Community preparedness when disaster meets conflict

Tuesday 21 April 2026 | 10.00 – 12.00 CET | ZOOM

Summary report[1]

Introduction to the event

Communities living in contexts of protracted crisis face a uniquely compounded challenge when an acute hazard strikes. In these contexts, conflict, displacement, political instability and weak governance are entangled and experienced over prolonged periods. An earthquake, flood, or drought then does not arrive in a vacuum. Moreover, it lands on communities already stretched to their limits, multiplying existing vulnerabilities and slowing recovery far beyond what the hazard alone would cause. Evidence shows that among the approximately 400 natural hazards occurring each year, more than 30% strike countries already affected by conflict. Nevertheless, global disaster risk reduction frameworks, donor priorities, and humanitarian programming have largely treated disasters and conflict as separate concerns.

The difference in outcomes between similar hazards in different contexts illustrates this clearly. An earthquake of the same magnitude causes minimal disruption in a country with strong institutions and infrastructure, while it becomes catastrophic in a fragile, conflict-affected state. This disparity is not determined by the force of nature alone, but by the depth of vulnerabilities or the degree of preparedness that exists before disaster strikes. Thus, whether natural *hazards* turn into *disasters* is a political matter.

This raises a vital concern for humanitarian and development practitioners: how can communities prepare for sudden disasters when they are already navigating ongoing crises? What does meaningful, locally-led preparedness looks like when national systems are weak, access is restricted, displacement is ongoing, and funding is shrinking?

This second session in a series on Community Preparedness jointly organised by KUNO and the Dutch Relief Alliance brought together local and international humanitarians from practice, government and research. Contributions by an academic and by practitioners from Afghanistan and Syria explored how community preparedness approaches can be adapted to protracted crisis contexts. They highlighted the potential as well as the real limitations of locally led efforts in fragile environments. They were followed by engaged conversations amongst 70 participants. This session was part of a learning trajectory in the Dutch Relief Alliance, creating space for learning within its acute crisis joint responses. The key takeaways contributed to cross-learning and will directly inform DRA's new multi-year strategy by helping to embed community preparedness even more intentionally in the programme design.

Speakers

- **Rodrigo Mena**, Assistant Professor, Institute of Social Studies, and Deputy Director, The Hague Humanitarian Studies Centre

[1] This report is written by Daniela Petrosian and Natalia Huggins, interns at Dutch Relief Alliance.

- **Riazullah Wali**, Director of the Rural Rehabilitation Association for Afghanistan
- **Sara Savva**, Deputy Director General of Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Antioch and All the East Department of Ecumenical Relations and Development (GOPA-DERD)

The session was moderated by Julia Golterman, Knowledge Broker from KUNO.

Community Preparedness – Background

Rodrigo Mena opened the session by framing the core challenge: in conflict-affected areas, disasters and conflict are rarely experienced as separate events, yet the humanitarian system continues to treat them that way. He structured his contribution around two questions: why community preparedness in conflict contexts matters, and what is needed to do it well.

On the first question, Rodrigo challenged a widespread blind spot in the humanitarian sector. When people think of conflict-affected countries, they think of the conflict, but research shows that in some cases up to 80% of people receiving humanitarian assistance in these settings are also affected by disasters such as floods, droughts, earthquakes, and heat waves, not only directly by conflict. The co-occurrence of disaster and conflict is very high, driven by the compound vulnerabilities that conflict creates. For instance, damaged infrastructure, displacement, restricted access, and weakened governance at every level. Despite this reality, global disaster risk reduction (DRR) frameworks, including major governance instruments, barely mention conflict, which contributes to donor hesitance and a lack of coherent policies. A key conceptual point Rodrigo made was that disasters are not natural. Conflict and disaster, he stressed, share the same political roots and must be addressed as part of a continuum of vulnerability, not as separate crises requiring separate responses.

On the question of what is needed, Rodrigo outlined several essentials. Preparedness in these contexts must adopt a **multi-hazard systemic approach**, because communities living through protracted crises oftentimes do not separate disasters from poverty, displacement, or everyday insecurity. Moreover, programming should reflect that reality. Also, it must be **conflict-sensitive**, equipping practitioners with proper analytical tools rather than simply assuming local communities can navigate conflict on their own. Crucially, **expectations must be realistic** as community preparedness and DRR in fragile contexts often differ from traditional frameworks and must be adapted to context-specific conditions.. Programming should be designed from the **outset to be scalable**, built to link to new governance structures as conflict subsides, and backed by **flexible, longer-term donor funding** that accepts a degree of uncertainty. Above all, Rodrigo stressed that **anticipatory action** and, even more importantly, risk reduction are both possible and essential since communities and organisations cannot afford to wait until a disaster strikes to begin preparing.

