IASC Operational Guidelines on the Protection of Persons in Situations of Natural Disasters

Human rights don’t disappear the moment an earthquake, a hurricane, or a tsunami strikes. As witnessed after the Indian Ocean tsunami, the earthquake in Haiti and many other disaster situations, the protection of human rights grows in importance during relief and recovery efforts because it safeguards the dignity and wellbeing of all those affected. People are at their most vulnerable in times of crisis, so preventing discrimination and abuse of their rights is vital to effective disaster response operations.

To promote and facilitate a rights-based approach to disaster relief, the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) adopted Operational Guidelines on Human Rights and Natural Disasters in 2006. The Guidelines are a major contribution to the promotion of a rights-based approach in situations of natural disasters. Following the feedback from the field-testing of the guidelines, the IASC incorporated lessons learned from the field into a revised version of the Guidelines. This revised version also expands the rights-based approach to address preparedness measures. Small steps in preparedness can have a major impact once a disaster strikes.


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For the past four years the Project on Internal Displacement has organized workshops on “Promoting and Protecting Rights in Natural Disasters” in all regions of the world with the participation of representatives from national and local governments, UN agencies, international and local NGOs, and Red Cross/Crescent representatives. These workshops have introduced the IASC Operational Guidelines on Human Rights and Natural Disasters and have provided a forum for discussion of good practices in promoting and upholding human rights in disaster risk reduction, emergency response and recovery.

The workshops have shown that there is both broad interest in strengthening protection in situations of natural disasters and a need for training about what it means to apply a rights-based approach. These training modules are intended to encourage others to organize similar training courses or sessions on human rights and natural disasters. The materials include a comprehensive agenda, facilitator’s guide, session modules, PowerPoint presentations, and resource materials for a two-day workshop on “Promoting and Protecting Rights in Natural Disasters.” The modules are based on the workshops we have previously held and have been reviewed by international protection specialists with a specific focus on introducing the IASC Operational Guidelines on Human Rights and Natural Disasters.

The content ranges from basic information about rights-based approaches and protection issues to more specific areas such as protection of specific at-risk groups and protection monitoring tools. The program can be used in its entirety or incorporated into larger workshop agendas. The modules can easily be adapted to local contexts and a wide variety of audiences.

IASC Framework on Durable Solutions for Internally Displaced Persons

Displacement is a life-changing event. While the often traumatic experience of displacement cannot be undone, internally displaced persons (IDPs) need to be able to access durable solutions to their displacement in order to increase their safety and wellbeing. As articulated in Principle 28 of the Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement, IDPs have a right to, and often need assistance in their efforts to achieve, a durable solution. Guiding Principles 28-30 set out the rights of IDPs to durable solutions, the responsibilities of national authorities, and the role of humanitarian and development actors to assist durable solutions.
Principle 28 recognizes that the competent authorities have the primary duty and responsibility to establish conditions, as well as provide the means, which allow IDPs to return voluntarily, in safety and with dignity, to their homes or places of habitual residence, or to resettle voluntarily in another part of the country. Securing durable solutions for the internally displaced is also in the State’s best interests. Leaving IDPs in continued marginalization without the prospect of a durable solution may become an obstacle to long-term peace stability, recovery, and reconstruction in post-crisis countries.

Facilitating durable solutions requires that all stakeholders – including national and local authorities as well as humanitarian and development actors – work together, identify the right strategies and activities to assist IDPs in this process, and set criteria that will help to determine to what extent a durable solution has been achieved. The Framework on Durable Solutions for Internally Displaced Persons aims to provide clarity on the concept of durable solutions and general guidance on how to achieve them. This version of the Framework builds on a pilot version released in 2007, which the Inter-Agency Standing Committee welcomed and recommended for field-testing. The Framework was revised and finalized in 2009, taking into account valuable feedback from the field.

