

# PEOPLE-CENTERED GOVERNANCE

## REDUCING DISASTER FOR POOR AND EXCLUDED PEOPLE

An ActionAid and Ayuda en Acción policy briefing for  
the World Conference on Disaster Reduction

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To achieve a safer world for poor and excluded people, disaster reduction must be underpinned by people-centered governance.

### Governance and disaster risk reduction

Natural and man-made disasters destroy human lives and livelihoods. This has tragic consequences for development-consequences that are exacerbated when disaster reduction policies benefit powerful groups at the expense of the poorest, and when excluded people cannot access the resources and services they are entitled to.

Local ActionAid workers around the world have repeatedly seen poor people excluded from risk reduction measures as a result of ineffective state institutions, corruption, poor accountability and a lack of political will. Such evidence leads us to conclude

that the quality of governance is critical in efforts to reduce the human and economic cost of disasters in both the short and long term.

To create the conditions needed for people-centered governance in the sphere of disaster risk reduction, governments need to promote eight key policies: participation; accountability; decentralisation; freedom of, and access to, information; legally enforceable obligations; access to justice; national coordination and cooperation and international cooperation and coordination.

## 1. Participation

It is essential that the most vulnerable people participate in accountability and decision making processes.

Different people and groups of people have differing levels of vulnerability to disasters. The most vulnerable people are often ignored by policy processes and have no access to services. They fall into four main groups, and are made vulnerable by their:

- identity: religion, migrant workers, ethnic minorities, lower castes
- ability: people with disabilities, economic status
- gender: women and girls
- generation: children and elderly people.

Development policies and projects that ignore vulnerability often exacerbate disaster problems or even create disasters. One of the key reasons why projects go wrong is that they are approved on the basis of technical information alone, rather than local wisdom. The most vulnerable people often cannot influence decision-making because their opportunities to participate in the approval process are limited. The little participation they do achieve tends to be meaningless because the decisions they take are based on incomplete or flawed information.

Certain loan conditions and policy frameworks can also exacerbate the impact of a disaster by weakening local peoples' capacity to influence the policies that affect them.

### Box 1: Ignorance of local knowledge creates disaster in Pakistan

The left bank outfall drain project (LBOD) in Pakistan's Sindh province is part of a US\$285 million programme partly financed by the World Bank's International Development Association (IDA). The LBOD was designed to drain saline ground and surface water from three districts in Sindh Nawabshah, Sanghar, and Mirpurkhas, to alleviate water logging and salinity.

However, the LBOD suffers from major technical flaws. The flow of drainage water goes against the direction of the wind, which frequently causes breaches. Poor operation and maintenance, coupled with a build up of silt deposits and seepage have rendered the system inefficient. A cyclone in 1999 further compounded the problem as it caused severe damage to the tidal link. The structure collapsed and many breaches occurred resulting in flooding, which rendered much of the local land useless for cultivation as a result of water logging and salinity. Due to the continuous discharge of effluents, wetland ecology, which served as a natural barrier to sea intrusion, has also been adversely affected.

The area, already ranked by the UNDP as one of the poorest districts of Pakistan, provides income for local people in the form of agriculture, rearing livestock and fishing. However, the reduced flow of fresh water has wreaked havoc with all three. Far from improving the situation, these huge projects have made people even more vulnerable and exposed them to new hazards and risks.

During the rains in July 2003 more than 30 people were killed in just one area and people lost livestock, crops and fishing their main sources of livelihood.

An application with over 2,000 signatures was submitted to the IDA's inspection panel in September 2004, which claimed that 'local communities, and especially the affected people of the coastal belt, have been kept entirely unaware about plans and environmental assessment'. It also mentioned that the project caused significant change in their lives, making them vulnerable to both the 1999 cyclone and the floods in 2003.