Community Preparedness – Riazullah Wali, Afghanistan

Riazullah Wali presented community preparedness from the Afghan context. He began by describing Afghanistan's layered crisis landscape. The country simultaneously faces earthquakes, floods, droughts, and displacement, all overlapping with insecurity and a recent large influx of returnees from Pakistan, between 200,000 and 300,000 people, who have placed additional pressure on already strained community resources. Conflict damages infrastructure, limits humanitarian access, and restricts early warning systems and safe evacuation routes. He gave a concrete example of two districts in Nuristan province where more than 50,000 people were blocked for two months due to a combination of flash floods and active fire exchange between security forces.

Riazullah described RRAA's community-based DRR work in practical terms through 7 key activities. First, establish **community-based disaster risk management (CBDRM) committees** and **youth volunteer committees** in each village, with clear roles and responsibilities. Second, **training communities on local risks** like floods, droughts, earthquakes, landslides and on mitigation measures. Third, developing **community risk maps** to identify local skills, safe areas, and available assets within villages. Fourth, constructing **physical protection infrastructure** such as drainage systems, flood protection walls, gabion walls, check dams, and trenches. Fifth, developing **evacuation plans and community emergency response plans**. Sixth, installing **early warning systems** using loudspeakers, mobile phones, WhatsApp groups, flashlights, and batteries, which are practical, low-cost tools suited to contexts where electricity is scarce. Last, providing **rescue tools** such as ropes, shovels, stretchers, and wheelbarrows, as well as first aid kits in each village to bridge gaps when roads are blocked, and hospital access is impossible. He also emphasised linking communities to other humanitarian actors and government authorities so that when RRAA cannot assist, others can step in.

Moreover, Riazullah was candid about the obstacles RRAA faces.

- **Bureaucratic delays**: Project registration with the Ministry of Economy and signing MoUs with relevant line ministries can take three to four months, significantly delaying emergency activities.
- **Restrictions on women**: Recruiting women staff and accessing female beneficiaries remains severely restricted, requiring verbal permissions, separate vehicles, separate office spaces, additional mahram costs, and work-from-home arrangements.
- **No large gatherings**: Community gatherings, especially for women, are restricted, limiting capacity building to very small groups of five to ten people.
- **Budget constraints on capacity building**: The government requires that operational costs not exceed 30% of a project budget, with 70% going directly to beneficiaries, which limits investment in training communities.
- **Reduced funding**: Overall donor funding has decreased significantly, limiting the quality and quantity of early warning tools and equipment that can be provided.

Community Preparedness – Sara Savva, Syria

Sara Savva presented how GOPA-DERD integrates disaster risk reduction into all aspects of its programming in one of the world's most acute protracted crisis contexts.

Sara began by painting a stark picture of Syria today. Despite being at a geopolitical turning point, Syria still has 16.5 million people in need because of a protracted crisis stretching over 14 years. 9.1 million people are food insecure, with three million severely food insecure, meaning they eat only once every two to three days. 7 million people remain internally displaced, and 95% of Syrians live below the poverty line. Sara directly puts forward a message that it does not take a disaster to push Syrians to the margins, as they are already there.

She outlined how conflict concretely interacts with disaster in Syria. To illustrate, the war has left damaged infrastructure that amplifies disaster impact, the transitional government has limited state capacity, meaning humanitarian workers must fill response gaps, widespread displacement has left millions in unsafe housing with high exposure to hazards, and the economic collapse has drastically reduced communities' coping capacity should a new disaster strike.

