

# THE SOCIAL LIFE OF COMMUNITY-BASED DISASTER RISK REDUCTION: ORIGINS, POLITICS AND FRAMING

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## **Abstract**

Behind a shared community-based disaster risk management (CBDRM) language, I observe differing ways in which people 'do CBDRM'. CBDRM has become a cover term for several approaches that emerged from different traditions. In this paper I review the origins of several CBDRM traditions since the 1970s. I focus on a home-grown CBDRM-tradition from the Philippines, which takes a clear political perspective, and the CBDRM-tradition promoted by the international community expressed in the Hyogo Framework for Action. The purpose of this paper is to uncover how CBDRM is framed in the different traditions and the worldviews behind them. Differing worldviews attach differing meaning and goals to CBDRM. This article makes a plea for a more explicit recognition of the contested nature of CBDRM.

This paper is part of a series on "Making communities safer: challenges of creating effective disaster risk reduction partnerships". The series arose out of a panel on this theme at the World Conference of Humanitarian Studies in Groningen, The Netherlands, 4-7 February 2009 ([www.humanitarianstudies2009.org](http://www.humanitarianstudies2009.org)). It includes papers given at the panel and those of others who submitted papers but were unable to attend the conference.

*“Those who put victims in the limelight without considering the political context,  
could do more harm than good”*

Achterhuis, 1999

## **Introduction**

Towards the end of the 1990s, policy-makers and practitioners rapidly adopted Community-Based Disaster Risk Management (CBDRM)<sup>1</sup> as an alternative to top-down approaches in disaster management. CBDRM approaches aim – at least in policy documents – to build resilient communities. To achieve this, CBDRM raises people’s awareness of disaster risks, using intimate local knowledge, and recognizes pre-existing local capacities and institutions. Hereby, policy-makers and practitioners assume that CBDRM approaches improve the position of impoverished, vulnerable, disaster-affected people by addressing the root causes of their vulnerability, and by recognizing their fundamental right to participate in decisions that impact on their lives (UN-ISDR, 2005; ADPC, 2004; Li, 2002). This paper challenges this assumption by showing that aid agencies do not directly respond to local people’s needs. Instead the nature of CBDRM responses is shaped through the worldviews of the intervening agencies and implicit interpretations of disaster situations, making it difficult to reach the most vulnerable people in communities.

Behind a shared CBDRM language, I observe differing ways in which organizations ‘do CBDRM’. These variations arise because people have divergent worldviews, values, and experienced histories of their environment. People interpret and construct ‘meaning’ to these events and experiences. For some, CBDRM means developing technical solutions to improve early warning systems and cyclone shelters at local level, while for others CBDRM is a governance and human rights issue (Wisner & Walker, 2005). Some consider CBDRM as an approach to advance local level decision-making and partnering with local government, while others interpret CBDRM as a strategy to transform power relations, and to challenge policies and ideologies responsible for generating vulnerability locally. Further, different interpretations exist of how grassroots people could best participate in CBDRM projects: some agencies ask people to contribute their - often limited - resources, emphasizing local ownership, while others promote the kind of participation which is empowering and aimed to transform society (Pretty, 1995; Pelling, 2007).

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<sup>1</sup> In other disciplines like forestry, natural resource management, coastal resource management and in the health sector, a longer tradition of community-based approaches exists. I reviewed literature from these disciplines as well, in so far as it showed parallels with discussions on CBDRM.

