

**United Nations**  
**Division for the Advancement of Women (DAW)**  
**International Strategy for Disaster Reduction (ISDR)**  
**Expert Group Meeting on**  
**“Environmental management and the mitigation of natural disasters:**  
**a gender perspective”**  
**6-9 November 2001**  
**Ankara, Turkey**

**The ILO Response to Natural Disasters**

**Prepared by**  
**Jayasankar Krishnamurty\***

\* The views expressed in this paper, which has been reproduced as received, are those of the author and do not necessarily represent those of the United Nations.

## ***Genesis of the ILO Crisis Programme***

Within the International Labour Office, the InFocus Programme on Crisis Response and Reconstruction (IFP/CRISIS) was set up in September 1999 at the time of the reorganisation of the Office after Mr. Somavia took office as Director-General. The Office was restructured along four strategic objectives and eight topics were identified for focussed attention. Crisis response and reconstruction was one of the selected topics.

IFP/CRISIS covers four types of crises: armed conflicts; natural disasters; financial and economic downturns, and difficult political and social transitions. One third of all ILO member-states are currently experiencing a crisis situation. As is well known, the frequency and intensity of natural disasters is on the rise. Our experience is that operating in an unstable environment requires special approaches and tools and this is what IFP/CRISIS has developed over the two years of its existence, on the basis of the experience accumulated while intervening in crisis-affected countries. The Programme undertakes four kinds of activities viz. operational activities, knowledge and tools development, capacity building and training and advocacy and resource mobilisation

We have been involved in responding to several major natural disasters, including the floods in Mozambique, the earthquake in Gujarat, the mud slides in Venezuela and the earthquake in San Salvador. We have also published a working paper on Gender and Natural Disasters and our publications and reports can be accessed through the website: [www.ilo.org/crisis](http://www.ilo.org/crisis).

### ***Importance of gender concerns in natural disaster contexts***

While dealing with gender issues in the context of natural disasters, several considerations should be borne in mind:

- Natural disasters affect women and men, boys and girls differently because society ascribes different roles and responsibilities to them.
- Over the disaster and during the recovery, the roles of men and women may change in several ways or even several times.
- The post-crisis period offers a window of opportunity for promoting social justice, redressing inequalities and reducing vulnerabilities
- Gender activities should not be equated to activities targeting women. Men are also affected. Men and women have different needs during and after a crisis. Again, they can both contribute to crisis prevention.

- Men and women are not two homogenous groups. Within each, some persons are more vulnerable than others.
- Women are generally over-represented in low paid and precarious employment and in the informal economy. Further, women have less access to productive assets and to information and early warning systems.
- Gender is not the only source of inequality; it may be combined with other factors such as race, ethnicity, religion, poverty, location etc. This could result in multiple and cumulative disadvantage which could grow over time.
- While designing interventions one has to be careful not to create new inequalities and exclusions (e.g. between project beneficiaries and other sections of the population as this could set back the recovery process). IFP/CRISIS places emphasis on the recovery of livelihoods and rehabilitation of the whole population through several means, including provision of inputs, skills development, local economic development and social integration. While specific groups may be targeted in the first instance, it is often both necessary and desirable to extend beyond immediate beneficiaries to families and whole communities.

### ***Some Programme Experiences***

ILO interventions in the context of natural disasters are focused on saving existing jobs and expanding decent work opportunities during recovery, reconstruction and the return to development. This does not mean that environmental concerns are neglected. In most of the current round of natural disasters, there is a person-made element, which contributes to or exacerbates the disaster and may even lead to its recurrence. Since the environment is already fragile, proposed areas for job creation have to be carefully assessed to ensure that they do not make a bad situation worse. In the case of Gujarat, it was observed that developing chemical industries using salt as a raw material, which might at first sight appear very promising, was likely to have adverse impacts on the already fragile environment.

When planning an intervention in a disaster situation, the considerations that apply in normal times may not always be relevant. For example, after the Gujarat earthquake, we focused on women for several reasons. Our assessment was that the destruction of dwellings hit the embroidery production of women much more than the activities of men, as these had been located in the dwellings. At the same time, production could be resumed fairly quickly as the skills existed, although there was scope for improvement. Our development partner, the Self Employed Women's Association (SEWA), was already working with the women and could revive and expand home-based embroidery very quickly. Finally, the ILO was just completing a project with SEWA in the area hit by the earthquake. We felt that we owed it to these women that we did not forget them in their hour of need.

The men could do construction activities, but many needed training, especially in earthquake and cyclone proof construction, which would take time to impart. Also,

by and large, livestock activities were not that seriously damaged. Our interviews reveal that the men appreciated the support provided to the women, which helped the family to survive during the early phases of the recovery.

However, a programme does not need to target women to benefit primarily women. Our intervention in Mozambique, undertaken after the floods in 2000, is a good example. After a needs assessment mission, a project was formulated whose objective was to reactivate the local economy (based on agriculture) and four local markets in Chokwe, one of the worst affected districts. An evaluation of the project, undertaken a year later, showed that 87 percent of beneficiaries were women. This was not expected. A detailed identification of likely beneficiaries had not been possible in the unsettled conditions prevailing at the time and an immediate intervention was needed. The low proportion of male beneficiaries was probably because most men in the area migrated to work in the mines in South Africa.

### ***Diversification as a risk-reduction strategy***

The issue of more diversified and remunerative activities for both men and women remains. Diversification can be viewed as a risk reduction strategy for families and their members, but it is constrained by environmental concerns and the viability or otherwise of undertaking non-agricultural production in remote and poor villages. In the part of Gujarat where we were involved, remoteness from roads and markets was a major obstacle to occupational diversification for men. Construction work was in great demand, but this required that the men would have to move to wherever the work was available. Livestock rearing was largely a subsistence activity in the absence of processing facilities and access to markets and consumers outside the village. Diversification cannot be achieved within the framework of a single crisis intervention. There is really a need for local or district level plans, which specifically address the problems and consequences of recurrent natural disasters.

### ***Disasters and Information Flow***

An important issue in the context of natural disasters is the question of flow of information and differentials in access to this information among different groups. While differences in information flow/access between men and women are a serious problem, differentials also exist in respect of tribal/indigenous and mainstream populations, ethnic and religious groups, the poor and the better off sections of the population.

Access to early warning information from the government or other sources could make a considerable difference to the extent of losses suffered due to certain kinds of natural disasters where advance information would save lives, inventories and productive assets. While traditional early warning systems may help to some extent to make up for this, they may not be adequate. Literacy and education differences can also play a role in the pattern of information flows.

The same set of considerations applies to the post disaster situation in relation to access to relief, access to credit and other facilities and access to markets outside the village. In this context, belonging to a membership based organization like SEWA or a micro credit group can help to reduce the degree of information asymmetry and raise creditworthiness.

### ***Making an early start***

By way of conclusion, it may be stressed that our experience indicates that even during the so-called humanitarian phase, development-related interventions have to be undertaken, especially when we are dealing with vulnerable groups, such as women, who may lose their livelihood sources in the days immediately following the natural disaster. Existing jobs have to be saved: we cannot wait. At the same time, employment creation policies and related measures for social and economic reintegration have to be initiated within the humanitarian or emergency phase, but with an eye to the future. These may take a little longer to produce tangible results, but they are the best way to provide lasting opportunities for promoting the values of freedom, equity, dignity and security through decent work.