Mobilizing informal workers for urban resilience: Linking poverty alleviation and disaster preparedness

By Bradley Cleveland

As workers in the informal economy organize to improve their wages and working conditions, membership-based organizations of these workers could become key players of global efforts to alleviate extreme poverty and enhance disaster resilience in urban slums and informal settlements. By engaging these worker-led organizations in community-based efforts to reduce disaster risk, the urban poor who live in informal settlements and work informal jobs can exert their collective power to overcome their social and economic marginalization. Such a strategy can build safer communities and lead to the extension of worker rights and social protections to those toiling in the informal economy.

Two landmark global initiatives—the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) to alleviate extreme poverty and the Hyogo Framework for Action (HFA) to reduce the risk of disasters—expire in 2015. The United Nations is working with its member countries and international non-governmental organizations to craft a new development agenda and disaster resilience framework to succeed these global efforts. While the original MDGs and HFA initiatives developed independently, the successor initiatives to reduce poverty and disaster losses are linked. As the world has learned, in a matter of seconds, a disaster can reduce to rubble the development achievements built over decades.

Development assistance and disaster response in the 21st century face three related challenges that require an integrated approach. First, as the world continues to urbanize, more people and assets are locating in disaster-prone cities. Second, disasters and extreme weather events are increasing in the severity and frequency, owing to climate change. Finally, the majority of the new city-dwellers are living in slums and informal settlements and working in the informal economy, creating a double exposure in which both their lives and livelihoods are at risk.

Poor city residents live in hazardous informal settlements because of the low costs of housing and proximity to informal sector work. To ply their trade, informal workers must navigate an urban environment where fines, eviction and harassment are a daily threat, only to receive poverty-level wages. Governments frequently refuse to recognize informal employment or informal settlements, and withhold a social safety net that would allow them to ride out a shock. In addition, local authorities often fail to provide basic services and infrastructure that could protect their homes, assets and livelihoods.
The United Nation’s effort to link the Post-2015 development agenda and the Hyogo Framework to build community resilience can address the double exposure facing city residents who are living in informal settlements and working in the informal economy. However, these global initiatives must be implemented at the local level by city authorities. The engagement of worker-led membership-based organizations can provide the political leverage to ensure the adoption of inclusive policies and practices that integrate marginalized communities and informal workers into the fabric of the city.

Employing workers in the informal economy in community-based efforts to reduce disaster risk offers co-benefits that address the Post-2015 development agenda to reduce extreme poverty by improving their wages and job security, and reducing their vulnerability to disasters and shocks. Such a strategy can meet the International Labour Organization’s goal to create “decent work,” through job creation, the extension of worker rights and social protections, and the establishment of a social dialogue between informal sector workers and local authorities.

In addition, city investments in infrastructure and services for informal settlements represent a “no regrets” strategy that can improve the public health and safety of residents, reducing costs over the long-term. Improved trash collection and sanitation can reduce disease vectors; developing and maintaining green and grey infrastructure can reduce flooding and landslides. Restored ecosystems can serve as natural buffers against hazards, while become the source of healthy, locally grown food as fruit-bearing trees and gardens replace denuded hillsides and landscapes.

Finally, this strategy promises to be financially sustainable as the informal workers become more productive, as new markets are developed, and local governments achieve savings from their investments in resilience through lower costs of disaster response and recovery.

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