Strengthening community preparedness; bridging theory and practice

Tuesday 25 November 2025 | 09:30 – 11:30 CET | ZOOM
Summary report

Communities are often the first to respond and the last to recover from disasters and other disruptive events, including weather-related disasters and public health emergencies. Strengthening community preparedness shifts humanitarian action from reactive aid to proactive, locally-led resilience. This session explores what community preparedness means and how humanitarian professionals can help enhance it in contexts with a prevalence of acute crises.

Community preparedness refers to a community's ability to anticipate, withstand and recover from disruptions by building on local capacities, relationships, and knowledge. It is about supporting communities to act before a crisis hits, by investing in resilient local systems, supporting inclusive local governance, and enabling people to make informed decisions about the risks they face and cope with a rapidly changing environment. A key principle of community preparedness is the active involvement of all local stakeholders, such as residents, local authorities, and businesses, in strengthening community resilience. It is undesirable to place the entire burden of preparedness on the plate of communities, as they rely on contextual political decisions that define the extent to which disasters happen and will affect them.

In the context of unstable humanitarian funding, strengthening community preparedness could be one of the most effective safeguards. Preparedness relates to a range of issues that are usually treated separately, but they are linked, which is why a system approach is vital. This may sound overwhelming, but it is very possible to act while including the systemic level, without having to address all facets. By supporting communities to develop preparedness plans and risk assessments and take preventive measures, community preparedness not only enhances resilience but also reduces the human and financial costs associated with disasters.

Speakers

- **Jaap Vuijk,** Lecturer and researcher, International Development Studies at Van Hall Larenstein University of Applied Sciences
- **Kiden Grace Wani**, Executive Director, Aid Link South Sudan
- **Minet Aguisanda**, Executive Director, Leyte Centre for Development (LCDe)

This session was moderated by **Britt Dutour Geerling,** Humanitarian Program Manager at Save the Children NL.

Community preparedness – background

First speaker **Jaap Vuijk** kicked off the meeting by explaining how community preparedness has been around for decades. In the 80s, there were many conflicts and natural hazards in the Philippines and

Indonesia. When governments fell short, civil society jumped in, and initiatives were set up to prepare and prevent. For example, churches and farmer organisations filled the gap, grew into established Civil Society Organisations (CSOs') and eventually into Non-Governmental Organisation (NGOs). Eventually, it was realised that response does not suffice, and there came a paradigm shift from focusing on the external, the natural disasters, to addressing why this [*the impact of the crisis*] is happening, the vulnerabilities. After this paradigm shift, communities started to advocate to address root causes. Organisations started to network beyond communities, to the regional and national level. Jaap defined community preparedness as: addressing root causes of vulnerability on multiple levels across sectors (systemic) with the community priorities at the centre.

It is key to keep in mind that the communities already have a lot of coping mechanisms and resilient processes in place and are active entities. Within community preparedness, it is vital to keep the minorities in mind and give them a voice. Furthermore, Jaap continued by explaining that there are different approaches: do you look at it from a hazard perspective and restore normalcy, or are you looking from a community livelihood perspective to sustain sustainable livelihood.

Lastly, there are a lot of **toolboxes and frameworks** that give us guidance for community preparedness. They give a large set of criteria and show what the components of resilience are. An example of a framework is the one by John Twigg, Characteristics of a Disaster-resilient Community (Twigg, 2007).

Community preparedness - South Sudan

The second speaker, **Grace Wani**, addressed the topic from a specific contextual angle. She witnessed South Sudan undergoing many floods and, since 2023, heat waves. What is key in community preparedness in South Sudan is ensuring that communities are informed and aware of potential crises.

Current activities in community preparedness include early warning communication on flood locations in which local leaders are engaged, engagements of youth in information dissemination, dykes construction, planting of appropriate crops for both flooding and droughts and more. Although the community is involved in executing these activities, planning of community preparedness is done with limited engagement with the community. Building on communities' capacities is key, as they are very willing to engage in preparedness for hazards.

Challenges that are occurring when organisations implement community preparedness are the lack of funding, the use of imported resources and materials, lack of trust, and, as mentioned before, top-down planning. Furthermore, imported response mechanisms are also still an issue. Building on local mechanisms is something not all organisations are used to or have incorporated into their way of working.

Community preparedness – Philippines

According to the third speaker, **Minet Aguisanda,** community preparedness is key to sustainability: "*the NGOs will not be there forever".* It also decreases the job of external responders, because the community becomes the first responder, since survivor-led response is the essence of disaster risk reduction.

The steps to organise communities according to Minet start with capacity building on community organising, leadership, and disaster risk reduction. Then, food security projects, youth mobilisation and a distribution of the needed equipment for disaster preparedness and finally monitoring and evaluation. However, to do this, challenges need to be overcome. In the Philippines, challenges are

the lack of government support, the lack of resources, and even the political persecution of civil society through judicial attacks. It was also stressed that nothing can be prepared without a sturdy organisation of the community. This is important since the community is the one going to continue the programs and policies initiated by the NGOs. Investing in community preparedness is also valuable because, as Minet mentioned, in a disaster, it's your neighbour who will be the first to help you. However, to do this well, resources are needed just as they are needed for the preparedness phase. Resources can be scarce, and not everyone has the same access to them. *''Everybody is in the same storm, but we are in different boats.''*

Discussion

In the second part of the session, space was opened for participants to ask questions to the panellists.

- Do different communities connect with each other to have an exchange on practices and collaborate?

