World picture of disasters

Disasters today

There are as many definitions of disasters as there are disaster types, while the insurance company, the seismologist, the relief worker and the famine victim will each have their own definitions, based on their own perspective.

Disasters combine two elements: events and vulnerable people. A disaster occurs when a disaster agent (the event) exposes the vulnerability of individuals and communities in such a way that their lives are directly threatened or sufficient harm has been done to their community's economic and social structures to undermine their ability to survive.

A disaster is fundamentally a socio-economic phenomenon. It is an extreme but not necessarily abnormal state of everyday life in which the continuity of community structures and processes temporarily fails. Social disruption may typify a disaster but not social disintegration.

By focusing on the impact upon people, the definition complements the Federation's definition of the vulnerable as "...those at greatest risk from situations that threaten their survival or their capacity to live with a minimum of economic and social security and human dignity".

The United Nations declared that the 1990s would be the International Decade for Natural Disaster Reduction (IDNDR). The two previous decades had shown ample evidence of the frequency of natural disasters and the overwhelming magnitude of human suffering that accompanies them.

International appeals are launched with depressing regularity, and

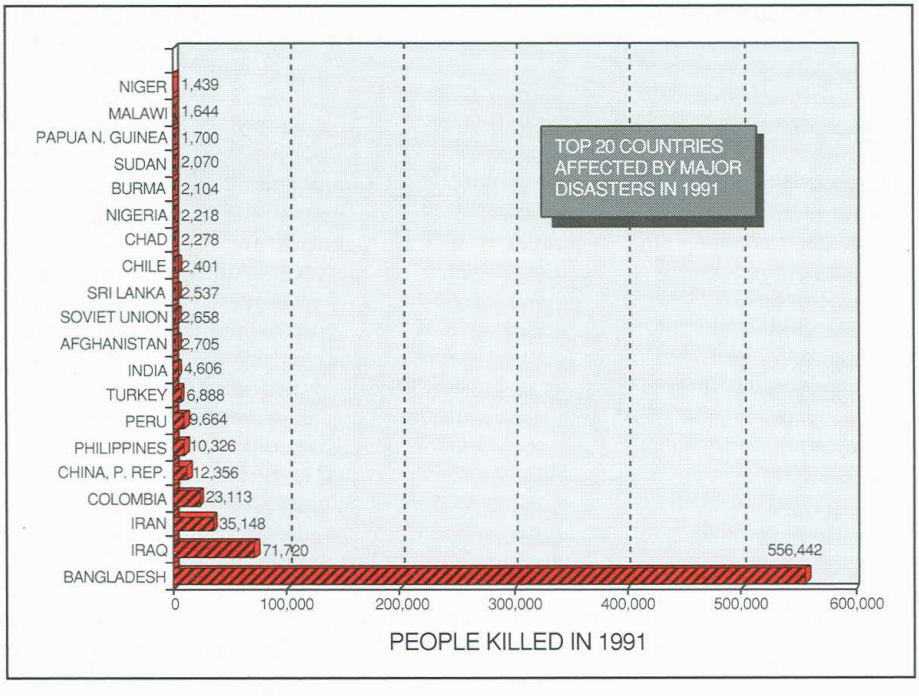

Figure 1: Top 20 countries affected by major disasters in 1991. Disasters affect every country of the world, but it is the poorest countries where people most frequently lose their lives. (Unless otherwise stated, all figures used in the World Disasters Report are taken from the Disaster Events Database of the Centre for Research on the Epidemiology of Disasters, which is described in more detail in Section Four, Part II of this report.)

millions of men, women and children, usually those already the poorest, most vulnerable and least able to cope, are further marginalised. The past few years have seen almost every type of natural disaster somewhere in the world, devastating communities, killing thousands, and leaving millions even more vulnerable to the next disaster

The disasters unfolding in the early 1990s in Somalia, former Yugoslavia, Cambodia, Afghanistan or in a number of the former Soviet republics bear witness to the fact that today there are few simple cases of cause and effect. The disasters of today involve economic dislocation, drought or floods, the collapse of political structures, violence ranging from banditry, through civil conflict to all-out international war, famine, and mass population displacements.

In such complex disasters, the provision of humanitarian aid is often seen by one faction or another as an aggressive political act, and the blocking of that humanitarian assistance is becoming part of the accepted arsenal of the politician and military commander.

In these situations, individuals concerned to preserve humanitarian standards and assist those in need

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Focus 1: Filling the humanitarian gap

More than 300 million people had their lives torn apart by disasters in 1991, and 770,000 people lost their lives. These are the figures which drive those in humanitarian organisations to seek better ways of reducing vulnerability to disaster and to find more resources to help save lives and restore livelihoods when disaster strikes

While the number of physical events which can cause disasters may not be increasing, the increasing vulnerability of people to them mean disasters are becoming more frequent and more catastrophic. A range of factors, from conflict to industry, mean disasters are also becoming more complex. The reality today is that there is a growing gap between the resources needed to reduce these tragedies - both in terms of tackling disaster vulnerability and improving relief response - and the national and international resources made available. This is the humanitarian gap", and it is increasing in size.

