Intersections ✛

MCC theory & practice quarterly

Community-based disaster management

The past few decades have witnessed a dramatic rise in the number of people around the world affected by disasters, triggered both by human-made hazards (e.g. conflict, industrial accidents, arson) and natural hazards (e.g. typhoons, earthquakes, drought). Although the average number of annual deaths attributed to these events has decreased by almost half since 1975, the economic losses attributable to disasters have risen more than four-fold over the same time period (The International Disaster Database, 2014). And while the frequency of disaster events suggests that high income and low income countries experience a similar level of exposure, the costs of disasters—economic, social, physical and environmental—are disproportionately borne by the latter in terms of lives, livelihoods and social disintegration. The recognition that these losses constitute a major set-back in achieving the longer-term development goals of equitable economic growth, sustainable livelihoods and poverty reduction has led to increased attention by governments, donors and development and humanitarian organizations on finding a more holistic approach of analyzing and responding to these calamities.

Disaster management has become the umbrella term for a range of activities that occur both prior to and following a disaster event aimed at mitigating the economic impact of disasters on vulnerable, low-income communities (see figure 1). Broadly speaking, these activities are commonly grouped together under the two overarching concepts of *prevention* and *recovery*. On the prevention side, emphasis is put on mitigation and preparedness, whereby strategies are designed and implemented to reduce the risk of a disaster occurring within a given population and to minimize the impact of such an event when it does take place. Once a disaster occurs, however, attention shifts to *recovery*, which includes a relatively short-term relief response aimed at addressing the immediate needs of a disaster-affected community, combined with a longer term recovery strategy that ultimately seeks the restoration of the affected community. Ideally, this continuum of categories is cyclical rather than linear, where the recovery activities integrate mitigation strategies that reduce the likelihood and impact of a future disaster.
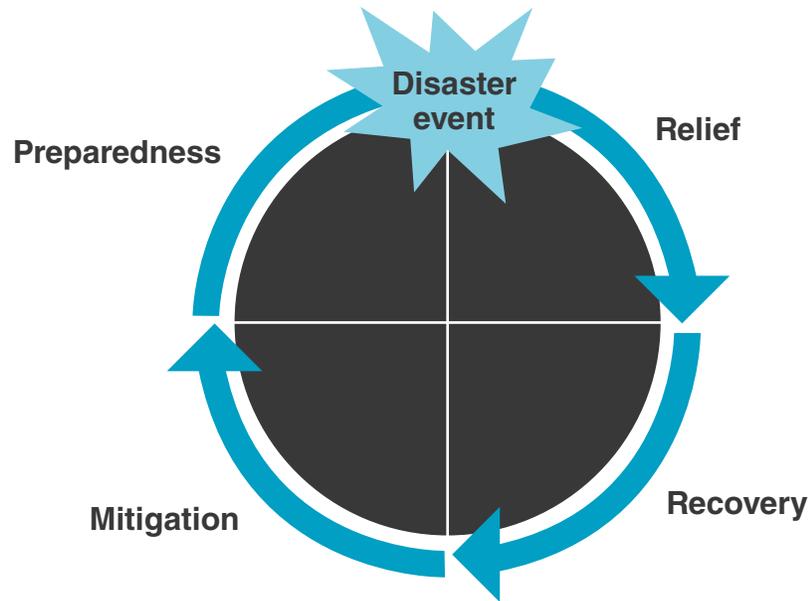
Disaster management cycle

Figure 1: Disaster management cycle

> **Community-based disaster management (CBDM) takes a bottom-up approach, recognizing that affected populations are best placed to identify their vulnerabilities and needs, while also acknowledging their agency to respond.**

Early applications of this framework were predominately implemented through a top-down, command-and-control approach that neglected affected communities in decision making and implementation. The results from these programs were largely seen as ineffective, inappropriate and/or unsustainable. The lessons learned echoed what had long been understood by many practitioners and academics in the development sphere—that genuine community participation is the key to effective programming. Thus the qualifier "community-based" was added to the framework of disaster management, representing the need to put local participation and ownership at the centre of all related programming.

In contrast to its predecessor, community-based disaster management (CBDM) takes a bottom-up approach, recognizing that affected populations are best placed to identify their vulnerabilities and needs, while also acknowledging their agency to respond.

Methodologically, CBDM works through deliberate engagement of community members in a way that empowers them to address the root causes of their vulnerabilities by transforming social, economic and political structures that generate inequality and leave them susceptible to further disasters (Salajegheh and Pirmoradi, 2013). For Mennonite Central Committee, this level of focus and engagement epitomizes the operational approach it strives for through the accompaniment of local community organizations and church partners in a process of mutual transformation.

The articles in this issue examine different aspects of CBDM, drawing on the diverse experience of MCC staff and partners working in unique settings around the world. Though the particular focus of each article varies widely, there are two characteristics that all contributions share. First, each relates to programming that falls within one or more phases of the disaster management cycle presented above. And second, each critically examines the opportunities and/or challenges of empowering local communities to manage the risk of disasters and other humanitarian crises in their settings effectively.

The opening article by Kevin M. Kamuya and Rand Carpenter explores the topic of disaster mitigation, describing the effectiveness of self-help groups among the Wakamba people in responding to the perennial threat of drought in East Africa. In the face of climate change and the increasing unpredictability of weather patterns, the article suggests that the community model, notwithstanding its own challenges, offers the best hope for successful adaptation through local innovation.

