

## **Relief in sight? How well prepared is Australia to respond to a crisis in our region?**

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### **The context**

Approximately 25% of natural disasters that hit globally in the last decade occurred within this region. World Vision works in 18 countries in the Asia Pacific Region, and these experience an average of almost one natural disaster every two and a half months in each country!<sup>1</sup>

The number and intensity of “natural” disasters is increasing. The term “natural” is used guardedly as many commentators are looking at the link between human activity and climate change on one hand, and the increased frequency and severity of disasters on the other. Perhaps “un-natural disasters will become a more accurate term.

Disasters such as flooding, hurricanes, earthquakes and tsunamis have been features of the regional hazardscape in recent decades. However, a review by 7 international NGOs including WV, of global trends through to 2015, identified additional factors that will seriously exacerbate community vulnerabilities, these being:

- adverse environmental factors, especially global warming,
- urbanisation,
- migration
- and HIV/AIDS.

Each one of these is projected to have significant impact in the Asia Pacific region.<sup>2</sup>

### **Reflection before next steps**

What should Australia be doing now to that ensure adequate and appropriate preparations are made in the face of such a deteriorating hazardscape? To answer such a question, it is instructive to look back at recent experience in a range of humanitarian contexts.

The Asian tsunami of December 2004 captured the attention of the world and prompted unprecedented generosity on the part of donor governments and the public, resulting in not only unprecedented support for the disaster response by governments (both host and donor) and aid agencies, but also increased scrutiny of the same.

Many organisations including World Vision (WV) have institutionalised rigous learning processes to identify weaknesses in their capacities and capabilities, as well as promoting emerging better practices. As an example, a publication from my own department in April this year presents a comprehensive review of findings and trends arising from almost one decade of humanitarian action by World Vision.

Display copy of “Poised for a Break Through”

### **Areas of focus?**

On what therefore do we focus to be better prepared in our region? From the perspective of a non-government organisation (NGO), should this be upon enhancing disaster preparedness and response mechanisms, including professionalisation of relief staff, prepositioning relief supplies

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<sup>1</sup> Statistics are available from the Emergency Events Database (EM-DAT) maintained by WHO Collaborating Centre for Research on the Epidemiology of Disasters (CRED) on <http://www.em-dat.net/> Numbers quoted are based on datasets created from advanced searches by country, period and disaster type.

<sup>2</sup> Ambiguity & Change : Humanitarian NGOs Prepare for the Future. August 2004. Peter Walker and Larry Minear, Tufts University, USA.

and equipment, and securing sufficient financial resources to launch credible disaster responses? While such endeavours are important and necessary, experience suggests that of themselves, these will prove to be inadequate. If Australia is to be as effective as it potentially could in the next crisis, more comprehensive and integrated approaches will be required of all sections of the humanitarian community.

### **Disaster risk reduction**

There is growing recognition emerging within the humanitarian community that much greater analysis and understanding of disaster contexts and their associated communities is needed if disaster management is to have profound and lasting positive impact on the resilience of communities to disaster 'shocks'. Analysis of emerging and existing disaster contexts indicate that application of a "disaster risk reduction" (DRR) frame at community and national levels not only lays a more conducive foundation to disaster management, but also results in greater positive impact in communities.

It was most pleasing to see just yesterday the Media Release from the Parliamentary Secretary to Mr Downer's office that an additional \$15 million will be spent on our region to reduce the impact of disasters. I understand that much of this expenditure will be in the context of disaster risk reduction strategies. The commitment of the Minister & Australian Government to DRR in the region is to be applauded.

The DRR frame effectively combines Early Warning, Preparedness and Mitigation together in a single "packaged approach". However, it adds additional dimensions that places greater attention on risk management and continuity of development.

All communities have strategies to cope with stresses and hazards. It should be remembered that members of local communities often provide as much as 80% of total emergency assistance to disaster victims. They are always first on the disaster scene and have considerable capacity (untapped in many cases) to provide assistance. Assistance from external agencies on the other hand, make up a relatively small portion of overall emergency assistance provided. It can be late in arriving and inadequate in comparison to the needs. Unfortunately, many community coping strategies are progressively eroded by repeated "shocks", making these communities increasingly vulnerable. It is important that communities are enabled to build up resilience to the various seasonal disaster trends and shocks that hit them regularly.

However, we do need to remind ourselves that DRR is not something that was invented in the past 12 months. Discussions, agreements and protocols promoting DRR have been in place for almost a decade. A review this year looked at the progress in mainstreaming DRR by 11 institutional donors. It found that progress is lacking in impact at field level. I believe this review is indicative for much of the humanitarian community. Most are in agreement at the conceptual level, that DRR presents one of the best opportunities to make a difference in vulnerable communities. Most entities are also able to articulate the challenges to implementing DRR initiatives, and many have identified viable solutions to these challenges. Mainstreaming into practice is where most find progress elusive.

Let me speak for just a moment about the application of DRR principles from WV's experience at community level. Some of the most successful work of WV in this area is among highly vulnerable communities in Latin America such as Honduras, although we believe our experience there is highly relevant and transferable to the Asia Pacific region. By focussing on 3 critical areas, our staff and the communities they work with, have found it possible to make significant gains in increasing the resilience of communities that have previously been highly vulnerable to disasters. These 3 areas are

- Building risk management concepts into all development programming,
- Strengthen community and institutional leadership capacity for monitoring threats, managing early warning systems, and planning emergency response, and

- Improve community response capacity through formation and training of local development committees and community rapid response teams.

The techniques used and results achieved have not only been impressive, but more importantly, have stood the test of recent disasters.

### **Think globally and act locally**

Another aspect of Australia's readiness for the next crisis relates to the positioning of Australian humanitarian entities, and their ability to leverage the increasingly globalised humanitarian environment. Aid agencies, individually and collectively, are under increased scrutiny to be more effective and more accountable.

Good intentions are no longer good enough!

Consequently, an extensive range of initiatives has been launched, especially in the past 5 years, to bring improvement in the outcomes of humanitarian action by all sections of the humanitarian community, as well as academia and the corporate sector – resulting in outcomes such as

- greater coherence of action,
- professionalisation of staff,
- better strategic analysis,
- coverage of gaps in humanitarian response mechanisms,
- development of cross-sector partnerships,
- industry protocols and standards,
- accountability to beneficiaries,
- principles of good donorship,
- minimum standards in technical sectors,
- principles of partnership,
- and many others.

While many NGOs are finding the diverse regime of these initiatives to be almost overwhelming in their call for organisational change and resources, most recognise the value and importance of these initiatives to their future effectiveness and relevance.

With projected hazardscapes in the region having a deteriorating trend, reluctance by the humanitarian community in Australia to “think globally and act locally” will not only find us wanting in our efforts to be ready for the next crisis in the region, but will also deny ourselves and the region the opportunity of leveraging global resources and strategies that will make the difference between high quality, high impact and timely responses, and those that are mediocre. In this globalised context then, Australia must find its place at the table in relevant and value-adding roles. Australia has demonstrated comparative advantages that can position Australia well to leverage and mobilise resources, capacity and determination to ensure that its humanitarian community, along with its regional neighbours, are ready for the next crisis.

Thank you.