Whether we are talking about Bangladesh or Somalia, the major disasters of today are no longer simple cases of cause and effect. Today's disasters often involve a combination of economic dislocation, drought or floods, the collapse of political structures, violence, famine, and mass population displacements.

Increasingly, states are reducing their responsibility for the welfare load. Many no longer feel it is possible, or even correct, for governments themselves to provide a safety net for the poor. This is as true in the North as in the South. In the North, the role of the welfare state is being progressively cut back. In eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union, the collapse of centralist economies means the state no longer automatically assures the provision of education, health care services and shelter.

The net result is that more people are vulnerable to disasters and aid agencies are expected to pick up the pieces, often without the necessary resources to do so.

In 1980, some 100 million people were affected by major disasters By 1991, this figure had risen to 311 million. Over the same period, developmental aid contributions from the developed to the less developed countries actually declined in size. Spending on disaster relief rose, but not at the same rate as the needs For the Federation, annual response to disasters went up from 198 million to 236 million Swiss francs. The need for humanitarian action is growing extremely fast, yet our ability to meet those needs is not keeping pace.

Faced with this, disaster response agencies, particularly international agencies, must seek a new perspective on their work They must move to increase the impact of their humanitarian actions both on the ground and in the corridors of power. They have to become more effective in delivering humanitarian assistance and more assertive of the rights of individuals and communities to both give and receive such assistance, to claim their basic human rights

This presents a major challenge to disaster response agencies. On the one hand they have to avoid being territorial and succumbing to competitive instincts. On the other they must strive to maximise their relief impact and the focus of their programmes to reduce disaster vulnerability

If the challenge is not taken up, the gap will get bigger, relief agencies will be increasingly asked to rescue communities engulfed by disasters. and crisis management, rather than planning for sustainable future, will become the priority

Filling the humanitarian gap: There is a growing gulf between global needs and available resources as the breakdown or lack of state welfare support forces more and more people to be vulnerable to disasters.
Romania, 1990. James Nachtwey/Magnum.

have little choice but to develop an arsenal of their own. Humanitarian agencies need more sophisticated political and diplomatic skills They need higher professional standards, standards which will make their disaster preparedness more effective and more useful to those who are most in need.

Amid deepening poverty, growing populations, increasing urbanisation and technological change, disasters are becoming more complex, extreme events are becoming disasters more frequently and disasters are becoming more catastrophic in their impact.

The prime reason is that the humanitarian gap is widening between the needs of the world's most vulnerable people, arising from disasters, and the financial and other resources available for the world's humanitarian agencies to meet those needs.

Relief teams

Many concerned people have reacted to this growing crisis by calling for donor governments and agencies to speed up the dispatch of relief teams when disaster strikes. Such a solution has often proved ill-advised.

While there is clearly a role for national and international organisations to help other countries, such as the supply of bulk food for refugees when local harvests have been poor, it is far more likely to be in channelling funds, training or expertise than immediate direct assistance. Exceptions occur when protection is an issue, such as civilians caught up in

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Focus 2: Spending donations on relief and preparedness

All aid agencies strive to make the most effective use of limited resources Often the hardest test is rapid relief response to a disaster The effectiveness of the response, and use of donors' money, is primarily dependent upon good disaster preparedness.

All disasters are first tackled at the local level by local organisations. International response is built upon those local efforts. The Federation and many other agencies invest in local disaster preparedness, building the capacity of structures from village to national level to meet relief needs.

Building competent local capacity ensures confidence that any international relief required can be channelled through a capable partner Delivering international aid effectively into this local structure requires its own effective system. The Federation routes international appeals through its secretariat in Geneva, which lobbies donors for funds and then dispatches funds, goods and, if appropriate, personnel to the National Red Cross or Red Crescent Society dealing with the disaster The internal coordination system links with other agencies through meetings, telex exchange and computer networks to maximise coordination

All disaster response agencies are constantly seeking ways to improve local and international preparedness. Developments in satellite communications, computer networking and computer-aided expert systems to facilitate logistics are all adding to the efficiency with which agencies working in disasters use relief donations.

The Federation raises funds in two ways: first, planned fund raising from National Societies and other organisations for the development and institution-building objectives of National Societies in disaster-prone countries, and second, immediate disaster appeals for emergency relief Fund raising for disaster relief has grown fast. In 1989, the Federation sought 54 million Swiss francs to help 2.6 million disaster victims In 1991, the targets were 263 million Swiss francs and 5.7 million people, in 1992, this rose again to 303 million Swiss francs and 19 million people.

The donor community generally responds positively to relief appeals, typically providing in total 85% of the resources sought. There are differences, however: sudden disasters continue to attract resources and media attention; long-running and slow-onset disasters face major funding problems

The Federation's 1991 development appeal to develop the structures and services 151 National Societies was far less successful All agencies find it difficult to raise funds for disaster preparedness. Results of funding are less obvious to donors, and the public and media pressure to donate funds is less severe and immediate than for relief operations.

The Federation is convinced that disaster preparedness is vital. The humanitarian gap is growing; a never-ending stream of disaster relief efforts will not be enough alone to make people less vulnerable A committed investment in disaster preparedness is the only viable way to try to close it.