

BUILDING COMMUNITY-LED RESILIENCE:

ENABLING CONDITIONS TO IMPROVE CSO CAPACITIES

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SUMMARY

Despite concerted effort at both the international and national level over more than 20 years, activities in support of disaster risk reduction, which emerged with the aim of reducing the human and economic cost of disasters, have failed to flatten the continuing upward curve of disaster losses. The impact of disasters is felt most keenly at community level where small-scale recurrent ‘everyday disasters’ carry a greater human cost than more widely publicised ‘mega disasters’. The Global Network for Disaster Reduction has been carrying out local level social surveying since 2009 through its ‘Views from the Frontline’ programme and evidence from these surveys has identified factors accounting for the limited success of top-down approaches. By identifying characteristics of community led resilience, this contribution to the CIVICUS State of Civil Society report sets out enabling factors that would strengthen local resilience, highlighting the critical role of local civil society actors in creating a complementary bottom-up approach to disaster risk reduction.

INTRODUCTION

Wide recognition of the increasing human and economic costs of disasters led to the emergence of a new thematic area within humanitarian response, disaster risk reduction, heralded by the launch of the UN International Decade for Natural Disaster Reduction in 1990. It reflected the belief that preparedness would drive down the impacts and costs of disasters. While there have been notable successes over the last two decades, and statistics show a reduction in lives lost, they also show that the human and economic cost of disasters continue to escalate (EM-DAT, 2011). What is of particular concern is that losses from ‘everyday disasters’ – the smaller-scale recurrent disasters that are referred to technically as ‘extensive disasters’ – continue to increase.² These are the regular events, whether natural, social, or economic, which repeatedly knock back communities. Seasonal floods, droughts, local famines, diseases, fires, landslides, price hikes, fuel shortages, social instability, violence and conflict all take a continuing toll (UNISDR, 2011).

The recognised data for disasters and disaster losses is known to under-report the impact of everyday disasters.³ These often slip under the radar because the individual events are small-scale, often uninsured and under-reported. For example, a study of the impact of landslides (Petley, 2012) drew on several sources of data to demonstrate that the recognised data from the Emergency Events Database (EM-DAT)⁴ under-reported true losses by over 400%, partly because they ignore any event in which the loss of life is small. Even the United Nations International Secretariat for Disaster Reduction (UNISDR), is turning to sources other than EM-DAT to find out what is really happening at this level (UNISDR, 2011). By looking at local level data from sources such as DESINVENTAR,⁵ UNISDR is also finding that the real picture at local level is far bleaker than the EM-DAT statistics suggest. Losses from everyday disasters have a far greater impact than was previously recognised, most often on people living in poverty.

Evidence from the frontline

Since 2009 The Global Network for Disaster Reduction (GNDR) has been gathering evidence from the ‘frontline’ – local communities, CSOs and local government in urban and rural locations exposed to disasters – asking what local level perceptions reveal about trends and possibilities for action. GNDR is a network of over 500 CSOs in over 70 countries in the global South, who contribute to the Views from the Frontline (VFL) programme. VFL is a participatory multi-stakeholder local level survey designed to monitor, review and report on critical aspects of disaster risk reduction and progress in building resilient communities. The survey has been conducted in 2009, 2011 and 2013, gathering responses from over 20,000 people in 70 countries for the 2011 survey.



Why is it the reality at local level that extensive and recurrent disasters – though largely unnoticed and underreported by authorities, statisticians and the media – are taking a bigger and bigger toll on peoples' ability to build better lives? Evidence from VFL (2009) indicated a policy-implementation gap. Many policies intended to drive progress in disaster risk reduction are primarily created and then implemented in a top down way. They are led from an (often external) institutional and governmental level, depending on plans, leadership, knowledge and expertise far removed from the local scene. The result is a gap between high-level policy and practical implementation.

The 2009 survey also suggested that whilst there was significant local capacity and expertise, this capacity was disconnected from local and particularly national levels of government, who tend to regard local people as passive beneficiaries. Although many programmes and projects include participation as an element, in practice this often turns into co-option, failing to achieve local engagement or empowerment.