In keeping with the topic of prevention, the second article by Riad Jarjour and Andrew Long-Higgins provides a fascinating account of how an inclusive humanitarian response can serve as a powerful tactic to prevent violence and foster trust amongst diverse peoples. Their argument draws on an example from Syria, where a food assistance project implemented by community members of different faiths works to keep a varied network of communities together against significant odds.

In the third article, Ignace Gull and Christopher Ewert investigate the importance of partnerships and, through a case study of the Attawapiskat First Nation in northern Canada, remind us that effective community-based disaster management requires support of external actors. However, in exploring the community's relationship with the Government of Canada in response to a series of humanitarian crises, the article highlights some of the challenges communities face when a partnership is characterised by extreme power asymmetries.

In keeping with the theme of government, the fourth article by Bruce Guenther outlines a rights-based approach to disaster management, whereby the state (the "duty bearer") has a legal obligation to ensure the well-being and safety of its citizens (the "rights holders"). In the absence of effective government intervention, Guenther compares ways in which MCC partners in India, Ethiopia and Colombia are implementing responses to humanitarian crises through educating and mobilizing citizens around their rights to government services.

In the fifth article, Bal Krishna Maharjan explores the effectiveness of community-based network organizations (CBNOs) in responding to disasters in the context of Nepal. In bringing together representatives from multiple communities, CBNOs are able quickly to mobilize the assets of a wide network that ensures a rapid response to the immediate needs of disaster-affected members.

The final article by Kristen Chege, Wawa Chege and Kurt Hildebrand explores the dilemma that is often faced by international organizations as they decide how best to intervene in the aftermath of a major sudden onset disaster crisis: whether to work through informal structures or to act through more formal democratic institutions. Using MCC's experience following the 2010 earthquake in Haiti, the authors examine the opportunities and challenges the MCC team faced in working through informal camp management committees.

Christopher Ewert is a Humanitarian Relief and Disaster Recovery Coordinator for Mennonite Central Committee.

Learn more

Khan, Himayatullah, Laura Vasilescu and Asmatullah Khan. "Disaster Management Cycle—A Theoretical Approach." *Marketing & Management Journal*. 6/1 (2008): 43-50.

The International Disaster Database. Retrieved August 27, 2014, from http://www.emdat.be/natural-disasters-trends

Salajegheh, Sanjar and Nasrin Pirmoradi. "Community Based Disaster Risk Management (CBDRM) and Providing a Model for Iran." *International Journal of Engineering Research and Development*. 7/9 (July 2013): 60-69.

Shaw, Rajib and Okajaki Kenji. *Sustainable Community-Based Disaster Management Practices in Asia: A User's Guide*. Kobe: United Nations Centre for Regional Development, 2004

Drought mitigation in Kenya

To many who visit, East Africa appears as a paradise: pleasant weather, abundant wildlife, plentiful trees and blooming flowers throughout the year. Yet this region is also home to vast stretches of arid and semi-arid land, where obtaining sufficient water for crops, livestock and households is difficult at the best of times and impossible at the worst. The threat of hunger is perennial and ever present. Water availability is always at a premium. Life is *always* precarious, rendered more so by the threat (indeed, the virtual certainty) of major periodic droughts. For the Wakamba communities in Kenya, sand dams and dry land farming techniques are a response to those threats. In addition to meeting immediate needs of their community, these strategies illustrate the value of a shared commitment by local community groups to addressing their collective crisis and the local ingenuity and innovation available to mount an effective response.

The devastating droughts in the 1970s created desperate conditions in several different regions of Kenya. As community councils of elders in the region of Ukambani in Kenya considered disaster mitigation possibilities, the idea emerged from a local engineer to harvest water in structures called sand dams, allowing the use of stored water during the dry seasons. To the surprise of many, these sand dams proved highly effective. Yet the success of sand dams is not just one of innovative engineering. For Utooni Development Organization (UDO), the more profound lesson for community resilience and disaster mitigation is the spirit and flexibility embodied in community self-help groups.

For the Wakamba, the present ethos of self-help groups is deeply rooted in their historical-cultural traditions. Despite the disruption of many indigenous practices in Kenya beginning with colonial intervention, Wakamba communitarian traditions have persisted. In the indigenous *mwethya*—work group—individuals are seen as broadly obligated to the larger community from birth and throughout life. These individual obligations fit into this culture's system of communal response to new influences, whether environmental, religious, economic or cultural. The communitarian nature of the *mwethya* provides the local foundation for the formation of self-help groups, the key local structure by which sand dams are built and managed.

Engaging communities to realize their own agency in finding solutions has long been a vexing problem in development. To this end, the self-help group model of development mandates the identification of local resources and ability to organize within a community as a prerequisite to any other work. In practice, members cooperate to form a governance structure and evaluate their particular community's capacities and needs when proposing to work with UDO in the construction of sand dams. They also receive inspiration through interaction with other community self-help groups, which helps support continued creativity and motivation. To this end, UDO has found that local resources are often undervalued without the benefit of seeing through others' eyes. After meeting another self-help group or participating in an exchange visit, community members more easily realize the value in their own communities.

> **Through collective endeavour, life is made more fruitful and disaster situations more tolerable for individual families and entire communities.**

As successful as these initiatives have been in mitigating against droughts, this type of communitarian work is not without its challenges. Groups have been accused of exclusivity by non-members, a sentiment that causes social tension and risks the possibility of conflict. Moreover, in some disaster situations, desperation among community members prevents, at least in the short term, full participation in community-wide visioning or work projects: rather than focusing on the group, some heads-of-household feel obligated to ensure the survival of their nuclear families using strategies that help themselves at the expense of others.

