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The ILO Response to Natural Disasters

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Genesis of the ILO Crisis Programme

Within the International Labour Office, the InFocus Programme on Crisis Response and Reconstruction (IFP/CRISIS) was set up in September 1999 at the time of the reorganisation of the Office after Mr. Somavia took office as Director-General. The Office was restructured along four strategic objectives and eight topics were identified for focussed attention. Crisis response and reconstruction was one of the selected topics.

IFP/CRISIS covers four types of crises: armed conflicts; natural disasters; financial and economic downturns, and difficult political and social transitions. One third of all ILO member-states are currently experiencing a crisis situation. As is well known, the frequency and intensity of natural disasters is on the rise. Our experience is that operating in an unstable environment requires special approaches and tools and this is what IFP/CRISIS has developed over the two years of its existence, on the basis of the experience accumulated while intervening in crisis-affected countries. The Programme undertakes four kinds of activities viz. operational activities, knowledge and tools development, capacity building and training and advocacy and resource mobilisation

- Men and women are not two homogenous groups. Within each, some persons are more vulnerable than others.
- Women are generally over-represented in low paid and precarious employment and in the informal economy. Further, women have less access to productive assets and to information and early warning systems.
- Gender is not the only source of inequality; it may be combined with other factors such as race, ethnicity, religion, poverty, location etc. This could result in multiple and cumulative disadvantage which could grow over time.
- While designing interventions one has to be careful not to create new inequalities and exclusions (e.g. between project beneficiaries and other sections of the population as this could set back the recovery process). IFP/CRISIS places emphasis on the recovery of livelihoods and rehabilitation of the whole population through several means, including provision of inputs, skills development, local economic development and social integration. While specific groups may be targeted in the first instance, it is often both necessary and desirable to extend beyond immediate beneficiaries to families and whole communities.

Some Programme Experiences

ILO interventions in the context of natural disasters are focused on saving existing jobs and expanding decent work opportunities during recovery, reconstruction and the return to development. This does not mean that environmental concerns are neglected. In most of the current round of natural disasters, there is a person-made element, which contributes to or exacerbates the disaster and may even lead to its recurrence. Since the environment is already fragile, proposed areas for job creation have to be carefully assessed to ensure that they do not make a bad situation worse. In the case of Gujarat, it was observed that developing chemical industries using salt as a raw material, which might at first sight appear very promising, was likely to have adverse impacts on the already fragile environment.

When planning an intervention in a disaster situation, the considerations that apply in normal times may not always be relevant. For example, after the Gujarat earthquake, we focused on women for several reasons. Our assessment was that the destruction of dwellings hit the embroidery production of women much more than the activities of men, as these had been located in the dwellings. At the same time, production could be resumed fairly quickly as the skills existed, although there was scope for improvement. Our development partner, the Self Employed Women's Association (SEWA), was already working with the women and could revive and expand home-based embroidery very quickly. Finally, the ILO was just completing a project with SEWA in the area hit by the earthquake. We felt that we owed it to these women that we did not forget them in their hour of need.

The men could do construction activities, but many needed training, especially in earthquake and cyclone proof construction, which would take time to impart. Also,

by and large, livestock activities were not that seriously damaged. Our interviews reveal that the men appreciated the support provided to the women, which helped the family to survive during the early phases of the recovery.

However, a programme does not need to target women to benefit primarily women. Our intervention in Mozambique, undertaken after the floods in 2000, is a good example. After a needs assessment mission, a project was formulated whose objective was to reactivate the local economy (based on agriculture) and four local markets in Chokwe, one of the worst affected districts. An evaluation of the project, undertaken a year later, showed that 87 percent of beneficiaries were women. This was not expected. A detailed identification of likely beneficiaries had not been possible in the unsettled conditions prevailing at the time and an immediate intervention was

The same set of considerations applies to the post disaster situation in relation to access to relief, access to credit and other facilities and access to markets outside the village. In this context, belonging to a membership based organization like SEWA or a micro credit group can help to reduce the degree of information asymmetry and raise creditworthiness.

Making an early start

By way of conclusion, it may be stressed that our experience indicates th