she has been a consultant on refugee and migration affairs and humanitarian aid to: the Ford Foundation, the World Bank, and various US agencies, both private and governmental.

Ms. Taft has received the World Hunger Award, the AID Distinguished Service Award. One of the Top Ten Men and Women in Federal Service, the USSR Supreme Soviet Award for Personal Courage in Armenia; and a White House Fellowship.

# The Role of Non governmental Organizations in Disaster Reduction

*How can we reduce the vulnerability of populations at risk? As the primary implementors of disaster relief, NGOs have an important role to play. Better information exchange between local NGOs and government planners, and more grassroots training are keys to integrating relief and development.*

I would like to thank Dr. Elo of IDNDR and Dr. Bassani of the World Health Organization for inviting me to this important discussion on the roles that the private sector, the public sector and private voluntary organizations can play in preventing and preparing for natural disasters.

The emphasis on prevention and mitigation is not only urgently needed, but also reinforces the notion that mankind is not at the complete mercy of natural phenomena. It reinforces the fact that, while natural hazards are an inevitable part of life on our globe, disasters are not. Disasters occur when hazards interact with vulnerable populations.

Helping reduce the vulnerability of populations at risk is the theme of this conference. It requires the collective efforts of public and private sectors at the local, national and international levels. As the draft strategy document emphasizes, it is the poor and socially disadvantaged who are most at risk. The NGOs which serve and frequently comprise this vulnerable group are essential intermediaries in disaster mitigation initiatives

From 1986 to 1989, I served as the Director of the Office of U.S. Foreign Disaster Assistance (OFDA). During my tenure we handled 253 reported disasters — about two a week. They included earthquakes, typhoons, famines, civil unrest, volcanoes, toxic chemical spills, floods, locusts, even a plague of rats

## ■ NGOs implement disaster relief

Throughout my tenure, I was consistently impressed by the resiliency and excellent efforts of locally affected populations and NGOs to spontaneously organize and manage their own relief efforts.

Today, I serve as president of InterAction, the largest coalition of US-based private voluntary relief and development agencies working internationally. I have the privilege of representing many of the same NGOs that I worked with at OFDA in coordinating response efforts to disasters worldwide

My experience has taught me one major lesson: non-governmental organizations are the primary implementors of disaster relief programmes. If we are to succeed in creating new techniques to prevent and mitigate natural disasters, the NGOs must be included in all phases of the planning and implementation process, not only at the community level but

at national levels as well. They bring culturally sensitive insight to the local hazards and traditional coping mechanisms, and have the ability to communicate hazard information and mitigation techniques to local populations.

As many of you well know, managing the impact of natural disasters is not easy. It is especially difficult today when there are so many man-made disasters with which to contend.

While we are not here to discuss the proper humanitarian response to civil strife and disorder, we cannot overlook the tremendous burden these conflicts have placed on the management of natural disasters.

Let's face it. Civil strife has become the black hole of humanitarian relief. It consumes billions of dollars for peacekeeping purposes that otherwise might go to humanitarian aid. In Somalia, for example, it is estimated that donors spent US\$10 on military peacekeeping for every dollar spent on relief last year.

I do not have the magic bullet to resolve all of the issues which are involved in responding to complex civil emergencies, but I do know that disasters caused by civil strife will continue to erode resources available for other humanitarian and development aid.

For all of us, the bottom line is quite clear: we must make disaster response more cost-effective by focusing key attention on disaster prevention and mitigation.

We need to recognize that among the worst effects of a natural disaster is that it can slow down — and sometimes even erase — significant progress in development. That is why it is so

important for governmental and NGO development practitioners to join with relief professionals in concentrating on preventing and mitigating disasters.

We must also develop better ways to take advantage of the tools we already have on the shelf — tools such as famine early warning systems, crop protection, earthquake-proof construction, storm-resistant shelters — and apply them before disasters take place.

Prevention is the key, but there can be no successful prevention programmes unless we face up to

the challenge of learning to better integrate relief and development. And NGOs are a key link in this process.

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#### ■ Early warning systems are not enough

Much has been said during this conference about early warning systems. Early warning systems can save lives when the forecast is well in advance and when it is part of a politically responsive mechanism that triggers coordinated action at the national, regional and grass roots levels. More often than not, however, the trigger is broken. The warnings go unheeded.

The drought that affected several million people in the late 1980s in the Sahel is a good example. The famine early warning system predicted a critical shortage of maize and durra due to drought, but there was little response on the various national levels. Relief and development agencies were paralyzed because of government inaction. As a result, many died before food assistance could arrive.

***We are often not aware of available scientific information. Sometimes grassroots agencies are so involved in management that they don't take time to understand reports that warn of impending disasters. And sometimes reports are written in such arcane language that only a scientist could understand the severity of the warning.***

Information is a key issue, not only for the media but also for the NGOs. It has been my experience that the major stakeholders —including NGOs — often are not even aware of the scientific and technological expertise available to them.

Sometimes grassroots agencies are so involved in managing programmes that they don't take the time necessary to read and understand the reports that are warning them of impending disasters. And sometimes the reports are written in such arcane language that only a scientist could understand the severity of the warning involved.

### ■ Information exchange is the key

While high-tech early warning systems can be extremely useful, they are not necessarily the most critical piece in mitigating disasters. Common sense dictates that one plans for the next disaster based on the experience with the last one, and that one includes this as part of an overall development strategy. This is basic, but all too often it does not take place. That information is often available at the grassroots, and NGOs can be a valuable source of communicating that experience on behalf of local communities to the national level disaster planning authorities.

A current example illustrates the importance of information exchange. In Ethiopia, during the past year two major rains have failed. Another food deficit crisis looms.

Surveys of the country by NGOs and government officials have resulted in valid estimates of crop shortages. Already, major donors are working with Ethiopian leaders and NGOs to develop contingency plans to ensure appropriate pre-positioning of food and seed.

The truth is that early, targeted responses to deteriorating situations are invariably more cost-effective and administratively manageable than massive, externally dominated operations.

NGOs, bilateral donors, international donors and affected governments must strive to work together to integrate existing early warning systems, disaster response capacities and development planning.

### ■ Improve training for better local response

Finally, a word about training and the role of NGOs. Training is critically important. In areas with predictable vulnerabilities, whether it's Los Angeles or New Delhi, donors and government agencies must emphasize the training of local professionals. No matter where a disaster takes place, it all ends up at the local level: do people know the hazards? Do they have exit routes? Do they have the needed supplies? Are they prepared? In many countries around the world, NGOs, in cooperation with local officials, are the organizations that communicate this information best to the people.

For NGOs to operate effectively, however, they must have access to the best available training. NGOs can play a critical role in getting information off the computer screens of the scientists and into the daily lives of the people most affected by disasters. But they have to keep up with the technology and the lessons learned of past disasters. The most effective response to a natural disaster — the response that results in the

most lives saved — comes from the people themselves who have been well prepared to respond. If properly trained, they can do the job better than anyone. I urge a proactive role on the part of higher education institutions engaged in prevention and mitigation research to work closely with the NGO network in each

country. Research institutions can communicate important information on a real-time basis and serve as a continuing resource to local and national planners.

### ■ Principles for emergency management

In summing up, I would like to offer three basic principles that should influence everything we do and some recommendations on how we can best adhere to these principles.

**First**, whenever emergency relief activities overshadow our efforts in development, we trade short-term band-aids for longer term solutions.

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