

In the immediate aftermath of a catastrophe, emergency relief aid is the priority. But when the focus moves on to reconstruction one of the most important elements is job creation.

Asia and the Pacific is the region most prone to natural disaster. Between 1980 and 2009, 45 per cent of the world's natural disasters occurred in this region, with a similar loss in GDP. Globally, of every 10 people affected by natural disasters (killed, injured or displaced), more than eight were in Asia and the Pacific .

"Natural disasters cause not only loss of lives and tremendous physical damage but loss of employment and livelihoods too. Without the ability to support themselves individuals and their communities cannot rebuild," said Sachiko Yamamoto, ILO Regional Director for Asia and the Pacific Region. "Job creation and livelihood recovery issues should not be treated as an after-thought when creating disaster relief plans".

For the last 10 years the ILO has engaged in post-disaster reconstruction in a number of countries in the region, using an employment-led approach to recovery.

The 2004 Indian Ocean Tsunami affected many countries in the region including Indonesia, Sri Lanka and Thailand. In its aftermath the ILO provided a range of employment-related assistance. This included establishing emergency employment services to match unemployed people with work opportunities, providing short-term technical and vocational skills training, and helping with enterprise development.

In 2006, following the devastated earthquake in East Java, Indonesia, the ILO supported recovery work by providing intensive courses on concrete mixing and masonry work, so enabling local people to rebuild their homes.

After Cyclone Nargis in May 2008, the ILO undertook a labour-intensive infrastructure project in Myanmar (as part of its mandate to work against forced labour), to maximise local job opportunities and demonstrate good employment practices.

Later that year unprecedented rains in Pakistan left crops destroyed and lands submerged. Some 15.3 million people lost their livelihoods and the survivors faced a year-long food crisis. Mr Sher Hassan, aged 24, his elderly mother, and six sisters and brothers were among those who lost their home. For them, finding employment and rebuilding their livelihood was a question of survival. Mr Hassan joined an ILO "Cash for Work" (CFW) programme that was implemented following an assessment of damage to livelihoods and employment. The CFW scheme was specifically designed to benefit women, men and disabled people by helping them restore critical infrastructure such as houses, roads and workplaces. Mr Hassan and other young people worked to clear the rubble and renovate local houses.

Skills and business management training are also provided to disaster-affected communities, to generate jobs and livelihood opportunities. Ms Liu Xiaorong was one of the beneficiaries of such post-natural disaster assistance. She lost her husband in the 2008 Sichuan Earthquake in China. Her house was destroyed as well as the family's small lodging business. "After I buried my husband, I felt that there was no longer meaning in my life," she recalled. "For months afterwards, I neither wanted nor had the ability to do anything." But Ms Liu had a college-age son to support. She started doing sewing jobs and finally managed to borrow some money from friends and relatives to buy a small car and started working as a taxi driver. But driving an unregistered taxi was only a stop-gap measure.

Ms Liu signed up for training offered by the ILO's Livelihood Recovery Project. She learned management skills including how to calculate costs, lower expenses, and make a profit. After completing the course she borrowed some more money to open a restaurant.

"Without the training I would not have been able to run a restaurant," she said. At the end of the first month the restaurant was not profitable but gradually things improved and Ms Liu's business is now doing so well that she can support her son's university tuition.

For many disaster victims, left devastated, homeless and jobless, finding decent work is not only a matter of rebuilding their livelihoods but also regaining their dignity. One displaced survivor of the Great East Japan Earthquake in March 2011 said that he would go insane without having any work to do.

Allowing people to regain their self-reliance and dignity is a vital part of sustainable social reconstruction, Mrs Yamamoto believes. "After disasters international assistance should aim to not only rebuild societies, but build them back better. That requires decent work--work that is productive and comes with conditions of freedom, equity, with security and human dignity," she said.

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