The first question asked was if people from different communities also organise themselves to have an exchange on practices and collaborate. In the Philippines, farmer organisations go to other areas to observe and learn how others are dealing with community preparedness. In South Sudan, people tend to collaborate on specific missions more at the individual level.

- Is it the state, NGOs or communities that are responsible for community preparedness ?

According to Jaap, the state is the primary duty-bearer because it is obliged to protect its people. However, states do not always take this responsibility, which leaves a gap. An example of this is the Philippines. The current government is not well prepared for disasters, but it also calls for support from other countries. Unfortunately, a large amount of money disappears in corruption, leaving communities to fend for themselves. This leaves it unclear who is responsible. Often, the gap is filled by NGOs and the communities. However, to have a clear division of tasks and responsibilities, it is important to go around the table and discuss who has which responsibility.

Thirdly, trust was discussed. Trust is especially an issue in the planning of innovations. It sometimes occurs that the local community has not been trusted and has been excluded from the planning phase. This results in the community being a receiver again instead of a participant.

Break-out rooms:

In the final part of the session, the group split up into four breakout rooms, each discussing a different question. This encouraged conversations that were deepened, and knowledge was exchanged. In this section, you can find what has been discussed in the breakout rooms. The break-out rooms were attended by participants from a various range of countries and contexts

Group 1

What are the biggest obstacles to community preparedness in your context? What could help overcome them?

Different contexts encounter different obstacles, for instance, in Afghanistan, the obstacles mentioned were the ability to assist women, and having women working in your organisation is also complicated in Afghanistan. Furthermore, the participants noted that greater youth engagement is

needed both in community preparedness initiatives and in identifying and developing local capacities. To do this, and to engage the community, disaster management committees can be developed including people from different places within communities.

Group 2 *What does it mean when you focus on capacities instead of hazard and risks? What are the local capacities that can be strengthened?*

It means looking into what the needs are and understanding the strengths of communities that are in place. Bottom-up responses are significant in order to make this happen. Furthermore, communication systems and awareness are key components. Education and awareness raising is often needed to maintain the sustainability of projects and decrease dependency on aid. *"Communities are not just victims; they are individuals with their own agency."*

Group 3

What actors can be (meaningfully) involved more? Who are the key actors?

The first actor mentioned here was the (local) government. They have the capacity to build up local community committees, allocate funds and incorporate NGO initiatives into local government for sustainability. However, this depends on the possibilities within countries. For instance, in Afghanistan, the Ministry of Disaster Management is hardly functional, resulting in NGOs stepping in. Other key actors mentioned are volunteers, youth groups, the private sector, and churches and religious leaders. Community-based organisations (such as Emergency Response Rooms - networks of volunteers in Sudan) were mentioned as a specific actor that should be mentioned. Their place within communities is well-established.

Group 4

What does preparedness look like in a humanitarian setting? How can we ensure preparedness efforts are locally led without actually placing an unrealistic burden on communities.

A top-down example mentioned in this group is the government-led preparedness action in the Netherlands. The government encourages citizens to prepare emergency packages in response to a potential spillover from the Russia-Ukraine conflict. Furthermore, the group discussed the need for context-specific knowledge and trusted sources of information because there is no one-size-fits-all all. Different people have different needs, making preparedness deeply personal and context-dependent. Communities themselves know what is best for them. Therefore, building on existing past experiences with hazards is key. This reveals their priorities, past mobilisation strategies and strengthens existing disaster preparedness mechanisms.

Group 5

What is community-led versus locally-led?

The idea of locally-led versus community-led shifted throughout the conversation. The initial ideas with community-led were people contributing to the community they feel connected with but they do not have to be local. For instance, diaspora and mutual aid systems. This means community is equivalent to a network which has a link to a local physical place. Locally-led is understood as local

actors being involved such as NGOs that are in place, and local governments and institutions. community-led was defined as the community facing the crisis and people in the community (which also be the diaspora) that are responding.

Group 6

What do we as humanitarian actors already do regarding community preparedness? How do we utilise the existing mechanisms, and how can humanitarian actors build more on these existing local networks, knowledge and capacities?

Contingency planning, early warning systems, risk reduction, flexible funding, long-term presence, and trust building are, according to the participants, already in place and create the enabling environment for community preparedness. However, gaps and challenges are also in place. For instance, coordination spaces remain dominated by INGOs and national actors, leaving communities without real influence and access. True localisation requires more than local registration; it requires community organising, recognition of existing coping mechanisms, and ensuring communities can meaningfully participate and lead in preparedness and decision-making. strengthened community-led coordination (e.g., local coordinators), creating space for experimentation, and better integrating DRR and preparedness into multi-year programs, is needed for localisation. It was advised to consider pooled funds that communities can directly access, involve diasporas, and expand community roles in planning and early warning to improve effectiveness and long-term resilience.

Conclusion and key takeaways

According to the participants, the steps to achieve effective preparedness were insightful and helped participants to grasp how to build community preparedness. The participants stressed in the evaluation of the session the importance of including marginalised groups, like the elderly, and people with additional needs. This adds to the different contexts in countries, which gives the need to tailor responses to specific contexts. There is no one-size-fits-all in community preparedness.

In conclusion, one participant's reflection captured a key takeaway: *''It expanded my understanding of root causes or disasters and how everyone faces disasters, but our vulnerabilities and privileges change how it affects us.''*

In the future, KUNO and DRA will organise more sessions together. Further details will be communicated shortly on the website.