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Preparing for disaster: how rich and poor countries cope

Posted by: Yvonne Bokhour Posted date: December 18, 2012 In: Impact | comment : 0

I was in the midst of writing an article on disaster preparedness when disaster struck. Hurricane Sandy was barreling up the East Coast. Living right by a river, I had to [get ready](#).

Fortunately, my affluent coastal Connecticut town had lots of resources. Instructions were issued often on multiple media platforms. It was easy to download lists of things to buy and do. Sand bags were available at the local transfer station. Perhaps most impressively, my First Selectman kept in constant touch via text, email and voicemail; these Code Red alerts led eventually to my evacuation.

After hauling all the family heirlooms upstairs, I decided against the town shelter (a surprisingly comforting option), making a beeline for my brother's place in Massachusetts. Once safely ensconced, I kept tabs on my community and the entire tri-state region through online and broadcast media outlets, Facebook, and Twitter.

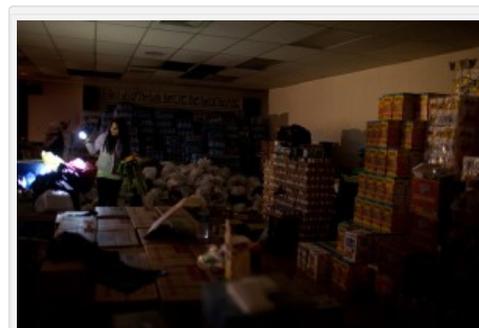
I was extremely fortunate. Floodwaters came perilously close to my place but in the end it was spared. Friends and neighbors, however, suffered terrible damage. [Homes as well as businesses were inundated with water](#) and assaulted by wind; some were destroyed altogether. The emotional toll was traumatic for many and remains challenging today while costly, laborious repairs continue. Nevertheless, as difficult as it's been for my community, things could have been worse. Connecticut's warning and preparations systems had made a difference.

Prior to the storm, when skies were clear and waters were calm, I'd interviewed two experts on disaster preparedness, both of whom work for [Save the Children](#), an international organization that creates lasting change for children in need. Save the Children had issued its annual [National Report Card on Protecting Children During Disasters](#). I'd wanted to compare and contrast preparedness in the United States with the developing world. How are we the same? How are we different? Can we learn from one another?

After Sandy, these questions seem even more poignant, more urgent. Climate science experts including [The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change \(IPCC\)](#) predict extreme weather events—such as storms, heat waves, floods, and droughts—[will occur more frequently](#) and with more intensity from now on. Preparations can no longer be delayed for disasters that seem far off and improbable. The time is now.

Developing countries know this all too well; they are ahead in their understanding, partially because they cannot hide, as Westerners do, from climate change impacts. As Ian Rodgers, Save the Children's Emergency Advisor/Disaster Risk Reduction and Preparedness, told me, "Our coping capacity mechanisms are able to mask any effects of climate change. I just turn up my air conditioner a little bit more or I move to another location."

Disasters can strike at any time, in any place. They have horrific humanitarian and economic consequences wherever they occur. Victims may lose their homes, their health, and their loved ones. Food, water, and power may be hard to come by; jobs may be lost. Rescue and recovery efforts are



Bianca Hulla sorts donated foods at a storm relief distribution center in Coney Island, New York. Photo: Matt Richter

painful and expensive—not only for individuals, but for nations.

Poor people, whether they live in developed or developing countries, are especially vulnerable. In New York City, for example, [residents of public housing facilities are still struggling](#) in dire conditions weeks after Sandy...weeks after their wealthier neighbors returned to normal lives.

But poor people in the developing world are far more likely to die when disaster strikes: 95 percent of natural disaster deaths occur there, according to the IPCC. A recent report anticipates [100 million deaths will result from climate change by 2030](#) if the problem is not addressed; 90 percent will occur in developing countries.

Why is death there more likely? Developing countries lack infrastructure—including buildings and roads designed to withstand floods, earthquakes and other traumas—as well as communication systems (such as Code Red alerts or 911 hotlines) and educational resources.

Also, many developing countries rely on agriculture to support their fragile economies. When floods inundate, or drought descends, rural populations lose not only their homes but also their food supplies and livelihoods. Disease and starvation can often result.

Governments hoping to eliminate poverty and stimulate growth are instead faced with massive rescue and recovery expenditures. But all countries, rich and poor, benefit substantially by disaster preparedness. This takes many forms (early warning systems, pre-positioned supplies, etc.), and planning is key.

Protecting children in the US

Children, of course, are most vulnerable of all, no matter where they live.

Save the Children headquarters, just up the road from my house, was not as lucky as me; our shared river overflowed its banks, flooding the building. Nevertheless its workers, many of whom were also dealing with damaged homes and/or power outages, came to the rescue of children throughout neighboring states, employing the very techniques I had discussed with organization experts only weeks before.

Jeanne-Aimee De Marrais, Save the Children's Domestic Emergencies Advisor, told me then US efforts to protect children in emergencies vary markedly by state. Connecticut is one of only 17 states to fully meet Save the Children's criteria for preparedness. The resources I'd found so helpful before the storm apparently exemplify readiness on several levels. Other states have more to do.

Save the Children looks at four basic standards they deem essential for ensuring the safety of vulnerable children in the US (68 million of whom attend childcare or school) in emergencies. [Does your state have:](#)

- A plan for evacuating children in childcare?
- A plan for reuniting families after a disaster?
- A plan for children with disabilities, and those with access and functional needs?
- A multi-hazard plan for K-12 schools?

According to the Report Card, 27 states (more than half) do not require plans for boys and girls with disabilities. Five states “fail to meet any of the preparedness standards” for childcare facilities or schools.

