



**A trade union contribution to the  
Third United Nations World Conference on Disaster Risk Reduction  
Preparatory Meeting  
Geneva, 14-15 July 2014<sup>1</sup>**

At a time when extreme weather events are aggravated by climate change, adding an incredible burden to other natural and man-caused disasters, the international labour movement engages on this issue to ensure that the focus of disaster risk reduction policies remains on protecting citizens' lives, livelihoods and future.

Trade unions approach Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR) from four critical angles:

- **PREVENTION:** The fairest and most cost-effective way to avoid the loss of lives, health and property when facing disasters is to prevent them from occurring, to reduce the risk and limit vulnerability. This requires high levels of preparedness, especially in vulnerable areas and communities. Current austerity measures prevent building and maintaining resilient infrastructures able to protect workers and communities. Many public services play key roles, from anticipating, to evacuating, responding and recovering.

Workplaces also play a critical role as communication hubs. Democratic disaster-prevention strategies, which inform potentially vulnerable groups of people (i.e. workers in specific areas or industries) or communities about risks, but also involve them in designing prevention and response strategies, have proven to be the most successful. Governments and public and private employers have the responsibility to develop these strategies.

- **SOCIAL PROTECTION:** Trade unions advocate for DRR policies which support resilience through the creation and strengthening of social protection systems, including:

- income-security mechanisms
- unemployment benefits
- child care and maternity protection
- universal access to essential health care
- pensions, including for people with disabilities

These mechanisms are able to sustain the livelihoods of families and communities that might be at risk and today face these risks with little or no protection.

- **SUSTAINABLE RECOVERY:** The need to ensure that reconstruction efforts are designed, planned and implemented with community involvement – ensuring there is no discrimination based on gender, age, income, color, disability, among others - and with thorough integration of sustainability challenges. Reconstruction should be an opportunity for creating better and more sustainable livelihood opportunities for workers, and should not be used to privatise. Communities should never be expelled from their lands for the benefit of more profitable investments.

- **PUBLIC SERVICES:** The need for ensuring a well-resourced public service of prevention and response to catastrophes, which includes the training, equipping and support of all workers committed to ensure the safety of families and communities before, during and immediately after extreme weather events and other disasters.

**Resilience rests on strong social protection systems**

Social protection is generally understood as a set of public actions that serve as social and economic stabilizers, providing residents with the means to manage major risks, preventing the worsening of poverty, inequality

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and social exclusion due to income insecurity. The benefits of social protection are far-reaching. Social protection contributes to social cohesion and broader national socio-economic development and security, fostering the transition to a more sustainable economy. Granting universal access to basic social services, such as education, health and water, is sound economic policy, as these services enhance individual opportunity and collective productivity, support economic growth and limit the risk and the greater costs of excessive income inequality.

Social protection has the potential to increase the resilience of populations to global challenges such as those posed by extreme weather events and other catastrophes. The Stern Review, for example, argued that social protection could become one of the priority areas for adaptation to climate change in developing countries.<sup>i</sup>

The number of casualties, displaced people, separated families and splintered communities depends largely on the extent to which communities have access to public, sustained and predictable support. Strong social protection systems provide this support, whereas private insurance mechanisms are too fragmented and sparse, intended for individual rather than extensive events.

In 2012, the International Labour Organization unanimously adopted a Recommendation to promote national floors of social protection (Social Protection Floors Recommendation, 2012). Based on the Right to Social Security enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the Recommendation promotes two national objectives: to establish and maintain basic income security and essential health care for all; and to implement them within strategies to extend social security, ensuring rising levels for as many people as possible. The components of basic social security guarantees comprise:

- access to a nationally defined set of goods and services, constituting essential health care, including maternity care, that meets the criteria of availability, accessibility, acceptability and quality
- basic income security: for children; for persons in active age unable to earn sufficient income especially in the case of sickness, unemployment, maternity and disability; and for older persons

Moreover, basic income security for children should provide access to nutrition, education, and care among other goods and services; income security for adults in active age must be linked to policies that promote employment and education; and nationally defined goods and services that constitute essential health care will include access to basic services such as water and sanitation, food and housing fundamental to health.

Member States are asked to establish basic social security guarantees by law and to mobilize the resources to ensure financial, fiscal and economic sustainability of their national protection floors.

It is fundamental that the social partners are permanently involved in the developing and implementing national policies for social protection floors, and to ensure that the minimum protection scheme providing coverage of basic benefits serves as a first step in the expansion in range and coverage of the social security system. Such social protection systems are the foundation for sustainable development.

By re-orienting and re-targeting development assistance to social protection components and meeting international commitments to official development assistance, more developed countries will contribute to the social protection of low-income populations. Over time, social protection floors – and the social protection systems that extend from them – will be nationally financed. Recent ILO studies demonstrate that implementing social protection floors even for low-income countries are less an issue of affordability than of political will.

Options to achieve social protection goals include:

- reallocating public expenditures
- increasing tax revenues
- extending contributions
- restructuring debt
- fighting tax evasion
- retargeting aid and transfers and using national reserves
- accommodating budgetary deficits and some inflation.

The costs of keeping people excluded ends up being much higher than those of building a comprehensive scheme.

