

Before Disaster Strikes

Why thousands are dying needlessly each year in preventable disasters

A report from Tearfund

“There must be new thinking about how we do aid work. Focusing primarily on emergency responses like air drops of food and pulling people from the rubble is no longer enough. Disasters can be prevented and people can be equipped to save their own lives.” Sarah La Trobe, Tearfund Policy Officer, Environment and Disasters

Tearfund is one of the UK's leading relief and development agencies, working in partnership with Christian agencies and churches around the world to tackle the causes and effects of poverty. Tearfund works with partners in over 60 countries in Africa, Asia, Latin America, Central America, the UK and Ireland. Around the globe, many of Tearfund's partners work alongside poor communities in implementing measures to reduce the risk and impact of disasters.

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Executive summary

Four years ago this month, torrential rain and flooding brought devastation and catastrophe to Mozambique and some of the most dramatic helicopter rescues scenes to our television screens. In recent years, hundreds of thousands of people in the developing world have perished in natural disasters. Hurricane Mitch struck Central America in 1998, killing 27,000 people and 20,000 died in the Gujarat earthquake in 2001. In December 2003, at least 30,000 people died in the earthquake that hit Bam in Iran.

Natural disasters in poor countries are on the increase and pose a huge humanitarian challenge to the international community.

- 98% of those killed and affected by natural disasters come from developing countries, underlining the link between poverty and vulnerability to disaster
- In 2001 alone around 170 million people - nearly three times the population of the UK - were affected by disasters
- By 2025 over half of all people living in developing countries will be highly vulnerable to floods and storms

There was a time when we did not know where disasters would strike. But today we know which countries are most disaster-prone. Flooding in Bangladesh and drought in Ethiopia are hardly a surprise. In Britain, other European nations and the US, we invest millions of pounds into reducing the risks associated with floods, earthquakes and droughts. Yet we spend very little of our international aid budgets on helping poor communities to do the same.

- 3 months before the Mozambique floods of 2000, its government appealed to the international community for \$2.7 million to prepare for the impending crisis. It received less than half this amount. After the floods hit, more than \$100 million of emergency aid was sent in by the international community. At a subsequent conference, a further \$450 million was pledged for rehabilitation costs
- It has been estimated that for every \$1 spent on preparing for a disaster, a further \$4-10 is saved in the cost of recovering from it

Tearfund believes that new thinking and action is urgently required by the international community. Thousands of lives could be saved each year in developing countries and millions of pounds made to go further, if more emphasis was placed by governments, local authorities and relief and development agencies on helping vulnerable communities reduce the risks of disaster.

Moreover, if this does not happen, millions of people will never escape the poverty trap, as with each new flood, drought and cyclone, precious gains being made in poverty eradication are being swept away. *"We lost in 72 hours what we have taken more than 50 years to build,"* Carlos Flores, Honduran President stated after Hurricane Mitch struck his country in 1998.

When it comes to crises in poor countries, the international community concentrates much of its efforts on emergency responses such as pulling people from the rubble, air-lifting people to safety and providing emergency food, water and sanitation. Such life-saving work is vital. The truth is, however, that some disasters can be prevented.

A major hazard that hits a well-prepared community need not result in a major disaster. For instance, there was minimal loss of life when Hurricane Isabel battered the east coast of America in September 2003 and only three people died in the Californian earthquake three months later. The risk of disaster can be reduced through measures such as ensuring homes and other buildings are

built to withstand natural hazards. And such measures are not always dependent on wealth. Protection against floods can be achieved by planting trees, particularly on steep slopes to reduce rainwater run-off and in coastal areas to reduce storm damage for example.

In the coastal Thai Binh province of Vietnam, which is battered by 8-10 typhoons a year, 2,000 hectares of mangrove were planted with support of the Red Cross. The trees acted as a buffer zone, protecting land, property and human life. But they also created valuable exports such as shrimp and crabs, creating more prosperity with which the poorest could survive future shocks.