However, notwithstanding these challenges, communities continue to work together with an obligation that is felt across time and place. Through this collective endeavour, life is made more fruitful and disaster situations more tolerable for individual families and entire communities. Over the decades these community groups have served as powerful disaster mitigating influences. UDO and other agencies, both locally and internationally, facilitate training and sometimes provide resources, but the heart and soul of these self-help groups are the community members themselves. They identify needs and solutions in their communities, provide labor for work projects, pool funds to sponsor projects or investments, bank seeds for future use and come together to build and then manage water harvesting infrastructure, such as the hundreds of sand dams in Kenya.

Today the pernicious onset of climate change has increased the frequency and intensity of droughts and led to general climatic uncertainty for small-holder farmers. These weather patterns have turned planting and care of crops into guesswork, while never-before-seen early morning frost and new diseases present unknown challenges to food security. The resulting poor harvests leave farmers unable to feed their families, pay fees for school or save seeds and make plans for upcoming seasons. Some are forced to abandon families, farms and their communities, seeking opportunities for casual labour elsewhere. Others, still, engage in cash-generating, and environmentally harmful livelihood practices, such as making bricks and charcoal. At present, sand dams and other water harvesting and retention technologies remain a viable solution, but in the wake of such extreme climatic changes, there will be a need for continued adaptation and innovation for new preventive measures that make survival possible. Yet despite the uncertain future for these communities, the one certainty that UDO has learned is that self-help groups will be an essential part of an effective response.

Kevin M. Kamuya is the Chief Executive Officer of Utooni Development Organization (UDO) based in Machakos, Kenya. UDO is a winner of the 2014 UNDP Equator Prize for sustainable land management in Kenya. Rand Carpenter is Co-Representative for Mennonite Central Committee in Kenya.

Learn more

Adger, Neil, Jon Barnett, Katrina Brown, Nadine Marshall, and Karen O'Brien. "Cultural Dimensions of Climate Change Impacts and Adaptation." *Nature Climate Change*. 3 (2013): 112-117.

Mugambi, Jesse. *Adaptation to Climate Change in Tropical Africa*. Nairobi: University of Nairobi, 2010. Available at: http://www.gronkirke.dk/fileadmin/filer/Topmoedet__klimakampagner_mm/KU_seminar/MUGAMBI_ON_ADAPTATION.pdf

Kuriakose, A. T., Heltberg, R., Wiseman, W., Costella, C., Cipryk, R. and Cornelius, S. "Climate-Responsive Social Protection." *Development Policy Review*. 31 (2013): 19-34.

Reid, Hannah, Terry Cannon, Rachel Berger, et al. *Community-Based Adaptation to Climate Change*. London: International Institute for Environment and Development, 2009.

Humanitarian assistance and social cohesion in Syria

> **A historically diverse host community in Qalamoun continues, to this day, to provide an example for how Muslims and Christians can not only live together, but thrive together.**

In any situation of crisis or conflict, the provision of humanitarian assistance aims to address basic needs related to the subsistence of those most deeply impacted. Responding to food security, water, sanitation, hygiene and shelter needs involves technical considerations requiring immediate attention. However, the provision of humanitarian assistance also provides an opportunity to engage affected communities in less obvious, but equally critical, strategic work aimed at the preservation of social cohesion within diverse communities. Through grassroots initiatives that foster positive relationships within communities threatened by the divisive factors of sectarianism, solidarity and trust can be achieved and sustained in the midst of open conflict. This conviction lies at the center of the philosophy of the Forum for Development, Culture and Dialogue (FDCD) as it approaches its work in providing humanitarian assistance to internally displaced persons (IDPs) in Syria.

Although the Syrian crisis has spared few as it has moved from village to village, certain areas have remained relative safe havens for those forced to flee their homes as the result of intense and often indiscriminate violence. The Qalamoun region, straddling the highway from Damascus to Homs in central Syria, is one such area. The diverse composition of the region provides a distinctive context to observe the tactical practice of distributing humanitarian assistance in a multi-faith environment as means of strengthening social cohesion and trust-building between different faith groups during periods of open sectarian conflict.

Long known for their hospitality, the people of Qalamoun responded with open arms to those who came seeking refuge from the intense violence in Aleppo, Homs and Damascus. In addition to welcoming displaced families into their shops, homes and schools, the people of Qalamoun immediately began organizing efforts to provide food and hygiene items to their new guests. As more and more IDPs arrived, and the need for humanitarian support quickly became evident, FDCD worked with its contacts in the Qalamoun region to form a local interfaith network of distributors and coordinators to respond to the crisis.

The purposeful inclusion of both Christian and Muslim partners in this process allowed not only the successful distribution of in-kind assistance to displaced families, but also helped to establish trust and cooperation between different faith groups. This approach has proved highly successful. As seen in the following case, this collaboration serves as a powerful example of how interfaith coexistence and solidarity are possible for both the host and IDP communities during a time when most external factors and voices appear to work counter to the idea of social cohesion.

Despite Qalamoun's reputation as a safe haven from the fighting that has ravaged Syria, its strategic location along the highway from Damascus to Homs has made it an attractive target for both the government and opposition forces. In October and November 2013 the allure of controlling this strategic location intensified as militant groups associated with the opposition attempted to wrest control from the Syrian government. Beginning in the village of Sadad and moving from village to village southward, forces aligned with the opposition moved into each village and immediately took control of vehicles and structures like homes,

schools and churches. In many cases, the armed groups refused to allow the local residents to evacuate the area.