On the Front Line of Climate Change and Displacement: Learning From and With Pacific Island Countries

The Pacific Island countries are internationally regarded as a barometer for the early impacts of climate change. Their geophysical characteristics, demographic patterns and location in the Pacific Ocean make them particularly vulnerable to the effects of global warming. Small Island Developing States, a UN-established category which includes most Pacific Island countries, are characterized by a high ratio of shoreline to land, low elevation, settlement patterns concentrated in coastal areas and a narrow economic basis—all of which put them at heightened risk of natural disasters, particularly rising sea levels. Perhaps more than in any other region, the populations and governments of Pacific Island countries are keenly aware that they face severe and multifaceted risks as a result of climate change. Their lives and livelihoods are linked to the Pacific Ocean; rising sea levels and other effects of global warming threaten not only their physical assets and coastal zones, but also their way of life and perhaps their national identities.

In the Pacific Islands, this acute awareness of the potential impact of climate change comes not only from books and studies, but from first-hand knowledge and ongoing ex-
periences with the effects of the world’s changing climate. The value and relevance of these experiences are not confined to the Pacific Islands, but are relevant for the world at large. This paper aims to conceptualize and distill some dimensions of these experiences, in light of the discussions and presentations made at the “Regional Workshop on Internal Displacement caused by Natural Disasters and Climate Change in the Pacific” (May 2011) organized by the Brookings-LSE Project on Internal Displacement in conjunction with the UN Humanitarian team in the Pacific. The synthesis report on the workshop’s proceedings contains additional information on the issues outlined and examined in this paper.
2011 Articles, Blogs, Books, Reports and Speeches on Natural Disasters and Climate Change Issues

January
IAASC Operational Guidelines on the Protection of Persons in Situations of Natural Disasters
A Research Trip to Haiti: Personal Reflections
Elizabeth Ferris

February
Climate Change and Internal Displacement: A Contribution to the Discussion
Elizabeth Ferris

March
Protecting Civilians in Disasters and Conflicts
Elizabeth Ferris
Beyond the Disaster: A Call for Japanese Leadership in International Disaster Response Law
Elizabeth Ferris, Kei Hakata
What a Difference a Government Makes: Japan’s Earthquake
Elizabeth Ferris

April
The Politics of Protection: The Limits of Humanitarian Action
Elizabeth Ferris
A Year of Living Dangerously – A Review of Natural Disasters in 2010
Elizabeth Ferris, Daniel Petz

June
A Human Rights-Based Approach to Protection of Environmentally Displaced Person
Chaloka Beyani
A Human Rights-Based Approach to Building Resilience to Natural Disasters
Walter Kälin
Natural Disaster Response in Japan and Fiji
Elizabeth Ferris
Internal Displacement caused by Natural Disasters and Climate Change in the Pacific
Workshop Report

July
Protecting and Promoting Rights in Natural Disasters in the Great Lakes Region and East Africa
Workshop Report
Famine in Somalia Once Again
Elizabeth Ferris

September
On the Front Line of Climate Change and Displacement: Learning From and With Pacific Island Countries
Elizabeth Ferris, Michael Cernea, Daniel Petz

November
Planned Relocations, Disasters and Climate Change
Elizabeth Ferris
2011 Events and Workshops on Natural Disasters and Climate Change Issues

January
Haiti: One Year After the Earthquake
Brookings Institution, Washington DC

March
Devastation in Japan: The Aftermath and Implications of the World’s Fifth Largest Earthquake
Brookings Institution, Washington DC

Climate Change and Displacement
Brookings Institution, Washington DC

May
Regional Workshop on Internal Displacement Caused by Natural Disasters and Climate Change in the Pacific
Suva, Fiji

June
Responding to Natural Disasters
Brookings Institution, Washington DC

Regional Workshop on Protecting and Promoting Rights in Natural Disasters in the Great Lakes Region and East Africa
Kampala, Uganda

August
Famine in Somalia: An Expected Turn for the Worse
Brookings Institution, Washington DC

October
Rebuilding a City: The Dos and Don’ts in Post-Disaster Urban Recovery
Brookings Institution, Washington DC

Conversations about Climate Change Adaption: Displacement, Migration and Planned Relocation
Brookings Institution, Washington DC

Roundtable on Climate Change Adaptation and Human Mobility
Brookings Institution, Washington DC

Transcripts and audio versions of the events hosted at the Brookings Institution are available on our website: http://www.brookings.edu/idp