"Natural hazards are a part of life. But hazards only become disasters when people's lives and livelihoods are swept away. The vulnerability of communities is growing due to human activities that lead to increased poverty, greater urban density, environmental degradation and climate change." UN Secretary General, Kofi Annan, October 8 2003, International Day for Disaster Reduction

It might not always be possible to prevent a disaster, but it is always possible to be prepared for one. **It is both indefensible and illogical not to help communities prepare for disasters, when very often, thousands of lives could be saved by even the simplest of measures.**

- In the high mountains of India, people hang chimes on ropes above rivers upstream of villages. The bells give warning of flash floods
- In Bangladesh, communities at risk of flooding bury supplies of quality seed and non perishable food in water tight bags under ground so that they can be retrieved when the flood subsides
- In the municipality of La Masica, on the Caribbean coast of Honduras, local people were trained in preparing for disasters and an early warning system for floods was put in place. In contrast to neighbouring communities, not a single life was lost in La Masica when Hurricane Mitch struck in 1998

There is a long history of aid money being used to 'bandage the wounds' rather than 'prevent the injuries'. New research by Tearfund, which canvassed the views of donor governments and financial institutions, reveals that they are aware of the urgent need to spend money on seeking to prevent disasters, but they struggle to do so because:

- Many working in the development sector do not fully understand the concept and practice of disaster risk reduction and how it relates to their work
- Measures to prevent disasters often fall between the different disciplines of relief and development work. Relief experts see it as a development role and vice versa
- Disaster risk reduction competes with many other pressing development concerns such as HIV/Aids, conflict and debt/trade

There is now an urgent moral and financial imperative for donor governments, financial institutions and aid agencies to adopt new thinking about aid budgets and programmes. Money and expertise must be urgently directed into reducing the risks of disasters in order to help the world's most vulnerable communities safeguard their lives and their path out of poverty.

"We must shift from a culture of reaction towards a culture of prevention. Preventative action is not only more humane than curative measures, it is also more cost effective." UN Secretary General, Kofi Annan

Recommendations

- Governments, including the UK, should make demonstrable progress with implementing the agreements they made at the World Summit on Sustainable Development on climate change and disaster risk reduction
- Donor governments, financial institutions and NGOs should act to prevent disasters in light of the threat they pose to long-term development (including attainment of the Millennium Development Goals).
- At CSD-12¹ (New York, April 2004), natural disasters should be recognized as a major barrier to achieving water and sanitation agreements
- Governments, aid agencies and local authorities should work alongside poor communities in vulnerable countries to identify and reduce the risks they face
- National governments of disaster prone countries should include measures to reduce the risk of disasters – such as reforestation, watershed protection and food security - in their poverty reduction strategies and plans
- Donor governments, financial institutions and NGOs should ensure that every policy decision and programme proposal for the developing world calculates whether the proposed action will increase or decrease the risk of disaster – and then take appropriate action
- Donor governments, financial institutions and NGOs should develop practical tools/checklists and specialist support/training to aid development professionals in their analysis of disaster risk
- The UK government (DFID) should implement the International Development Committee's (IDC) recommendations on climate change and disasters as a matter of urgency
- The IDC should review DFID's policy on disaster risk reduction as a follow-up to its 2002 inquiry
- Industrialised countries should redouble efforts to reduce their greenhouse gas emissions, recognising the role that climate change plays in increasing the risk of disasters. A first step would be to ratify the Kyoto Protocol

¹ CSD is the United Nations Commission on Sustainable Development. It was created in 1992 to monitor and report on implementation of the 1992 Earth Summit agreements made in Brazil. It is now co-ordinating the process of implementation of WSSD agreements. The twelfth session of the CSD (CSD-12) will meet at UN Headquarters in New York from 14-30 April 2004. CSD-12 will focus on **water, sanitation and human settlements**

Introduction

In many communities around the world totalling millions of people disasters are, quite literally, waiting to happen.

Battling against the growing number of floods, droughts and cyclones, millions of people living in the world's poorest and most vulnerable areas are increasingly at risk of disaster – and consequently of losing their lives or livelihoods.

Britain and other developed nations spend millions on their own natural disaster defence programmes, as seen in recent years when the UK was affected by flooding and Hurricane Isabel battered the east coast of America. In each case there was minimal loss of life and greatly reduced loss of property and infrastructure because there were systems and resources in place to cope with them.

But when it comes to the developing world, little money and effort is spent on such preventive actions. It is often spent **after** disaster has struck, as seen time and time again on our TV screens as emergency teams pour in to rescue and bring medical aid and relief to victims of flood, famine, disease and cyclone. Many need not have been in such danger if suitable measures to reduce the risk of disaster had been undertaken in advance.

On the fourth anniversary of the Mozambique floods, and just weeks after the devastation caused by the earthquake in Bam, Iran, Tearfund believes that new thinking and action is now urgently required.

Tearfund and its partner agencies and churches around the world have identified that ensuring communities are equipped to reduce the risk of disasters is critical to tackling suffering and poverty in the 21st Century.