For those who were able to flee, the confiscation of their vehicles forced hundreds to leave on foot. In response, FDCD's network of partners throughout the region quickly coordinated an effort to provide transportation for those forced to evacuate. When the presence of Islamist extremists in the area caused the movement of non-Muslims to be risky and greatly hindered, the Muslim communities of Qalamoun utilized their own vehicles to facilitate the safe evacuation of members of the Christian community to other villages in the area. In this regard, the deep partnership facilitated through the organization and distribution of humanitarian assistance in Qalamoun proved to be invaluable in the protection of the Christian community during this period of persecution and crisis.

A few weeks after the Syrian government regained control of Sadad, another group of militants associated with the opposition attacked the village of Deir Attieh. Proceeding in the same manner as the attack on Sadad, vehicles, structures and civilians were utilized by rebel forces in an effort to inhibit the Syrian military's efforts to retake the village. On one occasion, as the militants moved through the village, they attempted to enter the local Syrian Orthodox church. Upon entering the building, the armed persons were shocked to find members of Deir Attieh's Muslim community standing in the sanctuary. As the armed personnel approached, the Muslim residents of the community were resolute: "If you wish to defile this church and harm these people," they stated, "you will have to kill us first!" Upon hearing this, the militants left the building.

It is reasonable to assume that the consequences of the Battle for Qalamoun would have been far greater than the mere destruction of property without the network of inter-community and inter-faith partnerships facilitated through the local organization and distribution of humanitarian assistance. The strategic benefits of this deliberate approach to humanitarian distribution by an interreligious network for the maintenance of social cohesion in a time of conflict are clear. A historically diverse host community in Qalamoun continues, to this day, to provide an example for how Muslims and Christians can not only live together, but thrive together.

As many communities in Syria fall prey to the vicious cycles of hate, exclusion and persecution, FDCD sees great value and potential in this local approach to humanitarian assistance. Though the timeline for the Syrian crisis is unknown, steps must be taken now to preserve the social fabric of historically diverse and vibrant communities. If these steps are not taken, such communities run the risk of allowing hate and sectarianism to take hold and destroy any semblance of mutual understanding, respect, coexistence and dialogue.

Riad Jarjour is General Secretary of the Arab Group for Muslim-Christian Dialogue and president of the Forum for Development, Culture and Dialogue (FDCD), based in Lebanon. Andrew Long-Higgins is a former Intern at FDCD.

Learn more

Anderson, Mary. *Do No Harm: How Aid Can Support Peace— Or War*. London: Lynne Rienner Publishers, Inc. 1999

Jarjour, Riad. "The Future of Christians in the Arab World." In *Who Are the Christians in the Middle East*. Eds. Betty Jane Bailey and J. Martin Bailey, 12-21. Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 2003.

Lederach, John Paul. *The Moral Imagination: The Art and Soul of Building Peace*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005

> ❝ **Communities with strong partnerships are better positioned to manage a crisis than those who attempt to do so on their own.**

Power and partnership: responding to crises in Attawapiskat

The theory of community-based disaster management, which highlights the importance of community empowerment and the active participation of disaster-affected peoples in decisions around mitigation and response, is a welcome conceptual shift from previous theories that framed communities as passive victims who lack the capacity to assist themselves. In bringing the community to the fore, however, there is a risk that the focus sidelines the issues of partnership and power, two critical determinants of a community's ability to manage a disaster event. Just as no person is an island, all communities rely on a host of external actors for support in determining what response options are possible and for acquiring the necessary resources to implement those plans. These actors fall along a rather broad continuum that includes informal social networks, civil society organizations and formal government institutions. Simply put: communities with strong partnerships are better positioned to manage a crisis than those who attempt to do so on their own. But when the partner (e.g., a government agency) controls the resources that affected communities need, the ability of those communities to chart their own course is significantly diminished, as decision making power is largely left in the hands of others.

For all communities in Canada, government is one of the most crucial partners in disaster management. In the majority of these communities, local municipalities have the primary responsibility (in coordination with the provincial government) of managing the prevention of, preparedness for and response to disasters and emergencies that affect them, be they fires, floods, snowstorms or other humanitarian crises. The municipal governments and/or provinces and territories are also responsible for a vast network of infrastructure that is critical to the functioning and resiliency of these communities. A notable exception to this partnership model exists in First Nations communities, where the federal government has assumed responsibility for providing emergency management support, and holds all fiduciary responsibility. Moreover, under the Indian Act—a statute which governs the relationship between the Canadian state and registered First Nations peoples—responsibility for infrastructure falls to the federal government. It is a distinctive arrangement, characterized by an extreme asymmetry of power, and one which poses considerable challenges for First Nations communities seeking to mobilize in the face of seasonal disaster risks and ongoing crises. A look into the case of the Attawapiskat First Nation highlights these challenges.

Like many isolated communities in northern Canada, the Attawapiskat First Nation has found itself increasingly threatened by a variety of natural and human-made hazards that pose a serious risk to the community's existence: on more than one occasion, the community has seriously discussed the possibility of resettling elsewhere. While climatic hazards, such as flooding during the spring ice break-up, are nothing new for this community situated along the Attawapiskat River only a few kilometers inland from the coast of the James Bay, changing weather patterns have significantly reduced the predictability and scale of this annual event, thereby heightening the community's vulnerability to these floodwaters. In the face of this increased risk of flooding Attawapiskat has declared a state of emergency in three separate years since 2008, each time resulting in the

evacuation of a significant proportion of the approximately 1,900 persons living on the reserve at great financial and social cost.

