



PROTECTION, DIGNITY, AND RIGHTS: RESHAPING DISASTER AID

From wars to climate-related emergencies, paying attention to local voices, leadership, and solutions can be a matter of life and death.

Around the world, armed conflicts are triggering waves of migration, and floods, fires, droughts, and storms are threatening lives and livelihoods. The suffering caused every day by humanitarian disasters is incalculable, and it is only a taste of what's to come, as changes in the climate disrupt weather patterns and inflame tensions over crucial resources. Meanwhile, global funding for emergency response lags far behind the needs.

But there is a problem with the global humanitarian system that goes deeper than growing needs and lagging funds: the system concentrates power and resources in the hands of international organizations rather than those that are rooted in the affected countries and communities. The vast majority of international funding flows to the UN and international non-governmental organizations (INGOs) like Oxfam. We bring important knowledge

and experience to humanitarian work, but local and national organizations and governments are often more deeply connected and accountable to the affected communities. They are well placed to protect their countries from disasters, but too often they are sidelined—overlooked and underfunded.

PHOTO: A local emergency team in the Philippines that safely evacuated its riverside community when Typhoon Vinta struck in 2017—part of an Oxfam-managed program to strengthen local humanitarian leadership. *Elizabeth Stevens/Oxfam America*



BOOSTING WOMEN'S RIGHTS AND LEADERSHIP



“We saw women suffering,” says Ritah Nansereko. It was 2016, and women and children were pouring across the Uganda border from war-torn South Sudan, settling for whatever shelter they could find. In the town of Palabek, Nansereko found them living under trees. She and her women’s rights organization African Women and Youth Action for Development (AWYAD) were just stepping into the world of humanitarian response, thanks to a three-year program (2016–2018) managed by Oxfam and partners and focused on helping organizations like hers assume leadership in disaster preparedness and response in their communities. The program provided small grants, and training on humanitarian standards and practices, as well as financial systems, management, and other organizational issues. What did AWYAD bring to the table? Complete dedication to upholding the rights of women and girls. With the help of her team and allies, Nansereko lobbied hard for the authorities to create a new refugee settlement in Palabek—and they suc-

ceeded. AWYAD then established programs in and around the settlement. They trained local police how to handle gender-based violence; for example, how to manage cases of rape without doing further harm. They helped form groups of women, youth, and men to raise awareness about rights and responsibilities. They established community-protection committees to refer cases of gender-based violence to the authorities. And to lay the groundwork for peace in the settlement, they organized soccer teams of mixed tribe and gender.

“Refugees are staying here for more than 20 years,” says Nansereko, “but INGOs can only stay for four or five.” That’s one good reason to help local organizations grow and thrive—and show the way forward.

ABOVE: “If you can become used to speaking in this group, you can do the same elsewhere,” says refugee Veronika Lakulu, shown here addressing a women’s group organized by AWYAD. *Elizabeth Stevens/Oxfam America*

OUR VISION

Oxfam is working with partners and allies around the world to shift power and resources to capable local and national actors, changing the model of humanitarian response from one that is guided by international agencies to one that is led by local and national actors. Our vision: local people—and the organizations and governments that represent them—have the knowledge and resources they need to reduce disaster risks, and to respond to emergencies effectively when they happen. Further, they stand ready to uphold the rights of citizens, and challenge the power inequities that can magnify suffering in disasters.

Every emergency we engage in should leave local actors stronger, more independent, and more confident that they can handle—or avert—the next crisis.

In the system we envision, international actors like Oxfam and UN agencies meet local actors where they are and offer them a hand. Some will need intensive technical training and accompaniment. Others may want advice on their campaigns for people’s rights. Others will need institutional support, like help with improving their financial systems. Others will simply need us to stand back and be sure they have the space they need to operate. Every emergency we engage in should leave local actors stronger, more independent, and more confident that they can handle—or avert—the next crisis.

OUR PROGRAM

We are committed to protecting lives and upholding the rights and dignity of people in crisis by promoting local humanitarian leadership and disaster risk reduction, and addressing the root causes of conflict.