Reducing the risk of disaster means working with local people and experts to identify known or likely risks (such as floods, landslides etc) and putting in place measures to:

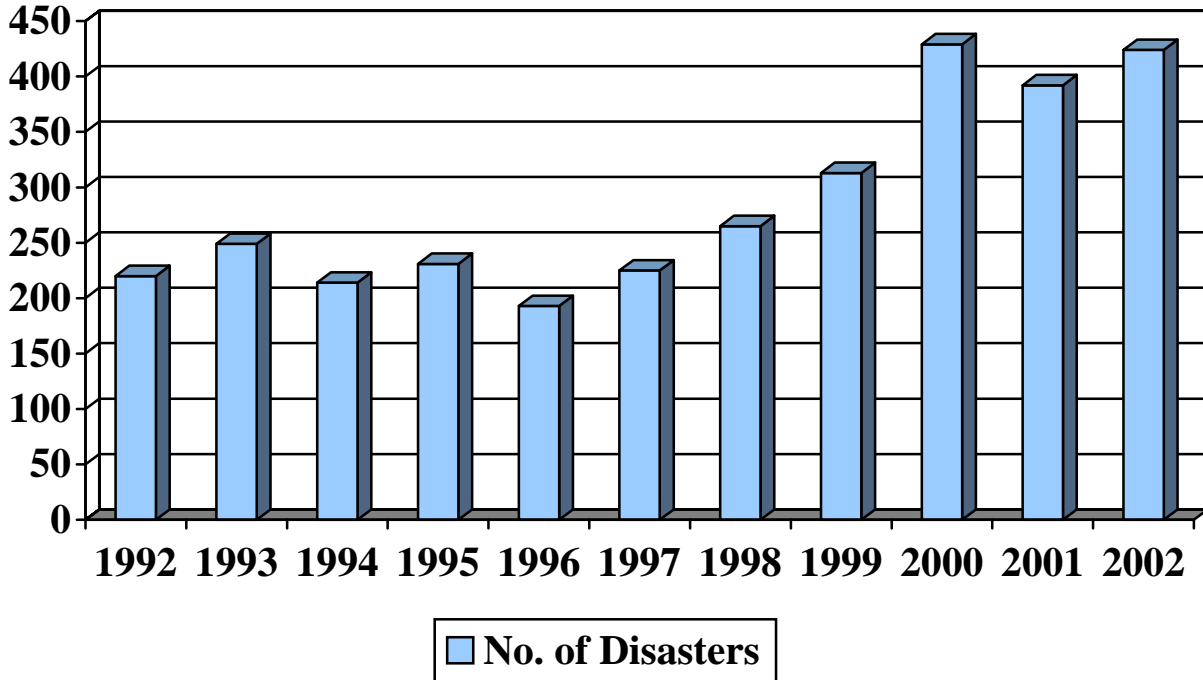
1. Minimise the impact of these when they strike – for example, creating policies to reduce vulnerability such as strengthening buildings and not building on flood plains
2. Prepare for disasters - for example by building flood shelters, creating stores of non-perishable food and emergency supplies in a safe place and setting up early warning and evacuation systems. Such preparation is vital because most lives are saved in the first 48 hours of a natural disaster. Very often, as is the case for rapid onset disasters such as earthquakes, the first emergency relief aid from the international community may not arrive until 72 hours after disaster strikes.

This report, *Before Disaster Strikes*, outlines research carried out by Tearfund in 2003 into donor governments and financial institutions' attitudes to disaster risk reduction. The report examines:

- The increasing frequency of natural disasters and the increasing risk of disaster for the world's poor
- The advantages of ensuring communities are equipped to minimise the impact of disasters, both in terms of lives and money saved
- The reasons why donor governments are failing to invest sufficiently in helping countries and communities reduce the risks of disaster

Disasters on the increase

In recent years, the world has witnessed a dramatic rise in the number of disasters:



Source: Statistics taken from the World Disasters Report 2003

The number of people affected has risen dramatically:

- Three times more people were affected by disasters in the 1990s than in the 1970s¹
- When Hurricane Mitch struck Honduras in 1998, it left 10,000 dead and 3 million able to survive only because of aid donations²
- Much of Kachchh district in Gujarat state, west India was devastated by an earthquake in 2001 which killed nearly 20,000 people and made more than a million homeless
- Around 10,000 people and over half a million cattle perished in the cyclone that swept through Orissa, India in 1999
- In 2001 alone, 170 million people, nearly three times the population of the UK were affected by disasters³

