

Honduras, Lebanon, Nepal: civil society on the front lines of natural disasters and their daily consequences

José Ramón Ávila • Director of the Association of

Non-Governmental Organisations (ASONOG), Honduras

Ziad Abdel Samad • Executive Director of the Arab NGO Network
for Development (ANND), Lebanon

Arjun Bhattarai • Deputy Secretary General of the NGO Federation of Nepal

Sarah Strack • Director of Forus, Paris, France

Bibbi Abruzzini • Communications team at Forus, Paris, France

How does society deal with the cascading consequences of natural disasters? In this collaborative article, the authors highlight the active participation of local civil societies, often the first and last on the scene when it comes to helping populations.

Our current geological age, the Anthropocene¹, is viewed as the period during which human activity has been the dominant influencing factor on climate and the environment. As a species, we are in the eye of the storm, but are we using the right compass and navigation system to go forward? Are we able to deal with the “everyday disasters” on our trajectory? In the words of Donna J. Haraway², our task has become “to settle troubled waters and rebuild quiet places”. In this collaborative article, we share the voices of civil society organisations, from Nepal to Honduras to Lebanon, at the frontline of natural or man-made disasters – often of both. How do local and global join forces to rebuild and protect communities and prevent the social and economic tsunami triggered by disasters?

Honduras in the “eye of the storm”

Central America is one of the regions of the world most exposed to the effects of climate change. Honduras is among the countries most vulnerable to hurricanes, tropical storms, floods and droughts and falls within the top twenty countries most affected by climate change. But how many of us have heard about the plights of Honduras³?

“Honduras is experiencing acutely intense disasters, from hurricanes to floods – especially if we compare our situation to ten or twenty years ago. We have climate refugees now, in particular farmers who are leaving their lands because of a lack of resources. All kinds of disasters are hitting Central America all over...Everyone is affected”, the Association of Non-Governmental Organisations

¹ “The Anthropocene Epoch is an unofficial unit of geologic time, used to describe the most recent period in Earth’s history when human activity started to have a significant impact on the planet’s climate and ecosystems”, see *National Geographic*, Resource library/Encyclopedic entry, <https://www.nationalgeographic.org/encyclopedia/anthropocene>

² Donna J. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*, Duke University Press, 2016.

³Podcast “Justicia climática en Honduras” (in Spanish), Forus/Asonog, <https://soundcloud.com/user-975127425/es-justicia-climatica-en-honduras>

HUMANITARIAN ALTERNATIVES

(ASONOG) explains. Since the 1980s, this national platform of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) has been working to strengthen civil society capacity to reduce the cumulative impacts of disasters. For years now, climate-related hazards are devastating crops and critical infrastructure across the country. For communities living in the so-called dry corridor, food insecurity has become a recurrent issue. With 30% of Hondurans⁴ working in agriculture, prolonged droughts coupled with huge storms and floods have reduced crop yields by catastrophic amounts. Yet the government has hardly put any measures in place to adapt to a changed climate⁵. The farmers mostly have to help themselves.

As Honduras endures one major disaster after another, international agencies and local civil society groups are calling out the need to deal with one of the longer-term problems that is being neglected in the country: corruption⁶. The government continues to grant land titles to companies in areas used by farmers, indigenous peoples or Afro-descendants. Operating licenses are conceded in protected areas, which affects ecosystems as well as the livelihoods of indigenous communities, who are often the most affected by natural disasters and the impacts of climate change in the first place. Anyone who shows opposition to those in power risks going to jail or paying legal fees. “For community leaders it’s very difficult to protest because of the violence they face. We are working to build capacity at the national and regional level with networks of civil society organisations, human rights defenders and social movements to fight against corruption”, Francisco Javier Garcia from ASONOG explains.

Ahead of the presidential elections⁷ in November 2021, civil society organisations⁸ have stepped up their efforts to promote greater oversight and accountability. In fact, ASONOG has linked the theme of disaster risk reduction not only to climate change but also to anti-corruption and the extractivist model of development that rules the country.