We are working with local partner organizations to create early warning systems, develop their technical expertise for disaster response, build networks, become effective advocates, bring their voices and stories to policymakers, and strengthen their organizations from the inside out—all with the goals of promoting people’s right to life and security, and creating sustainable humanitarian capacity and leadership on the ground in vulnerable countries.

The US government plays an outsized role in the geopolitics of global emergencies, particularly in hotspots like Yemen, Syria, Iraq, Sudan, South Sudan, Myanmar, and Central America. Oxfam America urges policymakers to uphold the rights of people in crisis—including the rights of women to protection from violence and other deadly threats. As part of our effort to bring peace and relief to Yemen, for example, we have played a key role in mobilizing congressional opposition to arms sales to Saudi Arabia. And where possible we help amplify local voices—including diaspora from Syria and Yemen—by creating opportunities for civil-society leaders from hard-hit communities to speak directly to US officials and lawmakers. For instance, we have brought women’s rights activists and peacemakers from South Sudan to Washington, DC, to impress upon US policymakers the critical role women can and must play in their country’s peace process.

Finally, with the help of our supporters, Oxfam America funds humanitarian responses around the world. Each time a major emergency unfolds, we turn to our members and the US public for funding to launch the programs that Oxfam carries out with local partners. The Oxfam confederation has expertise in improving water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) in the wake of disasters, which is important to preventing outbreaks of disease in communities that have been disrupted or uprooted. Oxfam also specializes in restoring incomes and livelihoods, so people who have lost essentials can buy what they most need to maintain the

health and dignity of their families and begin the process of recovery.

WOMEN IN EMERGENCIES

Expanding women’s leadership is crucial to improving the humanitarian system. Women and girls experience heightened vulnerability at times of emergency: according to the World Health Organization, women and children may be as many as 14 times more likely than men to die in a sudden-onset disaster. During emergencies, women are often faced with a range of hazards, from gender-based violence to the neglect of gender-specific needs, such as reproductive health care. Attempts to address these issues adequately without women’s guidance are doomed to failure, which is one important reason we are committed to supporting women and women’s organizations to play key leadership roles in disaster preparedness, response, and risk reduction.

BELOW: In a mountainside settlement near Lima, Peru, residents simulate an emergency response. Oxfam partner PREDES has been providing training and supplies to help residents of at-risk communities become expert first responders. *Elizabeth Stevens/Oxfam America*





ABOVE: “In the past five years, there have been four major crises in the area of Kebkabiya,” said Mohammed Mohammedian (left) from Oxfam’s Sudanese partner KSCS in 2017. “In each case, we were the first aid agency to arrive with help.” *Elizabeth Stevens/Oxfam America*

THE ROOTS OF DISASTER

At Oxfam, we see humanitarian crises as the consequences of political, social, and economic failures. This is obvious in the case of armed conflict, but it is also true of natural hazards: an earthquake can be relatively insignificant in a community with strong building codes and standards but devastating where construction is slipshod—and where the only land for housing that is accessible to the poorest families places them in harm’s way. Climate change and the disasters it is triggering represent a political failure of epic proportions.

JOIN US

Effective humanitarian work is not a matter of tossing boxes of food off the back of a truck. It starts with asking questions: what are the risks that people face each year, and how can we help reduce them before disaster strikes? What are the root causes of the hazards? What preparedness measures could help save lives and protect crucial assets? How can Oxfam build strong, equitable partnerships with local and national organizations? When emergencies take place, what are the affected communities saying about what they want and need most? What capacities do the local responders have, and what do they want from international actors? Are the voices of women and other disadvantaged groups being heard loud and clear? Are resources reaching the people in greatest need? What role should the US government play in resolving the crisis?

It is not enough for families and communities to survive a disaster: they deserve to emerge with their dignity intact, and with a clear path to recovery. And it is not enough for Oxfam to partner with local groups: our partners should be stronger for having worked with us.

We invite you to join us in building a better system of humanitarian response—one that places rights, dignity, and gender justice on center stage, and power and resources into the hands of those who need them most.

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LEARN MORE

To learn more about Oxfam’s local humanitarian leadership initiative, visit:

oxfam.org/localhumanitarianleadership



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