Knowledge, Power and Need in Disasters

How the misuse of power creates vulnerability

Disasters are human events, not natural ones. The World Disasters Report 1993 described disasters in terms of the coming together of extreme hazards and vulnerable people. But what lies behind that vulnerability? Is it just a matter of poverty and location, a product of a low family income and living on land susceptible to flooding, for example? Such a way of thinking is too abstract and general; it hides the very human and individual face of vulnerability. In this section of the World Disasters Report 1994, vulnerability as it impacts upon the individual is explored.

When vulnerable people are pushed to their limits by disaster events the tragedy acts as a lens to bring into focus the causes behind their vulnerability. The outcome of the disaster may be an exposure of immediate needs but underlying those needs is a web of human relations on an ever-changing natural resource base. The human relations, whether they be between the people of a threatened community, between a national authority and its population or, indeed, between an aid agency and the people it is endeavouring to assist, are essentially relationships of power Power, influence and resources may be shared or hoarded, and it is rarely a simple case of "us and them". Resources and power may be abused within a community vulnerable to disaster as well as between some higher authority and the community, or power may be used wisely, shared and distributed to achieve common agreed goals.

All societies recognise this double-edged nature of power and develop rules and norms of behaviour to control its excesses. At the international level, some of these norms of behaviour at codified in international humanitarian law and other instruments which seek to set common standards of behaviour (see Focus 1). The observance or violation of these "codes" - international humanitarian law, human rights and other instruments - determines people's power relationships. They pervade every aspect of our lives, including our disasters, and in this context, human rights abuses can be seen as abuses of power, sometimes conscious, often unconscious. Unwitting abuse of human rights is often behavioural conditioning, reflecting enduring social structures of inequality in families, communities, countries, and internationally. Human rights abuses start from power Those that have power are those that might be abusing it: governments, men, adults, parents, the rich, the educated, and aid workers

In Section Two, Part X, of this Report, the inequalities in wealth and land ownership in north-east Brazil, and the consequent denial of power and the means to attain sustainable lifestyles for the impoverished majority of the population, are graphically demonstrated as some of the prime causes behind the recurrent threat of famine in that region.

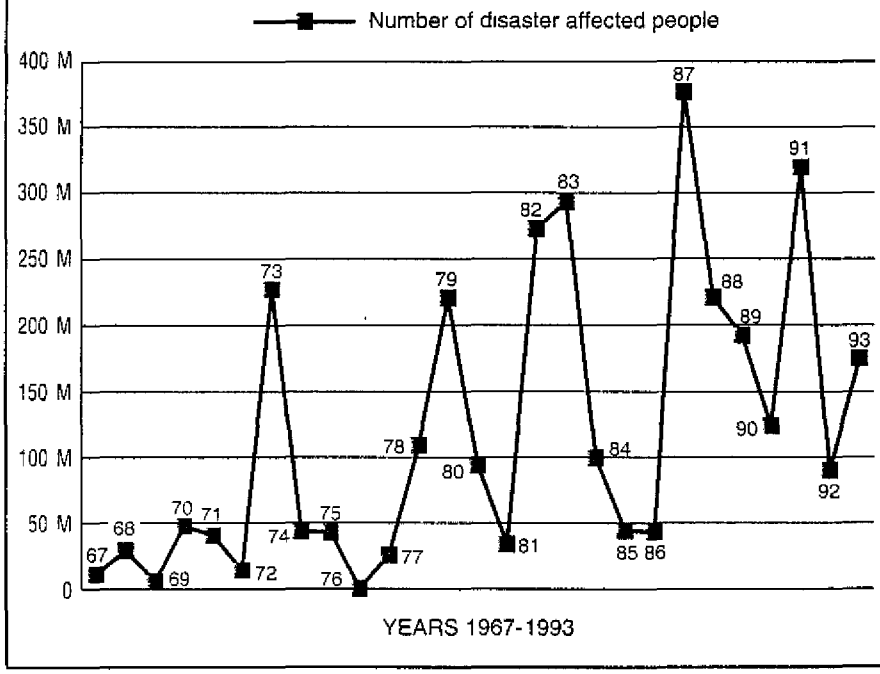
The abuse of power is sometimes an unwitting action. Northern NGOs, composed largely of individuals committed to counter-balancing injustice and unfairness, are not always fully aware of the dramatic power they wield in developing countries. Many

are far too easily seduced into relations in which they are as paternalistic and as dictatorial as those they criticise The paradox of aid agencies or relief workers hurting the poor highlights the need to understand the politics of human rights. This understanding must be internalised both personally and institutionally. Aid agencies and their workers must ask: "How might I be abusing my power, how do I effectively identify those abused, how can they be protected?"