Current plans for extensive mining in the lucrative "Ring of Fire"— Ontario's largest mineral reserve located upstream from Attawapiskat— pose an uncertain and potentially grave risk to the life and livelihoods of First Nations in the region, who are justifiably alarmed by the potential contamination of their water systems. For Attawapiskat, this would not be the first time they were affected by a human-made disaster related to resource extraction. In 1979, 30,000 gallons of diesel fuel—to date, the largest petroleum spill in Northern Ontario—leaked under the community's elementary school. Despite repeated efforts by Chiefs and band council members to call attention to the ongoing health problems suffered by students and teachers, the school only closed in 2001.

In addition to these discrete disaster events, a more chronic humanitarian crisis emerges from Attawapiskat's inadequate and substandard infrastructure, particularly its subpar housing and water treatment facilities. At present 124 families in Attawapiskat lack adequate housing, and substantially more have no access to treated drinking water. These families live in 24' x 36' bungalows sheltering 18 to 24 people sharing one bathroom and one kitchen. These specifications fall considerably below minimum shelter and sanitation standards recognized and observed by countless humanitarian organizations, including Mennonite Central Committee. Though this crisis was brought to light in 2011, when Chief Theresa Spence's hunger strike to demand a federal response made international news, it has been an ever-present issue for decades.

Despite the urgency and protracted nature of these crises, little progress has been made to address them in a comprehensive manner. In fact, the increasing rate of population growth in the community only exacerbates its vulnerability, as additional demands are put on infrastructure that is already inadequate. It would be a mistake, however, to assume that the community of Attawapiskat has not explored its own solutions to bring about change. In response to the annual flood risk, for example, the community seriously investigated several options, ranging from the construction of major dyke infrastructure to the seasonal migration of the community back to traditional spring camps. The government, however, had its own solution: evacuation and temporary resettlement. Another example of the Attawapiskat community organizing to mitigate its vulnerabilities to disaster occurred when, as a way of addressing inadequate housing and the exorbitant costs of building material, the Chief Assembly passed a resolution to establish a regional saw mill that would allow multiple communities in the area to access local natural resources at considerably lower prices than imported materials. The government, sadly, had its own flawed solution: woefully inadequate "temporary" shelters, which have since turned into subpar permanent housing.

There are many reasons why alternative solutions to the deficient answers provided by the Canadian government to the challenges facing Attawapiskat have not materialized and not all of them are external sources. That said, there are substantial obstacles within the current partnership between the federal government and First Nations communities that make it very difficult to achieve permanent solutions to the vulnerabilities First Nations communities like Attawapiskat have to disasters. First, payments from the government are unpredictable and often

Learn more

Buckland, Jerry, and Matiur Rahman. "Community-Based Disaster Management during the 1997 Red River Flood in Canada." *Disasters* 23/2 (1999): 174-191.

Epp, D., C. Haque, and B. Peers. *Emergency Preparedness and First Nations Communities in Manitoba*. 1998. Available at: http://publications.gc.ca/collections/Collection/D82-52-1998E.pdf.

ill-timed. For a community that is only accessible by air or by winter roads for the majority of the year, late transfers mean huge transportation costs that can render projects untenable. Second, the year-to-year allocation of funding by the government is insufficient to finance permanent solutions which require substantial up-front capital investments. This also makes long-term planning rather difficult. Finally, the fragmentation of the bureaucratic structure between various departments leads to temporary piecemeal solutions, when what is needed is a more holistic strategy that recognizes the multifaceted nature of these crises.

In exploring the challenge of a community-based response to crises within First Nations communities, the issues of partnership and power cannot be avoided. For the community of Attawapiskat to protect itself from hazards and ensure that each family has access to adequate housing and clean water, a serious commitment by the federal government to stand as an equal partner with Attawapiskat is required. This involves listening to the ideas of the community and taking seriously the concerns that have been raised with the current partnership model which disempowers First Nations communities who are best positioned to identify and implement measures to protect themselves.

Ignace Gull is the former Chief of Attawapiskat (1991-2001) and Grand Chief of the Mushkegowuk Tribal Council (2003/04). He is currently the President/Chair of the Specialized Solvent Abuse Treatment Center Board in Thunder Bay. Christopher Ewert is a Humanitarian Relief and Disaster Recovery Coordinator for Mennonite Central Committee.

> **Local partner organizations play an important role in mobilizing community members around their right to assistance and in holding governments accountable for the delivery of government programs under existing legislation.**

Rights-based approaches to disaster response and risk reduction

A rights-based approach shifts us away from viewing crisis-affected populations as the objects of charity or as passive recipients and towards recognizing their agency and rights as citizens. In this framework, disaster-affected communities are *rights holders* and governments are *duty bearers* who have an obligation to address the needs of their citizens. The Responsibility to Protect principle argues that in contexts where governments are unable or unwilling to respond to the needs of their citizens, the international community has an obligation to provide humanitarian assistance and protection. At its best, such responses involve international non-government organizations like Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) supporting the efforts of local civil society organizations who are often first responders to crisis.

In the context of humanitarian crises, a rights-based approach means that governments have the primary duty to ensure citizens have access to humanitarian assistance and to reduce overall vulnerability to disasters. With the support of MCC, local partner organizations play an important role in mobilizing community members around their right to assistance and in holding governments accountable for the delivery of government programs under existing legislation. In the absence of such a legal framework, MCC partners meet urgent needs and facilitate the formation of community-based organizations that are able to speak collectively to governments regarding their needs and priorities. This brief article compares ways in which MCC partners in India, Ethiopia and Colombia are implementing a rights-based approach in response to humanitarian crises in order to reduce disaster risk.