ASONOG advocates for “localisation” to share knowledge and resources, especially when it comes to everyday disasters and “environmental struggles” that are complex and do not usually hit the headlines. As a civil society network, they try to support local and indigenous communities across Honduras, because “this is where the greatest human rights violations occur. Assassinations, persecution, imprisonment of people whose only crime is to defend their people and their livelihoods”. Honduras ranks fifth⁹ in Latin America in terms of the number of environmentalists murdered. “We are number one in Central America,” ASONOG says regretfully, bringing up Berta Caceres whose 2016 murder following her vocal opposition to a hydroelectric project in Honduras sparked international outrage. More defenders than ever are being killed¹⁰, while others are threatened, sued or attacked.

⁴ International Labour Organization, ILOSTAT database, “Employment in agriculture (% of total employment) (modelled ILO estimate) – Honduras, *The World Bank*, data retrieved on 29 January 2021, <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.AGR.EMPL.ZS?locations=HN>

⁵ Martin Reischke, “Dauerkrise in Honduras. Korruption, Kokain und Klimawandel”, *Deutschlandradio*, 3 August 2021, https://www.deutschlandfunkkultur.de/dauerkrise-in-honduras-korruption-kokain-und-klimawandel.979.de.html?dram:article_id=501153

⁶ “Civil Society is Vital to Fighting Corruption in Honduras”, *Democracy Speaks*, 17 August 2021, <https://www.democracyspeaks.org/blog/civil-society-vital-fighting-corruption-honduras>

⁷ “Honduras: Process for General Elections in November Advances”, *Telesur*, 1 October 2021, <https://www.telesurenglish.net/news/Honduras-Process-for-General-Elections-in-November-Advances-20211001-0020.html>

⁸ See for example the video of ASONOG – Honduras, Forus International, 18 September 2020, <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=435665370729309>

⁹ “Latin America is the Most Dangerous Region for Environmentalists”, *Catalyst*, 18 October 2021, <https://catalyst.cm/stories-new/2021/5/7/latin-america-is-the-most-dangerous-region-for-environmentalistsnbsp>

¹⁰ “Last line of defence”, *Global Witness*, 13 September 2021, <https://www.globalwitness.org/en/campaigns/environmental-activists/last-line-defence>

When disasters hit, the impacts are even worse when people are deprived of their human rights. Research¹¹ shows that this can lead to unequal access to assistance, discrimination in aid provision, sexual and gender-based violence and unsafe or involuntary return or resettlement. Ensuring local voices are heard and protected, rather than persecuted and suppressed, is a crucial first step. But what happens when institutional forces are almost invisible and local communities have to deal with disasters virtually on their own?

Lebanon: civil society “saved the nation”

In Lebanon, no currency is available in major cities currency exchange offices, shelves in shops are half empty, the streets are without lighting, fuel pumps at petrol stations are empty, workers are on strike¹². This situation has lasted for many long months. With a gridlocked political system and a financial meltdown, leaders are pleading for foreign emergency assistance to stay afloat, including food for its starving army¹³. But those who are stepping up for communities affected by the crisis are civil society organisations and informal social movements that have joined forces to save Lebanon.

Last August, more than 200 people died and thousands were injured in a massive chemical explosion¹⁴ in the port of Beirut. “The explosion was the result of a failed State. Half of the city was destroyed and thousands of people lost their homes. The government was totally absent. The immediate response of civil society saved the nation”, the Arab NGOs Network for Development (ANND)¹⁵ explains. “It was a very efficient response from civil society because we have lived fifteen years in a civil war where the State was absent. Unfortunately, we have experience.”

The official response was characterised by a lack of transparency, and key politicians refused to cooperate with a judicial investigation into possible criminal negligence, according to Freedom House¹⁶. Having a vibrant and dynamic civil society is what saved people from the rubble, gave food to communities affected by the explosion and the economic crisis that ensued and allowed citizens to mobilise and fight for their rights. After the explosion, people from different religious, cultural and social backgrounds travelled to Beirut, provided humanitarian assistance and started to create a political process to “rebuild the nation”. “It’s not the time to be disappointed,” ANND believes. “It’s time to build new ties, political structures and models of citizenship. How do we do this? This is the challenge for civil society.”

