



**Defusing
disaster**
Reducing the risk:
calamity is *unnatural*



International Federation
of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies

The International Federation's Global Agenda (2006–2010)

Over the next five years, the collective focus of the Federation will be on achieving the following goals and priorities:

Our goals

Goal 1: Reduce the number of deaths, injuries and impact from disasters.

Goal 2: Reduce the number of deaths, illnesses and impact from diseases and public health emergencies.

Goal 3: Increase local community, civil society and Red Cross Red Crescent capacity to address the most urgent situations of vulnerability.

Goal 4: Promote respect for diversity and human dignity, and reduce intolerance, discrimination and social exclusion.

Our priorities

Improving our local, regional and international capacity to respond to disasters and public health emergencies.

Scaling up our actions with vulnerable communities in health promotion, disease prevention and disaster risk reduction.

Increasing significantly our HIV/AIDS programming and advocacy.

Renewing our advocacy on priority humanitarian issues, especially fighting intolerance, stigma and discrimination, and promoting disaster risk reduction.

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The suffering of millions could be diminished dramatically, countless lives could be saved and huge economic losses lessened, says the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies.

The tremors were felt right around the Indian Ocean, and countries with coastlines went on high alert. The magnitude 8.4 earthquake off Sumatra's south-western coast on September 12, 2007, left more than the Indonesian island shaken.

Within minutes, tsunami warnings were issued not only for Sumatra but also for Bangladesh, India, Sri Lanka, the Maldives – and even Mozambique, thousands of kilometres away – reviving memories of the devastating tsunamis of 2004 that killed more than 280,000 people in ten countries across two continents.

The quake – soon followed by another of 7.8 on the Richter scale and more than 40 aftershocks over the next two days – was the strongest to hit Indonesia since that catastrophe. But though waves did cause material damage along the Sumatran coast, there was no repeat of that tragedy. Casualty numbers were comparatively few, as were the direct consequences of the tremors themselves.

As disaster managers breathed sighs of relief, however, they were aware there was no room for complacency. It had been a near miss. The force of the quakes had been enough to set off gigantic waves and, had they done, so tens of thousands of people could have perished.

The new earthquakes provided a reality check, a reminder that far greater investment must be made in the prevention of human suffering – minimizing the odds of natural hazards becoming disasters among the millions of people around the world who live in harm's way.

Just weeks after the 2004 tsunamis, the World Conference on Disaster Reduction in Kobe, Japan, determined that a substantial reduction of disaster losses – in terms of lives and in social, economic and environmental assets – was urgently needed, and a global blueprint for disaster risk reduction efforts was adopted

by 168 governments. It was called the Hyogo Framework for Action and, with a deadline of 2015, was aligned to the UN Millennium Development Goals for a healthier, safer and more equitable world.

The timing of the Kobe conference had assured it far greater attention – and attendance – than otherwise might have been the case. But it had been coincidental. With or without the tsunamis of December 26, 2004, the number, severity and impact of disasters have been increasing dramatically, due to such things as climate change and environmental degradation, poverty and inequity, unplanned mass-urbanization, rapid population growth and conflict. The consensus is they will continue to do so.

Less disaster, more development

Disaster is never far from Lake Victoria, Africa's largest stretch of inland water. The 30 million people dependent upon it are confronted by poverty, disease and environmental catastrophe.

The countries bordering the lake – Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda – and Burundi and Rwanda in its basin, are among the least developed in the world. Making progress is hard particularly when disaster often carries it away.

Disaster and development are intertwined which is why the Red Cross began a Lake Victoria cross-border programme where not only emergencies are dealt with but long-term development as well. Supported by the Swedish Red Cross – and funded by the Swedish Government's International Development Cooperation Agency – the national Red Cross in all five countries run it.

Being prepared for disaster before it happens and reducing vulnerability is one of the prime targets. Much of the land around the lake is flat and the soil non-absorbent, leaving it prone to flooding from heavy rains. Homes are washed away and displacement is common.

Awareness is lessening the impact and villagers themselves are turning the tide, mobilized to build ditches and canals along roads and settlements. Excess water is emptied into the lake. The flooding has begun to be curbed.



