

ILO, its Crisis Response and Reconstruction Programme and Natural Disasters: Jobs and gender dimensions¹

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Introduction

Jobs are critical for promoting gender equality as well as disaster risk reduction. It is for this reason that the ILO has an important role to play in this field .

ILO, a specialized United Nations agency which was established in 1919 under the Treaty of Versailles at the end of the First World War, has as its overriding goal the promotion of opportunities for all women and men to obtain decent and productive jobs in conditions of freedom, equity, security and human dignity. The organization's other unique features include: its tripartite membership – made up of governments, workers' associations and employers – which emphasises social dialogue as an important channel for policy making and action; and its emphasis on gender equality. The latter is reinforced by a) a gender policy and plan of action which, inter alia, obliges every ILO programme to mainstream gender in its work; as well as by b) periodic gender audits. Such gender emphasis is also reflected in the diverse activities of the ILO's special global programme on Crisis Response and Reconstruction. This programme mobilizes the ILO's response to armed conflicts, natural disasters, financial and economic downturns and difficult political and social transitions.

The rationale of the Programme is that the above crises threaten the goal of decent and productive jobs for men and women. For example, during and in the aftermath of natural disasters, there is the real danger that the situation of individuals within the labour market may worsen due to destruction of productive resources and infrastructures. For example, the Mozambique floods of 2000 wiped away 300,000 jobs. Yet this adverse impact failed to feature in the media and many of the non-ILO assessments. In Peru, the earthquake of 2001 in the Southern part of the country adversely affected almost 50 percent of the 408,944 active labour force in the area in terms of temporary or permanent loss of jobs and reduction in salary and other forms of income. In Algeria, the earthquake of 2003 negatively affected 51,000 jobs.

In general, self-employed, home workers and other informal economy workers, oftentimes women, lose vital workplaces and supplies in developing countries which are affected by natural disasters. Farm lands, seeds and livestock may be destroyed; women who often lack land rights or farm small plots are especially vulnerable and may be forced off the land entirely. With the depletion of assets, women's household power often weakens; gender inequality and human insecurity may grow; and human dignity may suffer serious blows. Jobs provide people with hope, reduce their long

¹ Additional information on ILO 's work and other findings on natural disasters and other crises as well on the gender challenges in this area as well as in the world of work generally can be obtained from the ILO's website www.ilo.org/crisis and www.ilo.org.

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dependence on food aid, improve their socio-economic conditions and empower them to meet their basic needs and those of their families as well as to contribute to the rebuilding of their communities. The promotion of “decent work” must therefore be an essential element of relief, rehabilitation, reconstruction and development in response to disasters, as well as constitute an essential component of comprehensive measures for the reduction of risks and the building of resilience to natural disasters and other crises. Despite this, the importance of jobs continues to receive inadequate coverage within crisis response in terms of appropriate interventions, donor funding and media focus, thus worsening the poverty and vulnerability of individuals – both women and men - and communities.

Some findings by the ILO’s Crisis Response and Reconstruction Programme

From the work of the ILO’s Crisis Response and Reconstruction Programme - country-level technical cooperation projects and other interventions, capacity building, research and tools development and advocacy - a number of lessons have been gathered regarding not only jobs but also gender equity. Some are highlighted below:

- a) Jobs in general :
 - ! Productive jobs constitute a powerful route to recovery for both women and men reeling under the impact of a series of natural disasters and other crises. They have to be planned early in the response to the disaster and should also constitute part of the contingency, disaster preparedness and risk reduction plans and strategies.
 - ! Job promotion should straddle both the humanitarian and developmental phases of crisis response. Thus it has to start early and even during the relief phase.
 - ! Jobs do not just happen by themselves. They have to be targeted by a series of measures (e.g. adopting employment-intensive infrastructure rehabilitation and construction techniques instead of capital intensive approaches; micro-enterprise development, local economic development, skills training; micro-credits; creating an enabling macro-economic context, labour market and legal environment to promote access to productive activities). Plans and programmes for disaster response – humanitarian, reconstruction and developmental – need to be employment sensitive, in addition to making an effort to observe equity (gender and ethnicity), and other fundamental rights and principles, international labour standards and human rights.
 - ! The bulk of the jobs created by disaster mitigation and response interventions must go to the local affected people. Furthermore, support to build the capacity of local economic development agencies, micro-finance bodies, employers’ and workers’ organizations, community groups, training institutions and other labour market institutions can have a positive impact in terms of saving existing jobs and also creating new ones to absorb the disaster-affected groups.

