

# *A reconceptualization of the linkages between disasters and development*

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## INTRODUCTION

The victims of disasters in the Third World are also, too often, victims of relief, rehabilitation, reconstruction and development programs. These programs that purport to address the economic and social conditions that leave people vulnerable to famine, earthquakes, floods, or human-caused disasters seldom succeed entirely. Even as a development project reduces vulnerability in one area for some segment of a population, it may increase it in others. Are people, then, locked into a cycle of vulnerability? Is it possible to restructure both disaster emergency aid and long term development aid so that vulnerability is genuinely reduced? In this paper, we shall explore the relationships between disasters and development and propose a reconceptualization of these relationships which may prove useful in realizing the opportunities that exist for addressing vulnerability. We shall also discuss the implications of this new approach for the policies and programs of the international relief and development agencies.

## NEW DEFINITIONS

Those who work in emergency disaster relief in the Third World have, for the most part, viewed disasters as "interruptions" of development. They have calculated that the provision of material and organizational resources to disaster victims represents a "diversion" of these resources from the real work of basic development. Therefore, they have seen their task as getting things back to normal just as soon as possible so that effort can again be focused on basic and long term development. They have responded with short term and immediate material and technical aid, often provided through special arrangements that lie outside ongoing social and political organizations.

Increasingly, however, journalists and observers who cover disasters in the Third World are asking questions about "root causes" of poverty and vulnerability. Aid and relief agency personnel point to complex economic and political forces that precede any disaster and call for

attention to those conditions that, if altered, could prevent disasters. Many feel that disasters simply do not have to happen.

Here one must distinguish between crisis events (whether natural or political) and disasters. Natural crisis events occur indiscriminately though predictably more frequently in certain areas than in others. Political crisis events often arise from manipulation by certain interest groups. Nevertheless, in both situations not all crises become disasters and all people in crisis areas do not suffer equally. The disastrous impact of crises falls disproportionately on the poor and vulnerable. An UNDRO study in 1976 estimated that 95% of disaster-related deaths occur among the 66% of the world's population that lives in the developing countries. The Earthscan Briefing Document tells us that between the 1960's and the 1970's, while the number of natural disasters increased by 50%, the number of deaths from these disasters increased by 600%! Similarly, while the average annual death toll from natural disasters in Japan is 63, in Peru it is 2,900. A gas explosion in Miami, Florida in the summer of 1984 killed no one; a similar explosion a month later in Mexico City became a disaster with terrible loss of life and property. It is true that some years bring greater crises than others and some areas of the world experience crises with greater frequency than others. However, even with differences in impact that arise from these variations, the incidence of suffering from crises has been documented as higher among the poorer societies and among the poorer within societies.

At the Institute, discussed throughout this issue, on Education for Development in the Context of Disasters, a group of scholars and practitioners involved in disaster response efforts developed a set of definitions to point up the relationships between disasters and development. The group accepted the notion, put forth by Frederick Krimgold, Frederick Cuny and others (1976), that crises become disasters only when they outstrip the capacity of a society to cope with them. Given the relationships contained in this notion between suffering and coping ability, the Institute participants defined disasters and development by the following corollaries:

- Disasters are indicators of the failure of development.
- Development is the process of reducing vulnerability to disasters.

A society or group that faces a crisis but is able to cope with it so that long-term loss is minimal may be said to have experienced development. Where a crisis becomes a disaster because a group does not have the capacity to cope, a basic failure of development is indicated.

## THREE AREAS OF VULNERABILITY

Individuals and societies may be vulnerable in three areas: the material, the organizational and the socio-psychological. Reduced vulnerability in these areas, or in the mix of these three together, supports the ability to cope with crises so that they do not become disasters.