The Centre for Research on the Epidemiology of Disasters at the University of Louvain, Belgium, has said that over the decade from 1996 to 2005 the number of people reported affected by disasters around the world was one third more than in the previous ten years. The average number of annual disasters – natural and technological but excluding wars, conflict-related famines, diseases and epidemics – was up 55 per cent in the first four years of this century alone. Disasters doubled in countries of low human development, the greatest increase in Africa although Asia has the most catastrophes.

Kobe, it is hoped, will prove to have been a watershed although many pledges made remain to be translated into decisive action or meaningful financial commitment. And the clock is ticking ever faster.

Around the world, more than 250 million people are affected by natural disasters every year – and these are the

On the front line

Time is ticking fast in the South Pacific. Floods and tidal surges are worsening, cyclones are more and more frequent, and the sea level is rising faster than anyone ever predicted. It is creeping up the beaches at such a rate the Polynesian nation of Tuvalu – nine coral atolls and islands north of Fiji – could be gone within a century.

The advance of climate change is being felt. Even rich countries are suffering. In less wealthy ones it is causing fresh complex emergencies. The poor, the elderly, the disabled are bearing the brunt of it, and if there is a front line small island developing states are on it.

Around the world national Red Cross and Red Crescent societies are helping vulnerable people adapt to climate change, do their best to cope through community-based risk reduction.

The Samoa Red Cross has shown adapting in the Pacific is not just about building expensive sea walls. There are many low-cost options a national society can assist with because of its presence in communities.

The most practical steps it has taken have allowed it to leap a language barrier. Nearly every village in Samoa has a different term for north, south, east and west which makes it problematic to issue early warnings or direct people to shelters when emergencies loom. So the Red Cross now assists with the interpretation of meteorological information and weather warnings.

ones we know about. Untold numbers of others suffer as well, but their plight is never recorded as their disaster is unnoticed – too remote or obscure or small scale for the wider world to bother.

The already underprivileged suffer most. Natural hazards and the disasters they trigger hit all countries, rich and poor, but many poor people live in exposed and dangerous places where calamity seriously disrupts the way they cope with life and hinders their development. The poor become poorer, deprivation deepens.

Disasters, indeed, can wipe out years of development in minutes. They damage infrastructure, reduce productivity and generate social tensions. They consume precious resources that could be better used for development and confine vulnerable communities to cycles of disaster and response.

It need not be that way. In truth there is no such thing as natural disaster. Earthquakes, tsunamis, volcanic eruptions, landslides, storms, fires, floods and droughts are natural hazards which only become disasters when they disturb or destroy society's normal functioning.

Disaster is unnatural and risk reduction measures diminish the odds of it occurring by doing everything possible before the event to protect life, limit damage and strengthen a vulnerable community's ability to bounce back quickly from adversity. The solutions may lie in simple things like educating children on what to do in emergencies, or planting trees on unstable hillsides to stop those releasing landslides. The more complex include early warning systems, coastal protection, earthquake-safe construction and urban planning.

Whatever they are, thousands of lives and billions of dollars could be saved every year if a fraction of the cost of disaster response was spent minimizing the impact of hazards. Studies have shown that every dollar invested in risk reduction can save between two and ten dollars in disaster response and recovery cost.

A very natural priority

Reducing the risks that hazards bring is a Red Cross and Red Crescent priority, and is a very natural one for the world's largest voluntary network. With millions of members and volunteers living in communities in every corner of the world, our National Societies are uniquely placed. Because of their grassroots presence they can tap into local knowledge, help communities identify the dangers they face, assess their capacities and vulnerabilities, and come up with solutions.





International Federation



Nepal Red Cross Society

It was only too evident when the September 2007 tsunami warnings flashed around the Indian Ocean. In Bangladesh, where more than 40,000 Red Crescent volunteers are trained for such an event, half a million people were evacuated to Red Crescent shelters and other safe areas. People knew what to do because of the Bangladesh Red Crescent Society's long-term investment in disaster preparedness and contingency planning that has saved millions of lives from cyclones along the Bay of Bengal alone.

Such success explains why, over the five years from 2007, the International Federation's Global Agenda is intent on reducing the number of deaths, injuries, illnesses and overall impact from disasters, diseases and public health emergencies. It is why it wants to increase local community, civil society and Red Cross and Red Crescent ability to deal with extreme vulnerability.

