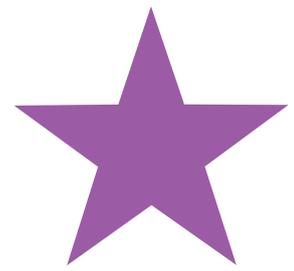


Emergencies: NGOs Helping People back from the Brink



Humanitarian crises can affect any country, any time, and arise as a result of slow or sudden onset disasters.

- ★ “Sudden onset” disasters can occur due to natural phenomena such as earthquakes, floods, volcanic eruptions, etc. or can be man-made, such as industrial accidents. Furthermore, natural disasters can be exacerbated by human error or neglect as in the form of poor construction in an earthquake zone or urban planning in flood plains.
- ★ “Slow onset” disasters include drought, war and famine which rarely occur overnight, and so experts can often predict their occurrence. Even so, it is often this type of disaster that does the most long-term damage, as they gradually undermine a society’s capacity to recover.

Whatever the type of disaster, it is **the most vulnerable that suffer the most**. Generally, being vulnerable means being poor and marginalised. It is the poor who cannot afford well-built homes, who live on marginal lands prone to erosion or flooding, and who cannot protect themselves from armed conflict or the steep price rises that herald the onset of famine.



Central to all humanitarian crises is vulnerability. The primary cause of vulnerability in developing countries is poverty, and the marginalisation and powerlessness associated with it.

Emergency aid – Responding to crises

When disaster strikes, we all have **a duty to assist** the people affected. Generally, the victims of disaster are assisted by their neighbours, communities and government. In poor countries however, major disasters can easily overwhelm national capabilities. In such cases, the international community must respond.

Governmental donors may respond to requests for emergency aid either directly - through the provision of financial assistance or material goods - or indirectly - by supporting the work of international organisations such as the United Nations or European Union. International aid agencies, like the members of Dóchas, also offer their assistance.



Poor people living in poor countries have fewer options to overcome unexpected disasters than others - if you live on the edge, it takes only a nudge to push you over. Emergency aid is not only about saving lives, but also about challenging the underlying injustices and vulnerabilities, to allow people to become authors of their own destiny.

Aid agencies develop their own responses, based on their role, experience and local needs. Yet, all established NGOs working in emergency relief are committed to a number of internationally agreed rules and standards.

Aid agencies will complement each other's efforts to provide food, medicine, equipment shelter and qualified personnel. And they all commit to meeting certain **minimum standards** in their work and behaviour.

Some NGOs work through local partners, basing their responses on **local knowledge and local capacity**. Others use their international contacts to mobilise people and goods in the most effective way, deploying **rapid response teams** to effect the swift distribution of relief items and provide essential services.

How are Irish NGOs helping?

- ★ Irish aid agencies have developed a strong track record in relief work. Some have developed their own response capacity, others mobilise the **skills and resources of their international and local partners**, to ensure that the **appropriate aid reaches the people who need it**.
- ★ When a crisis occurs, Irish NGOs support those affected by **providing essential services**, such as food, nutrition, water, sanitation, health and mental care, shelter, education or protection.
- ★ Irish NGOs assist people **regardless of race or religion**, and determine the type of aid based on objective **assessments of people's needs**. Importantly, needs should be determined by the victims themselves, or by those closest to them.
- ★ Most aid agencies do not work simply to save lives – they try to **ensure a right to life with dignity** for those they assist. Irish NGOs seek to provide opportunities for future development and people's control over their own destinies.
- ★ Most Irish NGOs work with local communities to **build their capacity and reduce their vulnerability to future disasters**. They support communities in their efforts to prevent crises from occurring, in preparing them in advance for possible crises, and in mitigating the consequences.
- ★ They lobby governments to do more to eliminate the root causes of people's suffering, and to **ensure funding is available** to help reduce the likelihood of future disasters.

The impact of natural disasters can be lessened if governments help communities to reduce their vulnerability to such events. Man-made disasters can often be avoided if targeted action is undertaken, and if governments **invest in long-term development processes**.



Irish NGOs have different ways of working in relief, but they all strive to adhere to professional standards, as laid down in the Sphere standards (www.sphereproject.org), and the Code of Conduct for the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies and NGOs in Disaster Relief (www.ifrc.org/publicat/conduct/code.asp)

Aid from Ireland has saved thousands of lives and allowed countless others to rebuild their homes, schools and livelihoods. Over the years, Irish aid agencies have built up a professional approach to emergency relief, with systems in place to ensure the appropriateness of their assistance and its effectiveness.

For more information, see www.HowYouCanHelp.ie