A central point Sara made was that in GOPA-DERD's model, DRR is not a standalone programme, but it is integrated into everything they do. She described three interlocking programming strategies:

- **Emergency response**: immediate risk reduction through rapid assessments after crises, distribution of food and non-food items, cash for rent, cash for protection, and psychological first aid. Field teams are on the ground from the first hours of a disaster. She cited the February 2023 earthquake that affected both Syria and Turkey, killing over 6,000 people, injuring more than 11,000, and displacing half a million, as a key example of this response in action.
- **Recovery programmes**: addressing underlying vulnerabilities by rehabilitating schools, shelters, and infrastructure. Then, providing livelihood support, running social cohesion programmes, and conducting community awareness sessions on protection risks. Intervention design is grounded in community needs assessments through household visits and focus group discussions.
- **Resilience and livelihood programmes**: the longest-term strand, focused on income-generating activities, vocational training, small business startup grants, and local economic recovery. Sara stressed that short-term cash or voucher assistance, while useful, is not the same as resilience. Vocational training and business grants help communities enter the labour market and reduce dependency on humanitarian aid over time.

GOPA-DERD does not implement one sector at a time but uses a multi-sector, neighbourhood-based approach combining livelihoods with psychosocial support, child protection, education, shelter, and WASH, all within the same community. This is where DRR becomes meaningful, as a **community with income, functioning schools, clean water, and social support has far greater shock absorption capacity when the next disaster strikes**.

Discussion

Participants asked what "preparedness" really looks like when communities are dealing with both recurring hazards and ongoing conflict, and what makes this kind of work possible (or impossible) in real operating environments.

One of the strongest threads was that conflict isn't one fixed reality. In the exchange between Rodrigo and Riaz, it came through clearly that Afghanistan's situation has shifted over time, and that this affects how organisations can work. Riaz explained that while access for humanitarian actors inside the country can be better than in earlier periods, disasters still create major obstacles, especially in remote and mountainous areas where roads can be blocked, and communities become unreachable. The example of relying on helicopter support after an earthquake illustrated how quickly "preparedness" can turn into a race to overcome basic access constraints.

Another big part of the discussion was about moving beyond emergency response and building longer-term resilience. When Riaz asked Sara how DRR can be integrated into development work, Sara described how GOPA-DERD approaches DRR in Syria as something woven through programming rather than a separate activity. She stressed the importance of livelihood support that helps people build a more stable base over time, such as vocational training and small business support, alongside a multi-sector approach that also covers shelter, protection, education, and WASH. The message was that resilience is not only about early warning or emergency plans; it is also about whether households can cope economically and socially when the next shock comes.

Sara also raised a point through the example of Syria, people are already living in the consequences of the crisis every day, so it can be hard to separate "conflict and crisis" from "disaster risk." Rodrigo's response pushed the discussion toward a shared understanding that disasters and crises are deeply shaped by politics, governance, and investment. A hazard becomes a disaster when systems fail or when

communities are not protected and supported. This made the case for looking at conflict and disaster through one lens, rather than treating them as separate tracks with separate solutions.

The conversation also discussed the different constraints that could exist. Riaz described several barriers in Afghanistan that slow down or complicate preparedness work. Such as long administrative timelines for registration and agreements, restrictions that affect women staff and women participants, limits on how communities can gather, and budget rules that reduce space for training and capacity strengthening. He also noted that shrinking funding forces organisations to rely on simpler tools for early warning and response, even when needs are growing.

Finally, there was a direct question from a participant about coordination with armed or security forces. Sara explained that in Syria, coordination is mainly about safety and access, such as safe passage and addressing risks like landmines, and that the current transitional context shapes what is possible. Riaz explained that in Afghanistan NGOs are formally registered with civilian authorities rather than armed forces, but that security actors can still play an important role during emergencies, for example by providing air evacuation or supporting access when routes are blocked.

Overall, the discussion showed strong agreement that preparedness in conflict settings requires more than technical DRR activities. It depends on local leadership, trust, and day-to-day resilience, but also on the wider system: flexible funding, workable administrative processes, and coordination arrangements that make access and continuity possible.

Breakout rooms discussion findings

In the final part of the session, the participants were divided into five breakout rooms, each with a topic and two questions. The participants came from various contexts and countries, allowing diverse, insightful discussions in which they could exchange information, some of which came from their own experiences. In this section, one can see the main points discussed in the breakout groups.

Group 1: Rethinking preparedness in conflict settings

1. Do conventional disaster risk reduction (DRR) efforts need to be redesigned within protracted conflicts, or is adaptation enough? What makes these contexts fundamentally different?

Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR) needs to be adapted to the context and to different phases of the crisis. However, it should not be entirely redesigned. As each environment has many other factors that affect local realities, these include economic instability and rising global costs, not just the conflict that is seen. This makes them fundamentally different from more stable contexts where traditional DRR approaches were developed. Think more often about risk reduction. This requires a change of mindset. Pushing our mindset on how to prevent crises.