But the importance of disaster risk reduction in all its forms has been reflected in the International Federation's policies and practice for years. A groundbreaking 1984 study by the Swedish Red Cross entitled *Prevention Better Than Cure* guided a new direction through the 1980s and into the 1990s with pioneering grassroots programmes incorporating disaster risk reduction in countries like Sudan.

Global level commitments have supported the focus. The importance of disaster preparedness as a contribution to risk reduction was recognized through the adoption of new preparedness policy by the International Federation's 1999 General Assembly. Preparedness, it said, was an effective link between emergency response, rehabilitation and development programmes. Community-based preparedness strategies would strengthen the ability of vulnerable society to cope better.

All along, the Red Cross and Red Crescent has illustrated the wisdom of investing in disaster risk reduction. Today it argues that global spending on it must be increased dramatically if we are to make real inroads and significantly reduce the effects of future disaster.

Nowhere is the wisdom shown better than in Ethiopia, where millions of tonnes of food aid each year save life in the short term but do nothing to address the deeper causes of chronic disaster. Cash for work does address these causes, reducing the risk to livelihoods from recurrent drought and famine.

South Wollo in northern Ethiopia is beset by dire food insecurity. The population depends on agriculture and

Taking the heat out of summer

Heatwaves over the past few years have brought increasing death to Europe. In 2003, as many as 35,000 people may have died as a consequence of extreme temperature, particularly among the elderly. Another sweltering spell in 2006 put the Netherlands and Belgium in the top ten list of the world's most deadly disasters. July 2006 was their warmest month since records began, as it was in Germany, Ireland and the United Kingdom.

Europe wasn't prepared for the excesses climate change was delivering, and though contingency plans were in place for any number of 'natural' disasters there were few, or none, for heatwaves, never considered a major hazard.

For the Netherlands Red Cross and the International Federation's Climate Centre in The Hague it wasn't good enough. After 2003 – which claimed up to 1,400 Dutch lives – they had begun a climate change education programme to show Red Cross branches how it affected their mission. Boiling summers, they said, were only a taste of the pattern of things to come. What was needed was a national plan.

Outside the Red Cross it was not a burning issue, until the Climate Centre contacted the Ministry of Health and more than 60 organizations. Advocating heatwave preparedness, it found unexpected partners and formed a broad platform that recommended action. A national plan was hammered out and due to come into force in 2007.

livestock, but drought has forced them to sell many assets and plunged them into destitution. As mountain soils erode, the increasing pressure on available land only makes matters worse.

By distributing US \$760,000 in cash to 62,000 people, Ethiopian Red Cross Society action teams have greatly improved their situation. In return, people worked on employment generation schemes that focused on road construction and environmental protection. Fields were terraced; check-dams built and springs safeguarded.

The benefits were many. Cash rather than food aid enabled households to choose what food to purchase, when and how much. And the work itself reduced risks.

Building 143 hectares of terraces and 50 check-dams lessened soil erosion and increased soil depth, moisture

and fertility, which in turn increased crop yields. The 96 kilometres of roads constructed improved the access of farmers and pastoralists to local markets, enabling them to buy and sell produce.

Better roads mean quicker journey times to health centres in district capitals, and cleaner springs ensure healthier drinking water, reducing disease. Better crop yields and water quality ensure healthier animals as well, and crucially the intervention stopped households from selling more vital assets, such as tools and livestock.

As always the presence of volunteers within the communities was paramount to Red Cross understanding of what the risks entailed, and their knowledge allowed the volunteers to help villagers design appropriate measures.

The project illustrates, too, why the Red Cross and Red Crescent insists that long-term risk reduction must be part of global development programming, something underlined as well in Aceh, the Indonesian province at the tip of Sumatra hardest hit by the 2004 tsunamis.

Glossary

Disaster risk reduction

Risk reduction aims to minimize the impact of natural hazards like earthquakes, landslides and hurricanes on disaster-prone communities by doing everything possible before disaster occurs to protect lives, limit damage and strengthen their capacity to bounce back quickly from adversity. A natural hazard only becomes a disaster when it disrupts society's normal functioning. Risk reduction is a framework of elements ranging from early warning of hazards to community self-assessment and action to reduce local vulnerability.