In India, where acute seasonal food insecurity remains a chronic problem for millions of Indian citizens, the federal government has instituted some of the most progressive food security legislation in the world through a series of measures under the Food Security Act. This includes national legislation, specifically the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MNREGA). Under MNREGA the government guarantees that all rural citizens have access to 100 days of seasonal employment, that is, daily wages in exchange for participation in the construction of public works.

In the nine years since its enactment, the implementation of the scheme has been patchy, with many citizens unaware of their right to seasonal employment in their communities. The impact of the legislation is also limited by a lack of knowledge, adequate resource allocation and implementation by local- and state-level governments. Long-time MCC partner in India, the Church Auxiliary for Social Action (CASA), implements a seasonal food-for-work scheme in communities where the government scheme is lacking or only partially implemented. In addition to filling the government void by providing access to food, CASA's Food for Community Mobilisation project—supported by MCC's account at Canadian Foodgrains Bank (CFGB)—seeks to educate and mobilize citizens to claim their right to employment under MNREGA. Increasing the number of citizens who have access to government employment is a key project outcome that CFGB, MCC and partners are supporting and monitoring.

In Ethiopia, MCC, in cooperation with several local partners, supports seasonal cash- and food-for-work projects. Like India, the government of Ethiopia has also implemented a national employment scheme—the Productive Safety Net Program (PSNP)—that aims to address predictable and preventable seasonal food insecurity. The coverage of the PSNP is inadequate, with government figures underestimating the number of people that require assistance.

In contrast to India where seasonal employment is a right or "guarantee," the PSNP in Ethiopia is not enshrined in any legislation and its implementation is at the discretion of international donors, policy makers and bureaucrats. In collaboration with district-level government, MCC partners implement parallel cash- and food-for-work schemes to provide greater access to social protection. While MNREGA in India is a right, and therefore demand-driven, in Ethiopia community members have no recourse to claim their right under the PSNP (Tessitore, 2011).

Community mobilization through the formation of self-help groups and district level community associations is, however, a key component of all of the projects in Ethiopia and encouraged by local government. These groups provide opportunities for community members collectively to set local priorities, build mutual self-reliance by saving and sharing resources and provide a platform for dialogue with local government.

Through the formation of community-based organizations and community mobilization, citizens are able to hold their governments accountable in order to realize their rights. For Ricardo Esquivia Ballestas, the director of Sembrandopaz, an MCC partner in Colombia, community empowerment is fundamental to addressing the needs of communities displaced by conflict. Community development, he says, has two wings: economic development and political action. Through community organizing and

Learn more

Green, Duncan. *From Poverty to Power: How Active Citizens and Effective States Can Change the World*. Rugby, UK: Practical Action, 2012.

Hickey, Sam and Diana Mitlin. Eds. *Rights-Based Approaches to Development: Exploring the Potential and Pitfalls*. West Hartford, CT: Kumarian, 2009.

Devereux, Stephen. Ed. *The New Famines: Why Famines Exist in an Era of Globalization*. London and New York: Routledge, 2007.

Tessitore, Savina. "One Step Beyond: From Social Protection Recipients to Citizens." In *Social Protection for Social Justice*. Ed. S. Devereux, et al. IDS Bulletin. 42/6 (2011).

mass mobilization facilitated by Sembrandopaz, Colombian citizens displaced by government military, para-military and rebel groups have been successful in some cases in receiving reparations from the national government.

Another MCC partner, Mencoldes, works with displaced persons in Colombia to access government services. In addition to providing food assistance and access to other essential household items, Mencoldes plays a critical role in informing conflict-affected families of government services available to internally displaced persons and providing legal support where such services are unfairly denied.

With case studies like this in mind, what might the implications be of a right-based framework for MCC's program? At least four principles present themselves:

1. Local civil society partners should play an important role in educating and mobilizing citizens around their rights to government schemes and services.

2. Where government programs are absent, implementation is patchy or programs lack legislative guarantees, partner organizations can fill gaps by providing humanitarian assistance, social protection and social services.

3. Group formation and community organizing (i.e. self-help groups, local associations, village savings and loan groups) should be integrated into disaster response project design in order to assist affected groups to increase their voice to government and build mutual self-reliance.

4. International non-governmental agencies, such as MCC, and local partner and civil society organizations need to incorporate participatory approaches to project design, monitoring and evaluation. This ensures greater adherence to international minimum humanitarian standards and thus increases the likelihood that the priority needs of affected groups are met.

A rights-based approach ensures that the rights of citizens are at the centre of governmental and non-governmental agency responses to disasters. In India, Ethiopia and Colombia, community empowerment alongside humanitarian assistance helps citizens achieve their rights and reduces long-term disaster risk.

Bruce Guenther is disaster response director for Mennonite Central Committee and is based in Winnipeg, Manitoba.

Community-Based Network Organizations and disaster management

For many communities around the world, a major disaster presents a considerable setback in the healthy development of local infrastructure, sustainable livelihoods and economic growth for years to come. For these populations, disaster management is not a standalone issue, but one that must be incorporated into the broader activities of the community as a means of promoting ongoing recovery and prevention. Unfortunately, for small rural communities, the resources needed to undertake this type of

> **" Group formation and community organization should be integrated into disaster response project design in order to assist affected groups to increase their voice to government and build mutual self-reliance.**

management typically exceed what the community is able to muster itself. In Nepal, however, an effective response to this problem has been the formation of community-based networking organizations (CBNOs), which work with local communities to create a regional network that collectively takes ownership over a range of development initiatives. The linkages formed by such a network enable communities to leverage their human, economic and political capital against that of the wider network. These linkages in turn not only play a major role in disaster recovery, but also offer an effective response in mitigating against ongoing risks.