The economic losses resulting from disasters have also increased significantly:

- Economic losses were five times higher in the 1990s than in the 1970s⁴

¹ Red Cross World Disasters Report, 2002

² Red Cross World Disasters Report, 1998

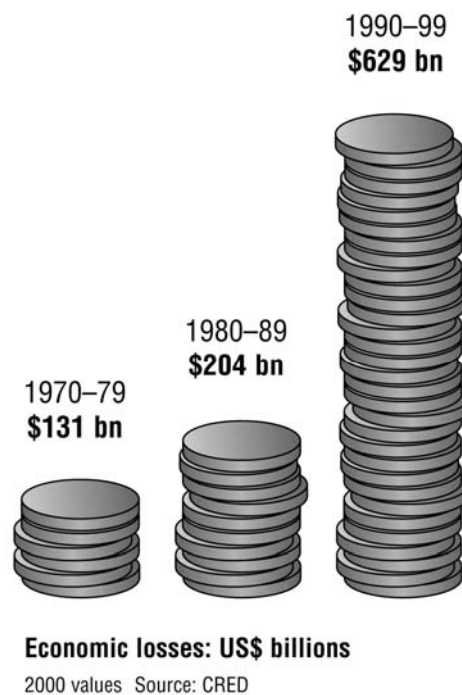
³ Red Cross World Disasters Report, 2000

⁴ Red Cross World Disasters Report, 2002

- Nearly two million houses were destroyed in the 1999 Orissa cyclone, which is widely described as one of the worst cyclones India witnessed in the last century
- In 1998, the Bangladesh floods destroyed thousands of homes, nearly half the people affected lost their household possessions and over 75% lost or had suspended their ability to earn an income¹



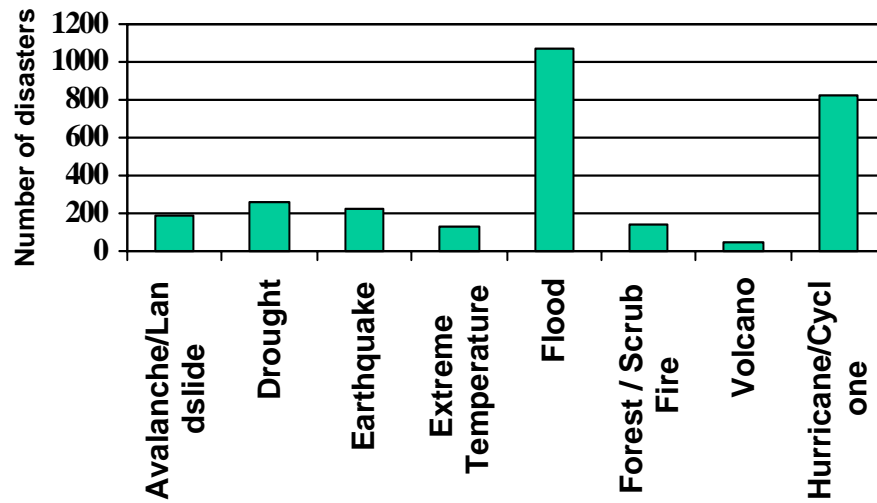
On the Bangladeshi island of Hatiya in the Bay of Bengal, many homes and farms are lost each year to erosion



¹ World Development Report 2000/2001

² Diagram: Red Cross World Disasters Report, 2002

Disasters between 1993 and 2002



Source: Statistics taken from the World Disasters Report 2003



In the slums of Phnom Penh, Cambodia, locals face regular flooding

There was a time when we did not know when or where such calamities would strike in the developing world. But now, with advances in science, it is increasingly possible to predict which communities, in which developing countries, are most vulnerable to earthquake, volcano, flood and drought.

Despite this however, more often than not, developing countries face these calamities unprepared.

The poor are the most vulnerable

98% of those killed and affected by natural disasters come from developing countries, underlining the link between poverty and vulnerability to disaster¹

By 2025 over half of all people living in developing countries will be highly vulnerable to floods and storms²

Rich countries have a far greater ability to reduce the effects of extreme weather events (such as floods and droughts) than developing countries. Proof of this can be found in statistics produced by the Red Cross, which reveal that 22.5 people die per reported disaster in highly developed nations, 145 die per disaster in nations of medium human development, while each disaster in countries of low human development claims an average of 1,052 people.³

Factors increasing the vulnerability of the poor to disasters include climate change, urbanisation, poor buildings and poor land use, environmental destruction and political, social and geographical marginalisation.

