

Missed opportunities: NGOs and the United Nations International Decade for Natural Disaster Reduction

Introduction

The 1980s put natural disaster mitigation and preparedness onto the international aid agenda. A succession of severe disasters—from the 1982-4 famines in the Sahel, the Horn of Africa and Southern Africa to Hurricanes Gilbert and Hugo in the Caribbean in 1988-9—were strong reminders of the power of natural hazards.

The relationship between human actions and the effects of disasters—the socio-economic dimension of vulnerability—was increasingly well documented and argued (Cuny 1983; Wijkman and Timberlake 1984; Maskrey 1989; Anderson and Woodrow 1989/1998).

International concern about these questions led to the creation of the United Nations (UN) International Decade for Natural Disaster Reduction (IDNDR) which ran from 1990 to 1999 (UN General Assembly 1987). The International Framework of Action launching the IDNDR, approved by the UN General Assembly in December 1989, set the international community the objective of reducing the impact of disasters through 'concerted international action', with the twin goals of:

- improving each country's capacity for dealing with the problem
- devising appropriate guidelines and strategies for applying scientific and technical knowledge.

It called on governments to take a series of actions, of which the principal ones were to:

- formulate national mitigation programs
- take part in the concerted international action
- establish national committees
- encourage support from the public and private sectors
- increase public awareness of risk and the value of preventative measures (UN General Assembly 1989).

NGOs in development and disasters
NGO¹ activities form a significant part of development and relief work in developing countries. In 1993 there were an estimated 4,000 non-governmental development organisations based in Organi-

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sation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) countries, spending almost \$3 billion a year and working with or alongside 10,000–20,000 developing-country NGOs who, in turn, assisted up to 100 million people (Edwards and Hulme 1992, p. 13).

In 1995 development NGOs were reckoned to be spending \$7–10 billion a year, compared to \$55 billion in official development assistance from OECD governments (Smillie 1995, p. 14). The proportion of official aid channelled to and through NGOs increased from 0.7% of OECD aid in 1975 to 3.6% in 1985, and at least 5% in 1993/4. With donors and the UN now relying heavily on NGOs as implementing partners in humanitarian operations, NGO capacity has also become crucial to the functioning of the international relief system (Borton and Macrae 1997, p. 45; Hendrickson 1998, p. 16).

The NGO sector's increasing popularity with governments and official aid agencies is partly a response to recent shifts in development thinking—the so-called 'New Policy Agenda' based on neo-liberal economics and liberal democratic theory that endorses the retreat of the state (Edwards and Hulme 1996, pp. 4-5; Wallace *et al* 1997, pp. 13-25).

But the sector's rapid growth worldwide in recent decades is also due very largely to the widespread *perception*—among aid and development professionals, academics, donor agencies, governments and the public—that NGOs are particularly effective in running development programs.

A variety of features are normally cited to justify this perception, which can be summed up as follows:

- NGOs choose to work with and on behalf of those most in need: the poorest and most vulnerable

- they work at the grass roots, with communities and local organisations as partners, and take a participatory approach to development planning; this ensures that they respond to the priorities of local people and build on local capacities
- their sense of responsibility to their partners encourages them to make long-term commitments to those they help
- their operational flexibility, relatively free from bureaucratic structures and systems, enables them to respond and adapt quickly and easily
- NGO operations are relatively cheap and cost-effective, with low overheads
- NGOs are constantly questioning the effectiveness of their approach, identifying emerging issues and attempting new methods, which places them at the cutting edge of development thinking and practice
- their culture (at policy and operational level) is collaborative, not competitive; they are keen to share lessons where this will help others
- they attempt to give disempowered or marginalised people a voice in policy discussions with the rich and powerful; their day-to-day work with the people of the South enables them to make links between the 'micro' and 'macro' environments

Similar arguments are used in assessing the value of NGOs' contribution to relief operations.

Brian Neldner, former International Director of the Lutheran World Federation's humanitarian aid program, identifies four

Notes

1. Debates about NGO definition and typology have been lengthy and largely inconclusive. We have used a set of key characteristics as a rule of thumb to determine what constitutes an NGO, based on the NGDO Charter drawn up by the Liaison Committee of Development NGOs to the European Union (Liaison Committee 1997) and modified to encompass NGOs in developing countries and those involved in relief. These characteristics include a belief in social justice and serving the interests of communities, a base in civil society, non-profit-making aims, legal identity and accountability to donors and beneficiaries. This approach conforms to everyday usage in relief and development circles. It excludes universities and other academic or research institutions..

main characteristics of NGOs' contribution here:

- they adopt a 'people-to-people approach'
- they are flexible operationally
- their inputs are pragmatic and task-oriented
- they can respond promptly (Neldner 1996, pp. 27-29).

A report to the Government of Nepal in 1990 argued that the NGO sector should be mobilised to deliver relief because 'most NGOs operate at the grass-roots, and are better equipped in terms of superior training and organisation to impart immediate relief' (King Mahendra Trust/Interdisciplinary Analysts 1990, pp. 69-70).

A number of commentators have encouraged or endorsed NGO involvement in natural disaster mitigation and preparedness (DMP) for similar reasons. For example, APRODEV, a network of the major European NGOs associated with the Protestant churches, maintains that there is a wealth of experience among developing-country NGOs in dealing with natural disasters and summarises NGOs' comparative advantages as follows:

Because NGOs have direct links with the grass roots in developing countries, they can easily identify potential threats and vulnerabilities, as well as mobilise people's capacities. NGOs are therefore particularly well placed to support local initiatives (often with very small costs) to prepare for, or mitigate the consequences of, disasters (Zomer 1997).

A similar formulation has been put forward by two other major European NGO networks, VOICE and EuronAid (VOICE-EuronAid 1998).

Their perspective is shared by donors. The OECD Development Assistance Committee's guidelines on disaster mitigation ascribe important roles to both NGOs and the community-based organisations (CBOs) that they support. CBOs, the guidelines state:

can raise awareness of the hazard risks at the local level and mobilise the community or groups within to take steps to reduce their vulnerability either through local structural measures, and by pressing for central government involvement in larger structural measures or through the development and introduction of adaptive or preparedness measures ... There are numerous instances of such schemes developing spontaneously, without external support.

NGOs are important because of their involvement in relief programs and ability

to support CBOs (for example, they are already assisting CBOs with small grants, providing technical advice and exchanging information between CBOs facing similar hazards).

NGOs are also 'often well placed to test, develop and disseminate innovations which may substantially reduce vulnerability at the community or household level.' The document suggests that donors could support such NGO work and encourage NGOs to become involved; it also recommends that NGOs be encouraged to take part more in official committees and task forces (OECD-DAC 1994, p. 19)².

NGO involvement in DMP is difficult to chart, even though 'The relationship

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between disasters, relief and development represents one of the major recurrent themes in the history of private foreign aid.' (Clarke Guarnizo 1991, p. 50)³. NGOs have always made significant contributions to disaster relief efforts.

Many of the best known NGOs were started in response to humanitarian crises. The institutional separation of relief and development programs, beginning in the 1960s and gathering pace in the 1970s, discouraged NGO activity in DMP, but by the mid-1980s, with the experience of the famine in Africa and other disasters in mind, NGOs were beginning to look more closely at the links between disasters and development. As early as 1983 Cuny could write: 'The growing awareness by volags [voluntary agencies] of the connection between disaster response and development is the single most important trend in disaster programs today' (Cuny 1983, p. 257). By

1990, with the added impetus of the IDNDR, one might expect disaster mitigation to have been placed firmly on the NGO agenda.

Evidence in the literature for NGO commitment to DMP in the 1990s is elusive and contradictory. There are positive and negative examples of the extent and quality of NGO involvement (Twigg *et al* 2000, pp. 3-4, 21-23). Research on this subject that we have recently completed in five countries indicates considerable variations in the type of work undertaken, approaches adopted and their effectiveness in reducing risk, the extent to which DMP is systematised within NGO operational systems and structures, and the degree to which it is integrated with other development and relief work by NGOs and other actors.

NGO DMP activity appears generally to be on the increase but it still tends to be unsystematic and the ideal of mainstreaming mitigation in sustainable development programming remains distant in many cases, especially for rapid-onset hazards (Twigg *et al* 2000; Luna 2000; Matin and Taher 2000; Rocha and Christophos 2000; Shumba 2000a).

NGOs and the UN system

NGOs have played a role in UN development and humanitarian affairs for decades. In the 1990s, though, they became much more involved and their influence on policy and practice grew. This came about because NGOs widened their areas of engagement with the UN system (Donini 1995).

Hitherto, NGOs' links with the system had been of two main kinds. First, the UN granted individual NGOs 'consultative status' to its Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC)⁴.

Second, individual UN agencies developed their own working links with individual NGOs. However, NGOs played a marginal role overall. This was mainly because the UN's view of the world was state-centred but it also owed something to UN officials' rather dismissive view of NGOs, and while some UN agencies, such as the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), did interact a good deal with NGOs in the field, most had little to do with them.

During the 1990s NGOs became much more active behind the scenes at the annual General Assembly and in formal and informal dialogue with the Secretariat, Security Council and Secretary-General—thereby starting to overcome the strong barriers of mutual disregard and suspicion between UN and NGO staff. They

also played a significant role in the several major international conferences on development held during the decade.

The more than 1,400 NGOs accredited to the UN Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) at Rio de Janeiro in 1992 had a major role in shaping the conference agenda and building the political consensus behind Agenda 21. This marked a leap forward in NGO influence, and NGOs continued to play important roles in subsequent UN conferences, for example those on women (at Beijing in 1995), social development (Copenhagen, 1995) and shelter (Istanbul, 1996)⁵.

At the same time, individual UN agencies, including the Department for Humanitarian Affairs (DHA) and UNHCR, began to hold regular meetings on policy and operational issues with the main operational NGOs in the humanitarian field.

The growth in NGO numbers, the expanding extent of their outreach especially vis-à-vis that of the state, the considerable funds disbursed by and through them, and their power as lobbyists combined to increase their importance in the eyes of UN officials. A report to ECOSOC by the UN Secretary-General in 1998 observed that:

The emergence of non-governmental organisations as a definitive force in the socio-economic arena presents a challenge to the long-standing view of the States as the exclusive actors in the international system. As non-governmental organisations increasingly participate in the development work of intergovernmental bodies and address areas of primary concern to them, it is inevitable that growing numbers of them will seek an institutionalised channel

through which to influence policies and programs at the international level (UN ECOSOC 1998).

NGOs' involvement in international conferences has been seen as their 'entrance' to the deeper contacts they have made with UN organisations (Gordenker and Weiss 1995, pp. 546-7)⁶.

The traditional, formal and highly managed system of accreditation to ECOSOC, which is a mechanism for consultation by the UN rather than a forum for debate, has been left behind by these developments and possibly even rendered obsolete, even though the number of NGOs becoming accredited increased rapidly during the 1990s: from 928 in 1991 to 1,356 in 1997 in all categories (UN ECOSOC 1998). Efforts were made to make the process of accreditation simpler and to encourage a wider range of NGOs, especially in developing countries (which were still largely excluded from these new processes of UN-NGO interaction), to apply for consultative status (UN ECOSOC 1996; UN ECOSOC 1998; *Go Between* 1998/9, p. 11).

There are now some opportunities for wider NGO participation in the 'NGO Committees' on a number of issues run under the auspices of the Conference of NGOs in Consultative Relationship to the Economic and Social Council of the United Nations (CONGO): these are open to all NGOs, whether or not they enjoy consultative status (UN CONGO 1998).

Contacts in the field—NGOs as advisers, project partners or subcontractors—also appear to have expanded rapidly in the 1990s. Some individual UN agencies have developed policies and systems for closer engagement with NGOs.

The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), for instance, did not have a framework for dealing with NGOs at field

level before the late 1980s, but in 1993 endorsed a strategy that emphasised the need to include NGOs in its policy dialogues with governments and to support more effective capacity building in NGOs (Donini 1995, p. 431; Uvin 1995, p. 508).

NGOs and the IDNDR

This period of changing relationships between NGOs and the UN system took place at the same time as the IDNDR. However, from its beginning, the IDNDR saw NGOs as peripheral actors, for two reasons.

The first was the UN system's traditional view, explicit in the Decade's terms of reference, that 'the primary responsibility for defining the general goals and directions of efforts undertaken in the framework of an international decade for natural disaster reduction and for implementing the measures that could result from the activities of the decade lies with the Governments of the countries concerned' (UN General Assembly 1987).

The second reason was more specific to the IDNDR itself. It was the belief that significant reduction of disasters' impact could be achieved principally by the application and dissemination of scientific and technical knowledge, particularly to developing countries.

As a result, scientific and technological institutions were to play a leading role in implementing the Decade's agenda (UN General Assembly 1987; 1991; 1993; 1994). This was a narrow base on which to build major improvements in disaster reduction policies, practice and culture, and the lack of 'legal or societal mandate from the citizens and stakeholders' was to be a barrier to success throughout the Decade (Hays 1999, pp. 276-7).

The IDNDR system was dominated from the start by the scientific institutions that had promoted it and offered little scope for NGOs to become involved. The IDNDR's advisory body, the 'Scientific and Technical Committee', consisted, as its name indicated, of 20-25 'scientific and technical experts... selected in consultation with their Governments' (UN General Assembly 1989).

When the Committee was set up in November 1990, only one of its 25 members was from an NGO (the Ethiopian Red Cross Society); the remainder were mostly scientists with a few members from government or international (but still scientific) agencies (*STOP Disasters* 1991, pp. 6-7). The IDNDR also encouraged governments to form national IDNDR committees 'in co-operation with the relevant scientific and technological

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2. There have been number of variations on this basic theme, from practitioners and policy makers (e.g. Maskrey 1989; Davis 1990; Link ed. 1991: 10-11; Skinner 1992).

3. The following paragraph is based largely on *ibid.* 50-103. We are grateful to Dr Clarke for permission to cite her PhD thesis.

4. Article 71 of the founding Charter of the United Nations in 1945 states that: 'The Economic and Social Council may make arrangements for consultation with non-governmental organizations which are concerned with matters within its competence. Such arrangements may be made with international organizations and, where appropriate, with national organizations after consultation with the Member [state] of the United Nations concerned.' (United Nations 1945). The system of accreditation is based on Resolution 1296 adopted by ECOSOC in 1968. Like Article 71 of the UN Charter, it views NGOs in a legal rather than a functional sense, a view repeated in the revised system of accreditation

set out in 1996 (Gordenker and Weiss 1997: 443-4; UN ECOSOC 1996).

5. An evaluation of UN world conferences 1990-96 by a roundtable meeting convened by the German development think-tank the Deutsche Stiftung für Internationale Entwicklung (DSE) in 1996 agreed that NGOs had become more active and significant participants in such events whilst conceding that this was a slow process and that NGOs from developing countries were still largely excluded (DSE 1996).

6. The role of the UN Secretary-General has also been important. Boutros Boutros-Ghali (Secretary-General 1992-6) appears to have been influential in shaping UN attitudes by his open recognition of NGOs' valuable role in shaping international policy and the appointment of NGO staff to his high-level advisory committees (Donini 1995: 423, 425; Ritchie 1995: 521-22).

7. We are grateful to Ms Bricchieri-Colombi (née Simmonds) for permission to cite her thesis.

communities' (UN General Assembly 1987). By 1999 there were 141 national committees or focal points. Evidence for their commitment and achievements overall is inconclusive (Simmonds 1999)⁷ and information on their membership is not generally available, but their composition probably varied greatly from one country to another. It is likely that NGOs did not make up a significant proportion of their members in most cases, although they may have played a more substantial role in special advisory groups or working groups formed by the committees⁸.

The scientific community's view of the Decade was articulated by one of its leading figures, Sir James Lighthill, Chairman of the Special Committee for the IDNDR of the International Council of Scientific Unions, who wrote in the IDNDR's newsletter in 1991:

To meet the world's objective of a major reduction during the 1990's in acute human disasters due to natural causes, all the nations most threatened need the help of scientists: their own scientists operating as part of the global confraternity of scientists. That confraternity has spent 1989 and 1990 examining ways in which scientists all over the world can work together to combat types of natural disaster which, besides being exceptionally damaging, can be tackled only by a great, globally cooperative scientific effort.' (Lighthill 1991, p. 8).

Where NGOs were mentioned by name in official UN documents during the preparations for the Decade and in its early years, this was within a long list of other actors, with no significance being attached to their role and no comment upon their value (e.g. UN General Assembly 1989; 1993; 1994). It should also be noted that where the term 'non-governmental organisation' appears in UN documents, it is used mostly to refer to *any* organisation that is not strictly governmental, including academic institutions and the private sector.

The first opportunity to change the overall direction of IDNDR came at the World Conference on Natural Disaster Reduction at Yokohama in May 1994, the Decade's mid-term review, where it was hoped that governments and multilateral agencies would join with other sectors such as science and technology, business, industry and NGOs (UN General Assembly 1991; 1993).

There were about 1,500 delegates. The main participants were national governments, which sent 147 delegations of

different sizes. Intergovernmental agencies sent 41 delegations.

There were 47 NGO delegations. In addition some NGO staff were part of their countries' national delegations (El-Sabh 1994, p. 334).

The level of NGOs' participation in the Conference and their influence on its decisions are hard to measure (El-Sabh 1994; Davis and Myers 1994).

The conference was organised into three parts: plenary sessions, the main committee and a set of seven technical committees on different aspects of disasters. Of these, the main and technical committees were the active sessions where there was room for debate, but the

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main committee was the most important in terms of setting international priorities. This prepared the 'Yokohama Strategy and Plan of Action' for the rest of the IDNDR (see below) and received national and regional reports and statements from the delegations.

It discussed strategies for enhancing interaction between the public sector, private sector and NGOs. The 47 accredited NGOs presented a common statement to the committee which endorsed the general objectives of the IDNDR but called for two main improvements. The first was greater emphasis on the human dimensions of risk and vulnerability.

The second was improved integration of NGOs in UN processes and procedures generally and the IDNDR in particular (El-Sabh 1994, pp. 334-5; cf. Warmington 1995, p. 6)⁹.

The Yokohama Strategy and Plan of

Action did express a shift in emphasis from scientific and technological fixes to wider disaster prevention strategies and capacity building as integral parts of development planning (IDNDR 1994; Simmonds 1999).

This shift may have owed something to lobbying in the months running up to the conference, by NGOs as well as others, although evidence for this remains anecdotal. Perhaps it also owed something to the common statement presented by the NGOs at the event, but the main elements of the conference statement had already been agreed at a preparatory meeting of UN and government representatives in Geneva, and some observers felt that NGO representatives were marginalised at the conference and their voices were not heard (Davis and Myers 1994).

The Yokohama Strategy and Plan of Action opened the way for greater involvement by NGOs and communities by, for example, noting the need for participation in disaster prevention at all levels from the community upwards and recognising the value of indigenous technical knowledge in mitigation. Key principles of the Strategy included:

- giving emphasis to programs that promote community-based approaches to vulnerability reduction
- promoting the involvement of non-governmental organisations in natural hazard management, in particular those dealing with environmental and related issues and including indigenous non-governmental organisations (IDNDR 1994, pp. 10-15).

The Plan of Action based on the Strategy and its principles reaffirmed the commitment to 'genuine community involvement' and traditional skills, but — significantly — was reluctant to transfer any authority to NGOs: here the commitment was merely to 'Consider making use of NGO support for improved disaster reduction at the local level' (IDNDR 1994, pp. 16-17).

Subsequent resolutions on the IDNDR at the UN General Assembly do not reveal any shift in thinking on the role of NGOs (UN General Assembly 1994; 1997). Little changed in terms of NGO representation

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8. Of course, influence is not necessarily in direct proportion to numerical representation. For example, only six of the German IDNDR Committee's 37 members were from NGOs but three of these were from the German Red Cross, which also housed the Committee's Secretariat (Eikenberg 1998: 52-61).

9. Greater participation by and support for NGOs in disaster reduction activities had also been advocated in pre-conference meetings (e.g. DSE 1994: 9-10).

on the IDNDR's Scientific and Technical Committee (two members out of 24 by 1998) although socio-economic and developmental aspects of disasters appeared to be represented slightly better (IDNDR 1998, pp. 39-40).

NGO participation in international IDNDR conferences remained low. For example, at the major conference on early warnings in Potsdam in 1998 only 10 of the 292 participants were from NGOs (EWC 1998).

However, coverage of the work of NGOs became more extensive in the IDNDR's official newsletter, *STOP Disasters* after Yokohama. The newsletter also gave more prominence to the social and economic dimensions of vulnerability and the links between development patterns and disasters.

There is evidence that the marginalisation of NGOs in the Decade was recognised within the small IDNDR Secretariat in Geneva. In its report on the IDNDR's 1995 world disaster reduction campaign (on the theme of 'Women and Children: Key to Prevention'), the Secretariat noted:

Above all, every roundtable emphasised the need for stronger links between government and NGOs, particularly at community level. NGOs can be a vehicle to mobilise women or children. These groups, however, need to be consulted in the early stages of project development, and not simply asked to mobilise supporters to carry out various actions after decisions have been made within governments. (IDNDR 1996, pp. 33-38).

The report also recognised that NGOs and academic institutes 'have not always been adequately targeted by the Secretariat or national IDNDR organisers, and hence the overall numbers in these categories remain low' (IDNDR 1996, p. 3).

The International Programme Forum held in Geneva in July 1999—the IDNDR's closing conference—produced a 'Strategy for a Safer World in the 21st Century' that revealed the international community's position five years after Yokohama. This admittedly short document put out the now conventional rhetoric about greater public participation and increased partnership and coordination in general, and did not discuss the particular roles of different institutions. Its position on responsible parties hints at a shift in attitude since Yokohama:

Governments have the primary responsibility for protecting citizens from risks and disaster, however, local

communities and elements of civil society most threatened by hazards emerge as key initiators of important risk and disaster prevention actions. They must work through partnership, and together, receive necessary encouragement and support to realise the vision of disaster resilience. (IDNDR 1999a)

Here, civil society is allocated a more active role in initiating activity although the term 'elements of civil society' is vague, and the implications of this statement for NGOs are unclear. The emphasis in another Forum output, the 'Geneva Mandate on Disaster Reduction' on strengthening mechanisms for regional and inter-

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-IDNDR Secretariat

national cooperation, also opened up potential space for NGO activities, but again this was not defined (IDNDR 1999b). Elsewhere in the Forum's outputs NGOs were mentioned as providers of helpful educational resources but they did not appear in the brief summary of the conference session on 'partnerships' which was devoted entirely to the potential role of the private sector (IDNDR 1999c).

The IDNDR and NGOs in the UK

The UK's IDNDR efforts focused on disasters in other, developing, countries. This was an area where British international NGOs could have offered considerable assistance. There are well over 200 British NGOs engaged in relief and development activities overseas, ranging very widely in their size, structures, areas and modes of work.

Over the years, the sector has been

involved in a variety of DMP initiatives helping to protect vulnerable communities against major hazards throughout the Third World, even though this involvement has been unsystematic (Twigg *et al* 2000).

However, the development and scope of the UK's IDNDR effort largely paralleled that of the international IDNDR. The initial impetus was from the scientific and technological community with the formation of a Science, Technology and Engineering (STE) Committee in 1991 sponsored by the Royal Society and the Royal Academy of Engineering.

This remained the UK focal point for the IDNDR until January 1993, when a National Coordination Committee was established with the same sponsors and financial support from the new budget line for disaster mitigation created by the British Government's international aid agency, the Overseas Development Administration (now the Department for International Development: DFID) (Eades 1998).

The establishment of the National Committee was a move to broaden the base of involvement in the IDNDR and it followed a workshop organised by the STE Committee which attempted to identify different facets of the UK disaster community and develop links between them (IDNDR UK 1992). However, throughout its existence, the National Committee was composed predominantly of scientific researchers and engineers, with limited additional representation from the media and consultancies. There were only ever two members from the NGO community, neither long-serving, and by the time the Committee wound up there were no NGO representatives in a membership of 14 (Davis and Westgate 1999, p. 72).

NGOs had a greater voice in two of the seven UK IDNDR working groups, the other five being devoted to scientific and technological interests with members largely drawn from the academic and commercial sectors.

The Drought Mitigation Working Group brought together researchers, scientists and NGO staff, but was not particularly active in the second half of the Decade. The Applications and Implementation Working Group, set up in 1994, sought a wide mix of members from government, universities and research institutes, consultancies, NGOs and the insurance sector. It aimed to stimulate 'a series of new initiatives to reduce risks through the work of non-government relief and development agencies' (IDNDR

UK 1994, p. 18). These included an initial consultation meeting for representatives of the disaster management sector as a whole (in 1994), a seminar on community vulnerability assessment (in 1995, which drew participants from across the disaster community), the research and publication of an 'audit' of British agencies and individuals working on disaster mitigation, preparedness and response (Sanderson *et al* 1996), and the design of a two-year research project on NGO activities in natural disaster mitigation and preparedness (Twiggs *et al* 2000, p. 1).

NGOs did not take much part in many of the seminars and conferences organised by the UK National Committee or its working groups, even where these were designed to appeal to a wide group of interests. For instance, only three NGO representatives took part in the workshop in March 1992 to discuss opportunities for British involvement in the IDNDR, out of a total of 72 participants (IDNDR UK 1992, pp. 35-6).

Only three British NGOs were represented at the international conference on 'Protecting Vulnerable Communities' in October 1993, the most significant conference held by the National Committee, which was promoted as a multi-disciplinary event.

Lack of NGO participation was also reflected in the conference papers: most were by scientists and engineers; few looked at the social aspects of vulnerability; and the organisational aspects of disaster mitigation and preparedness were also largely missing, except from a national perspective (Clayton 1994, pp. 89-90).

Only one of the 27 people who attended a meeting in January 1996 to discuss UK IDNDR strategy for the remainder of the Decade was from an NGO (IDNDR UK 1996). Only three of the 66 listed participants at the 'Flagship Programme Conference' on forecasts and warnings in November 1998 were from NGOs (IDNDR UK 1998).

Only five of the 76 listed participants at the UK's IDNDR 'wrap-up' conference in November 1999 were from NGOs: two of these were from the same NGO, and one was from their NGO's consultancy division (IDNDR UK 1999)¹⁰.

The evaluation ('audit') of the UK's IDNDR system and efforts in 1999 found that the IDNDR had not reached out far beyond the scientific and engineering sectors. In focus group discussions held as part of the evaluation 'there was repeated comment on the failure of the IDNDR to penetrate the world of UK

	Development staff	Emergency staff	DMP staff	Mixed ¹²	Total	%
Had not heard of IDNDR	36	5	0	2	43	57
Heard of IDNDR, no impact on work	12	7	0	4	23	30
Heard of IDNDR, some/possible impact	6	1	2	1	10	13
Total	54	13	2	7	76	100

Table 1: awareness and influence of the IDNDR within British NGOs.

NGOs' (Davis and Westgate 1999, p. 55).

Confirmation of IDNDR's exclusive character came from research we carried out into NGOs' activities in natural disaster mitigation and preparedness.

One of the main components of the research was a study of the work of 22 international relief and development NGOs based in the UK (Twiggs *et al* 2000). These were selected to provide a broadly representative sample in terms of their age, size, area and mode of work. Some of those studied were 'generalist' NGOs that addressed many different aspects of development or relief work in developing countries; a few were 'niche' NGOs (i.e. focusing on a particular development sector or issue, or on particular regions or countries).

The researchers met a range of staff within each NGO, including regional programme/desk officers, funding officers, specialist technical advisers (e.g. in the areas of DMP, emergencies, food security, communications or capacity building) and in 14 of the NGOs at least one member of the senior management team. In total, 125 people were interviewed individually using a semi-structured interview process that covered a wide range of issues including policy, organisational systems, field programs, understanding of concepts and terminology, information flows and organisational learning, funding and other external influences.

As part of the study, interviewees were asked what they knew and thought of the IDNDR. As the interviews were semi-structured, the question was not put in every case. A total of 76 people (61% of interviewees) were asked: 54 of them were primarily involved in development work¹¹, 13 worked on emergencies, two on DMP; and seven had an element of more than one of these areas in their work or background (in six cases this touched upon DMP, or had done so).

The replies fell into three categories:

- those who had not heard of IDNDR

- those who had heard of it but felt it had made no impact on their work
- those who felt it had perhaps made some impact.

The numerical findings are set out in **Table 1**.

Thirty-three interviewees (43% of those asked) had heard of IDNDR. However, a closer look at both the figures and the comments made in the interviews shows that this bare total is misleading as an indicator of IDNDR's outreach and influence. About half of those who had heard of IDNDR worked for, or had worked for, three medium-sized and larger NGOs. Two of these NGOs were significantly involved in emergencies; the other had a formal DMP strategy, and a former staff member there had been active in an IDNDR working group. Several smaller NGOs had not heard of the Decade, and overall only one third of development staff interviewed had.

A number of the interviewees who had not heard of IDNDR clearly assumed from the question that the Decade was about to start and were surprised and even amused when they learnt that it was about to finish.

In terms of impact on UK NGOs' approach to DMP, IDNDR's record is poor. Only 10 interviewees (13% of those asked) indicated any impact but some of these were not sure, and in other cases the evidence was ambiguous and impact could at best be inferred. Only one interviewee felt that IDNDR had affected their thinking on the subject of disaster reduction. One had used it to argue for changes within their NGO but gave no indication that this had led to any positive developments. Two interviewees felt it had been useful in stimulating funding; both worked for the same NGO, which has received significant funds from two budget lines for DMP established during the 1990s, by DFID and the European Community Humanitarian Office (see below). One interviewee felt that IDNDR had been useful in some developing

countries but did not say that it had been useful specifically to that NGO nor to its UK office. Another interviewee felt some IDNDR publications had been useful, and one had fed IDNDR literature into their NGO's environmental work; but again, there was no evidence of any impact. The remainder had been to one or two UK IDNDR seminars or received information.

The comments of those who had heard of IDNDR but did not feel it had made any impact on them fell into four broad categories. Twelve interviewees had heard of it vaguely (i.e. heard the title, seen material a long time ago, might receive publications); three had heard of it vaguely and wondered if it might be a funding opportunity, or may even have mentioned it in a funding proposal; three were critical of UN decades in general; and five were critical of this decade in particular.

The first two categories of reply differ from those replies indicating some impact mainly in the degree of vagueness about the subject. The second two categories denote more substantial criticism of the IDNDR approach itself. There was no enthusiasm for UN decades, though an interviewee in one agency felt UN years might work. Critical remarks made about IDNDR in the interviews included 'stunningly boring', 'turgid and technical', and 'it must have been pretty ineffective if people like us haven't been seriously involved'.

Several interviewees expressed, in different ways, the view that IDNDR had focused too much on high-level principles and the technical aspects of hazard and as a result had failed to engage with field-level practitioners and the needs of vulnerable communities. These views of the Decade give us some insight into the reasons why British NGOs did not become involved. Our research identified others. First, DMP has not established itself in the mainstream of NGO work. There is a good deal of DMP activity in the field but it tends to be *ad hoc* and is not institutionalised within organisational planning systems and operational guidelines.

There are encouraging signs of changes at policy level—largely as the result of several major natural disasters since 1998—but institutional bottlenecks will have to be overcome before DMP is 'mainstreamed'. Perhaps the most important of these bottlenecks is the very heavy workload of operational staff, who are too busy with their ongoing concerns to reflect on or absorb new ideas. This, coupled with high levels of staff turnover, has hindered organisational learning and

we saw that institutional memories were weak. We found that NGO staff were put off by the formal terminology of disaster mitigation (finding it too academic), that books and academic journals are not widely read, and that staff tended not to go to formal conferences and seminars. Efforts to raise awareness and understanding of DMP issues among NGO staff must recognise these factors if they are to succeed, and they must prepare and target information accordingly (Twigg *et al.* 2000).

The UK IDNDR National Committee woke up to the importance of wider communication with disaster professionals rather late in the day. It preferred conferences, seminars and research reports as media for disseminating information.

These are the main sources of information for the academic community but, as we have seen, they do not suit NGO workers. The National Committee did not produce a newsletter until late in 1996 and its uninspiring website was established only in 1998. Like the website, the newsletter, *At Risk*, was intended primarily to publicise the work of the National Committee and its working groups—although because this approach led to a shortage of good-quality copy, the newsletter's editor had room for manoeuvre regarding contents and as a result published several items on NGOs' work or of interest to them. However, only five issues were produced before the National Committee disbanded in 1999. (IDNDR UK 1996-1999).

The IDNDR and NGOs in developing countries

More detailed research is needed to find out how IDNDR affected NGOs in other countries but evidence collected by two of the other studies in our research project indicate that the UK National Committee was not alone in failing to reach out to this sector.

Both studies were of NGOs in developing countries severely affected by disasters, with an active NGO community many of whose members were engaged in disaster work.

The Zimbabwe study, which concentrated on NGOs known to be involved in disaster reduction (principally drought) found that IDNDR's influence on NGOs had been 'negligible'. Fourteen senior and specialist staff, from nine NGOs, were asked about IDNDR: five had not heard of it; nine were aware (from reading or hearing it mentioned in workshops) but had not been involved—none of these

nine interviewees stated that IDNDR had influenced their thinking in any way and five of them stated categorically that it had not (Shumba 2000a; Shumba 2000b).

The Philippines study interviewed 33 people in 10 NGOs, again focusing on organisations working on disaster management to some extent. It found that 19 (58%) had not heard of IDNDR while three (9%) had heard something about it but claimed they were not familiar with it or had not done anything as a result of it. However, the remaining 11 (33%), from five NGOs, had participated in IDNDR initiatives—by taking part in international conferences and carrying out public education work in connection with it; two of the NGOs appeared to have been quite active (Luna 2000).

Further evidence comes from interviews with 11 senior and middle managers in 11 NGOs in the State of Gujarat in India, which is also prone to a variety of hazards including repeated drought (these interviews did not form part of our study but did draw on our approach). Ten NGOs were development agencies but all were involved in disasters in one way or another—principally in occasional relief activity but some in food and water security.

The final NGO specialised in DMP and it is noteworthy that the other organisations had professional links with it in some shape or form. Perhaps reflecting this, all of those interviewed were aware of IDNDR, but eight were aware only generally. Three claimed to be very familiar with its aims and plans but in two of these cases other interview evidence cast doubt on this. Eight were positive about the Decade but some responses were vague

Notes

10. There were certainly much higher levels of NGO participation (as speakers and in the audience) at the two seminars organised by the Applications and Implementation Working Group mentioned above but attendance lists for these have not been preserved.

11. In some cases – for example, desk officers – they might have occasional involvement with emergencies.

12. staff involved in work encompassing elements of emergency and development work, or with an element of both in their work background.

13. We are grateful to the Disaster Mitigation Institute for sharing the results of its research with us.

14. Exact expenditure from year to year is not always clear. DFID expenditure statements from 1996/7 to 1998/9 show an allocation of £1.75 million per annum for disaster preparedness (Davis and Westgate 1999: 70).

15. Davis and Westgate (1999: 65-71), analysing this budget's spending between 1993 and 1999, estimate that NGOs of all kinds (i.e. not just British) received £3.744 million, just over 44% of total expenditure. However, this figure includes some projects where NGOs were not the grant holders although they were partners or beneficiaries.

and suggested that interviewees were talking about its potential rather than its achievements. Seven NGOs stated that IDNDR had been influential in raising awareness and providing new insights but only one was active in IDNDR initiatives (Disaster Mitigation Institute 1999)¹³.

The IDNDR and NGO funding

DMP has always been marginal to funding policy, even to disaster funding policy, with obvious consequences:

There is a widely shared view among humanitarian agencies, particularly the private, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), that reliable up-front funds for preparedness are lacking. In essence, donor procedures have placed the burden on the agencies to raise the necessary 'risk capital' for building preparedness systems. Yet the voluntary basis of the income with which most NGOs meet their core costs makes it extremely difficult to make sustainable investments in preparedness (Center on International Cooperation 1999).

Indirectly, the IDNDR has had some influence on British NGOs' work on natural disaster reduction by stimulating the creation of two significant budget lines. The first of these is DFID's budget for disaster mitigation and preparedness which was established in 1993 and spent approximately £2 million annually during the rest of the decade¹⁴.

Between 1993 and 1998, some £2.4m was awarded to eight British NGOs for 14 DMP projects overseas¹⁵. The second budget line is the European Community Humanitarian Office (ECHO) disaster preparedness programme, launched in 1994. Between 1994 and 1998, it awarded grants totalling 11,431,000 ECU (52% of the programme's total expenditure), to NGOs' DMP projects; this included grants totalling 2,412,900 ECU to seven British NGOs (Twigg *et al* 2000, pp. 107, 111-12, Appendix 2). We found from the interviews with NGO staff that the availability, or potential availability, of funding for DMP has been a major factor in encouraging some British NGOs to start work in this area. However, both DFID and ECHO appear to be reducing their commitment to DMP, and it seems likely that DMP work will be left to geographical departments to fund out of their emergency and development programs. In both cases, the move is likely to lead to the further marginalisation of DMP. These developments have followed quickly upon the IDNDR's close, and a senior DFID official admitted informally to one of the authors that its financial

commitment to DMP had been essentially token because of the need to make a gesture towards IDNDR.

Future trends

It is still too soon to judge how the IDNDR's successor in the UN system, the International Strategy for Disaster Reduction (ISDR), will work with NGOs, but early indications are that it will continue along the same path. Opportunities for NGO participation in high-level decision making remain limited, as shown in the composition of the inter-agency Task Force for Disaster Reduction which will be 'the main forum within the United Nations for continued and concer-

The IDNDR, which was intended to overcome such obstacles, has in fact maintained them as far as the involvement of NGOs is concerned... Exclusive institutional structures, be they at international or national levels, are no solution to the problem of reducing the impact of natural disasters: they are part of the problem itself.

ted emphasis on natural disaster reduction', providing advice on strategies, identifying gaps in policies and programs and recommending action, ensuring complementarity of action by agencies, and convening expert meetings. Its 24 members were meant to include eight representatives of civil society and NGOs designated initially by the IDNDR's Scientific and Technical Committee, but only one of the 22 members present at the Task Force's first meeting in April 2000—the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies—is an NGO: the rest are UN agencies, regional bodies, government departments, scientific institutions and the private sector (UN General Assembly 1999; ISDR Informs 2000, p. 5).

In the UK, the IDNDR's successor structure is the Natural Disaster Reduc-

tion Committee, a new standing committee of the Hazards Forum, an association of engineering institutes and similar bodies set up to promote professional and public understanding of risk and ways of reducing it. At the time of writing the members of the new Committee—membership is by invitation—are drawn almost entirely from the old National Coordination Committee for the IDNDR. NGOs are not represented; disaster management, social science and developmental perspectives are also largely unrepresented. However, the Committee does aim to be broadly representative of UK interests in natural disaster reduction, recognising the need to establish relationships with, and encourage the involvement of a number of groups including NGOs (Hazards Forum Natural Disaster Reduction Committee 2000).

Conclusions

Throughout its history, IDNDR had to admit its own under-achievement. The formal statement of the mid-term Yokohama Conference referred to 'the meagre results of an extraordinary opportunity given to the United Nations and its Member States' (IDNDR 1994, p. 7). Addressing the Decade's closing conference in Geneva, UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan conceded that 'the number and cost of natural disasters continue to rise'. He also pointed to one of the main obstacles to progress: 'We know what has to be done. What is now required is the political commitment to do it.' (IDNDR 1999d). The remark appears to have been directed at the international donor community and national governments, but it can also be applied to the disaster 'community' itself—i.e. those who are professionally engaged in efforts to prevent disasters and deal with their consequences. Like most communities, this one is not homogeneous. It consists of a diverse range of professional disciplines and organisational types. Disasters are complex problems demanding multi-disciplinary, institutionally co-ordinated solutions, but they rarely get this. All too often, the disaster community is characterised by fragmentation along disciplinary and organisational boundaries, a lack of dialogue and understanding between different actors, and a culture of competitiveness and professional rivalry that is fuelled by competition for funds (Twigg 2001).

The IDNDR, which was intended to overcome such obstacles, has in fact maintained them as far as the involve-

ment of NGOs is concerned. This can only be viewed as a great opportunity missed. Exclusive institutional structures, be they at international or national levels, are no solution to the problem of reducing the impact of natural disasters: they are part of the problem itself.

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