Communities that live with hazards such as drought, flash-floods and soil erosion, develop sophisticated methods for controlling these risks or at least mitigating their effects. When this knowledge and commitment to securing their own futures is coupled with outside resources, disaster preparedness can take on a new dimension Well designed soil conservation methods, supported by the community, can stave off the worst effects of drought. Ethiopia, 1985 Chris Steele-Perkins/Magnum

pliance with export-based production; and arrogance and racism which preclude consideration of CBO knowledge systems and NGO development alternatives. Structural constraints facing Northern NGOs and their constituents are as complex and pervasive as Southern poverty and vulnerability. Together, these international problems provide advocacy NGOs with an important advantage in linking issues through an informed global analysis. Global coalitions - such as the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, the Third World Network and IRED - can advance agendas of mutual concern between the South and the North.

Across the South, the emergence of NGOs and CBOs as organisational counterparts to the international disaster and development communities provides a unique opportunity to apply the skills and social processes which vulnerable groups bring to problem-solving. The international community's response to this opportunity has been mixed. Some agencies have a genuine commitment to interact and learn with vulnerable communities and share responsibility for addressing the causes of vulnerability. Other NGOs have been coopted by large agencies which claim them as representatives of low-income and vulnerable groups. In other instances, donor agencies have defensively reacted to a perceived threat to their claims of expertise, and have commonly dismissed NGOs and CBOs as inefficient, unorganised or incapable.

Among indigenous NGOs, the response to working with international agencies has been diverse. In general, most indigenous NGOs are willing and prepared to engage in dialogue in order to push an agenda with international agencies. The best response is when indigenous NGOs have the confidence and internal strength to define criteria of operation that meet their needs - including being able to reject money or advice not under their control

Six S in the Sahel, Zimbabwe's ORAP and the Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee are three such grassroots-based NGOs that have en-

livened the debate about equitable relationships in development and disaster response. The essence of these movements is defining and practising alternatives to the prevailing philosophy of donors and national elites. They reject a development process which threatens people's security and needs.

For example, in the Horn of Africa, coalitions of indigenous and international NGOs have taken a lead in the promotion of peace, addressing the causes of regional conflicts and contributing to discussions on the appropriate elements for achieving sustainable civil societies. Another example of this interface between indigenous and international agents is the collaboration of traditional healers and midwives by public health officials seeking to minimise the spread of the HIV virus. In South Africa more than 7,000 traditional healers have been trained to counsel their patients in safe sex practices and to identify AIDS symptoms for possible referral to clinics or hospitals.

Similar positive and collaborative efforts have taken place in Latin America. As NGOs in Argentina worked with communities to contain the cholera epidemic, one study showed how "people joined groups and discovered how to take action to help themselves. Many people found ... small local organisations which had formed in their area. These groups worked out a strategy to protect their community from a local epidemic ... [and] discussed what was lacking in the national efforts .. "

Learning and collaboration

How can the lessons learned from the diverse actors involved in community problem-solving - field programmes of development NGOs, home and regional offices of international donors and relief agencies - be applied to disaster prevention? Another way to ask the question is: whose knowledge counts in which situations? The best answer is to consider a spectrum along or around which the experiences and knowledge of different groups come into play. The spectrum is not exclusive;

it links the actions and responsibilities of all groups.

Within the range of frontline actions and responses to disasters, community groups and some support and programme NGOs offer initial warnings of impending disasters as well as critical insight into the causes and potential solutions to disasters. This is the province of many rural communities and of urban dwellers in low-income and vulnerable housing.

Further along the spectrum, programme NGOs and field-based government workers may provide services. They may have passing awareness of the conditions which induce disasters, but normally remain focused on delivery services, without placing that work in a wider context. They may be the interface between communities and governmental and NGO programme managers and can become advocates for beneficiaries around service provision. Rarely will this group collaborate with others along the spectrum to analyse their experiences or those of the target groups.

Overlapping this group, is another that manages programmes, which is both aware of delivery constraints and familiar with funding agency policies. This group includes senior government officers, international NGOs, and social and cultural opinion-shapers. Administration is a major portion of their duties, and they play a role in planning and evaluating large-scale programmes and intervention policies.

Connected to this group, but with a different and more extensive agenda, are a growing number of indigenous NGOs and a handful of international NGOs which assess policy and programme impacts and promote alternatives to prevailing development policies. Linked among themselves through numerous collaborative networks, these NGOs interact with governments, international agencies and grassroots' programmes.