Views from the Frontline's analysis suggests that the missing ingredient that would drive real progress in disaster risk reduction, building resilience at local and ultimately national level, is an active citizenry, which have responsibilities as well as rights. To investigate this notion GNDR members turned their focus to what they saw as a key factor in strengthening resilience at local level: local organisation and partnerships – essentially, a focus on governance. The analysis (VFL, 2011) found that bridging the gap between top-down and bottom-up approaches demanded stronger local level governance through participation of all those concerned at local level. The study went on to show that good local governance depends on good local knowledge and the key ingredient for local governance based on local knowledge is an active citizenry. Data and case studies demonstrated that where citizens exercised their responsibilities in knowledge creation, decision-making and action, local level resilience was strengthened (AFL, 2011).

What is resilience?

While it may seem intuitively obvious that greater resilience is a good thing, and indeed many institutions and international CSOs have embraced the term recently, it can mean many things to many people. The word 'resilience' therefore requires unpacking. For some, it refers to 'bouncing back' and 'coping'. As such, it serves to maintain a stable status quo. For others coping is not enough and resilience is seen as building capacity for change and transformation. For others, it may mean addressing systems as a whole – an approach that has the benefit of linking together the many factors that may jointly affect resilience. Against this later interpretation, some feel that a systems approach is mechanistic, dehumanises society and ignores the critical issues of power and powerlessness (Weijer, 2013; Béné et al, 2012; Levine et al, 2012).

Whilst this discussion is about words, it is also about reality, as the meaning of the term defines how institutions and organisations will act, and critically, in practice what they will fund. GNDR takes a local and bottom-up view in defining resilience, based on the realities that shape local communities, their ability to deal with external shocks, and their capacity to improve their situations. This conception of resilience identifies a number of characteristics of such communities:

- a) They face complex multiple risks and uncertainty. People are confronted with a mix of economic pressures, increasing prices, human-created as well as natural hazards, social tensions, and violence and conflict, often combined with weak organisation and governance. With over 50% of the world's population now living in cities, the pressures resulting from unplanned overdevelopment make the situation worse. A new layer of poor people, the ultra-poor (people living on less than 50 US cents a day) are emerging, and having to rely on crime to survive, being unable to exist legally (Ahmed et al, 2007).
- b) Peoples' lives are repeatedly knocked back by small-scale frequent disasters. Climate change is increasing the frequency of climate related disasters.
- c) Small scale losses are under-reported, uninsured and do not attract national government attention or external resources.
- d) Affected people find that external policy and legislation is not tuned to local needs.

Given these characteristics how do such communities define and build resilience?

- a) They take a holistic (multi-risk) approach, tackling all the pressures that affect them rather than just one risk factor.
- b) They have to be flexible as risks and disasters are unpredictable.
- c) They have to learn from experience to improve how they deal with the situations they face.
- d) They have to work together in partnerships, as external support is weak or non-existent.
- e) As well as issues of protection, they try to improve their lives and livelihoods - strengthening resilience to shocks and stresses of all kinds (including natural and human created, and internal and external).
- f) They often resist external interventions, which tend to have limited engagement with local knowledge and local capacities and as a result have limited sustainability.

What factors can strengthen community led resilience?

From this bottom-up perspective there are several enabling factors that would enhance community efforts to build resilience:

- a) The starting point is a widely recognised view of how practical knowledge is created. The starting point is the principle of experiential learning, where people take the time and effort to take a step back from their actions and experience to reflect and learn from them they can change and improve their actions. Experiential learning is cyclical, involving a repeated cycle of taking action, reflecting and learning, and improving action based on that learning.
- b) Where people start to act and learn together they can build valuable local knowledge on how to tackle the local conditions that weaken them and knock them back, and in doing so implement activities to build their resilience.
- c) When people move from passivity to action and start to work together they start to attract and engage others. For example VFL (2009) has shown that partnerships start to form with community groups, local government and local business. People start to have a say in local governance, based on their local knowledge.
- d) The collaborations and partnerships that form at the local level can secure new political space, enabling people to be heard by authorities beyond this local level.⁶
- e) Many of the conditions that impede and knock back local people are beyond local control, strongly influenced by decisions about policy and economics. Greater political space for local people increases their influence, giving them a voice beyond the local level in tackling these underlying conditions.
- f) As local partnerships founded on local knowledge creation and participation grow in influence they can move beyond coping responses to changing the conditions that impact on them, building their ability to transform their situation and build their resilience.