Disaster

Disaster hits all countries, rich and poor. But it is poor people who usually suffer the most. Poor people often live in unprotected or dangerous environments. A natural disaster can severely disrupt the way they cope with life and hinder their development.

Disasters damage infrastructure, reduce productivity and generate social tensions. Disasters consume precious resources that could be better directed towards development. Disasters can wipe out years of development in minutes. Vulnerable communities are often confined to cycles of disaster and response.

As this province was beginning to find its feet again, a Red Cross Red Crescent analysis of 63 villages showed that they were threatened by catastrophe on all sides.

Landslides were induced by illegal logging and irresponsible quarrying. Poorly constructed buildings, weak infrastructure, ignorance and a lack of coastal protection left communities wide open to earthquakes, tsunamis and shoreline erosion. High tides and river obstruction worsened flooding. An absence of shelters and escape routes aggravated the dangers.

Simply rebuilding what the villages had lost was unthinkable. They would remain in harm's way, and harm – as the 2007 earthquakes showed – was never far away. It is why disaster preparedness and risk reduction are at the core of Red Cross Red Crescent recovery operations around the world: build back better, by building safer, resilient communities.

The analysis of the 63 villages had come from community self-assessments. With Indonesian Red Cross Society guidance, the villagers had sat down, mapped the hazards they face and discussed what could be done about them. A plan of action had been based upon the findings. Village contingency plans, community action teams, the development of escape routes and safe havens were among the measures taken, along with the creation of disaster calendars.

They cannot predict the earthquakes but they do know that, from December to March, serious storms can occur, and from July to September huge waves can be expected. They know the rainy season can release landslides.

A village leader looked up to the hills. "We have fields up there, and gardens," he said. "Sometimes people want to extend their land, and plant more crops. They are not rich. You cannot blame them. But when big trees are cut, the danger of landslides increases."

Following the risk mapping, the clearing of land had been banned where homes could be threatened. Thinking had begun to change.

If they planted trees and bushes with a good spread of roots they could stabilize the hillsides, the leader said. Then he frowned and shook his head. At the foot of the mountains, an international aid agency had been building new homes to replace those lost to the tsunami. Scores of them stood half finished. Work had ceased once the villagers had questioned the clearly dangerous location. Perhaps the agency had not been in Kobe.



A global alliance

Evidence-based practical interventions guided by local needs and realities are key in risk reduction. The greatest challenge facing the Red Cross and Red Crescent has been to find the most effective and efficient means to deliver them.

The outcome is the International Federation's Global Alliance for Disaster Risk Reduction, which lays out the Red Cross and Red Crescent's vision for increased, strengthened and coordinated risk reduction efforts.

The first step will be to undertake a 12 month thorough review of what is already being done to support disaster prone communities in order to map out gaps, need, and of course successful efforts to reduce risk.

At the end of this process, the International Federation will launch a detailed and evidence based disaster risk reductions strategy, a strategy that will bring together: all major players like-minded partners in the UN's International Strategy for Disaster Reduction (ISDR), UN agencies, NGOs, the ProVention Consortium, government ministries and relevant institutions such as national meteorological offices and the World Bank.

By 2013, through the Global Alliance for Disaster Risk Reduction:

- At least 20 Red Cross or Red Crescent societies in disaster-prone low income countries will have well functioning disaster risk reduction programmes.

Goals of the Global Alliance

The Global Alliance for Disaster Risk Reduction aims to dramatically increase the International Federation's efforts to reduce disaster risk among the most vulnerable communities, by ensuring:

- A greater community-level focus in global and national risk reduction policies and in strengthened national and local institutions
- Expanded community based programming to identify and tackle disaster risks
- Enhanced community-centred risk reduction measures as part of comprehensive disaster response management
- Strengthened Red Cross Red Crescent Society capacities to deliver and sustain scaled up programmes in disaster risk reduction.

- Resources allocated to risk reduction will have increased by at least 30 per cent.
- The number of participants and beneficiaries in Red Cross Red Crescent disaster risk reduction initiatives will have increased by at least 30 per cent.

All of this will be in tune with the Hyogo Framework for Action.

More National Red Cross and Red Crescent Society advocacy, more dialogue, with government at all levels is intended to increase each country's commitment to risk reduction and have it integrated as part of the normal development process.