**=> The post-2015 framework for Disaster Risk Reduction, in realising its goal of strengthening resilience by social and economic measures that enable countries and people to absorb loss, minimise impact and recover, must include the promotion of a rights-based approach to the economic and social resilience on which the framework is founded. This implies creating and strengthening social protection systems, and achieving the basic social security guarantees of Social Protection Floors (SPF) as the requisite first step.**

### **Prevention must be the first disaster risk reduction strategy**

Governments and employers have the responsibility to protect workers and communities from losses of life, health and property due to disasters. Pro-active information from them to workers and communities, as well as democratic development of prevention strategies is critical to ensure ownership of those who will implement them on the ground. Workplace action is key in this regard. Beyond the fundamental role played by trade unions in preventing industrial catastrophes, trade unions must also play a role in developing the risk prevention strategies related to the workplace, based on the risks. This ownership will contribute to a better dissemination of the information among workers, but also with communities.

The underlying causes of vulnerability (unequal economic development, poorly planned and managed urban and regional development, the decline of regulatory ecosystem services, poverty and inequality, weak governance and local capacities and climate change) must be tackled when prevention strategies are developed, so that communities that are already facing vulnerable situations see their resilience enhanced through public interventions.

Investment in public infrastructure is also critical. Current austerity measures as well as structural adjustment and poverty reduction programs of the IFIs have led to increased loss in lives and income to millions as catastrophes, which could have been prevented (or at least in part, mitigated), overwhelmed obsolete infrastructures which had been starved of public resources.

### **Recovery is about decent work and sustainability**

After disasters, families and communities often lose their land or sources of income, especially when reconstruction efforts are not organised with their participation or in their favour. This represents a huge missed opportunity for these communities, their prosperity and the future development of their regions. Reconstruction efforts can bring new life to communities through improved public infrastructure and services, new jobs and community-based prevention strategies, coupled with low-carbon investments.

This potential can only be realised if:

- investments in recovery focus on building sustainable, safe infrastructure driven by a process that empowers and engages the community
- the jobs created by the reconstruction correspond to the ILO's definition of Decent Work<sup>ii</sup>
- occupational safety and health standards are observed
- the involvement of workers and communities is secured in the design and implementation of strategies for future risk reduction and economic diversification

Experience shows that labour intensive, decent work-based infrastructure projects can provide low-skilled workers with critical sources of income, which is an important economic stimulus due to its multiplier effect. It is fundamental that infrastructure and other reconstruction projects incorporate specific employment and decent work objectives, including local recruitment targets, and use local Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs). General budget support should be provided, complemented by donor programmes and project support, aimed ensuring universal access to public services and at stimulating the productive base of local economies and overcoming supply-side constraints, such as the need for training and skills development. Mechanisms for democratic decision-making must be put in place so that citizens can shape the future of their communities. Collective representation mechanisms, such as those brought by trade unions, must also be promoted, as they foster ownership as well as accountability of decision makers.

Finally, reconstruction efforts must prepare the communities for the future. Investments should target economic sectors that will be more resilient facing potential future hazards – in particular if science indicates that those might be recurrent. Reconstruction should be conceived so that communities are not left facing the same hazards with unchanged, or even reduced capacity to cope. Local natural resources should be safeguarded. Reconstruction should serve as a means to transform urban and rural environments into more sustainable ones, especially as regards transport, water and energy infrastructure.

**=> The post-2015 framework for Disaster Risk Reduction must incorporate reconstruction strategies that are sustainable, based on decent work and democratic ownership by communities**

### **Workers at the heart of disaster response**

Natural and man-made disasters require that untold numbers of workers and trade union members put themselves in harm's way to save lives and protect property. It is vital that at all levels, from the workplace, in communities and with governments, that workers through their trade unions are consulted on preparing, preventing, reacting and recovering from disasters.

The full range of public servants must be involved in disaster response planning. This implies going beyond first responders (fire, police and emergency medical technicians), to include workers in water and sanitation, electricity and gas, telecommunications, education, public transport, health and social services, all of which are at the forefront of the response to disasters.

The ability of these workers to act decisively, as well as their capacity to survive in good health and be able to return to their working lives depends on receiving sufficient training, appropriate equipment and advice on potential risks faced by their communities, and on ensuring their workers' rights so that they can speak with a strong voice when they share concerns related to their safety and that of the communities in which they work.

Any Disaster Risk Reduction strategy must put public servants and workers involved in disaster response at the heart of planning, as they are the primary persons responsible for executing the strategy and are able to provide decision-makers with experience-based information and advice.

Today, many of these public servants lack minimum labour rights, such as the right to organise and form a union or to bargain collectively. This is a direct violation of the UN Declaration of Human Rights, as well as of ILO Core Labour Standards.

**=> The post-2015 framework for Disaster Risk Reduction must acknowledge the critical role played by public sector workers, including those dealing with immediate disaster response, and their rights to organise and to negotiate on core disaster response issues, such as training, equipment and information about the risks they face. It must also ensure appropriate wages and benefits.**

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<sup>i</sup> Stern Review on the Economics of Climate Change, Nicholas Stern. 2006. London School of Economics.

<sup>ii</sup> Decent work has four basic dimensions: employment, workers' rights, social protection and social dialogue.