

Disaster Laws

Fact sheet: DRR legislation

Enhancing disaster risk reduction through legislation, particularly at the community level

To prevent disasters, we need laws that work for communities

In November 2011, the state parties to the Geneva Conventions and the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement will come together to discuss the key humanitarian issues of the day at the 31st International Conference of the Red Cross and Red Crescent. High on their agenda will be the question of how laws can work for communities to prevent disasters.



Earthquake in Haiti, 2010.

Why laws?

We now know that there is really no such thing as a “natural” disaster. Disasters happen because natural events combine with human vulnerability. That vulnerability is something we, as nations and communities, can absolutely change, if we make the effort.

Good laws are critical for that effort. They strengthen protective infrastructure and assist governments to move people out of harm’s way. They help communities to understand the risks they face and to make themselves safer. They motivate, organize and promote cooperation between government, civil society and the private

sector, and guard against forgetfulness when it has been a long time since that last major crisis.

On the other hand, weak laws can sap public confidence, entrench old ways of thinking and enable a culture of inactivity. They make it even harder for committed individuals to make a difference.

Community-level action

The good news is that, over the last two decades, countries around the world have been improving how their laws deal with disaster risk reduction (DRR) – particularly by creating relevant institutional structures. But this is not enough. Recent studies show that national commitments to DRR are falling short in many countries when it comes to impact at the community level.

“Disasters do not strike departments or committees, they strike communities,” observes IFRC Secretary General Bekele Geleta, “In the long run, we will not be successful in reducing risks if our laws merely distribute responsibilities among dedicated agencies and expert groups.”

Involving and supporting communities to prevent disasters is a key concern of National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies. Around the world, their volunteers are working to build the resilience of their own communities and reduce the likelihood of disasters. Their hands-on experience can be a valuable resource to governments interested in broadening and strengthening their laws.

Best practice

So what can laws do to support DRR at the community level? States and National Societies will be asked to bring their best ideas with them to the International Conference in order to begin the much-needed dialogue on this issue. Some of the best practices they may consider include:

Laws can involve communities and civil society

- In Nepal, many DRR committees have been able to legally register as community-based organisations, allowing them to access government assistance and participate formally in local government processes.

Laws can improve knowledge and education

- Following the adoption of a new act in the Dominican Republic, the Ministry of Education has included key aspects of DRR in its ten year education plan, supporting the teaching of hazard awareness.

Laws can improve land management – even for poor communities

- In Brazil, municipalities are called upon to designate “Special Social Interest Zones” with the goal of progressively legalizing and securing homes built outside of land management rules.

Laws can set realistic standards for community construction

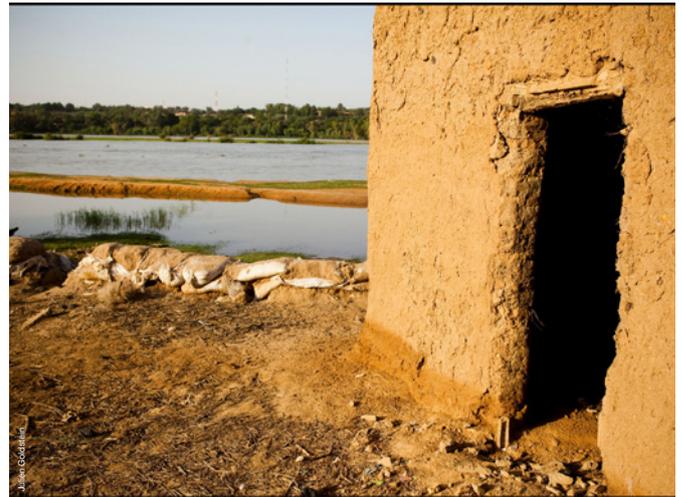
- In Nepal, the Department of Urban Development is disseminating “Mandatory Rules of Thumb”, a set of voluntary guidelines intended to assist owner-builders to construct earthquake and fire safe smaller buildings.

Laws can ensure adequate funding at community level

- New legislation adopted in the Philippines ensures that 5% of annual local revenues are set aside and strictly reserved for disaster risk reduction and preparedness activities.

Laws can mandate community risk mapping

- In Sweden, municipalities play the primary role in the promotion of comprehensive risk management programmes, and are mandated to undertake floods, landslides and forest fires risk mapping.



An island on the Niger river. River flood destroyed many houses in 2010.

For more information

- available at www.ifrc.org/idrl -

- [Desk review on trends in the promotion of community-based DRR through legislation](#)
- [Analysis of legislation related to disaster risk reduction in Nepal](#)
- [Case study summaries: Albania, Brazil, Dominican Republic, Nepal](#)



For further information,
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