CBNOs are established and operated with the democratic principle of people-led development, putting local individuals and communities as the primary stakeholders at the forefront of their own development through their direct involvement in the planning and implementation of related initiatives. This approach, which brings together communities with similar needs and diverse capabilities, has demonstrated positive results for improving livelihoods, realizing rights and responding effectively and quickly to disasters. When, on the contrary, plans are imposed on a community by an outside actor, there is a high risk that the recipients will not take ownership of them, diminishing the prospects of successful implementation and sustainable results.

Sansthagat Bikas Sanjal, a networking organization operating throughout Nepal, focuses on uniting highly marginalised and disadvantaged people who have little access to resources. These marginalised individuals—members of lower castes and classes, Muslims, women and minorities—have lower indicators in health, education, literacy and awareness and lack access to state resources and facilities. Although these groups technically have rights formalized by the government, the lack of accountability within and instability of the political system in Nepal has failed to create functioning mechanisms and institutions for their realization. From the rights-based perspective, then, the role of CBNOs is critical, as it not only signals a break from the historic tradition that saw lower-caste individuals at the mercy of their rulers, but it also demonstrates that all citizens have the right to a better life.

In a CBNO, members from different community organizations elect representatives to lead the overarching networking body, an important characteristic that highlights one of the strengths of this model—that each member organization of the CBNO remains in its constituent community, thereby ensuring strong accountability to its primary stakeholders. In bringing together different communities, the CBNO is able to provide a broader scope for self-help through building social capital on a regional level and mobilizing resources on a larger scale.

By linking the household to the community to the region, the network rekindles the traditional spirit of cooperation in the wider society. The sharing of resources not only enhances the ability of any one constituent community to implement strategies that reduce vulnerability to disasters and improve the community's overall wellbeing, but also motivates individuals to evaluate their own needs and be involved in seeking solutions.

This approach has made CBNOs key partners in disaster response, owing to the fact that they have an established system that channels information and resources among member communities. Thus, when disaster strikes, the CBNO is able efficiently to assess the impact and quickly respond

Learn more

Korten, David C. "Third Generation NGO Strategies: A Key to People-Centred Development." *World Development*. 15 (1987): 145-159.

Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of Nepal and Disaster Preparedness Network-Nepal. *Nepal Disaster Report, 2013: Focus on Participation and Inclusion*. Kathmandu: Rolwaling Printing Press, 2013.

Williamson, John. *Practical Community Empowerment: Concepts, Organizational Issues and the Process*. MCC Occasional Paper 27. Akron, PA: Mennonite Central Committee, 2000.

with the help of other community groups in the network. Additionally, the CBNO has connections to larger organizations and government bodies which provide a path for disaster-affected communities to receive assistance from sources outside their communities that they otherwise would not be able to access.

When a settlement of landless agricultural labourers in Banke district, located in south-west Nepal, was gutted by fire three years ago, the CBNO, Janajagaran Samajtook, mobilized a response from the wider network of communities that it represented. While the affected community focused on meeting its immediate needs, the network sought support to cover the more substantial expenses linked to shelter reconstruction. Thus, the CBNO approached district-based committees, organizations and development agencies, seeking aid for the rehabilitation of victims' homes. Ultimately, Janajagaran Samajtook initiated a partnership with Mennonite Central Committee Nepal, on behalf of the affected community, for the provision of hazard-resistant construction materials that were not locally available. When the materials were received, 42 damaged houses were reconstructed within six months, with the local community contributing the majority of the labour.

As the previous example highlights, a CBNO's strength in disaster response is the ability quickly to mobilize the assets of a wide network of communities that ensures a rapid assessment of and response to the immediate needs of affected members. By drawing on the local capacity of members for disaster response, CBNOs are able to gain information and resources quickly that allow for an immediate response to the physical and economic impacts of disasters. Within a short amount of time, communities are able to marshal resources and begin advocating with local governments and organizations to attend to urgent needs identified by the affected community that would otherwise go unmet.

Bal Krishna Maharjan is the Executive Chief of Sansthagat Bikas Sanjal, a community-based networking organization in Nepal.

> ❝ **Camp management committees played a critical role for camp residents, serving as the bridge used by local authorities, police, NGOs and civil society groups to provide access to shelter, food, medicine and legal support.**

Camp management in Haiti and the dilemma of local partnership

In the aftermath of the January 2010 earthquake, 1.5 million Haitians suddenly and unexpectedly found themselves homeless. United in a collective effort, those affected by the disaster spontaneously congregated in open-air spaces, forming gatherings that would later receive the more formal designation of internally displaced peoples (IDP) camps. Not waiting for external assistance, they used bed sheets, tarps and scraps of wood to construct their own temporary shelters.

During the impromptu creation of these camps, which began forming mere hours after the quake, leaders of these various gatherings emerged, installed through a process that was much more reflexive than it was deliberate. In most cases, the individuals were already seen as natural camp leaders, due to their previous influence in their former communities. Under this leadership, nearly every camp independently established its own management committee, notwithstanding a few cases in which NGOs were involved in the process. These committees played a critical role for camp residents, serving as the bridge used by local authorities, police, NGOs and civil society groups to provide access to shelter, food, medicine

and legal support. In fact, Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) Haiti engaged with the management committees of 14 camps around Port-au-Prince to provide canned meat and locally purchased food supplies as well as essential non-food items such as tarps, tents, relief kits, water filters, water bottles, comforters and flashlights. Through this role as camp ambassadors, the camp committees grew in power and social status as they distributed humanitarian assistance, managed the registration of IDPs and resolved conflicts within the camps.

