



UNICEF AT WORK DURING NATURAL DISASTERS

Natural disasters, in the form of humanitarian emergencies like floods and cyclones, have a severe impact on the lives of many women, children and families around the world. These emergency situations result when a sudden disaster overwhelms the ability of the affected population to respond. In many countries around the world, local authorities struggle to rebuild basic infrastructure and respond to the survival, development and protection needs of the affected population.

Today's emergencies are more complex and greater in number than before. Although many are a result of natural events, the causes and impacts of the emergency are often affected by human activity. Climate change, environmental degradation, population pressure, economic instability and poverty all intensify the frequency and severity of humanitarian emergencies leaving some populations more vulnerable than others.

Natural Disasters: refer to the effects of severe natural hazards, such as tsunamis, mudslides, floods, hurricanes, cyclones, volcanic eruptions and earthquakes.

VULNERABLE POPULATIONS

Some communities are more at risk to the impact of humanitarian emergencies based on where and in what conditions they live. Certain geographical areas will be more susceptible to some natural disasters (e.g. living on floodplains or along geological fault lines). Other communities will be more vulnerable to human-made crises because of human degradation of the natural environment, a history of unstable governments or long simmering tensions. Wherever disaster strikes, poor communities will be the most affected, especially the children among them.

The poor often have less choice about where they live. They can be forced to settle in overpopulated areas or geographically vulnerable areas (e.g. steep hillsides). They often construct their own homes without the materials or information needed to meet building codes or erect houses that will withstand natural disasters. Few poorer people will be able to afford insurance. Rebuilding after a disaster without that assistance just ensures they will remain vulnerable well beyond the crisis. The chaos and insecurity of major natural disasters threatens the lives of children. When disaster strikes, parents' livelihoods are often interrupted, their homes damaged or abandoned, and their access to important resources such as safe water and sanitation, food, shelter and health care are affected. All of these realities impact children. In some circumstances, children will find themselves separated from their parents or even orphaned by disaster. With no primary caregivers, children become vulnerable to abuse, neglect, trafficking, malnutrition, disease and psycho-social trauma.



UNICEF IN EMERGENCIES

By working in 150 countries and having supply networks around the world, UNICEF is on the ground before, during and after most humanitarian emergencies. The overall aim of UNICEF's emergency response is to preserve life, alleviate suffering and protect the rights of children. Children in the midst of armed conflict and natural disasters have the same needs and rights as children in stable situations.

Each year, UNICEF works with local and international partners to respond to more than 200 emergencies worldwide. These partnerships with national governments, United Nations (UN) agencies, and civil society are crucial to ensure the best possible delivery of humanitarian assistance. Partnerships allow for a wide variety of programming to be delivered efficiently with both international and local knowledge and support.

In the first six to eight weeks after the start of a crisis, UNICEF and its partners focus on vital, life-saving interventions. A broader range of activities are undertaken once the initial response is well established. Based on a rapid preliminary assessment of how women and children have been affected by the crisis, UNICEF and its partners work together to address the following programming priorities:

HEALTH AND NUTRITION In any emergency, UNICEF focuses on the health of children and women. Vaccination programs for children vulnerable to disease, vitamin A and nutritional supplements, essential medicines and emergency health kits, fortified foods, mother and child nutrition programs, post-rape-care kits and emergency supplies such as blankets, tarpaulins and cooking sets, all ensure the health of children and women in crisis.

WATER, SANITATION AND HYGIENE To ensure access to safe water and sanitation for children and women in emergencies, UNICEF and its partners provide an emergency supply of safe water, well-repair supplies, water purification kits, jerry cans or clean containers to transport water, basic hygiene supplies (e.g. soap, bleach), improved sanitation facilities, hygiene education and information on the safe handling of water and disposal of human waste.

CHILD PROTECTION UNICEF cares for children that have been separated from family members or even orphaned during an emergency. These children are particularly vulnerable without the support and protection of care-givers. UNICEF focuses on registering these children in tracing and reunification programs and getting them home to their families. If parents cannot be located, UNICEF finds appropriate care, preferably with other family members. Where children are vulnerable to abuse, neglect and exploitation, UNICEF provides trauma counselling, child-friendly spaces where children can play and residential centres where children receive supplies and safe shelter.

EDUCATION The unpredictability of emergency situations is stressful for children. Returning to school as soon as possible will restore a sense of normalcy and security. UNICEF provides tents and school-in-a-box kits for temporary schooling, as well as recreational activities and teacher training to spot the signs of severe trauma. UNICEF also works with local government to get schools reopened and classes resumed.

“Earthquakes don’t kill people. Bad buildings kill them.”

-John Mutter, Columbia University seismologist and disaster expert

Source: This factsheet has been adapted from the UNICEF Canada ‘When Disaster Strikes: Understanding Humanitarian Emergencies’ resource. Full resource available:

<http://globalclassroom.unicef.ca/pdf/When%20Disaster%20Strikes%20Elementary%20Resource%20Guide.pdf>