¹¹ Elizabeth Ferris, “Natural Disasters, Human Rights, and the Role of National Human Rights Institutions”, 25 October 2008, *Brookings*, <https://www.brookings.edu/on-the-record/natural-disasters-human-rights-and-the-role-of-national-human-rights-institutions>

¹² “In crisis-struck Lebanon, school year is gripped by chaos”, *Associated Press*, 30 September 2021, <https://apnews.com/article/business-middle-east-lebanon-education-beirut-04f3c529848195cf139a3cbc1a730395>

¹³ “Qatar to provide aid for Lebanese troops as crisis deepens”, *Al Jazeera*, 7 July 2021, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/7/7/qatar-to-provide-aid-for-lebanese-troops-amid-economic-crisis>

¹⁴ “Beirut port explosion investigation suspended for second time”, *BBC News*, 27 September 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-58705687>

¹⁵ For more details: <https://www.annd.org/english/page.php?pageId=1#sthash.8gLt2edU.dpbs>

¹⁶ Freedom House, Lebanon – Key Developments in 2020, <https://freedomhouse.org/country/lebanon/freedom-world/2021>

Nepal: cumulative weaknesses

“I thought I was going to die,” says Sapana, a local from Bhaktapur, thinking back to the 2015 earthquake. “I had three daughters at home. Because of the earthquake I couldn’t reach them, my house was destroyed. I hope we will be able to build a better society now.”

In Nepal, intensive disasters, most recently the 2015 Gorkha earthquake¹⁷, are part of everyday life. On top of seismic vulnerability due to its geography, the Himalayan nation is also one of the most climate-vulnerable countries on Earth. Millions of Nepalese¹⁸ are estimated to be at risk from the impacts of climate change including reductions in agricultural production, food insecurity, strained water resources, loss of forests and biodiversity as well as damaged infrastructure.

To make things worse, Nepal had the worst wildfire season¹⁹ in living memory this past spring. Right across the Himalayan foothills, mountains were ablaze from November till March – and at its peak there were nearly 2,000 fires raging out of control. The charred earth barely had time to recover when the monsoon arrived²⁰, unleashing record precipitation, much of it in the trans-Himalayan region which is supposed to be in the rain shadow. As a result, the denuded slopes were unable to hold the water, and the runoff surged into rivers washing away homes, bridges, roads and hydropower plants, Kunda Dixit from *Nepali Times*²¹ explains.

As with many disasters, the first responders²² were local civil society organisations. The NGO Federation of Nepal²³ and its members play a key role in strengthening coordination not only “on the ground” but also by pushing for the establishment of new legislations and action plans.

In fact, the work of civil society organisations does not stop when a disaster ends: “We continue supporting the victims” NFN explains. In a country like Nepal, civil society organisations mobilise volunteers, bring food, gas, water and fulfil other basic needs in communities. But they also encourage the emergence of new networks, models of collaboration and governance.

When the earthquake struck Nepal in 2015, thousands of private and public buildings including historic monuments and temples were destroyed, killing nearly 9,000 people and injuring close to 22,000. The material cost was exacerbated by the mental cost of the earthquake. In instances of solidarity, neighbours kept each other afloat by sharing food, shelter and, most importantly, emotional support. This is a huge part of disaster risk management that is often left for last. How to deal with the psychological scars both at the individual and collective level?

“During the earthquake I felt terrible. It was the scariest thing I’d ever experienced, I thought I’d lost everything. During the rescue efforts, I saw dead bodies... my relatives told me to be strong and help

¹⁷ Multiple sources: “Gorkha Earthquake 2015”, *ScienceDirect*, <https://www.sciencedirect.com/topics/earth-and-planetary-sciences/gorkha-earthquake-2015>

¹⁸ Climate Links, “Nepal at a Glance, Climate Projections and Impacts”, <https://www.climatelinks.org/countries/nepal>

¹⁹ Kunda Dixit, “Nepal is going up in smoke – Wildfires lead to hazardous air quality for third straight day, with no end in sight”, *Nepali Times*, 28 March 2021, <https://www.nepalitimes.com/banner/nepal-is-going-up-in-smoke>

²⁰ “Monsoon hits Nepal with a bang”, *Nepali Times*, 15 June 2021, <https://www.nepalitimes.com/latest/monsoon-hits-nepal-with-a-bang>

²¹ Kunda Dixit, “Disasters in Nepal come in waves – There are crises within crises, layers upon layers of calamities”, *Nepali Times*, 17 June 2021, <https://www.nepalitimes.com/banner/disasters-in-nepal-come-in-waves>

²² KhemLal Bishwakarma, “Community Forestry: An Effective Avenue to Respond to COVID-19”, *my República*, 7 October 2021, <https://myrepublica.nagariknetwork.com/news/community-forestry-an-effective-avenue-to-respond-to-covid-19>

²³ NGO Federation of Nepal, <https://www.ngofederation.org>

others,” a teenager explained. Decades after a landslide, a tsunami or a man-made conflict, people still have to deal with the consequences. These silent emergencies linger but are often forgotten about.