National Society capacity to deliver scaled-up programmes will also be strengthened, and risk assessment and analysis promoted. Success with the latter will be evident in the use of the Vulnerability and Capacity Assessment (VCA), a method developed by the International Federation for communities themselves to weigh the hazards they face and the capacity they have to deal with them.

The Hyogo Framework for Action

The World Conference on Disaster Reduction convened in Kobe, Japan, in 2005 identified five priorities in its action plan, the Hyogo Framework for Action:

- Ensure that disaster risk reduction is a national and a local priority with a strong institutional basis for implementation
- Identify, assess and monitor disaster risks and enhance early warning
- Use knowledge, innovation and education to build a culture of safety and resilience at all levels
- Reduce the underlying risk factors
- Strengthen disaster preparedness for effective response at all levels.

Support for community-based early warning will be crucial, linking communities to existing national, regional and global systems.

The Bangladesh Red Crescent Society has shown the way.

When a cyclonic depression appears in the Bay of Bengal, it is mapped and its progress passed to the population. From the Red Crescent's Dhaka headquarters, satellite information from the state meteorological department is beamed to a network of radio stations and on by VHF to more remote islands and settlements. In the high-risk zone along the coastal belt, villagers can follow potential storms as they would a cricket match. Sometimes the cyclones fade or change direction – but when it hits, the people are ready for it, using well-rehearsed coping procedures and purpose-built cyclone shelters.

Sumatra is following suit. Aceh is progressing with early warning systems. Putting vulnerable communities in touch with government warnings, it is based around a radio network that has been taking shape as part of an overall Red Cross disaster preparedness programme.

A network of stations is linked to the Red Cross headquarters in Jakarta which, in turn, is fed directly by the government's monitoring agencies.

How accurate, timely information saves lives and helps mitigate economic damage was seen well in the Caribbean during 2004's appalling hurricane season. Most countries successfully alerted their populations to approaching storms, but the key to their success was putting people, as well as technology, at the centre of the warning systems.

Central America's Costa Rican Red Cross has done that to great effect. Following deadly landslides in 2002, it introduced early warning on the understanding that the communities themselves would follow through and operate the system. Nine months after the disaster another, very similar, landslide occurred. This time, the losses were cut dramatically. Community training had ensured that people knew each other and what they had to do.

The notion of 'building back safer' – of identifying the risks revealed by disasters and of incorporating risk reduction measures into recovery efforts – will be a key part of this Global Alliance.

A Zen Buddhist tenet asserts: together we can go far. It is the Global Alliance's bottom line. By strengthening Red Cross Red Crescent capacity to scale up risk reduction, by making optimal use of combined capability, by bringing in funding and operating partners to support community action, safer, resilient communities will emerge.

How can 250 million people a year left in the path of disaster ever be considered *natural*?

The Fundamental Principles of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement

Humanity

The International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, born of a desire to bring assistance without discrimination to the wounded on the battlefield, endeavours, in its international and national capacity, to prevent and alleviate human suffering wherever it may be found. Its purpose is to protect life and health and to ensure respect for the human being. It promotes mutual understanding, friendship, cooperation and lasting peace amongst all peoples.

Impartiality

It makes no discrimination as to nationality, race, religious beliefs, class or political opinions. It endeavours to relieve the suffering of individuals, being guided solely by their needs, and to give priority to the most urgent cases of distress.

Neutrality

In order to enjoy the confidence of all, the Movement may not take sides in hostilities or engage at any time in controversies of a political, racial, religious or ideological nature.

Independence

The Movement is independent. The National Societies, while auxiliaries in the humanitarian services of their governments and subject to the laws of their respective countries, must always maintain their autonomy so that they may be able at all times to act in accordance with the principles of the Movement.

Voluntary service

It is a voluntary relief movement not prompted in any manner by desire for gain.

Unity

There can be only one Red Cross or Red Crescent Society in any one country. It must be open to all. It must carry on its humanitarian work throughout its territory.

Universality

The International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, in which all societies have equal status and share equal responsibilities and duties in helping each other, is worldwide.



The International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies promotes the humanitarian activities of National Societies among vulnerable people.

By coordinating international disaster relief and encouraging development support it seeks to prevent and alleviate human suffering.

The International Federation, the National Societies and the International Committee of the Red Cross together constitute the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement.