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## DISASTER PLANNING ESSENTIAL FOR MINIMIZING RISKS

 by *Chris Hufstader*

Asian earthquake and tsunami disaster points to need for comprehensive disaster planning, risk reduction to protect poorest citizens.

Just after the massive Indian Ocean earthquake and ensuing tsunami waves hit her island nation, Sri Lanka's President Chandrika Kumaratunga told the BBC, "The scale of the tragedy is massive ... this is a grave tragedy which we have not been prepared for."

The staggering death toll—over 22,000 in Sri Lanka alone as of 29 December—is partly attributed to lack of preparation for disasters. Cash-strapped governments like Sri Lanka simply don't have the resources to create disaster preparation plans, communications networks, evacuation plans, and disaster recovery programs needed to minimize the loss of life from natural disasters. Although Oxfam has helped specific communities in Sri Lanka to develop plans to deal with disasters, the lack of a national plan was sorely felt there the day after Christmas.

It might seem that a thorough, well-funded disaster plan is a luxury an impoverished country cannot afford, but there are cases of individual communities and even entire countries that have overcome lack of money and created effective ways to reduce risks and save lives. For a small investment in planning, millions of lives can be saved.

Oxfam America recently studied the experience of Cuba in its development of disaster prevention and mitigation programs. Situated in the Caribbean Sea, Cuba frequently stands in the way of serious hurricanes. While its neighbors are battered, losing lives and property, Cuba is unusually good at withstanding these calamities, and suffers much fewer dead.

Oxfam's report, entitled *Weathering the Storm: Lessons in Risk Reduction in Cuba* cites a number of attributes of Cuba's risk reduction program that can be applied by other countries. Three in particular are transferable to Asia and other regions:

- Disaster Preparedness: [Cuba was especially good at](#)

### Weathering the Storm

This comprehensive Oxfam research report studies the Cuban model of risk reduction in disaster mitigation, preparedness, response, and recovery. [▶](#)

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### Mitch + Five

Lessons in disaster preparedness and recovery from Central America, five years after hurricane Mitch. [▶](#)

mobilizing entire communities to develop their own disaster preparations. This involves mapping out vulnerable areas of the community, creating emergency plans, and actually simulating emergencies so people can practice evacuations and other measures designed to save lives. When disaster strikes, people know what to do.

Commitment of Resources: Cuba's strong central government prioritizes resources for its civil defense department. This helps the country to build up a common understanding of the importance of saving lives, and the citizens trust that their contributions to the government are well used for this purpose. Their collaboration on developing emergency plans helped build confidence in the government, so people trust in the plan they helped develop.

Communications: The communications system for emergencies in Cuba builds on local resources. Using local radio stations and other media to issue warnings on potential hazards also reinforces the disaster preparations. Since the local population is already involved in mapping risks and creating emergency plans, they are more inclined to act on emergency bulletins. Good communications, packaged simply, and built on existing, commonly used resources, is another way to build trust in disaster preparations.

Cuba is a unique example. There is a strong central government committed to protecting all its citizens, even the poorest and most isolated who are typically the most at risk. The most common natural disaster in Cuba is a hurricane, a threat visible for days and even weeks in advance. Yet building a culture of disaster preparedness, and involving local communities in mitigating risks, are strategies that can be applied in many other places, regardless of how rich or poor a country might be.

There are specific examples: In El Salvador, communities in the lower Rio Lempa region had developed their own evacuation plans after years of periodic flooding. A decade of civil war also helped people and communities learn how to pull together to help each other survive. When hurricane Mitch struck the area in 1998, citizens knew what to do: there was an orderly evacuation, and no lives were lost in several well organized villages on both sides of the river. Strong community leadership, trust in their evacuation systems, and communications networks served them well.

Oxfam America's Humanitarian Response program stresses community level disaster preparedness, and helps organizations train local leaders to mobilize people and resources to reduce risk from conflict and natural disasters. Training in the development of risk maps, evacuation plans, and communications networks all adds to ways of helping the poorest people in society, the most vulnerable in wars and natural disasters, overcome emergencies and get back on the path to building a better future.

There may never be such a widespread and devastating event in the Indian Ocean in our lifetime. Nevertheless, after the emergency phase of the flood and earthquake recover in the affected countries, it will be essential to learn from this disaster and implement life-saving measures in anticipation of the next disaster.

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