The distributions mediated by camp management committees were, for the most part, quite orderly. And to the degree that MCC was able to verify, the goods were distributed equitably, with priority given to the most vulnerable IDPs. This differed significantly from the large-scale distributions organized and implemented by other international responders. For example, various UN agencies and larger NGOs, eager to deliver aid as soon as possible, opted for mass distributions with security provided by UN peacekeepers or U.S. Marines. Aid recipients were made to stand in very long lines and wait for hours in the hot sun—an assault on their endurance, to say nothing of their dignity. Some of these distributions turned chaotic, with trucks getting looted and people getting stampeded.

Unsurprisingly, distributions carried out through camp management committees were clearly preferred by recipients, at least early on. But as time went on, it became evident that the committee-led model faced problems of its own. Lacking adequate systems of accountability, these camp committees had the opportunity to abuse their authority through coercion, corruption and sexual exploitation. Women were particularly vulnerable, with some camp committee members using their power in order to gain favors in exchange for access to humanitarian assistance. In other cases, where donors were supporting camp committees from abroad, funds were siphoned off for personal use. As the months wore on and aid began to wear thin, frustrations were directed more and more at the management committees. In some larger camps, grievances led to rival committees forming to challenge the authority of those in power. Even the best examples of camp management committees were never meant to last forever. By six months, most of them had spent their social capital and outlived their usefulness.

Reflecting back on the situation, it seems that many of these unfortunate outcomes could have been avoided had there been some form of accountability instituted for camp committees. However, given the spontaneous nature of their creation, the question is, how? Ideally, this role would be played by the government, at both the local or national level, yet even before January 2010, the Haitian government was in a weakened position. With the destruction of nearly every governmental building and the death of many public service workers, the state became completely paralyzed, unable to make major decisions regarding the coordination of the overall response. Even now, almost five years later, Haiti ranks eighth on the failed states index. This incapacity was seen as a green light by the international community to provide assistance with no governmental oversight.

In lieu of the government, the Interim Haiti Recovery Commission (IHRC) was founded as an international partnership that would provide strong oversight to build the country back better than it was before. Co-chaired by former U.S. President Bill Clinton and then-Haitian Prime Minister

Learn more

Overseas Development Institute. "The Haiti Earthquake Response." *Humanitarian Exchange*. 48 (October 2010): 2-28

Schuller, Mark. *Killing with Kindness: Haiti, International Aid, and NGOs*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2012.

Sherwood, Angela, Megan Bradley, Lorenza Rossi, Rosalia Gitua and Bradley Mellicker. *Supporting Durable Solutions to Urban Post-Disaster Discplacement: Challenges and Opportunities in Haiti*. Washingon, D.C.: Brookings Institution, 2014.

Max Bellerive, the IHRC was mandated to manage all money that entered into Haiti for relief and development projects and to coordinate the overall response. However, the Haitian members of the IHRC ultimately protested against the organization, saying they were simply being treated as a rubber stamp, while other critics suggested that placing an American ex-President on equal footing with the Haitian head of state was an attack on Haitian sovereignty. As Sannon Reynolds from MCC partner organization, Force for Reflection and Action on Housing (FRAKKA) stated, "They [Haitian government] didn't have the capacity to act, but they shouldn't have been left out of the decision-making process."

To be fair, however, Reynolds admits that the government assumed no role in the initial stages of camp management. Thus, there was no choice of engaging with the government in the realm of material aid, because "the government was absent." Then, as emergency assistance transitioned to recovery and resettlement, things got more complicated. The national government showed signs of taking leadership in the earthquake response, but not in ways that were appreciated by MCC or its Haitian partner organizations: it championed one-year $500 rental subsidies to incentivize IDP families to move out of the camps and focused on short-term cosmetic fixes meant to spur private investment and tourism, rather than addressing the dearth of safe and affordable housing in the capital.

Against this background, MCC opted to continue engaging with its partners at the community level. It worked through several Haitian organizations to repair earthquake-damaged homes, and took on a project with the Christian Center for Integrated Development (SKDE) to build a new village for 100 displaced families. Compared to the camp management committees, these organizations were a bit further removed from earthquake survivors, but still a more viable medium-term option.

In the absence of an effective government, the homeless earthquake survivors performed a miracle: they bravely rescued each other from the rubble, built a habitat where they could wait out the aftershocks and shared what they had. In a society long riven with class divisions, they lived in solidarity with each other. They developed leadership and effectively absorbed assistance. But impressive as this was, it was short lived. In a different setting, a more rural setting, a community of disaster survivors might be able to recover and thrive over the long term without assistance. But in ultra-densely populated Port-au-Prince, true recovery is impossible without the assistance of state planning. The challenge now, as it has been for a decades, is for the international community to support the local Haitian population by supporting its government. If its government can be as responsive as its people are resourceful, Haiti will be able to weather any storm.

Kristen and Wawa Chege served as Policy Analyst and Advocacy Coordinators for Mennonite Central Committee in Haiti. Kurt Hildebrand is Co-Representative for Mennonite Central Committee in Haiti.

Mennonite Central Committee

Relief, development and peace in the name of Christ