**Source** ActionAid Pakistan<sup>1</sup>

The International Monetary Fund and World Bank imposed a structural adjustment programme on the highly indebted and weak government of Malawi, which contributed to undermining the livelihoods of rural farmers. The state marketing board, the Agricultural Development and Marketing Corporation, was privatised, and subsidies to ensure food security were watered down or abolished, causing a food security gap. In a World Bank impact assessment study, the Malawian government and civil society groups all warned that these actions would significantly increase vulnerability to food shortages, but the warnings were ignored. In the event, the structural adjustment programme was one factor that contributed to the famine in 2002. <sup>2</sup>

## 2. Freedom of, and access to, information

People must have access to the information they need on policies, rights and major decisions to ensure meaningful participation in disaster reduction

Poor and excluded people need better access to information if they are to make informed decisions and participate effectively in public decision-making processes.

Knowledge about risks can be deliberately withheld from marginalised groups, or they may simply be forgotten because decision-makers do not want their version of the facts to be called into question by people with knowledge of local conditions.

At other times, information is made available, but in a way that people do not understand or cannot access. Information should always come in a form that people can understand, and should be easily accessible to all, not kept at a distant government office. It is the responsibility of government and other agencies involved in disaster risk reduction initiatives to ensure that poor and excluded people are properly informed about any risks they may encounter, the actions they can take, and any possible future changes that may affect them.

Information can be disseminated in many ways, including public meetings, radio and television, leaflets and notices, information centres and through

information officers. The information must be in a form that people can understand; people must have the opportunity to ask questions and dispute official claims, and be able to relate knowledge to their own lives and the risks they face.

### Box 2: Saving lives from hurricane Michelle through advance warning and risk communication

In 2001, Michelle was a dangerous category three storm (on the five-point Saffir-Simpson hurricane scale) that hit Central America. It made contact with land at the Bay of Pigs on Cuba's southern coast with winds of 216 km/hr, and travelled north across the island damaging 22,400 homes and destroying another 2,800, causing heavy damage to agriculture, industry and infrastructure. Although this was the worst hurricane to have hit Cuba since 1944, there were only five deaths. By contrast, when Michelle travelled through Central America in a weaker form, ten people were killed and 26 listed as missing.

In Cuba, timely evacuation saved lives from Hurricane Michelle: advance preparation, training and planning helped to make this possible, as well as the fact that Cuba has an effective system for communicating warnings through state television and local government and humanitarian staff.

**Sources** Pan American Health Organisation <sup>3</sup>

## 3. Decentralisation

Stronger local governance is needed to ensure decision-making is locally appropriate

ActionAid's experience around the globe suggests that decision-makers are more accountable and actions more appropriate when decisions are made locally. Decentralising authority in administrative structures makes participation more meaningful and successfully influences key decisions in disaster reduction. Devolving power and resources from the centre to the

local level can help to ensure that disaster reduction initiatives are appropriate to the local context. While it is essential to plan for disaster prevention at a national level, this should not be at the expense of local decision-making and action. Working alongside partners in civil society and central government, local government is well placed to understand the risks people face and to respond to their demands.

Giving more power and authority to local government does not in itself guarantee pro-poor policies. Increased power at the local level must be shared equitably, with special emphasis on increasing the voice of poor and excluded groups. Legislation may be needed to change the structure of local institutions, introduce new participatory mechanisms, and address entrenched exclusionary practices based on gender, caste, class, race and religion that increase people's vulnerability to hazards.

### Box 3: District- and community-level emergency preparedness planning in Ghana's Bolgatanga region

In northern Ghana, communities face a range of hazards that can rapidly turn into disasters for the poorest people, including crop destruction by animals, blackfly infestation, anthrax, cerebrospinal meningitis, bush burning, drought and food shortage. While the national government recognises some of these hazards (such as meningitis and anthrax), and responds when cases are reported, other hazards go largely unnoticed at the national level, despite the devastating consequences they have on poor communities.

Since 2001, ActionAid Ghana has helped communities to develop contingency plans, through which they identify the risks they face and those who are most vulnerable to these risks, and they prioritise actions to avert or mitigate the hazards. At the same time the district assemblies (the main local government units), together with regional and sub-district administrations, NGOs and representatives of

national ministries, including the ministry of health, developed emergency preparedness plans and practical actions to support communities.