Even if, since this disaster, much has been achieved in the coordination between government, international agencies and civil society, the challenge now is maintaining this commitment to be better prepared for the next major earthquake or disaster. Near to a small stone memorial to the 1934 earthquake that stands by a busy street in Kathmandu, three-storey houses were built: this is the limit imposed by a law passed to reduce the impact of subsequent earthquakes. Yet further floors have been built, destabilising the buildings, as memory recedes and learning fades. How do we keep personal, public and political commitment alive?

The way forward

How do we shift from dealing with disasters to dealing with the more complex and intertwined realities that lead to the multiplication and intensification of both intensive and everyday disasters? In 2019, Forus started a project²⁴ to strengthen the capacities of national NGO platforms in crisis and post-emergency situations with the support of the *Fondation de France*. From Mali to Colombia, passing through Nepal and Bangladesh, this has brought together the experiences and mechanisms of networks of civil society organisations that deal with disasters on a daily basis. They shared their experience in bridging experts, local groups and others to coordinate a more effective response and to be better prepared by laying the foundations for collective and inter-connected work.

What came out of this process? To deal with disasters, we have to rely on the local knowledge of communities, we have to build innovative partnerships with international actors challenging the balance of power, and we need to strengthen trust and coordination amongst actors.

The efforts to build resilient communities does not stop when the fire is extinguished, the hurricane stops or a town is rebuilt. It is a long-term process that goes hand in hand with new models of financing sustainable development²⁵. If we continue promoting extractivist models as the only way to achieve development, or we curtail the space of civil society, communities and citizens, the way forward is going to be marred with more failures and suffering. The epicentre of these endeavours needs to be grounded in local communities, since they are the ones who need to be at the core of reconstruction and preparedness efforts – to open up optimistic perspectives and sustain paths for the future of our societies.

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²⁴ Forus, “About the DRR toolkit”, <https://drr.forus-international.org>

²⁵ Forus, “Financing for Sustainable Development”, <https://www.forus-international.org/en/financing-for-sustainable-development>

Biographies

José Ramón Ávila • He is the Director of the Association of Non-Governmental Organisations (ASONOG), an association founded in the 1980s in Honduras as an initiative to coordinate the efforts of a group of organisations working with refugee populations in the western border areas of the country. Since then, ASONOG has promoted advocacy processes for the country's development policies with the participation of traditionally excluded populations at the local, municipal, departmental and national levels through the generation of participatory processes.

Ziad Abdel Samad • He is the Executive Director of the Arab NGO Network for Development (ANND). Based in Beirut, since 1999 ANND has brought together thirty NGOs and nine national networks from ten Arab countries that are active in the protection of social and economic rights.

Arjun Bhattarai • He is the Deputy Secretary General of the NGO Federation of Nepal. Arjun Bhattarai has been working with civil society organisations since 1995 and continues to work on issues related to poverty reduction, inequality, community empowerment, youth leadership, civic space and policy advocacy on different issues. He has promoted social entrepreneurship since the era of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and has continuously engaged and contributed on localising and achieving Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Sarah Strack • Sarah Strack has been Director of Forus since April 2020 and brings over a decade of experience working with civil society networks and alliances such as Climate Action Network (CAN) International, the International Civil Society Centre and Transparency International. A passionate advocate of social justice, Sarah believes in the transformative power of people-centred coalitions acting for change.

Bibbi Abruzzini • She is part of the communications team at Forus, a global network of civil society organisations which gathers sixty-eight national NGO platforms and seven regional coalitions from Africa, America, Asia, Europe and the Pacific to fight for a more just and sustainable future. Bibbi Abruzzini is also the co-founder of Both Nomads, a creative collective making documentaries and collaborative photo reportages around the globe.

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