Climate Change

The world's climate is changing. Increases in global temperature and rising sea-levels are leading to more severe weather events. The IPCC⁴ predicts that global temperature and sea-levels will rise even further over the 21st century, increasing the frequency and severity of floods, droughts and cyclones.

The poor are less able to adapt to climate change than the rich, and will therefore be the most harmed by it. The IPCC predicts: 'The effects of climate change are expected to be greatest in developing countries in terms of loss of life and relative effects on investment and the economy'.

Very often it is poor people who live in areas where the risk of extreme weather conditions is the greatest. The IPCC predicts that global warming will cause the following over the 21st century:

- Increased summer drying over most mid-latitude continental interiors, with increased risk of drought
- An increase in tropical cyclone peak wind intensities
- An increased risk of floods and droughts, associated with "El Niño", in many different regions

Urbanisation

In the past 40 years, while the overall world population has doubled, its urban population has increased fivefold. Up to half the people in the largest cities of the developing world now live in unplanned squatter settlements (around a billion people). Many squatter settlements lack even the most basic infrastructure -health and fire services, dykes and drains, telecommunications, piped water and sanitation - and are therefore ill equipped to cope when disaster strikes.

¹ World Disasters Report 2001

² World Disasters Report 2000

³ World Disasters Report 2001

⁴ IPCC = Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change

- Poor building and land use

"At no time in human history have so many people lived in cities clustered around seismically active areas. Destitution and demographic pressure have led more people than ever before to live on flood plains or in areas prone to landslides. Poor land-use planning; environmental mismanagement; and a lack of regulatory mechanisms both increase the risk and exacerbate the effects of disasters" UN Secretary General, Kofi Annan¹

Poor people often live in homes that offer little protection from floods, storms and earthquakes. In some countries, even critical buildings such as hospitals are not necessarily safe-guarded against disaster, as was so tragically demonstrated in Bam, Iran.

The poor are also often forced to live on marginal and flood-prone land. Hundreds of thousands migrate each year to safer ground or to temporary camps - for example, along the river flood plains of India and South East Asia. On the Bangladeshi island of Hatiya in the Bay of Bengal, many homes and farms are lost each year to erosion, but their owners are too poor to buy land elsewhere.



Nur Mohammed is one of the island's 400,000 inhabitants. He lives in a shack at the north end of the island. Where his house used to be is now submerged underwater, half a mile from the shore. "I'm aware of the risk," he says, "but there's nothing much I can do, because I don't have the money to buy land or to go somewhere else."

Environmental destruction

Poor people often have to resort to bad environmental practices to survive, such as slash-and-burn agriculture and deforestation, which increases the risk of flooding and landslides. They are also vulnerable to environmental destruction caused by others. For example, it is estimated that an area of rainforest the size of England is destroyed each year, partly by commercial logging and cattle ranching for foreign markets.

Political, social and geographical marginalisation

Poor communities often face political, social and geographical marginalisation, which increases their vulnerability to disasters. In Honduras for example, wealthy powerful elites and illegal loggers are clearing vast tracts of land for their own use, thereby increasing the risk of drought, flooding

¹Kofi Annan, UN Secretary-General, Foreword to 'Living with Risk: A Global review of disaster reduction initiatives', ISDR

and landslides for local poor communities. The rural poor also frequently do not have rights to reasonable quality land, and so are forced to live in vulnerable areas.

And they are often denied a voice in politics and the media, meaning it is difficult for them to defend their rights especially when their interests conflict with the interests of the politically and socially powerful.

“In Honduras 70% of the land is mountain. Over 20 years an elite took over the best land and left everyone else without land and forced them to move to the city to look for work, or to live on the river banks. The gap between rich and poor is very dangerous” says Alexis Pacheco, Tearfund Regional Adviser.

Poor people living in remote areas may not receive early warning of disasters (or even relief assistance). When Hurricane Mitch struck Honduras, communities living in rural areas such as La Mosquitia received little or no information and had no means of evacuation. Tearfund workers living in this area at the time wrote: *“Communications with the outside world are very poor, there exists no emergency procedures and the local Miskito people have no organised system to deal with such situations. It is not the place to be in the event of a hurricane.”*

Cost of disasters

Years of development threatened with each disaster

- Hurricane Mitch was one of the worst natural disasters to hit Central America. In Honduras, around 10,000 died and 3 million people were left dependent on aid. The cost of the damage in Honduras was put at \$3.6 billion by the United Nations Development Programme – around 60% of the Honduras annual GDP. The UK Government’s Department for International Development (DFID) reported that 60% of bridges, a quarter of schools and half of agricultural production was destroyed. Decades of development work was destroyed overnight.