This vision of community led resilience depends on creating new spaces for communities – spaces for learning and local action, collaboration and shared decision-making and engagement with political processes. These spaces combine to create an enabling environment in which community insights and capacities engage with expanding levels of partnerships and governance to build locally-owned resilience, progressively reducing the grinding impact of recurrent extensive disasters. The focus is therefore on these enabling factors rather than on rigid programmes, projects or methodologies, which evidence suggests are often inappropriate and are not strongly taken up by communities (IFRC, 2012).



As a CSO, GNDR is concerned with the specific roles of CSOs in pursuing the goal of community resilience. Key questions here are what factors can create spaces where active citizens can build resilience, and what role can



CSOs play in facilitating, supporting and mobilising this? The table below sets out disabling factors based on VFL studies and the vision presented above. Reflecting on these disabling factors, the table then sets out contrasting enabling factors – those that would create an environment in which CSOs can support community led resilience.

FACTORS INFLUENCING COMMUNITY LED RESILIENCE		
Disabling factor	Enabling factor	Why this factor is important
Rigid 'one size fits all' methodology frameworks.	Resource local civil society to facilitate locally appropriate actions.	Top down, technocratic and one-size fits all methodologies do not connect with local realities, do not engage with them, and are not sustainable. Local CSOs can facilitate the creation of spaces for learning and action.
Short termism.	Recognise that sustainable change takes time.	The demands of short project cycles do not support the building of social capital and sustainable resilience. Local CSOs have history and multiple links to community, unlike external visitors, and can sustain long-term work.
Working in silos.	Holistic, multi-risk perspective – collaborations between all stakeholders.	At the frontline people don't differentiate between risks but address them holistically. Local CSOs are often 'generalists' who can understand this holistic context.
Placing a low value on local knowledge.	Recognise the value of both existing and newly created local knowledge.	In terms of everyday disasters the most accurate knowledge of appropriate actions often exists locally. Local CSOs can facilitate activities to create new knowledge.
Placing a low value on local participation in governance.	Move from passive participation to enabling local people to have an equal voice.	Participation in theory often becomes co-option in practice. Local CSOs are in a position to understand how to engage local people as active participants in decision-making.
Placing a low value on partnership building.	Recognise and support the energy and insights resulting from strengthening local partnerships.	Formation of partnerships between different local level actors strengthens capacity and builds their political space to engage in governance. Local CSOs are important bridge-builders in these efforts.
Placing a low value on local civil society as 'boundary operators'.	Recognise and support the unique roles of local civil society as 'boundary operators' in facilitating learning and action and partnership building.	Local CSOs are key bridge-builders who can facilitate learning, action, partnership building and knowledge flows.
Placing a low value on local government.	Recognise that local government is often as under-resourced, lacking in capacities, and under-supported as local communities and CSOs and has a valuable role to play in strengthening local government.	Local government has a valuable role in channelling both resources and information between institutional levels. CSOs can build bridges between communities and local government.
Placing a low value on political and economic conditions and policies beyond the community and the importance of community links and collaboration to affect these conditions.	Recognise that underlying factors beyond local control can be better understood and tackled when actors at all levels work together.	Where local level actors build partnerships and collaborations, recognise that they can use them to secure political space, they are in a position to exert influence on underlying factors.

SUPPORTING CSOs IN STRENGTHENING COMMUNITY LED RESILIENCE

The table above highlights nine enabling factors that taken together can strengthen community resilience. Whilst this list is not exhaustive, it does encompass the key activities of learning, action and participation in governance. The spotlight is particularly on local CSOs and their capacities. GNDR has increasingly recognised the key roles of these often small organisations and the table

demonstrates the rationale for this priority. Precisely because they are small, locally embedded, often general in their purpose (engaging with the whole range of risks and issues in their locality), have strong local links and local legitimacy, they are in a position to facilitate and build bridges – the key activities required for local communities to secure spaces for learning, action, partnership building and engagement with governance.