By 2002, the results of the community contingency planning process had been incorporated in the emergency preparedness plans of five districts in Bolgatanga region through a series of participatory stakeholder workshops. Because the planning process was devolved to the district level, and communities were given a voice, the district-level emergency preparedness plans reflect locally important hazards and risks which poor people identified as their priorities. This would not have happened if the planning process had taken place solely within central government.

**Source** Fisher, *Lesson-learning visit report for ActionAid, 2002.*

## 4. Legally enforceable obligations

To be effective, policies and obligations for disaster reduction must be legally enforceable

Although the existence of policy instruments is necessary, such instruments alone will not reduce disasters unless they provide a clear, legal definition of the obligations of various actors. Legally enforceable responsibility empowers people to seek justice in cases of non-compliance, and helps governments to ensure they have done all they can to protect their citizens against disasters.

In 1993, the federal government of Ethiopia ratified a national policy on disaster prevention and management that clearly states: 'no human life shall perish in want of food or relief assistance'. The policy also emphasises disaster recovery and reduction, stating that the assets and economic fabric of affected areas will be preserved to ensure speedy recovery in the event of a disaster, and that adequate income levels should be assured in households affected by the disaster. Similarly, the government of Bangladesh has

a key disaster management instrument, Standing Order, which defines the jobs of various administrative and local government bodies.

While the Ethiopian policy defines its objectives, Bangladesh's Standing Order is merely an administrative procedure. However, neither plan has any legal backing.<sup>4</sup>

## 5. Access to justice

### Access to justice safeguards the most vulnerable

One of the weakest points in the legal regime for protecting vulnerable people through reducing disasters is in its enforcement mechanisms. For poor and excluded people, or those working on their behalf, the law provides a potentially valuable tool for enforcing accountability. Legal action is of value in gaining redress after a disaster: for example, to ensure that relief resources are allocated fairly, or to secure compensation from those whose actions have led to industrial or environmental accidents. This is equally important for the vulnerable people to get fair share to the resources that reduce their vulnerability.

However, formal courts and legal services are often too expensive, too slow and too far away for poor people. Traditional legal systems may be the main form of justice in rural areas, but they are unlikely to be suited to handling cases where poor people have experienced a disaster or been put at risk. Legal services may discriminate against certain categories of people such as women, people with disabilities and minorities. For poor people who have lost almost everything in a disaster, legal proceedings can be intolerably slow. Their cases may be delayed because they lack wealth or connections.

A new approach to safety, security and accessible justice needs to be based on an appropriate legislative framework. Laws should be consistent, easily understood and should reflect internationally recognised human rights. Governments must ensure that laws do not discriminate against poor people or excluded groups, and that laws forbidding such discrimination are passed and strictly enforced. Unfortunately, although these laws exist, they are often routinely ignored in practice.

Courts, whether formal or informal, should dispense justice fairly, speedily and without discrimination. New models of accessible justice should be promoted in relation to disaster reduction policies, giving people recourse to the law if these policies fail, and recognising the inter-dependence of policing, courts and the penal justice system in the provision of safety, security and accessible justice.

It is essential that poor people are informed of their rights; successful mechanisms for doing this include media campaigns and legal literacy programmes.

#### Box 4: Public interest litigation in India

In 2001, large parts of India were hit by a severe drought, which caused acute hunger for many people, while government warehouses were overflowing with grain. The People's Union for Civil Liberties considered this to be an outrage and filed a public interest litigation in the Supreme Court, demanding the right to food and to work for all drought-affected people. The case was strengthened by the fact that the Indian constitution includes the right to food, work and information. ActionAid India supported civil society groups in gathering and presenting information for the case.

In response to the public interest litigation, the Supreme Court established a number of new legal entitlements to food and other necessities. The successful action was a result of people's movements, civil liberties groups and pro-poor lawyers working together.

**Source** ActionAid India <sup>5</sup>

## 6. Accountability

### Accountability enhances performance in disaster reduction

A need for accountability lies at the heart of people-centered governance for disaster risk reduction. All too often, governments and their agents make promises that are either not put into action, or fail to reach the

poorest and most excluded groups of people. When this happens and people are left vulnerable to disaster, they need to be able to hold decision-makers to account.