2. When communities are in survival mode, is “preparedness” realistic or appropriate? How to avoid shifting responsibility onto already overstretched communities?

In situations where people are focused on meeting immediate survival needs, preparedness is often neither realistic nor appropriate as a primary expectation. There is a risk that it places additional responsibility on communities that are already under significant strain. To address this, greater emphasis is needed on systemic prevention and risk reduction, with stronger roles for governments and political actors in providing social protection and support, rather than relying primarily on community-level resilience. Facilitating quick responses is not the same as being prepared for it. Preparing is also coping,

recovering, reusing risk, being able to quickly respond. Shift in mindset. INGO should become more of a facilitator instead of responder: Bring in the government and bring all actors together to discuss what is the best way to support.

How to protect affected communities that have more assets from robberies, violence, assault? Key is to organise communities, e.g. Defence brigades to protect communities. Frugal DRR: traditional knowledge based, frugal solutions are important. However, these can be less attractive for donors. How do you sell this to donors? Responsibility to protect and use traditional knowledge.

Group 2: Conflict dynamics and structural barriers

1. When local power structures are part of the conflict, how should community-led preparedness approaches avoid reinforcing harmful hierarchies?

In contexts where clan dynamics, political tensions, and shifting control by armed actors shape vulnerability, community-led approaches must carefully navigate existing power structures. The first step is thorough stakeholder mapping to understand formal and informal actors, including government authorities, community elders, and religious leaders, while identifying who may be perceived as neutral. Maintaining neutrality is essential, as NGOs risk becoming part of the conflict if they are seen to align with groups. Even when community elders play a central role in mediation and decision-making, they may also be involved in the conflict. In such cases, engaging religious leaders or other neutral figures can help balance power dynamics. Practical approaches to avoid reinforcing harmful hierarchies include creating representative committees that bring together different clans, women, and youth, ensuring transparency and inclusion. Community sensitisation activities, as well as initiatives like sports, can also help strengthen social cohesion and reduce tensions between groups.

2. What structural barriers (e.g. funding, power dynamics, political risks) limit community-led preparedness approaches, and how can INGOs offer meaningful support?

Community-led preparedness in conflict settings faces several structural barriers, including funding constraints, power imbalances, political risks, and social fragmentation. In Somalia, these challenges are compounded by climate shocks such as droughts and floods, displacement, and competition over scarce resources, which can intensify conflict between groups. The divide between urban and rural areas further shapes how vulnerability is experienced, with some communities facing exclusion based on clan affiliation. There is also the risk that NGO staff may be perceived as aligned with certain clans, which can undermine trust and access. To address these barriers, INGOs can play a supportive role by prioritising inclusive approaches and strengthening local systems rather than replacing them. This includes supporting the formation of representative community committees, enabling fair resource distribution through mechanisms like cash transfers, and investing in shared infrastructure such as water systems managed by local groups. INGOs can also facilitate dialogue, support conflict-sensitive programming, and ensure that interventions are designed with an awareness of local dynamics, helping communities manage risk without exacerbating existing tensions.

Group 3: Inclusion in disaster preparedness

1. How do intersecting vulnerabilities (e.g. displacement, gender, marginalisation) shape who participates in preparedness and whose knowledge counts?

Intersecting vulnerabilities such as displacement, gender, and marginalisation strongly influence who can take part in preparedness efforts and whose knowledge is taken seriously. Those most affected are often left out of decision-making, even though they bring important perspectives and lived experience.

2. What existing capacities or coping mechanisms can be strengthened for preparedness in conflict settings?

In conflict settings, preparedness is often built on what already exists. National NGOs tend to work closely with communities through needs assessments and focus group discussions, while also coordinating with local authorities and ministries. Capacities differ depending on the setting. In cities, there may be formal early warning systems, while in rural areas people rely on mosques, loudspeakers, or other local ways of sharing information. Strengthening these existing systems and practices, rather than introducing entirely new ones, is usually a more realistic and effective approach.