For example, in the Battambang region of Cambodia a GNDR member, a small local CSO working in the region, facilitated the development of a community micro-insurance project (Cara, 2011). Through community consultations a revolving fund was developed, which supported villagers to make agricultural innovations and to start small businesses. These local improvements in turn reduced their vulnerability to the frequent droughts the area experiences. After this initial work, the CSO passed the leadership of the programme to the community. Three years after this point the fund and the programme had grown in scale. Local commune leaders had become interested and similar projects were being initiated in other communes. The CSO's role in envisioning and facilitating created the conditions for sustainability, triggered expanding partnerships and possibilities, and produced spin-offs such as increased social stability and reduced domestic violence without the need for provision of funding or continuing input.

But is this localised approach limited to small-scale community projects? This question was raised in a discussion about community action at UNISDR's Global Platform in 2011. Someone suggested that a local community could not, for example, build a dam. However GNDR was able to point to a case study of exactly this happening in Costa Rica (AFL, 2011). Just because community-led resilience may start small, does not mean these activities cannot have an expanding impact.

This chapter has identified major and seemingly intractable challenges in building resilience. They include the inexorable upward trends in disaster losses, the failure of top-down approaches to achieve real progress, and a continuing failure to value the huge potential contribution of civil society and communities to contributing knowledge and expertise in partnerships for change. The enabling factors listed in the table above highlight a range of straightforward shifts in attitude and resourcing. Taken together, they support and strengthen a complementary bottom-up approach for community led resilience, which can address and have impact on the prevalent everyday disasters that in total have a greater net human cost than mega disasters.

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What issue do you feel affected civil society the most in 2012?

New post-2015 developmental agreements are being negotiated at present, including the HFA, MDGs, SDGs and the Climate treaty. Civil society is engaged in these processes. However, there are signs that space for civil society engagement only opens at the behest of powerful government and institutional actors, who are equally able to close it again when they wish. What's more, civil society actors engaged in these negotiations are often isolated.

What do you feel can create a better environment for CSOs in 2013?

A coherent vision of the requirements for effective developmental frameworks, shared across a coalition of civil society actors, would support more holistic frameworks, balancing top down and bottom up perspectives and creating sustainable political space to maintain calls for effective implementation for the sake of the billions who most need it.

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1. This paper represents the views of the individual author and does not reflect any official position or recommendations of the Global Network for Disaster Reduction. Author can be contacted at terry.gibson@globalnetwork-dr.org.
 2. The term 'extensive risk' is defined as 'The widespread risk associated with the exposure of dispersed populations to repeated or persistent hazard conditions of low or moderate intensity, often of a highly localised nature'. (UNISDR, 2009) However it does not have a precise quantitative definition (UNISDR, 2011).
 3. The UNISDR biennial study found in 2011 that extensive risk - recurrent small scale disasters - had a greater impact on losses than intensive risk: *"The analysis shows that extensive risk accounts for only 9.6% of deaths and 20% of houses destroyed (a proxy for direct economic loss). Damage is much more extensively spread, with extensive risk accounting for 53.9% of houses damaged, 80% of people affected, 83.1% of people injured, 45.2% of damage to schools and 55.2% of damage to health facilities."*
 4. EM-DAT is the widely recognised Emergency Events Database maintained by the Centre for Research on the Epidemiology of Disasters (CRED).
 5. DESINVENTAR is a programme of work to gather local level data on disasters: <http://www.desinventar.org/>
 6. John Gaventa (2005) uses the 'power cube' to visualise opportunities for securing political power at local level, which may exercise influence on external conditions. He suggests there are closed political spaces, enabling authorities to ignore other voices. They may create invited political spaces, enabling a degree of participation but under the management of the authorities. He shows from a range of case studies how the formation of partnerships can bring pressure to bear to create new political spaces, securing a degree of power to influence external conditions – where none existed previously. A GNDR workshop (GNDR 2010) at which Gaventa collaborated with GNDR members recognised this process occurring in VFL case studies.