Building shock proof communities in the age of recurrent crises

It’s barely made the news in Australia, but a record 45 million people are facing severe food insecurity in Southern Africa over the next six months, with nine million people already experiencing ‘crisis’ or ‘emergency’ levels of food insecurity. Prolonged droughts, flooding, back-to-back cyclones and environmental degradation have devastated a region heavily dependent on smallholder agriculture. The situation has been exacerbated by conflict and prolonged economic challenges.

Many of these countries now affected had never fully recovered from the 2015/16 El Nino-induced drought.

One of the most discussed trends of international humanitarian assistance in the twenty first century is that funding is being directed to crises that are lasting longer and affecting more people. The average length of humanitarian response plans has increased from 5.2 years in 2014 to 9.3 years in 2018 and the number of people targeted to receive assistance under these plans grew from 77 million to 101 million. While humanitarian funding continues to grow (although not at the same pace) it is designed to be short-term, providing life-saving interventions.

Yet as the average length of crises continues to rise,
humanitarian funding is too often being forced to act as a substitute for development programs better equipped to address underlying conditions of vulnerability and need. Longer-term programming that reduces these vulnerabilities and enables people to break the cycle of crisis and humanitarian response is too often missing.

The Somali experience

In 2011 the Horn of Africa region was affected by a food security crisis. In Somalia this manifested as a devastating famine and between October 2010 and April 2012, 258,000 people are estimated to have died — just under half of them children. Frustrated by the frequency and severity of the crises facing the country and the inadequacy of traditional humanitarian assistance to address the underlying vulnerabilities of communities, seven international NGOs (led by World Vision with Action Contre Le Faim, ADRA, CARE, COOPI, Danish Refugee Council and Oxfam) came together to form the Somali Resilience Program (SomReP). With funding from a range of donors, including DFAT, SomReP, now in its eighth year, has sought to mitigate the effects of recurrent shocks and stressors and alleviate chronic vulnerability among target households. SomReP has been designed to address communities’ unique needs through multiyear programming drawing from both humanitarian and development approaches. The program seeks to build resilient livelihoods and increase the adaptive, absorptive and transformative capacity of communities to cope with shocks and stressors.

Following failed rains in 2016 and below-average rains through to June 2017, many parts of Somalia again faced widespread and
prolonged drought conditions with severe humanitarian consequences. By July 2017, an estimated 3.3 million people were in crisis and emergency stages of food insecurity and an additional 2.9 million people in situations of stress.

In contrast to the usual stories of communities struggling to cope in drought situations, World Vision staff began reporting anecdotal evidence that participants in SomReP project activities were coping better with the shock. SomReP Village Savings and Loans Association members were providing loans to support and sustain members’ livelihoods. Members were also using savings to help community members and displaced people in nearby villages, ensuring that SomReP programs had impact beyond project participants.

A project evaluation in mid-2017 – the middle of the drought – found that while food consumption scores for program participants had dropped, they had not dropped back to the same levels as when the project started, suggesting that without SomReP programs, participants would have been markedly worse off. SomReP’s monitoring and evaluation team polled both project participants and non-participants on the reduced Coping Strategies Index (rCSI). In contrast to non-program participants whose reliance on negative coping strategies increased as the drought deepened, SomReP participants continued to reduce their use of negative coping strategies. This evaluation, and a subsequent positive deviance analysis, confirmed the anecdotal evidence that SomReP program staff were reporting: program participants were coping better in the face of another drought.

Shockproof
A World Vision report released today demonstrates that with an intentional approach to building community resilience, it is possible to chart a different future for communities facing recurrent or protracted crises. Using case studies of World Vision-supported projects in South Sudan and Afghanistan, as well as of the SomReP program outlined above, Shockproof demonstrates the need for, and impact of, donors and aid organisations working differently in situations of protracted crises.

The 2016 World Humanitarian Summit was convened partly to address the increasing gap between needs and funding available. Adopted at the summit’s completion, the Grand Bargain aimed to, among other things, enhance engagement between humanitarian and development actors – addressing the humanitarian-development nexus.

Grand Bargain signatories, including Australia, also committed to increasing collaborative humanitarian multi-year planning and funding, which, it was recognised, “lowers administrative costs and catalyses more responsive programming, notably where humanitarian needs are protracted or recurrent and where livelihood needs and local markets can be analysed and monitored”.

For the millions of people in situations of recurrent or protracted crises, translating these policy commitments into action has never been more important.

Australian NGOs have long advocated that the Australian Government should commit to multi-year funding in contexts of protracted humanitarian need. The experience of SomReP, and
the other case studies highlighted in Shockproof, demonstrate the impressive impact on food security and community resilience when these types of programs are adequately resourced by donors.

The current emergency in Southern Africa is just one example of the challenge that humanitarian and development workers will increasingly face as the impacts of climate change intensify. In addition to the ongoing need for lifesaving humanitarian assistance, focused attention and investment in building community resilience is increasingly critical for ensuring that people and communities at the front-lines of environmental changes and recurrent crises can survive, and thrive, through future shocks.

The policy frameworks and commitments already exist – the challenge is to translate these into action.

Note: The Reduced Coping Strategy Index asks a series of questions about the behaviours a household has employed in the past seven days to cope with food insecurity. A heightened rCSI score corresponds with increased reliance on extreme coping measures to deal with food insecurity. The coping strategies measured by the rCSI are: reliance on less preferred and less expensive foods, borrowing food or relying on help from friends or relatives, limit portion size at mealtimes, restricting adult food consumption to allow small children to eat, and, reducing the number of meals eaten in a day.
Reducing disaster risk in 2020: opportunities for Australia

Disaster risk reduction (DRR) is everyone’s business. Or so the saying goes.

Yet a quick search of the Devpolicy blog archives yields a disappointingly low number of hits – sixteen blogs came up in a search of DRR across the last eight years’ worth of commentary, but only four dealt with the topic in any substantive way. (It should be noted this search covered a timeframe when both the Sendai Framework for DRR and Framework for Resilient Development in the Pacific were both launched).

I suspect that the absence of commentary in this blog reflects a general malaise about DRR in the Australian development sector. Aid sector advocacy on DRR hasn’t changed – for the last four years, ACFID’s budget ask has been to increase DRR investment to 5% of ODA. Advocacy effectiveness is however, hard to measure as DFAT’s reporting makes it difficult to track DRR spend – DRR is conflated with preparedness and response in the budget line and the only way to get an understanding of total spend that includes expenditure in country, regional and multilateral programs is via Senate estimates.
This malaise is in an environment where the Australian Government is spending more on humanitarian assistance than ever before and the evidence for the cost-effectiveness of such investments in DRR is increasingly widespread.

In an announcement that gained little public attention last year Senator Concetta Fierravanti-Wells, then Minister for International Development and the Pacific, announced that in June 2020 Australia would host the Asian Ministerial Conference on DRR. Set to have a more intentional focus on the Pacific and become the Asia Pacific Ministerial Conference on DRR under Australia’s leadership, APMCDRR (try to say that three times quickly) puts DRR up in lights for Australia in the next 12 months.

What is APMCDRR?

APMCDRR is a biennial conference, organised by the Asia Pacific Regional Office for UNDRR (the agency formerly known as UNISDR) and Asia Pacific states. The conference is an opportunity to address global and regional disaster challenges and strengthen domestic capacity and commitment for implementing the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction. As conference co-host, the Australian Government plays a critical role in setting the conference agenda and thematic focus.

2020 is a crucial moment in the implementation of the Sendai Framework. A third of the way through the Framework’s implementation, 2020 marks the first Sendai Target deadline (Target E): a ‘substantial increase’ to the number of countries with national and local disaster risk reduction
strategies. It also marks the start of the decade of focus for Target A: substantially reducing global disaster mortality and Target B: substantially reducing the number of affected people. At this critical point, the opportunity for Australia is to mobilise and accelerate progress on Sendai implementation.

Why is APMCDRR Important?

The Asia Pacific region is one of the most disaster-prone in the world, and a person living in the region is five times more likely to be affected by a natural hazard than those outside. Since the 1970s disasters have cumulatively affected over 2.2 billion people and caused more than USD400 billion worth of damage. The region has benefited from significant progress on DRR, however still accounts globally for over half of the deaths and people impacted from disasters. While 38 countries in the region have some type of DRR guiding document, only 18 of these are aligned with the Sendai Framework – and there is still much more to be done in shifting the paradigm from disaster management to risk prevention and reduction. Ensuring the implementation of effective DRR policies, at the local, national, regional and international levels remains critical.

Can APMCDRR achieve meaningful change?

At the Australasian Aid Conference earlier this year, World Vision Australia convened a panel discussion asking this very question. In the context of the region’s challenges, will the conference be proved as nothing but a talkfest, or will it represent an opportunity for meaningful progress in the
region? The panellists were optimistic – noting the increasing rigour and commitment to reducing disaster risk that each regional platform had brought to date.

Some of the ideas that have remained with me in the months since, include:

- The need to broaden attendee representation. Too often regional DRR forums have only involved those already bought into the importance of DRR, often Emergency Management Ministers. To genuinely strengthen the regional agenda on DRR, and country-level commitment, one clear opportunity for Australia is to broaden representation of senior officials at these meetings to, at minimum, include Finance Ministers (including Australia’s own!). Taking seriously the need for disaster resilient education systems, the inclusion of education ministers might also elevate this profile. Broadening representation would be a vital step in building commitment to and ownership of DRR.

- APMCDRR2020 could also work to genuinely increase the engagement and involvement of children and youth in preparation, deliberations and outcomes. Children have inalienable rights in all circumstances and the right to participate in decisions that affect them. Given the heightened vulnerability of children in disaster situations, consideration of how best to uphold children’s rights, and ensure their full participation, is critical in effectively preparing for and reducing the risk of disasters. The Sendai Framework recognises children and youth are agents of change, and should be given the opportunity, and the appropriate mechanisms
for contributing to DRR. APMCDRR2020 is an opportunity to make this a reality – this could happen through child and youth participation in planning for the conference, attending as part of official government delegations and inviting them to present and participate as part of plenary deliberations.

• Finally, Australia could make space for acknowledging, sharing and learning from Indigenous knowledge and expertise, both in Australia and in countries around the region. The Sendai Framework recognises the role of traditional, Indigenous and local knowledge in supporting improved understanding of disaster risk. Engaging regional partners on this issue would be a key opportunity for Australia.

The panel discussion acknowledged that the opportunities of APMCDRR2020 ran both ways – Australia shouldn’t be too proud to acknowledge it has as much to learn from the region as it does to contribute. Australia can learn from the experience of some regional countries in responding to compounding, cascading events (as noted in Robert Glasser’s recent ASPI report). It was also suggested that DRR could be better mainstreamed across major sectors in Australia, not just the sole purview of emergency management personnel.

If it is true that DRR is everyone’s business, a successful conference in 2020 is not the sole responsibility of a limited few in government. All of us – domestic and international, DRR and non-DRR professionals – need to think about how to strengthen disaster risk reduction initiatives in our own work, and what we can bring to making the conference the success it needs to be.