

What has to be done to increase the effectiveness of disaster interventions

Frederick Cuny

Intertext

Editors Note: What follows is drawn from a session at the Institute on Education for Development in the Context of Disasters that focused on factors that limit effective response to disaster situations. In that session Frederick Cuny, author of *Disasters and Development* (Oxford University Press, 1983), outlined the conditions in pre- and post-disaster situations that affect possible responses. He also raised several important challenges and dilemmas for consideration by those who work in disaster response and long-term development. The following is a partial summary of his remarks, and a distillation of his points that require further exploration.

Cuny characterized many situations in which disasters occur (or pre-disaster situations) as those where poverty prevails, people are illiterate and have limited access to services. He noted further that in these situations governments usually are concerned with overall economic performance, while private agencies concentrate their programs on the poor. These poor are disenfranchised and, in some cases, repressed by their governments. They are marginalized politically as well as economically. There are few social institutions, and those that do exist are rigid and discourage change. Disaster prone areas are often remote from centers of power and communication, accessible only through long and difficult travel, or are the result of increasing urbanization through the movement of people onto marginal lands closer to the seat of government and/or economic activity. Agricultural systems are marginal and subsistence-oriented and, often, natural resources are declining through overuse and misuse.

Post-disaster situations, Cuny pointed out, add a high level of confusion, political uncertainty and mobility to the above circumstances. New jobs and activities emerge for some, while for others old forms of occupations are destroyed. Some people are able to take advantage of sudden changes, while others are dispossessed of the little they have and lose out. There often are secondary threats, as in the case of an earthquake followed by mudslides, and these generate continuing risk and uncertainty. Decision-making and activity can be severely slowed by such uncertainties. In such a setting, people suffer economic loss and are struck by a sense of lost future opportunities even as

they attempt to recover from their immediate situation. They may suffer food shortages, damaged housing, and health problems. In addition, they must cope with severe grief and emotional loss. All these factors contribute to a high degree of uncertainty and volatility for private agencies attempting to operate in post-disaster conditions.

As he outlined pre- and post-disaster circumstances, Cuny warned that the single most important factor that limits or impedes effective intervention in disaster situations is the pre-set mind of many of those who work in this area. He challenged all people who work in disasters/development to rethink their basic assumptions and approaches to disasters. In particular, he challenged them to: (1) shift the focus of effort from disaster response to pre-disaster prevention and mitigation; (2) abandon the current program approach to disaster response in favor of other, more appropriate methods of intervention; and (3) develop new institutional forms for disaster intervention rather than relying on the private voluntary agencies which now perform much of the disaster response work.

SHIFT AWAY FROM RESPONSE PHASE TO PREVENTION/MITIGATION PHASE

Cuny drew a continuum in the form of a loop to illustrate the relationship between development, on the positive side, and a crisis event that might become a disaster, on the negative side. He noted that before a disaster, three phases — preparation, mitigation and prevention — may occur in development. After a disaster, three phases — response, transition and reconstruction — lead back to development.

Cuny's point was that a disaster event does not occur out of context. On the contrary, it is imperative to recognize the circumstances which give rise to a disaster and the necessity to direct development activities toward prevention, preparation and mitigation. Prior to a crisis, people involved in social/economic development have a greater ability to focus their efforts on systematic and fundamental problems, to involve community people in decision-making and planning through community organizations, and to take a broader

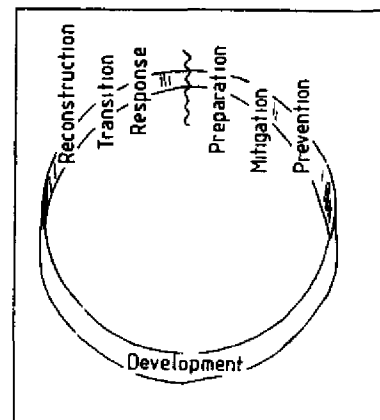


Fig. 1. The relationship between development and a crisis event.

view of context and planning. Once a disaster has occurred, the elements of confusion and uncertainty, coupled with the emergency conditions described above, put workers into a reactive position. The urgency of the situation mitigates against reflective and comprehensive planning and precludes community organizing.