De Marrais says, “Parents assume that if a disaster or an emergency strikes children's needs will be protected.” But the Report Card shows “states are failing to require facilities to have adequate plans in place to ensure the safety and protection of children.”

Hurricane Katrina brought such shortcomings dramatically to the fore. Before that storm hit, De Marrais called governors' offices in Louisiana, Mississippi, and Alabama asking: “Where are the children being evacuated, where are the largest concentrations of families...? And straight across the board all three governors' offices told me, ‘We have no idea. If you find out any details, please call us back.’ At Save the Children, that was a massive red flag.”

Since then, the organization has been working at national, state, and municipal levels to develop guidelines for preparedness and practice. While it's worrisome only 17 states currently meet these guidelines, it's an improvement over 2008, when four met them.

Progress was apparent after Sandy, which De Marrais saw first hand as she joined colleagues in recovery efforts. This was especially true at the

federal level, where agencies prioritized children's needs as never before. But there are still major gaps in emergency planning—getting food to children in shelters, for example.

De Marrais is also concerned by rapid onset events such as earthquakes that might occur during school hours or the working day. She says, “You could, particularly in major metropolitan areas, have tens of thousands of children, some of whom are too young to...self-identify, who need to be reunified with their families. There are no plans, adequate plans, in place to facilitate the reunification of large numbers of children with their families.” (FEMA is now spearheading a framework for reunification.)

Of note, De Marrais says we are “the only country that hasn't signed the [Convention on the Rights of the Child](#),” a legally binding international treaty recognizing the human rights of children. This means “when we're trying to improve planning for children, we cannot do it from a child rights perspective.” On the other hand, in signatory countries “children have specific rights to access certain programs.”

Also, the US does not utilize [The Sphere Project](#), which provides international standards for housing, sanitation, and other basic necessities in emergencies. According to De Marrais, “In any other country you could call those up and say, look, you're not meeting this global standard.”

Protecting children in the developing world

Comparing preparedness in developed and developing countries is like comparing apples and oranges, explains Rodgers. For one thing, in the US “data and mechanisms are in place,” enabling experts to measure preparedness. In developing countries, such measurements are not available, so it's harder to see what's missing.

For example, in the US, mass shelters are used most often for short periods, while developing countries may require them for months at a time. Residents' needs are very different long-term; this is where Sphere standards help, for they aim to maintain the dignity of those recovering from disasters.

Rodgers describes several ways in which Sphere standards are applied: making sure victims have easy access to adequate water, ensuring separation and privacy between different genders and age groups...[the rules are extensive](#).

As part of their risk reduction efforts, Save the Children approaches schools—often used as mass shelters in developing countries—offering to add the showers, toilets and other items required to meet international standards. That way they'll be ready in an emergency.

Preserving access to food is a huge component of preparedness in developing countries. Malnutrition may result when populations are displaced after disasters; traditional foods upon which families have relied for generations are no longer available. Save the Children teaches mothers how to grow herbs in a bucket they can carry with them, on the run. Such herbs, when mixed with rice, will provide their infants and children with nutritionally sound meals.

Slow-onset disasters like droughts—induced by climate change—are a challenge of a different sort. Residents in places like Ethiopia or the Sahel region have their own masking techniques. Lacking water, they may sell their cattle, then their seed, to make do. But eventually their inability to find food catches up with them. Rodgers says, “By the time we realize that somebody is starving...they actually have been starving probably twelve months beforehand.”

Preparing for droughts involves, among other things, agricultural solutions: climate appropriate crops, for example, and dry land farming. Of note, developed and developing countries have much to share in this regard.

Rodgers, born in Australia, points out that the climates of his homeland and Ethiopia are very similar. Australia can apply its adaptation technologies in Ethiopia, expand its knowledge there, and then use its increased capabilities at home. He says, “An investment in Ethiopia is an investment in Australia's own future.”

Financing preparedness is a problem everywhere

Financing safer infrastructure—so schools, for example, are less likely to collapse and kill in a disaster—is an issue across the board, for both rich and poor countries. “People forget,” warns Rodgers, “that these things can happen, so it's hard to keep them motivated. That's the same for both developing countries and the US...we're facing the same motivations, the same fiscal queries.”

Unfortunately, continues Rodgers, “So often in a country, and I think in the United States it’s the same, a fiscal imperative trumps a social imperative.” Rodgers, in his role as Save the Children’s Emergency Advisor, will therefore explain to finance ministers the costs of doing nothing.

This can be tricky, for while Rodgers can predict what disasters will do, he can’t predict when they will occur. It’s hard for governments to justify massive preparedness expenditures, especially if years go by without a disaster. But financial imperatives can be compelling too: “If 1000 children die in one school building, that’s 1000 persons worth of taxable economic implications.” Rodgers will say: “Are you prepared to take this risk?”

Preparing for climate change

Interestingly, Rodgers notes, “People in Ethiopia or the Sahel...don’t care whether we talk about...natural disasters or climate change related disasters. It’s a disaster in their lives. We have to look at how to create a capacity...for adaptation.”

Rodgers says in the past, our species was able to adapt to its environment because the pace of change was manageable. But “we are losing that ability now...to adapt quickly enough to climate change...and it will overtake us. The West just hasn’t woken up and realized that as yet. And that’s because...we have a surplus of resources that will allow it to be masked.”

“But that day will come to an end,” Rodgers continues. “The sooner we wake up and realize...what’s happening in places like Ethiopia and the Sahel will happen to all of us. It’s merely a matter of time unless we react.”

What can we learn from developing countries? While I have, throughout this article, referred to the developing world and the developed world, we are in fact one world, sharing nature. We must listen to the pleas of poverty stricken countries, which feel the impact of climate change acutely, today. They know what we are now discovering, and their problems are fast becoming our own. By helping them, we help ourselves.



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