



Socio-cultural Engagement and Sensitivity in Disaster Risk Reduction

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Key points

- Socio-cultural factors play a key role in the vulnerability of certain groups to disasters. They can have a marked impact on the success or failure of disaster risk reduction approaches in communities.
- In order to reduce the continuing high losses from disasters, and the inequity in vulnerability to natural hazards, more attention should be paid to socio-cultural dimensions in training and disaster risk reduction activities.

Socio-cultural factors affect disaster risk

Disasters are often approached in a purely technical and physical manner. However, people's behaviour in the face of natural hazards and disasters is influenced by several factors: environmental, historical, economic, political – and also socio-cultural. Socio-cultural attitudes are particularly important as they can influence readiness to adopt, modify, or reject safety measures offered through outside assistance. Socio-cultural matters should always be taken into account in disaster risk reduction.

One characteristic of the modern world, whether in small rural communities or large cities, is that activities increasingly involve contact and interaction among people from different cultures. Problems often arise where official approaches are formulated without proper understanding of local conditions. Any community is complex and in this sense beyond the understanding of outsiders. But in the current context of great uncertainties and rapid changes, communities are also unlikely to understand all the processes happening beyond their

This *Briefing Paper* is addressed to policy and decision-makers at all levels. It aims to trigger consideration and discussion of policy options for socio-cultural engagement and sensitivity in capacity-building of communities at risk from natural hazards and disasters.

borders and the degree of influence from outside. This explains why the role and responsibilities of 'outside' assistance remain both essential and controversial in disaster risk reduction – and in development in general.

This briefing paper highlights these issues and makes recommendations, drawing among others on the results of a global e-conference on 'culture and risk' held in late 2008 by ICIMOD.

International discussions

At the 1995 Yokohama meeting of the UN International Decade for Natural Disaster Reduction, a greater focus on vulnerable communities was acknowledged as an international priority. The discussions highlighted the fact that social processes and environmental degradation play a key role in exposing some people to dangers and in increasing their vulnerability. Yet, whatever its other achievements, the Decade did not contribute to a decrease in the growth of disaster losses.

Ten years later in 2005, 168 governments adopted the Hyogo Framework for Action (HFA) at the World Conference on Disaster Reduction. The Framework reiterates the need to address disasters in relation to environmental, physical, social, and economic vulnerability, and the importance of accounting for socio-cultural factors in risk communication and as part of the reduction of the underlying risk factors. The Framework also recognises the importance of mainstreaming disaster risk reduction in development planning and resource allocation at national and global level. Vulnerability is created over the long-term and requires a long-term commitment to solve.

Despite this recognition, the sources of social and cultural vulnerability are still poorly addressed. There is a lack of sensitivity to the concerns, values, and belief systems of those most at risk, which contributes a great deal to the continuing high losses from disasters.

Socio-cultural factors may influence the access, understanding, and reaction to early warnings. The warning "the river is going to rise by one to two metres in the next 24 hours" released by a meteorological agency may have little meaning to a community in the local context. The community may measure increase in water levels using local references (e.g., tree trunks). As a result, the community does not respond to the official warning.



The issues

Losses from natural hazards are rising worldwide – and this would be the case even if the frequency and magnitude of hazard events remained constant, indicating increased vulnerability. A large and growing number of people, those who have proven to be most at risk in recent disasters, do not benefit from the investments related to modern technical understanding and safety standards. More data and new technology alone are not sufficient to improve disaster risk reduction.

1. **Socio-cultural factors can increase or reduce people's vulnerability to natural hazards.** Disaster risk reduction practitioners often overlook or misread these factors, thereby creating new challenges and additional financial and social costs. Trust, and differences in language, world view, and perception and assessment of risks are extremely important issues.

2. **Natural hazards contribute to reinforcing or increasing existing inequities and vulnerabilities.** The most vulnerable (women, children, the elderly and disabled, indigenous or ethnic minority groups, recent migrants and illegal migrants) suffer the most in disasters. They are living at risk mainly due to lack of access to resources and lack of choices, rather than lack of knowledge.
3. **Understanding and accounting for socio-cultural differences requires a major investment of time and dialogue but ultimately saves resources.** Few individuals or institutions have been willing to make this commitment.
4. **In a context of rapid change and complex interactions between 'local' and 'global' scales, some local knowledge and practices which used to contribute to disaster risk reduction are eroding.** They include local environmental knowledge and community memories carried in stories of dangers and past events. Some is becoming less relevant, but much that would be helpful is being lost when it is most needed.

Each new flood weakens the economic status of this dalit woman in the eastern Terai, Nepal. Women in many societies often have differential access to information and education, which makes them more vulnerable to natural hazards. The 2005 Indian Ocean tsunami killed two to three times more women than men in communities from Aceh to Sri Lanka and India. In the Bay of Bengal cyclone of 1991, reports suggest 90% of some 140,000 deaths were women and children.



Recommendations for socio-cultural engagement and sensitivity in disaster risk reduction (DRR)

In order to increase understanding and inclusion of cultural aspects, and thereby reduce the inequitable balance in vulnerability to risks from natural hazards, we recommend the following:

1. **Support training on socio-cultural aspects among officials and professionals responsible for DRR**
– Special attention should be given to language training and aspects related to religious beliefs, attachment to a place, and those socio-cultural norms and traditional customs that promote or inhibit social inclusion in DRR.
2. **Integrate the socio-cultural dimensions of DRR in school and university curricula to promote an ethic of engagement** – With new generations of young people in higher education, the potential exists for major outreach campaigns to marginalised groups through schools. Special attention should be given to incorporate fieldwork by students who spend several weeks documenting local knowledge within the context of national campaigns to mainstream culturally diverse knowledge into disaster risk reduction.
3. **Support interdisciplinary research and application of that research to increase understanding and develop tools and methods to account for socio-cultural factors in DRR activities** – Special attention should be given to developing models that combine 'local' and 'outside' knowledge and facilitate the dialogue between local experts and government and non-government authorities.
4. **Ensure that communities, including the most vulnerable, are engaged in the development of vulnerability reduction strategies and the communication of risk information through diverse sources, formats, and audiences** – Where differing

cultural groups or outside interventions are involved, special attention should be given to guarantee the co-generation and co-production of knowledge through multi-stakeholder dialogue.

5. **Facilitate access to resources (especially means of livelihood, information, decision-making power, and technologies) to those living with risks, particularly among the most vulnerable groups**
– Land reform, micro-credit and banking, non-farm income opportunities, and above all freedom for cultural minority groups to organise themselves, clarify their interests, and advocate for themselves are among the immediately available tools that can help ensure local control over resources.

Additional resources

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Acknowledgments

This Briefing Paper draws from previous ICIMOD work on social inclusion in disaster risk reduction including a global e-conference on 'Culture and Risks: How Socio-Cultural Settings Influence Risks from Natural Hazards' held in October 2008. More than 450 people registered for the e-conference from more than 70 countries representing all aspects and responsibilities within the risk and disaster field, including some leading international experts. The Briefing Paper was written by Julie Dekens and Kenneth Hewitt. We thank all of those who provided valuable comments. This work was funded by the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida).



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