- ! Household job diversification can form an integral part of a clear risk mitigation strategy.
- ! Efforts should be made by international and local media to highlight the job losses stemming from natural disasters, to stimulate attention being paid to this issue at the different levels, such as by donors and national policy makers.
- ! How to rebuild livelihoods is generally not adequately emphasized nor mainstreamed in the national policies and measures adopted in response to a natural disaster nor as a disaster mitigation factor.
- ! The value of money and assets lost under a natural disaster differs with the context and the economic status of the affected people. One dollar may mean the loss of several days' food for a family in a very poor environment, while millions of dollars lost in a developed country may be seen as insignificant. Furthermore, destruction of a home (even a very poor one) may mean complete destruction of livelihoods when the affected occupants depend on home-based enterprises.
- ! Effective disaster response has to be locally rooted by using local institutions in execution and by strengthening these institutions in the process. Such institutions should not be seen as only the designated disaster management body, but also bodies like the Ministry of Labour, women's groups, women's groups, workers' associations, employers' agencies, etc. which the ILO works with and are also critical in relation to the job situation. Public and private sector partnerships are also crucial owing to the complexity of the problem which makes it impossible to be handled by the public institutions alone. Such an approach also enhances the local sustainability of the interventions.
- ! Local people often possess well tested early warning and coping strategies in response to natural disasters. The positive ones need to be identified and strengthened in response interventions to the disasters and should never be ignored..
- ! Since armed conflicts weaken a country's resilience to natural disasters, like drought and floods, responding to the former should also be sensitive to the latter problem. This implies that there should be collaboration between gender efforts in relation to conflict prevention and peace building and those in relation to natural disasters.

b) Gender

- ! Because of differences in the ascribed roles of the sexes, men and women, boys and girls tend to be affected differently by natural disasters.
- ! Disasters can bring changes in gender roles. The positive ones could be sustained through appropriate gender sensitive response interventions.
- ! Gender biases in investment policies during reconstruction may constrain women's recovery. Targeting assistance to male-dominated employment

activities and construction projects will promote only the economic recovery of men but disadvantage women who also need income support.

- ! Responding to natural disasters and other crises should be used as a window of opportunity for positive social change in gender equity, social cohesion and also for reducing vulnerabilities and promoting resilience to withstand future disasters. For example, women could be aided to acquire “male – labelled” skills in the response projects implemented to assist them to improve their economic opportunities and income, as happened in an ILO response to population in the Chokwe district of Mozambique that was adversely affected by the floods of the year 2000. Here women were trained, inter alia, in the use and maintenance of motor-pumps and the making and repair of agricultural tools.

Care should be taken to prevent introducing new inequities and other exclusions as well as reintroducing the “status quo ante” with all its unequal features which often are at the root of people’s vulnerability to disasters in the first place.

- ! In dealing with the gender dimensions of natural disasters and other crises, the various actors should recognize the heterogeneity within men and women’s groups and not treat each group as homogenous. Therefore, there will be both vulnerable men and women who need to be identified and targeted by assistance..

Conclusion

The World Disaster Report of 2001 (by the International Federation of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies) poses the pertinent question “Why are people returning to their disaster-prone old homes?” It answers by referring to jobs. “Unemployment in the areas they were relocated is the main reason. Earning an income is clearly one of the best, and most obvious, ways to recover from disaster”.

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