

# WHD FEATURE



## Disasters cripple efforts to achieve the MDGs

The victims of civil wars and protracted conflicts are overwhelmingly civilians, especially women and children. An estimated 20 million people have become refugees, and 25 million others have been displaced within their own borders in 52 countries.

On December 26, 2004, a tsunami killer wave struck in several Indian Ocean countries killing 30,500 people in Sri Lanka, displaced a million more and wiping out some 112,000 homes. In Indonesia, the coastal settlements of Aceh province lost 100,000 people half a million were rendered homeless. More recently, hurricane Katrina nearly destroyed the entire city of New Orleans killing thousands and displacing millions in the process.

Flooding and droughts that translate into famines affect millions of people in Asia and Africa where civil wars and debilitating poverty add to the devastation. After 14 years of civil war, 85 percent of Somali people live in slums or partially-destroyed homes.

Rapid urbanization, poverty, poor governance and lack of resources and capacity particularly in developing countries present additional risks. And although disasters destroy lives and livelihoods everywhere, poor people in urban areas are more vulnerable because they inhabit densely populated settlements that lack basic services.

But disasters also create opportunities for re-thinking the development process. “Disasters can provide opportunities for sustainable development. Sustainable relief and reconstruction require rehabilitation efforts to be integrated into long-term development strategies” says the UN-HABITAT report; *Post-Conflict, Natural and Human-made Disasters Assessment and Reconstruction*.

For instance:

- Many settlements in Tsunami-hit cities of Sri Lanka and Indonesia had showed that they were highly vulnerable to disasters even before the disaster struck. And when it did, it gave national authorities and residents an opportunity to rebuild in a manner that could reduce their vulnerability by moving to higher grounds.
- Perpetual flooding in Bangladesh has led to land reclamation on higher ground less prone to flooding.



- In Maldivian Islands, many households had inhabited smaller atolls each of which sheltered a few homesteads. After the tsunami, the government moved families to safer ground.
- An international early warning system was created in January 2005 at World Conference on Disaster Reduction in Kobe, Japan.

Although the world has, and continues to experience such devastating disasters, there has not been a significant shift in investments towards disaster mitigation which ought to be the first step towards managing disasters. Seldom are communities aware of the hazards they face nor do they have much faith in mitigation measures. So, when disasters strike, such communities are often unprepared for the eventual devastation and end up relying heavily on outside humanitarian rescue.

Mr. Dan Lewis, the Chief of UN-HABITAT's Disaster, Post Conflict and Safety Section argues that investing in disaster mitigation is considerably cheaper than the cost of recovery and re-development.

"To prevent a disaster costs as little as 7 percent of the entire cost of recovery. However, there is a growing mind shift about vulnerability," he said citing the political commitment reached in the Kobe Conference.

In some instances, countries and cities affected by disasters have benefited from overwhelming global response. This happened in the immediate period following the Indian Ocean tsunami when the world pledged US\$6 billion to the affected countries. In many cases, global response to disasters tends to tilt more towards humanitarian assistance than towards financing redevelopment.

"This is because of the difficulties entailed in convincing donors and governments in affected countries to think beyond the immediate humanitarian need," Mr. Lewis said.

The UN-HABITAT approach to disaster management revolves around the belief that sustainable recovery has to begin with a home and a job as this is the only way lives and dignity of those affected can be sustained in the immediate aftermath and into the future. This strategy lays importance on cleaning up critically-affected areas, rehabilitation of basic infrastructure, land use planning, rehabilitation of shelter and economic recovery and restoration of livelihoods.

Following the tsunami, UN-HABITAT's Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific and the Disaster Management Programme helped to prepare the UN's flash appeal. It also established a Tsunami Human Settlement Recovery Facility with seed capital of US\$1 million which is working on the sustainable reconstruction of settlements in the affected countries to support governments, local authorities and communities to mitigate and manage human disasters.

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However, there are a number of challenges which include getting the affected people to embrace and understand the need for a different way of life, logistical problems entailed in taking investments to disaster areas and funding shortfalls.

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*Journalists around the world are encouraged to write similar stories about meeting the MDGs in their own cities and about slum upgrading.*

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