In today's complex disasters, where the stakes in terms of human lives and financial resources are high, aid organisations may, wittingly or unwittingly, abuse their power. Recognising this, seven of the world's most prominent non-governmental agencies have come together to develop a Code of Conduct to govern

The growth in vulnerability

Year	Number of disaster affected people	Year	Number of disaster affected people
1967	11,047,904	1981	33,756,865
1968	28,981,406	1982	272,759,375
1969	5,680,571	1983	292,955,799
1970	47,485,048	1984	99,489,539
1971	40,445,109	1985	43,913,036
1972	14,137,334	1986	42,789,783
1973	227,121,061	1987	376,879,839
1974	43,471,600	1988	220,764,909
1975	42,632,028	1989	192,276,076
1976	271,135	1990	124,148,628
1977	25,755,722	1991	319,227,321
1978	109,335,442	1992	90,321,014
1979	220,783,204	1993	175,093,174
1980	94,115,471		



The figures for people affected by disaster fluctuate from year to year, but the trend is ever upwards Today some 250 million people are affected by disaster and increasingly it is the national and international NGOs who are expected to provide the much-needed emergency assistance.

Source: CRED 1993

A main shopping street in Sarajevo, host city for the 1984 winter Olympics, which as 1994 opened hosted a besieged people, carting water where once they carried Christmas presents. Bullet holes in the street are a stark reminder of the danger and deaths from snipers. War is a prime causal factor in many of today's major disasters, and war today kills, maims and terrorises far more civilians than it does soldiers.
Bosnia, 1993 Paul Lowe/Magnum

the work and behaviour of their disaster-response staff The Code, which is presented and discussed in Part II of this Section, highlights the need for aid agencies to guard against the imposition of their ideas, their structures and their culture upon the very people they aim to help.

Denying people control over their lives, and not allowing them the right to know about the hazards which might affect them, are abuses of power and denial of rights of no less importance than the right to life or the right to food. Disaster relief agencies, governments and the powerful must all learn to trust people to take their own decisions. Running other people's lives, even through benign authority, moves inexorably in disastrous directions. Section One, Part III, on access to information, shows that censorship and restrictions on the free flow of information preclude knowledge, debate and action and, consequently, the absence of pressure on governments and authorities to deal with both vulnerability and impending disaster.

In many disaster-prone societies those most vulnerable to disaster are excluded from the sharing of information on the causes and consequences of the hazards they face. After the Chernobyl accident, for example, local people living in the area were given little information about the effect radiation was having upon them, their food and the land they farmed. A Federation-supported project (see Section One, Focus III) tackled this issue and provided a simple way for local people to have the level of radiation in their food measured and the consequences of being exposed to radiation explained. Internationally, information about impending disasters has often been suppressed. In 1984, the Nimeiri regime in Sudan deliberately tried to hide the true extent of the growing famine in the west of the country from the rest of the Sudanese population and the international aid community, in an ultimately unsuccessful bid to hang on to power.

If information and knowledge are power, then local knowledge is a powerful tool. In Part IV of this Section, on indigenous knowledge and disasters, the critical role played by local organisations and community groups in disaster prevention and action is highlighted, along with the central role played by local knowledge. In Zimbabwe, for example, the Organisation of Rural Associations for Progress is an indigenous group much favoured by external donors as a local implementation partner. The organisation has demonstrated the viability of using local knowledge and local structures to tackle development and disaster preparedness and has highlighted the limitations of externally-driven approaches.

This wealth of knowledge, critical analysis of situations, and organisational experience is not lost during crises, but often invigorated. Community groups in Mexico City, for example, were the first to respond following the September 1985 earthquake.

The ability of local groups to respond to crisis and the more chronic problems of vulnerability is becoming increasingly important as the traditional welfare net provided by governments is being eroded in almost all countries of the world. Whether in western Europe, the former Soviet Union, Africa or Latin America, increasingly the burden of looking after the dispossessed and vulnerable people of our planet is being placed upon voluntary and private institutions.

Today non-governmental organisations and community-based organisations are becoming the favoured means to providing compensatory assistance to people devastated by rapidly-contracting economies and cuts in social services and food subsidies. Community-based groups are also now starting to dispel the myth that poor people and disaster victims are ignorant of the solutions to their crises. In the area of public health, the Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee assumed the role of informing parents of the causes of dehydration in children and demonstrated a simple home remedy. The effectiveness of the campaign was seen in the aftermath of the 1991 cyclone in Bangladesh when it was observed that the diarrhoea rates among