The Honduran president, Carlos Flores commented:

“We lost in 72 hours what we have taken more than 50 years to build.”

Disasters widen the gap between rich and poor

- **24 out of the 49 least developed countries face a high risk of disaster – at least six of them have suffered between two and eight major disasters per year in the last 15 years¹**

Developing country governments frequently do not have the resources to look beyond the reconstruction stages after a disaster has occurred to reduce the long-term vulnerability of the poor. Very often it is only the rich in society that have the resources to regain their previous way of life.

Therefore, disasters can widen the gap between rich and poor, as poor people, caught in a vicious cycle of repeated disasters and emergency aid, are unable to improve their standard of living.

Poverty plays a big role in keeping people vulnerable to disasters. And in the same fashion, disasters keep the poor in poverty by consistently wiping out the few resources they have.”
World Bank 2000

¹ Disaster Profile of Least Developed Countries, United Nations Development Programme, 2001

Reducing the risk of disasters

There is strong evidence to show that equipping vulnerable communities to anticipate and reduce risks, can reduce the impact of disasters or even prevent them from happening. If disaster does strike, a well-prepared community is better equipped to cope and recover from it, hence saving lives and increasing cost-effectiveness from every aid dollar.

It is estimated that in the 1990s while \$50 billion a year was spent on overseas development assistance, disasters caused \$69 billion a year in damages¹

The US Geological Survey has calculated that economic losses worldwide from natural disasters in the 1990s could have been reduced by \$280bn by investing just one seventh of that sum in disaster risk reduction².

Examples of how existing disaster risk reduction measures are saving lives and money include:

- Cyclone shelters, early warning systems and other measures in the Bay of Bengal are protecting communities from major cyclones
- The planting and protection of 12,000 hectares of mangroves by the Red Cross in Vietnam has cost around US\$ 1.1 million, but has helped reduce the cost of sea dyke maintenance by US\$ 7.3 million per year³
- In La Masica, Honduras, early warning flood systems and training for the local community ensured that not a single life was lost in La Masica when Hurricane Mitch struck in 1998
- When Hurricane Michelle hit Cuba in 2001, effective disaster planning ensured that 700,000 people were evacuated to safety⁴



In Bangladesh, locals dig up bricks so houses, previously destroyed by flooding can be relocated to higher ground

¹ World Disasters Report 2002, International Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies

² World Disasters Report 2001, International Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies

³ World Disasters Report 2002, International Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies

⁴ World Disasters Report 2002, International Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies

The ability of local people to resist the impact of disasters should not be under-estimated. In fact, local coping mechanisms must form the basis of international development support.

For example, two Tearfund church partner agencies in Honduras, OCDIH (Organismo Cristiano de Desarrollo Integral de Honduras) and CASM (Comision de Accion Social Menonita), are working alongside more than 80 poor communities in Honduras, encouraging them to plan for disaster as they seek to develop their communities. Tearfund partners have been working alongside locals in:

- Drawing up 'risk' maps of the areas most prone to flooding and mudslides
- Building specially-designed 'swing' bridges that can withstand strong winds
- Relocating exposed people's homes to higher ground
- Planting trees in river basin areas most prone to flooding
- Planning escape routes for villagers in case of hurricane
- Adapting home designs to withstand high winds
- Planting drought resistant crops

New research calls for new thinking by governments

Background to the Research

In 2001 the UK Parliament's International Development Committee (IDC) began an inquiry into Global Climate Change and Sustainable Development. Tearfund supplied written and oral evidence to this inquiry, and urged the UK government (DFID) to intensify its efforts to reduce disasters in vulnerable regions at community level. The IDC subsequently wrote a report for DFID which contained many conclusions and recommendations for action. For example, the IDC stated: 'We are concerned that too much focus on the short-term responses to extreme events could undermine progress towards longer-term development goals' and 'We recommend that DFID support renewed efforts to mitigate climatic disasters....'¹

Later that same year, significant attention was given to natural disasters at the World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD) in Johannesburg, revealing that disasters are a global concern. Agreements on climate change and disaster prevention were made and included in the Summit's 'Plan of Implementation'.

