

# Disaster Risk Reduction through Schools: A Groundbreaking Project



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# Disasters can be prevented

Natural disasters like floods, droughts and earthquakes destroy the lives of more than 300 million people every year. Disasters can affect anybody at any time. But in most cases the poorest and most vulnerable people are affected first and are hit hardest.

Natural disasters are not uncontrollable, random events. Climate change is increasing the strength and frequency of storms, cyclones, floods and droughts. The impact of these disasters depends on people's vulnerability and their ability to cope. By building community resilience and by helping people to adapt to climate change, we can reduce the impact of future disasters.

## 2007: the year of extreme weather

- 2007 was the world's second warmest year on record
- 12 out of 13 UN emergency appeals that year were related to severe storms, floods and droughts
- Unprecedented floods hit 23 African countries and affected more than 41 million people in Bangladesh, India and Nepal
- Two Category Five hurricanes, several tropical storms and unusually heavy rains affected 1.5 million people in Central America, Mexico and the Caribbean

## What is Disaster Risk Reduction?

Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR) is a relatively new concept based on three core areas:

**Prevention:** eg. planting trees on hillsides to avoid landslides

**Mitigation:** eg. building river embankments and raising plinths to reduce the risk of flooding

**Preparedness:** eg. early warning, evacuation plans and first aid training for community volunteers

## Hyogo Framework for Action (HFA)

The Hyogo Framework for Action is a comprehensive 10-year strategy for disaster risk reduction which aims to reduce human and material losses from disasters by 2015. 168 governments have signed up to the HFA.

### The HFA's five key priorities:

1. Ensure that DRR is a national and local priority with a strong institutional basis for implementation
2. Identify, assess and monitor disaster risks and enhance early warning
3. Use knowledge, innovation and education to build a culture of safety and resilience at all levels
4. Reduce underlying risk factors
5. Strengthen disaster preparedness for effective response at all levels

## Disaster Risk Reduction through Schools (DRRS): A Pioneering Project

ActionAid's five-year Disaster Risk Reduction through Schools project (2006-11) is operational in seven countries – Bangladesh, India, Nepal, Ghana, Malawi, Kenya, and Haiti - with a budget of £2,809,7124, funded by the UK's Department for International Development (DFID). The Greek Government (Hellenic Aid) has committed an additional €106,000 to replicate the programme in a further two countries; the Democratic Republic of Congo and Zambia.

The three overarching aims of the project are to:

- Support the implementation of the Hyogo Framework for Action through innovative, grassroots DRR programmes
- Build local communities' capacity to act on their own behalf and secure their basic rights, using Participatory Vulnerability Analysis (PVA)
- Advocate for governments to uphold their responsibilities to protect their populations

Already the project has facilitated the transformation of over 100 local schools into community hubs for implementing disaster prevention measures.

### What is Participatory Vulnerability Analysis (PVA)?

PVA is a tool for building awareness and understanding on why disasters occur and how they can be reduced. It is undertaken by vulnerable communities themselves, together with local leaders and government officials. The process involves a joint analysis of hazards and their aggravating factors, highlighting community strengths and discussing potential solutions for reducing risk. This shared analysis helps assign roles and responsibilities to different actors so that in the event of a disaster, communities can hold these actors to account.

### DRRS project activities:

- ✓ Engaging children, teachers, parents, school management, local authorities and other key actors in PVA techniques
- ✓ Investing in school infrastructure to make buildings and surrounding areas safer
- ✓ Using schools as centres for community action, training and coordination on DRR
- ✓ Raising the awareness of children and their communities on climate change and disaster prevention and mitigation
- ✓ Tracking how climate change is affecting communities
- ✓ Helping vulnerable children and their communities to claim the rights that will allow them to live in safer conditions
- ✓ Campaigning for the implementation of the Hyogo Framework for Action by all signatory governments
- ✓ Persuading and supporting governments to integrate DRR into all areas of their work and to replicate successful DRR models
- ✓ Supporting civil society networks and experts at local, national and international levels
- ✓ Documenting and sharing experiences and learning with peers, governments, academics and donors

Country	Schools engaged in the DRRS project	Students Actively Involved	People Reached
BANGLADESH	29	5,428	204,510
DRC	8	1,932	384,171
GHANA	20	8,972	463,889
HAITI	9	2,000	30,000
INDIA	74	17,000	100,000
KENYA	11	3,000	20,000
MALAWI	4	1,582	21,500
NEPAL	8	4,500	25,000
ZAMBIA	8	2,500	10,000

## Progress to date

An independent review conducted halfway through the DRRS project indicates that the project is making concrete contributions to all five pillars of the Hyogo Framework for Action.