The negligence of political leaders often results in widespread suffering in emergencies such as flood or famine. Victims can exercise (or withhold) their vote, but otherwise there are few sanctions that they can impose on their leaders, particularly in young democracies where other accountability mechanisms are fragile.

Where participatory processes have opened up the necessary spaces, people have been able to demand accountability, transparency and responsiveness from government institutions.

However, there is no single mechanism that will work in all contexts or pave the way to total accountability. For example, a free media can act as an accountability mechanism, but can only successfully expose abuses of power if other actors, such as opposition parties and civil society, are willing to back up demands for accountability. Therefore the strengthening of accountability is the responsibility of all actors involved in disaster risk reduction in support of poor and excluded people.

#### Box 5: Citizen action promotes policy change for disaster reduction in Bangladesh

In northwest Bangladesh the citizens' committee for protecting vulnerable people in Haor areas identified two issues that exacerbated the problem of flash floods. These were delays in allocating resources for the annual maintenance of submergible embankments, and the lack of participation by local government and vulnerable people in the maintenance process.

The Ministry of Water Resources recently announced changes in government policy as follows:

- An allocated fund for the annual maintenance of the embankments to be

- available two months earlier than was previously the case.
- Contracting practices were amended, with maintenance now being the responsibility of the project implementation committee, which is made up of local government officials, local civil society, NGOs and local vulnerable people; this work used to be carried out by contractors and supervised by the water development board.

The policy changes have come after many years of citizen action, including:

- undertaking policy research and social audits
- disseminating the findings to raise awareness among politicians, MPs and government officials about the magnitude of the problem
- achieving significant media coverage of the issue following a long media campaign at local and national levels
- mobilising vulnerable people, organising human chains, etc
- entering into dialogue with key government officials
- providing officials with practical solutions.

**Source** ActionAid Bangladesh

## 7. National cooperation

There must be cooperation at a national level for disaster reduction to be effective

There are many different organisations and institutions within any given country working for disaster risk reduction, including international agencies, inter-governmental organisations, government institutions and NGOs. From a governance perspective, this creates a complex institutional field, often characterised by uncoordinated policies, plans and actions. This can, in turn, lead to programme duplication and contradictions, with potentially damaging effects on those poor and vulnerable people for whom support is intended.

Government and state institutions have an important role to play in ensuring coordination and cooperation between government departments and other agencies working in the risk reduction sphere at national and local levels. This role extends to integrating disaster risk reduction into development planning to ensure that planned development will not in itself create new hazards and potential disasters.

## 8. International cooperation

### Effective transnational accountability agreements promote safety outside a country's borders

Disasters do not respect international boundaries, and disaster reduction policies and actions in one country can affect other countries either positively or negatively. All too often, these situations are characterised by a lack of international and regional coordination. There is, therefore, a need to develop mechanisms for international cooperation, wherever risks cross political boundaries.

Countries have different risk management philosophies, and handle trans-boundary risk issues in different ways. Their regulations and implementation mechanisms may also differ, as may management constraints, opportunities and styles. Unless there are institutional mechanisms to facilitate cooperation, this situation can lead to disagreement and conflict, particularly when there is already political tension or conflict between two countries.

There is an important role for region-wide institutions that can promote cooperation in an open, transparent and trustworthy manner. International contact, between both governments and civil society, allows dialogue and information flow. Parliaments should hold their executives responsible for maintaining cross-border links at all times for humanitarian reasons, whether or not governments are on good terms. Rapid international arbitration procedures are also needed to reduce cross-border disasters.

### Box 6: The Mekong River Commission

The people of the Mekong basin are amongst the poorest in the world, with an average daily income of less than one dollar per day, whose livelihoods have always depended on water. Many are subsistence farmers reliant on rice, wetland plants and wild-caught fish. In many places in the basin, fishery is one of the few sources of employment for an increasingly young, often landless rural population. The lower Mekong basin produces approximately 2% of the world's fish yield, including oceans. Rice is essential too: between 1990 and 2000 the area planted with rice increased by an average of 10% every year.