All governments have, for example, agreed to: 'Reduce the risks of flooding and drought in vulnerable countries...'² and 'Provide financial and technical assistance to strengthen the capacities of African countries...for effective disaster management, including observation and early warning systems, assessments, prevention, preparedness, response and recovery'.³

¹ Global Climate Change and Sustainable Development Third Report of Session 2001-02 Volume 1

² Paragraph 35 (D) of the WSSD's Plan of Implementation

³ Paragraph 59 (A) of the WSSD's Plan of Implementation

Nevertheless, this issue is still not receiving sufficient attention and funding. In October 2003, in a speech at the UN high level dialogue on financing for development, the UK Secretary of State for International Development stated: “We are seriously under-investing” in disaster preparedness.

New Research

During 2003, Tearfund held face-to face meetings with donors including the UK, US, Canadian, Swiss, Swedish governments, the European Union, the United Nations and World Bank, to gain a better understanding of their attitudes towards helping vulnerable communities reduce the risks of disasters.

The research revealed that while ensuring communities are equipped for disaster makes both economic and moral sense, aid officials informed us that it often remains a low priority within institutional donors’ relief and development plans, processes and practical implementation.

There is a long history of aid money being used to ‘bandage the wounds’ rather than ‘prevent the injuries’, with the international community concentrating much of its efforts on responses such as emergency feeding, pulling people from the rubble and air-lifting people to safety. For example:

- **Following the floods of 2002 in central Europe, the EU re-established the Solidarity Fund – a reserve of 1 billion euros per year to be used within EU member countries only after a disaster event has occurred**
- **Six months before the Mozambique flood disaster of 2000, its government appealed to the international community for US\$2.7 million to prepare for the impending crisis. It received less than half this amount. After the floods hit, Mozambique received US\$100 million in emergency assistance. Then, at a subsequent conference, a further US\$450 million was pledged by the international donor community for rehabilitation**¹

Tearfund’s research revealed that measures aimed at reducing the risks of disaster are not built into development programmes as a matter of course but are done on a random, ad hoc basis.

*“Many of us in our rhetoric talk about (risk reduction), but in practice I think very little is done in terms of integrating these issues into development planning.” Johan Schaar, Head of Division - Humanitarian Affairs and Conflict, Swedish International Development Agency*²

The reason for this is threefold:

1. **Lack of Understanding:** Many working in the development sector lack an understanding of the relevance of reducing the risk of disasters to their work
2. **Lack of Ownership:** development and relief professionals each see disaster risk reduction primarily as the responsibility of the other
3. **Competition:** There is big competition from other pressing development concerns such as HIV/Aids, conflict and debt/trade

Lack of Understanding

Tearfund’s research found that:

- Development sectors of donor organisations often lack awareness of what disaster risk reduction entails. Moreover, most organisations suffer from a lack of communication between sectors and departments. In many cases specialists’ expertise and knowledge of the subject is not shared with development departments as a matter of course

¹ Tearfund report October 2003: Natural Risk Reduction – The policy and practice of selected institutional donors

² ‘Natural Disaster Reduction – the policy and practice of selected institutional donors’ – Tearfund research 2003

Lack of Ownership

“On the whole, development and emergency funders each see disaster risk reduction primarily as the responsibility of the other and therefore it has remained an area of marginal concern to both parties”.

- British Red Cross study NGO Natural Disaster Mitigation and Preparedness Project

- The research confirmed that this problem persists because disaster relief specialists feel unable to give ‘disaster risk reduction’ the long-term approach it requires and development specialists often do not perceive ‘short-term’ disasters as their remit.
- There is a persistent, erroneous assumption that pro-poor development automatically reduces disaster risk, so the development community *already* owns the problem.

Competition

- Tearfund’s research found that disaster relief specialists are unable to fully tackle long term disaster risk reduction because of the pressure to respond to an increasing number of disasters.

“The scale of human needs right now in the world today is so overwhelming, simply meeting humanitarian needs exceeds all the systems we have in place”- Everett Ressler, Senior Programme Officer, Office of Emergency Programmes, UNICEF

“...good [disaster risk reduction] more than pays off ... the only real limitation is that when push comes to shove, are you going to do mitigation or are you going to respond?”- Jeff Borns, Director, Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance

- A key problem is also competition from other long-term development concerns such as HIV/Aids, conflict and debt/trade

Conclusion

The rich world's scant investment in reducing the risk of natural disasters in vulnerable regions is illogical and indefensible.