Group 4: Displacement, risk and preparedness continuity

1. How repeated displacement disrupts preparedness & what "portable" preparedness could look like?

Repeated displacement disrupts preparedness by breaking the connection between people, place, and the systems they rely on. Each time communities move, they often lose access to land, livelihoods, livestock, social networks, and familiar coping strategies, making it difficult to sustain any previous preparedness efforts. Approaches that depend on fixed infrastructure are particularly vulnerable, as they are frequently left behind when displacement occurs, limiting their long-term value. In this context, "portable" preparedness becomes more relevant. This means focusing on capacities that people can carry with them, such as skills, knowledge, decision-making, and everyday risk-aware behaviours. Strengthening these forms of self-reliance and anticipatory action allows preparedness to continue across different locations. This is especially important as displaced populations often move between high-risk areas, which increases their vulnerability and makes continuity in preparedness essential.

2. Collective memory of risk in fragmented communities & the role of humanitarian actors

The collective memory of risk in displaced and fragmented communities does not disappear when people move; it remains embedded in individuals, relationships, and informal networks rather than in a single place. Even when communities are spread across IDP sites and host areas, they often retain internal cohesion and social structures, though these are not always recognised or supported by external actors. At the same time, host communities share many of the same risks and pressures, so preparedness efforts need to include both displaced and host populations. Humanitarian actors can unintentionally take ownership of this collective knowledge by holding onto tools, information, and decision-making processes, a tendency often reinforced by donor expectations. This can limit communities' ability to retain, adapt, and apply their own knowledge. A shift is needed from delivering solutions towards creating the conditions for communities to manage risk themselves. In practice, this means supporting inclusive local committees, strengthening connections and knowledge sharing between groups, and avoiding approaches that meet immediate needs but undermine longer-term capacity, such as repeated aid distributions that do not contribute to more sustainable systems or livelihoods.

Group 5: Funding and evaluation challenges

1. Why are disaster risk reduction and conflict response still often treated separately, and what are the consequences of this divide?

Disaster risk reduction and conflict response are often treated as separate areas largely because of how funding is structured and delivered. Donor priorities and restrictions tend to divide these sectors, with shrinking international support in places like Afghanistan and Lebanon further reinforcing short-term, siloed approaches. In Afghanistan, reduced funding from major donors, combined with the lack of a recognised government, has limited both resources and coordination, leaving local NGOs dependent on project-based funding and struggling to sustain capacity. In Lebanon, funding constraints have similarly limited the ability to respond to large-scale and rapid displacement, with basic needs often going unmet. This divide results in fragmented responses that fail to address overlapping risks, weakening both immediate humanitarian action and longer-term preparedness, while placing additional strain on local actors who are already operating in fragile conditions.

2. How to evaluate preparedness effectiveness when baselines constantly shift and "success" may simply mean a disaster that didn't get worse, and what metrics are we missing?

Evaluating preparedness in volatile and conflict-affected settings is challenging because baselines are constantly changing, making it difficult to measure progress in conventional ways. In many cases, success may simply mean that a situation did not deteriorate further rather than showing clear improvement. Local NGOs are often able to identify outcomes based on their close engagement with communities, but they frequently lack formal evaluation frameworks and the resources to apply them consistently. This is compounded by reliance on donor-driven projects, which makes it difficult to retain skilled staff and build long-term evaluation capacity. As a result, important aspects of preparedness are often overlooked, particularly less tangible elements such as community resilience, adaptability, and informal coping mechanisms. Addressing these gaps requires more flexible funding, shared evaluation support between organisations, and greater recognition of shifting baselines as part of the findings rather than a limitation.

Conclusion and Key Takeaways

This session made clear that community preparedness in contexts where disaster meets conflict is not a niche concern. More than that, it is an urgent and underserved area of humanitarian practice. A central takeaway was that disasters are political, not natural. Their impact is determined not by the force of the hazard alone, but by the depth of vulnerabilities that exist before it strikes, vulnerabilities that conflict actively deepen. Participants left with a stronger understanding that communities in protracted crises do not experience disasters, conflict, and poverty as separate events, and that programming must reflect this reality through multi-hazard, systemic approaches rather than siloed responses.

The experiences shared from Afghanistan and Syria demonstrated that locally-led preparedness is both possible and effective, but that it requires genuine investment. Such as flexible and long-term funding, conflict-sensitive tools, and a willingness from donors and international actors to accept uncertainty and work at the pace of communities. The breakout group discussions reinforced that there is no one-size-fits-all approach. Displacement disrupts preparedness, power structures shape who is included and who is left out, and funding gaps have real consequences for the sustainability of local organisations and the communities they serve. Above all, the session underscored that communities are not passive recipients of preparedness but are its protagonists.

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