### 1. Communities are able to make DRR a local priority with strong representative community organisations dedicated to it

#### In Malawi...

The formation of local Risk Management Committees in Nsanje, one of the project's implementation areas, has engaged local communities in recognising the importance of disaster preparedness and taking concrete actions to reduce their vulnerability to the hazards that threaten them.

"The PVA session came just at the right time for us and raised the issues in a way that everybody could understand," said Chiyembekezo Kulinji, a schoolteacher and head of the student Nsanje Risk Management (NRM) Club.

"I am going to share what I have learnt on disaster preparedness and management with pupils, teachers and communities so that we are all aware. I will also make sure that in our school we work together on issues of environmental management so that floods are banished to history."

### 2. Communities are aware of the key hazards and vulnerabilities that affect them and can monitor and disseminate information about them

#### In Nepal...

In 2006, disaster management committees in three districts of Nepal drew up comprehensive disaster preparedness plans, based on the findings of PVAs. Students from Churiyamai Secondary School in Makawanpur singled out PVAs and vulnerability mapping as the most exciting skill they had gained through this process. "We now analyse our surroundings and the vulnerability of our forests, rivers and

schools," says one student. She and her fellow students are now helping to clean school compounds and protect river banks through actions such as planting bamboo.

Across Nepal, street drama has proved the most effective means of raising awareness of hazards and preparedness in schools and communities. Children and other community members have been trained in how to develop dramas on earthquakes, floods, fire, and sanitation. In Banke, 700 people witnessed street dramas on earthquake preparedness and on precautions for tackling epidemics like diarrhoea and cholera.

#### In Haiti...

In Thiotte, a highly flood-prone area, PVA exercises have successfully contributed to change in the way local communities approach disaster management, helping them undertake initiatives to reduce risks and protect themselves. In Bois-Chadèque, in the South East of the country, parents were engaged in building a protective wall around a local school commonly used as a community shelter in the event of emergency. Local community members have also formed several committees to alert the public of impending storms using megaphones, giving people time to seek shelter and safety. ActionAid has distributed equipment and trained working groups to undertake rapid intervention and first aid, as well as perform rescue operations and damage assessments when disaster strikes.



Local people work to build a protective wall around a school used as a shelter in times of emergency

Alce Jean Baptiste/ActionAid

### 3. Communities are well informed and motivated to build a culture of safety and resilience

#### In Bangladesh...



Lamia Akter, the 7 year old whose cyclone warnings saved her family  
ActionAid

ActionAid is working with local teachers and partner organisation South Asia Partnership to help children understand how to keep themselves safe in a cyclone. When Cyclone Sidr hit Bangladesh in 2007 Lamia Akter, a 7-year old student from one of ActionAid's project sites, helped save the lives of her family and many others by passing on a cyclone warning alert she had received at school to villagers in her community of Char Bangla. "As soon as our teacher announced in class that there would be a cyclone and released us early," she explains, "my five friends and I returned to our village and went from door to door, telling people to store their valuables and go to the cyclone shelter."

Many people, including Lamia's relatives, were reluctant to go to the shelter but Lamia had learnt in school what could happen if they delayed. She had also learnt what action to take before, during and after a disaster. She knew that legal papers and precious crockery should be buried at home and the place marked with a bamboo cane so that the items could be recovered afterwards. She also knew that livestock

should be moved to higher ground and that people should take refuge in the nearest emergency shelter.

Lamia's quick action meant that she was able to get her family and neighbours to the cyclone shelter in time. The cyclone destroyed many homes and belongings, but Lamia and her family survived and are now rebuilding their lives.

### 4. There is progress towards changing social, economic and environmental conditions and land utilization at the community level to reduce underlying risk factors

#### In Ghana...



Yakubu Abubut with his wife and four children  
Alhassan Sulemana/ActionAid

PVA exercises conducted with local communities in the DRRS project implementation areas have helped people examine how their interaction with their environment can influence the likelihood of disasters, and thus take steps to change their behaviour and help reduce the risks they face.

"I participated in the PVA exercise that was conducted in our community. It affected me so much that instead of just participating for one day as originally planned, I took part in all three days," explained Yakubu Abubut, a 27 year- old farmer and father of four children, from the Upper East Region of Ghana.

“Before, I used to go to the bush to hunt, but during the PVA exercise hunters were identified as one of the causes of bushfires in our communities. This upset me to such an extent that I decided to stop hunting and concentrate on rearing guinea fowl and chickens instead. I also tried to persuade some of my friends to stop hunting.