Finally, donors - bilateral, multilateral and lenders like the World Bank - and international disaster-response agencies link with governments, although their influence is of-ten felt far beyond the boundaries of governmental action. Attached to their funding, donors frequently bring policy and programme assumptions which may or may not be appropriate for disaster prevention.

There are multiple, often interrelated, roles for organisations. One agency's role does not exclude other agencies. Whether viewed in a linear, circular, hierarchical or reverse-hierarchical fashion, integration of issues, structures and organisation is a reality which offers opportunities for common learning.

Bringing that space for mutual learning to a practical stage is the challenge currently facing disaster-relief agencies, governments, NGOs and CBOs. The goal of the new learning will be to create a significant repository of community socio-economic and political structures and knowledge of the environment, coping strategies, criteria and processes for improving the quality of life of households and communities.

This could include shifting some resources now devoted to development and disaster research - applied and theoretical - to grassroots-based and international NGOs. Training centres, developed within CBOs and community-based NGOs, could offer courses on indigenous knowledge, community problem-solving and disaster-planning and mitigation actions and give participants practical exposure to the daily activities of communities.

Supporting international networking, communication and advocacy, NGOs provides another link between research and practice. The mandate for such NGOs will be to work with governments, programme NGOs and international agencies to ensure community involvement is integral to policy and programme design and implementation.

Where might this process start? On many fronts it has already begun. Communities have been working to reduce the potential for disasters and respond to disasters in ways that reflect their needs and resources. Whether on India's streets, Eritrea's mountain slopes, Peru's shanty towns or Mozambique's refugee camps, a

wealth of knowledge and practical skills exists which can stimulate new perspectives on prevention and mitigation.

Ironically, disaster prevention's most valuable resource - community-based groups - are only infrequently involved in concept, planning and response activities. The costs to disaster or development agencies of involving communities in planning are minimal. The biggest item is time; slowing the pace of planning to allow communities to identify priorities and processes.

In disaster-preparedness planning and response, agencies can incorporate anthropologists, community development practitioners, local economic specialists, and NGO policy analysts. At limited cost and with few further logistical requirements, disaster organisations can gain extensive and valuable insight into the strengths of communities within disasters.

Disaster and development agencies can initiate pilot activities and document experiences with communities to disseminate results and lessons learned. Such examples can be a basis for indigenous workshops to which national and international NGOs and donors are invited. Changing the terrain of learning can break down the isolation of many hotel and conference centre meetings.

Lessons to be learned

Two parallels have been drawn: the failure of development activities based on a model of top-down economic growth parallelled by growing poverty, inequities and the intensity of disasters; and the substantive revision of "development" by people who have limited income and assets but significant knowledge, skills and social resources parallelled by similar people-based involvement in disaster mitigation and development.

The elements of the second set of parallels provide the basis for much of the most creative activities within which disasters may not end, but their impact could be significantly altered.

Sustainability of popular development has become commonplace in the jargon of most international develop-

ment agencies. What differentiates rhetoric from reality is the origin of those who use the terms. For some impoverished communities, "development" is synonymous with disaster. Recent experience has shown that alternatives to the disasters of "development" include:

•The processes of self-reliance;
•Self-empowerment of individuals within groups and of groups;
•Leadership accountability to popular constituents;
•Resilience of the organisations and dispossessed people;
•Two-way learning;
•Equitable socio-economic relations;
•Decentralisation and fully representative involvement in decision-making; and
•Cultural and technological adaptability.

For Northern disaster-response and development organisations it is useful to differentiate between those immediate actions they can take to support the problem-solving approaches of local communities and the longer-term structural factors which will remain even without aid.

For example, underlying causes of income and asset inequality, land ownership, gender relations and other issues, although exacerbated by external assistance are also endogenous to societies. More immediately accessible to disaster-response agencies is an appreciation of indigenous knowledge and local problem-solving processes, a careful review of the assumptions built into their aid, and incorporating local people much more completely into their aid planning and delivery process.

The strength of Northern disaster-response agencies can be expanded to include a significant advocacy component directed at addressing the failures of development and external assistance. Many NGOs argue that this could be the most important contribution that Northern groups can make to the South.

Popular groups which have adopted these principles into their philosophy and practice offer approaches to sustainable and popular development which not only will reduce disasters but also provide a base