Rich nations, when facing a threat to their security or well-being, mobilise and invest massive resources to protect their interests. They do not do the same for poor countries threatened by disaster, although they frequently plough major resources into relief and recovery operations once a disaster has struck. It would make more sense for rich nations to invest greater resources in disaster prevention with vulnerable countries. As Ressler¹ observes, '...in light of increasingly fragile social, political, economic and natural environments, the longer we delay in addressing risk reduction and preparedness, the greater the impact, scale and cost of emergencies'.

Measures to reduce disaster risks must be systematically integrated into all relief and development planning and programming in vulnerable regions. Unless such a systematic approach is adopted as a matter of urgency, preventable disasters will continue to undermine the efforts of poor people to escape poverty and the efforts of rich countries to help them. More investment in reducing disaster risks as a component of relief and development programmes, on the other hand, will save lives, safeguard development efforts and add value to them.

On 14th November 2003, Tearfund and Cranfield University co-hosted a conference in London on natural disaster prevention. The conference was primarily aimed at key governments and financial institutions, and was well attended by them. The conference represented an unprecedented opportunity to discuss the obstacles and problems faced when seeking to address the issue of natural disasters. There were high levels of agreement among delegates on the need for a more systematic approach to reducing disaster risks in vulnerable countries. There was also widespread agreement on the means and methods to achieving such an approach, which included many low-cost, practical actions. There is no reason why progress cannot now be made on this issue and more assistance given to poor and vulnerable communities around the world *before* disaster strikes.

Tearfund recommends that:

- Governments, including the UK, should make demonstrable progress with implementing the agreements they made at the World Summit on Sustainable Development on climate change and disaster risk reduction
- Donor governments, financial institutions and NGOs should act to prevent disasters in light of the threat they pose to long-term development (including attainment of the Millennium Development Goals).
- At CSD-12 (New York, April 2004), natural disasters should be recognized as a major barrier to achieving water and sanitation agreements
- Governments, aid agencies and local authorities should work alongside poor communities in vulnerable countries to identify and reduce the risks they face
- National governments of disaster prone countries should include measures to reduce the risk of disasters – such as reforestation, watershed protection and food security - in their poverty reduction strategies and plans
- Donor governments, financial institutions and NGOs should ensure that every policy decision and programme proposal for the developing world calculates whether the proposed action will increase or decrease the risk of disaster – and then take appropriate action

¹ Everett Ressler, Senior Programme Officer, Office of Emergency Programmes, UNICEF

- Donor governments, financial institutions and NGOs should develop practical tools/checklists and specialist support/training to aid development professionals in their analysis of disaster risk
- The UK government (DFID) should implement the IDC's recommendations on climate change and disasters as a matter of urgency
- The IDC should review DFID's policy on disaster risk reduction as a follow-up to its 2002 inquiry
- Industrialised countries should redouble efforts to reduce their greenhouse gas emissions, recognising the role that climate change plays in increasing the risk of disasters. A first step would be to ratify the Kyoto Protocol

Tearfund's research report, 'Natural Disaster Reduction – the policy and practice of selected institutional donors' can be found at www.tearfund.org/policy

Appendix

Tearfund research objective and methodology

During the course of February and March 2003, Tearfund held face-to-face meetings (or where this was not feasible, conference calls) with nine key institutional donors to determine:

- a) the level of priority they place on disaster risk reduction within their relief and development policy and practice
- b) the rationale behind this level of prioritisation.

Discussions with donors were guided by seven preset questions. The donors were selected by Tearfund's Environment and Disasters Cluster group as representative of a broad range of actors in the field of risk reduction.

Questionnaire

1. How and where does your organisation focus its resources to reduce disaster risks? i.e.
 - * in which countries
 - * in which sectors (e.g. agriculture, health, public education, etc)
 - * at which levels (i.e. community level, national, regional, etc)?
2. How does it make such selections?
3. How/where does disaster risk reduction fit into your organisation's relief and development structures and processes? (Does it think disaster risk reduction should be promoted as a separate entity or fully integrated into development planning/programming?)
4. What level of priority does disaster risk reduction have within your organisation? i.e.
 - * long-term security of risk reduction programmes
 - * number of staff working on the issue
 - * proportion of overall development budget spent on risk reduction?
5. Can you explain the reasons behind your organisation's current level of expenditure on disaster risk reduction? What would cause your organisation to allocate more resources to it?
6. How does your organisation evaluate the effectiveness of risk reduction measures? Does it believe risk reduction is cost effective? (Has it undertaken any cost-benefit analyses?)
7. Do you have any other comments or observations (e.g. trends in risk reduction expenditure, previous difficulties, future challenges, etc)?