ABANDON THE PROGRAM APPROACH/INVENT OTHERS

Cuny characterized the program approach by definition as short-term and rigid, and noted what he considers basic incompatibilities between this approach and "fundamental development." He noted that the poor training and temporary nature of program staff restricts the possibility that programming can contribute to basic development. In addition, programs are focused on limited goals, conducted in restricted areas with small numbers of people and controlled from outside by the agency which plans and pays for them.

DEVELOP NEW INSTITUTIONAL FORMS FOR INTERVENTION RATHER THAN PVOs

Cuny characterized the private relief agencies as generally small and unskilled with little base of disaster experience. Of necessity, he said, they must recruit staff only in response to a disaster with the result that staff generally are short-term, ill-trained, and have limited responsibility to the agency. In addition, this staffing pattern limits any development of an organizational memory upon which improvements in activities could be based. The management models of such relief agencies, he claimed, are more responsive to their donors than to the victims of disasters. Thus they may become authoritarian, centralized in their decision-making and non-participatory. Further, both their management styles and their hiring patterns cause the agencies to ignore, or even be wary of, technologies they might usefully employ in relief work. They set no collective standards for their work, operating individualistically and in an *ad hoc* manner, so that little cumulative learning and programming improvement is possible.

Cuny also noted that government agencies involved in disaster response also lack an ideal design for effective work. He described them as often growing out of a military approach, with top-down command and logistics-centred responses. In addition, they frequently operate under explicit or implicit political constraints that limit and affect their work.

Thus, in each of these three areas — phasing of interventions, the programmatic approach, and the institutional arrangements — Cuny called for a break with past experience and a new inventiveness based on an understanding of the relationship between disasters and development. In his additional remarks, he brought out

several important issues and dilemmas confronting those who are concerned with disaster intervention. He said that these will require future exploration and experience if new and better intervention approaches are to be developed.

DILEMMAS FOR FURTHER CONSIDERATION

First among the dilemmas for further consideration is the difficulty of finding an appropriate kind of involvement and interaction between "outsiders" and "insiders" in disaster situations. Outsiders may range from workers with international agencies to local relief workers from another neighborhood or region. That is, even within countries, some workers will be viewed as "outsiders" by victims. Nonetheless, the arrangements, divisions of roles, coordination and responsibility for planning, and styles of interaction among various players in a disaster response are areas of repeated difficulty in practice and, as such, require additional analysis.

Related to this issue is another that directly addresses the development process — namely, the role of expertise in disaster interventions. The issue raised frequently around technological knowledge as "experts" in disaster interventions frequently are deemed such because of some technical ability. For disaster prevention, a serious question arises concerning the level of technical expertise which is required and who should possess it in a disaster-prone area in order to prevent/mitigate crisis effects. Embedded in this issue of the location of technical expertise is the additional issue, raised by Cuny, of the level of technical sophistication that is appropriate in any given situation. He pointed out the importance, even the necessity as he sees it, of certain rather sophisticated knowledge to deal with potential impacts of natural disasters. On the other hand, he noted, many vulnerabilities to disasters arise from or are exacerbated by inappropriately-introduced technologies. At issue here is the relationship of disaster-related technologies to other technologies used in a society. More attention must be given to this interaction if disaster interventions are to become more effective.

Finally, Cuny raised a dilemma surrounding the location of responsibility for long-term development and/or disaster preparedness. On the one hand, he noted the advantages of working to strengthen the capabilities of government agencies because, he pointed out, these agencies have a long-term commitment to working for economic and social strength in their societies. On the other hand, Cuny noted that the agencies often work within constraining political contexts, or for goals which are not in the best interests of groups of people in the countryside and, in these cases, he recommended finding ways to bypass governments and to go "straight to the people." He believes that the ramifications of working at different levels, and the implications of choosing the level at which efforts will be most effective, are also issues requiring additional attention.