

# SECTION 1: OVERVIEW OF DISASTERS

## **What is a disaster?**

In this workbook, a disaster will be defined as a serious disruption of the functioning of a society, causing widespread human, material or environmental losses which exceed the ability of the affected society to cope using only its own resources (WHO, 1972).

The typical result is significant disruption of normal living patterns, economic activity and communication systems. Extraordinary needs for shelter, food, clothing, medical assistance and other essential care services may follow.

## **What is a mass casualty incident?**

A mass casualty incident is any incident where the resulting number of casualties exceed the resources of the emergency services to manage them and hence the actual number of persons affected will vary from situation to situation. A mass casualty incident may also qualify as a disaster and produce a scene of carnage so devastating that no description can adequately convey what it was like to have witnessed it. Most persons exposed to such a mass casualty incident experience some psychological dysfunction and a high percentage of such persons need help in coping.

## **What are the characteristics of disasters?**

1. Type of event
2. Familiarity of population with the hazard
3. Predictability of event
4. Avoidability of hazards
5. Suddenness of onset
6. Intensity of the impact
7. Severity of the consequences
8. Duration
9. Course
10. Threat of recurrence

## What are the phases of a disaster?

PRE-IMPACT PHASE	CONSOLIDATION PHASE:	The period during which the disaster is known to be threatening.
	WARNING PHASE:	The period when a disaster is imminent and warnings have been announced.
IMPACT PHASE		
The period during which the disaster event occurs.		
POST-DISASTER	CONSOLIDATION PHASE:	The period immediately following a disaster when individuals are taking stock of the situation.
	REBUILDING PHASE:	The period during which people rebuild their lives and try to bring something positive out of the ruins.

*The duration of each of these phases is dependent on the type of disaster, its severity, the pre-disaster standard of socioeconomic development and level of preparedness, the availability of resources to rebuild and the stress tolerance of those affected.*

What are some of the possible consequences of disasters?

<b>Morbidity &amp; Mortality</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Injury</li> <li>• Suffering</li> <li>• Disease</li> <li>• Starvation</li> <li>• Death</li> </ul>
<b>2 Material Losses</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Damage</li> <li>• Destruction</li> <li>• Pollution</li> <li>• Economic loss</li> <li>• Resource depletion</li> </ul>
<b>3 Social Disruption</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Disruption of normal activities</li> <li>• Homelessness</li> <li>• Unemployment</li> <li>• Antisocial behavior</li> <li>• Civil unrest</li> </ul>
<b>4 Psychological Distress</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Helplessness</li> <li>• Hopelessness</li> <li>• Grief</li> <li>• Guilt</li> <li>• Stress</li> </ul>

## **What factors determine the stressfulness of a disaster?**

### ***Features of the disaster:***

- Familiarity with the event,
- Avoidability of the event,
- Suddenness of its onset,
- Intensity of its impact,
- Course and duration of the event,
- Degree to which it could be controlled.

### ***Community or societal factors:***

- The pre-existing level of resources,
- The community's level of preparedness,
- The community's past experiences with such an event,
- Extent and nature of the damage done,
- Consequent social and/or political unrest,
- Availability of resources to rebuild.

### ***Characteristics of the individual involved:***

- Previous experiences with similar events,
- Potential and actual losses,
- Physical or psychological closeness with the event,
- Level of background stress in one's life,
- Effectiveness of one's coping mechanisms,
- Nature and extent of available social support.

## The realities of disasters

Although almost every segment of a population will be touched by a disaster, the poor (especially women, children and the elderly) are much more vulnerable to its devastating consequences.

Poverty usually implies sub-standard housing in areas most naturally prone to catastrophes, overcrowding, poor levels of sanitation, a shortage of basic medical services, inadequate levels of preparedness and a lack of resources with which to rebuild.

The key to preventing epidemics after a disaster is to improve sanitary conditions and educate the public.

