

# 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

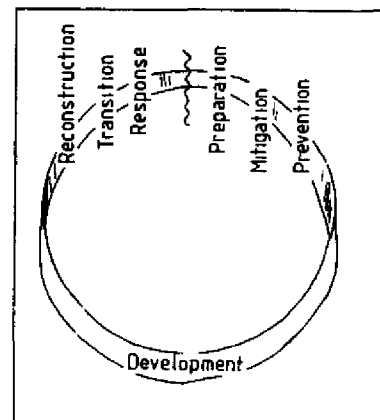


Fig. 1. The relationship between development and a crisis event.