During the analysis, it became clear that poverty was one of the things that made us vulnerable to disasters, so I decided to extend my farmland this year. I also planted more maize than millet, and early maturing crops such as sweet potatoes and other vegetables that I can sell. This means I won't have to sell my grain which would have caused hunger in my family later in the year. I was not lucky enough to get an education myself but I'm going to make sure my children do.”

### In Haiti...



Children walk to plant trees as part of a “Risk Reduction Day” in Thiotte, Haiti, August 2008

Alice Jean Baptiste/ActionAid

ActionAid Haiti has been at the forefront of implementing activities to help local communities recognise how their interaction with the local environment can influence, and reduce, the risks they face from common hazards such as floods. In August 2008, local children in Thiotte, one of the DRRS programme's operational areas, took part in a “Risk Reduction Day” where they planted trees to help reduce the

risk of mud/landslides during almost annual flood episodes. Students in Pichon have also participated in a number of climate change training sessions where they have learnt how to prepare plant nurseries.

## 5. Individuals and communities are well prepared, ready to act, equipped and resourced with the knowledge and capacities for effective disaster response and recovery

### In India...



Chandan Chakrabarty demonstrates how to wear an improvised life jacket, made from glass bottles  
Prashant Panjiar/OnAsia/ActionAid

Annual flooding in the Nalbari district of Assam state, India, has affected communities for decades. As part of ActionAid's DRRS project, local children from a number of schools have formed School Disaster Management Committees

(SDMCs) and have become DRR volunteers.

“Almost every year, we are hit by floods, and every time communication becomes a major challenge for us,” local volunteers explain. “There are two or three boats in every village but these are owned by rich people and cannot be used by poor people like us.”

Thanks to the DRRS project, the villagers now have life jackets and feel safer. They have also learnt how to make boats in a few minutes out of wooden desks and tarpaulins that can carry three to four people to a safe location. “DRR has taught us how to live through disasters and has given us new hope,” says volunteer Chandan Chakrabarty.

## The next step: from local to national

ActionAid works with partners at all levels to:

- share lessons learnt from its DRR work
- ensure that DRR measures implemented at the local level are understood at a national level
- persuade governments to make DRR a national priority.

ActionAid's DRR work has already succeeded in influencing national policies and in replicating elements of the project at regional and even international levels. One notable success came in Nepal in 2008, where lobbying and sensitisation of relevant authorities was successful in prompting the government to incorporate DRR into the national curriculum.

## At the international level

**Education:** ActionAid has been a leading international advocate of involving schools, education ministries and children themselves in reducing the risk from disasters. As part of this work, ActionAid commissioned a review of the role of education and knowledge in DRR entitled 'Let our children teach us'.

**Climate change:** ActionAid has actively campaigned for DRR work to be linked with efforts to adapt to climate change, at UN climate change conferences in Nairobi (2006), Bali (2007) and Poznan (2008), and elsewhere. 'Unjust Waters', ActionAid's study of the impact of climate change on the urban poor in Africa, captures communities' own knowledge and experience of adapting to climate change and highlights the need for donor funding in this area.

**International fora:** ActionAid is a member of the Knowledge and Education/Management Oversight Group within the UN International Strategy for Disaster Reduction (UNISDR) Platform, and a steering committee member of the Global Network of CSOs on Disaster Reduction. This network is currently undertaking a review

of the implementation of the Hyogo Framework, based on views from the 'frontline'.

ActionAid is also a member of DFID's inter-agency group on DRR whose intervention at the 3rd International Conference on Early Warning in Bonn led to the publication of a user-friendly paper providing '10 essential ingredients for successful people-centred early-warning systems'.

In 2007 ActionAid co-hosted an event at the World Social Forum in Nairobi with UNISDR, bringing DRR messages to new audiences. During this event, children from rural Malawi and Kenya were given a platform to explain the impact of disasters on their schools, communities and on their education. Their testimonies conveyed key messages from the Hyogo Framework through children's eyes.

## International recognition for ActionAid's DRR work

In 2007 ActionAid was awarded a Sasakawa Certificate of Distinction by the UN International Strategy for Disaster Reduction for its innovative approach to DRR and its integration of DRR into "national, sub-national, sectoral, and community initiatives." ActionAid's work was commended for facilitating the "development and introduction of the Hyogo Framework as a component of these efforts in moving societies toward inclusive, integrated strategies and plans for achieving sustainable development in the near future."

For more information about ActionAid and its disaster risk reduction work, please see:

[www.actionaid.org](http://www.actionaid.org)

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A child in Bangladesh plays in  
front of a flooded house  
Andrew Biraj/Panos Pictures/ActionAid