

Introduction

Disasters affect millions of people every year. They cause damage to life, property and livelihoods. Some affect large numbers of people over a short period of time, such as the South Asia tsunami in 2004. Other disasters happen over many years, but may kill many more people than sudden events. For example, HIV and AIDS are gradually causing disaster in many places around the world. Every place has the potential to be affected by some type of disaster. Areas that have not experienced disasters before are increasingly likely to find themselves exposed to new ones due to climate change.

There is evidence that the number, severity and negative economic impact of disasters are increasing. This is mainly because more people are living in vulnerable conditions, such as on flood plains, in urban slums or in poor quality housing. Most people affected by disasters live in the poorer countries of the world.

Disasters often reverse development progress. The increase in the number and impact of disasters is one reason why many people predict that the Millennium Development Goals will not be met by 2015.

Many disasters can be avoided, or at least made less destructive, by reducing the risks that people face. Disaster risk reduction has been effective in many countries around the world, by saving lives and protecting livelihoods. Risk reduction makes good economic sense. A relatively small amount of money spent on risk reduction before a disaster happens may save much larger amounts that would need to be spent on humanitarian aid and reconstruction after the disaster. A study of a community-based project to reduce the risk of flooding in India found that the benefits of the projects were four times higher than the cost of the project. A similar project to reduce the risk of drought and flooding produced thirteen times more benefits than the cost of the project¹.

The most effective way to reduce disaster risk is to work with local people to identify and analyse their vulnerabilities and capacities, and to develop and implement an action plan. This book looks at one method that can be used to achieve this. This methodology is called **Participatory Assessment of Disaster Risk (PADR)**.

The PADR process should involve the active participation of local people. It is an empowering process, as people begin to understand the reasons for their vulnerability, and identify their own capacities. These capacities then become the focus of action planning. The action plan looks at how capacities can be developed and used to overcome some of the vulnerabilities. Some activities can be carried out locally to reduce risk, while others may require external support or involve advocacy at district, national or international levels.

¹ Venton C, Venton P 2004 *Disaster Preparedness Programmes in India: a cost benefit analysis*
ODI Network Paper 49

In order to increase ownership and sustainability of the action planning, it is best if Participatory Assessment of Disaster Risk is carried out where local people have identified a need to reduce disaster risk. A development organisation that has worked in the area for some time could provide a field worker to work through the PADR process with local people. At all times, the staff member must ensure that ownership remains with local people. The development organisation should only facilitate. Local people themselves may be able to use this book and carry out PADR without outside facilitators.

Christians have a God-given responsibility to help those who live in poverty and to relieve suffering. Christian development organisations and churches have an important role to play in reducing the risk of disaster. The local church, where it exists, is well-placed to work with the local people to reduce disaster risk. It should be encouraged to participate fully in using PADR. The Assessment could be used by churches as part of church or community mobilisation processes.

PADR can be used in a number of different situations:

- in areas experiencing regular disaster events.
- in planning all types of development projects in all areas – not just disaster-related projects in areas that are known to be at risk of disaster. Development projects should be planned with an awareness of the risks facing local people. Otherwise, they could increase vulnerability to disaster. In addition, sustainability of development projects can be improved. If risks are not identified and a disaster occurs, the benefits could be lost.
- after a disaster, to help people to address long-term, underlying causes of their vulnerability, as well as meeting their immediate needs.

PADR has been used successfully by Tearfund partners in many countries, including Eritrea, Ethiopia, India, Malawi, Sierra Leone and Sudan. This book contains case studies showing how this process has made a positive difference to people's lives.

This book starts by considering disasters from a Christian perspective. It then looks at some disaster theory and outlines PADR as one way of reducing disaster risk.