Tens of millions of people depend on the river system for their food. Unfortunately, the increasing population in the existing socio-economic environment is placing huge pressure on this fragile resource, as increased fishing contributes to habitat loss and alters the quality and quantity of the water. While flooding remains an important phenomenon for the sustainability of wetlands and fisheries, the flash floods provoked by changes in land use bring death, devastation and economic cost to the region. The Mekong Delta also needs to be protected against increasing saline intrusion.

The Mekong River flows through Laos, Thailand, Vietnam and Cambodia. Recognising the need for regional action, on 5 April 1995 these countries decided to cooperate to ensure the sustainable development of water and water-related resources in the lower Mekong basin. An inter-governmental body, the Mekong River Commission, was created for this purpose. One of its four main areas of cooperation is protecting the people and the environment through flood management and water quality protection

## Key priorities for the World Conference on Disaster Reduction: from strategy to action

ActionAid calls on ministers, government delegates and key officials participating in the negotiations at the World Conference on Disaster Reduction to ensure that the following key messages are included in the outcome document, Building the resilience of nations and communities to disasters: framework for action 2005-2015, and in the possible declaration:

- people-centered governance is a prerequisite for disaster reduction
- the most vulnerable people must participate in accountability processes in order to sustain governance for disaster reduction
- freedom of and access to information on policies, rights and major decisions enables meaningful participation in disaster reduction
- stronger local governance enables locally appropriate decision-making for disaster reduction
- policies and obligations for disaster reduction need to be legally enforceable
- development projects must be subject to public scrutiny before approval, to ensure that they are not creating new disasters
- effective trans-national accountability agreements will promote safety outside a country's border.

People-centered governance is also a prerequisite to ensure that the framework for action 2005-2015 is translated into action based on locally appropriate means. The partnership between state and non-state actors must be stronger, and the relationship more accountable to make for resilient nations, communities and households.

A safer world is possible.

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- 2 Devereux, Stephen (2002), State of disaster: causes, consequences and policy lessons from Malawi, Action Aid, London
- 3 Pan American Health Organisation (October 2004) Disasters preparedness and mitigation in the Americas, Washington
- 4 Khurshid Alam and team (2003) Public accountability and famine reduction in Ethiopia, Emergencies Unit, ActionAid UK, Addis Ababa and London
- 5 ibid

## Contacts

### Roger Yates

head of international emergencies team  
Mail: RogerY@actionaid.org Tel. +44 77 3402 3375.

### Khurshid Alam

policy advisor, international emergencies team  
Mail: KhurshidA@actionaid.org Tel. +44 77 5373 8146.

### María Jesús Izquierdo Carballo

responsible of disaster risk management & humanitarian action.  
Ayuda en Acción  
Mail: mizquierdo@ayudaenaccion.org Tel. +34 915 226060

### Shashanka Saadi

theme leader, disaster reduction. ActionAid Bangladesh.  
Mail: Shashanka.Saadi@actionaid.org

### Wahida Bashir Ahmad

associate coordinator. ActionAid Bangladesh.  
Mail: wahida.ahmed@actionaid.org

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### ActionAid International

Post net Suite #248  
Private Bag X31  
Saxonwold 2132  
Johannesburg  
**Telephone**  
+27(0)11 880 3221  
**Facsimile**  
+27(0)11 880 8082  
**Website**  
www.actionaid.org

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Johannesburg  
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### Ayuda en Acción

c/ Infantas, 38  
28004 - Madrid  
Spain  
**Telephone**  
+34 91 5226060  
**Facsimile**  
+34 91 5328402  
**Website**  
www.ayudaenaccion.org

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**The authors and contributors:** Dr. Eleanor Fisher, Roger Yates, Koy Thomson, Khurshid Alam, Nasreen Pervin Huq, Dr. Alberto Arce, Dr. Salahuddin M Aminuzzaman, Seema Fazilat, Patrick Watt, Stephanie Ross, Tony Darham, Adam Malik, Shyam Sundar Jnavaly, Kazi Maruful Islam and Mustafa Talpur.

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