When healthy persons die in a disaster, their bodies can be left in the open for up to three days. Admittedly, this will lower the morale of survivors, cause odors and attract flies, but will not cause the transmission of disease. Hence, one needs to deal with the injured first and bury the dead after.

Even though isolated cases of antisocial behavior do occur, studies have consistently shown that disaster situations bring out the best in people.

The majority of persons affected by a disaster tend to respond spontaneously and generously to help each other.

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*Disasters have a way of accentuating social inequality.*

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*Epidemics and plagues are not inevitable after every disaster.*

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*Disasters do not invariably bring out the worst in human behavior.*

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*Disasters do not invariably result in food shortages.*

Each disaster has its own unique effects on food supply. For example, floods may destroy crops and food stores while earthquakes hamper the distribution of such supplies.

Relief agencies are now more cognizant of the fact that excessive food donations can result in a dependence syndrome. Consequently, they are more careful to also invest in long-term solutions to food-shortages by donating agricultural supplies such as seeds and tools to ensure a new crop and to help rebuild the local economy.

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*Assisting people to rebuild while they remain within their neighborhood and close to their neighbors is economically and emotionally cheaper than relocation to temporary settlements.*

Persons at risk and those rendered homeless by disaster situations are usually taken in by relatives and friends with livable dwellings long before shelters can be mobilized to house them.

Those with damaged dwellings tend to prefer assistance in salvaging such dwellings to render them habitable, over relocation to emergency shelters.

"Tent cities" should only be established as a last resort. Instead, many donor agencies are now opting to use the funds that would normally have been spent on tents to purchase building materials, tools, etc., for the affected country. This not only allows affected persons to rebuild but it also serves to stimulate the affected country's economy.

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*Only foreign volunteers who possess the specific skills required by the affected territories should go there after a disaster.*

It is a myth that populations affected by disasters are too shocked and helpless to take responsibility for their own survival.

For example, one of the realities of any disaster is that local people come to the assistance of those who have been affected.

Foreign volunteers possessing skills already available locally serve only to deplete already scarce resources.

It is imperative that post-disaster assistance to affected communities be governed by the confirmed needs of such communities.

Every gift to a disaster-affected community has a cost to the recipient country, whether it is the cost of receiving it and transporting it or the cost of its disposal if it proves to be inappropriate.

Disaster affected countries tend to deplete the majority of their resources in the immediate post-impact phase of a disaster. Hence, their major needs for external assistance should be geared towards the restoration of normal housing, primary health care services, water systems, waste disposal systems and income-generating employment.

Consequently, effective post-disaster relief programs are those which take into consideration the fact that international interest wanes as needs and shortages become more pressing.

After a disaster, international organizations providing assistance to affected communities need to work closely with local agencies and members of the community to ensure effective and efficient operations. Local expertise needs to be utilized wherever possible.

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*After a disaster, international assistance needs to be tailored to the needs of the affected community. Cash is the most flexible donation.*

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*International assistance which does not complement the national effort can result in chaos.*

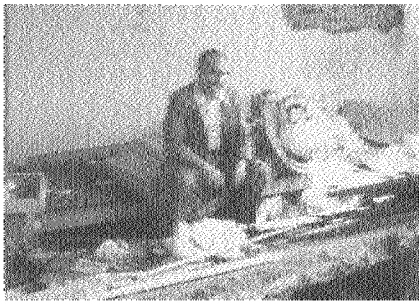
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*The effects of a disaster are long-lasting and do not just fade away within a few weeks like international interest usually does.*

After a disaster has struck, things do not return to normal in a few weeks. In fact, the economic, psychosocial and environmental consequences may become long-term disasters in their own right and their effects may last for years.

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*The psychological consequences of disasters tend to be far more pervasive and long-lasting than their physical ones.*

*"Years have now passed but it seems like yesterday. I feel lost and empty. I can't get rid of the horrifying memories and the vivid images that remain in my mind. These memories, some of which are very patchy indeed, seem to haunt me all the time and I become very distressed whenever anything - a sound, a smell or a sight - remind me of my ordeal."*