CBDRM has become a cover term for several approaches that emerged from different traditions. In this paper I review the origins of CBDRM since the 1970s. I will do this through the life histories of people who documented their views on disasters, and wrote about CBDRM in their specific local contexts. I will further use my own experiences with some of these people whom I worked with, and who were part of the history of CBDRM in Asia. Their views are closely related to problems of underdevelopment, to processes of marginalization and to failing government responses to recurrent disasters. These home-grown CBDRM-traditions have a clear political perspective. Since the end of the International Decade of Natural Disaster Reduction, the international community has been promoting a CBDRM tradition which diverted its approach towards Multi-Stakeholder Platforms to enhance public participation and institutional reform in the field of disaster risk reduction. This approach – laid down in the Hyogo Framework of Action (HFA) - supposes a harmonious interaction between the government at different levels and civil society actors: the government shapes policies and institutional frameworks, while civil society actors play a complementary role in supporting vulnerable communities. This approach, however, raises questions about mutual trust, the nature of participation of grassroots people, about representation and power dynamics (Warner, et al, 2002). These CBDRM traditions share a common language, but attach differing meanings to CBDRM pursuing different goals and strategies, which causes confusion, misunderstanding, and troubled partnerships when these traditions meet in practice. This paper stresses that, conceptually, CBDRM is a contested approach, and makes a plea for a more explicit recognition of the contested nature of CBDRM policies and realities.

### **Framing CBDRM narratives**

The purpose of this paper is to make the implicit interpretations and worldviews behind the various CBDRM traditions visible by reviewing how people weave their CBDRM narratives from scientific knowledge, political interest, and cultural patterns into policy documents. I use the concept of ‘frames’ which refers to how *“groups.....portray issues deliberately in certain ways so as to win the allegiance of large numbers of people who agree (tacitly)”* (Schön & Rein, 1994: 32). Frames serve to persuade people and to justify policies and actions. Within society, groups construct their specific ‘frames’ on how they view the world, e.g. how they view CBDRM.

Within a frame, people use language to give meaning to their experiences. A frame becomes a “structure of expectation”, or a body of knowledge that is evoked in order to provide a logical basis for the understanding of an utterance (Lakoff, 2000: 47). Within the frame things are normal, predictable, orderly, according to what you expect and do not require an explanation. When *“we identify a frame and decide what is right and appropriate within it, we become*

wedded to it: it becomes extremely difficult to change our expectations” (Lakoff, 2000: 48). To discover that you don’t share a common viewpoint with somebody else causes misunderstanding, and even distress, as in the scene from *Through the Looking Glass* (Carroll, 1998:178-183): Alice has found herself in a shop tended by a Sheep. She can’t make up her mind what she wants to buy. Suddenly, the shop turns into a river, on which Alice and the Sheep are rowing. At a certain moment Alice commits a rowing error, and she finds herself in the water. The Sheep comments, “That was a nice crab you caught”. Alice responds: “Are there many crabs here?” meaning the river where she is still rowing. The Sheep replies: “Crabs and all sort of things... make up you mind...what do you want to buy”? “To Buy!” Alice echoed in a tone that was half astonished and half frightened” as she recognizes the sudden shift of frame back to the Sheep’s shop. This frame-shifting distorts communication, causes confusion and even agony. I refer to these kind of distortions when the home-grown CBDRM tradition interacts with the one promoted by the international community: they act as if they share a common CBDRM language and definitions, but they attach radically different meanings to the reasons *why* communities are unsafe and vulnerable, and believe therefore in different strategies and goals of CBDRM.

Why then do people act as if they share a common language? There is a difference between what is written in policy documents and what people do in practice: *the espoused theory* and *theory-in-use* (Argyris and Schön, 1978). The espoused theory consists of *the words used to express what we think we do and why, or what we like others to think we do* (Guijt, 2008: 109). The theory-in-use defines what people actually do, and this may be different or not from the espoused theory. In the espoused theory, people use ‘frames’ strategically to deal with actors who do not necessarily share the same values or views, but with whom it is crucial to maintain relationships. NGO staff, for example, use multiple ‘frames’ to find legitimation in order to survive (Hilhorst, 2003). When writing proposals to donors, NGO staff use language from disaster management literature to access funds. They use humanitarian language vis-a-vis government forces to create access to disaster and conflict affected communities. They use ‘social movement language’ to convince their network members that they still adhere to specific principles and strategies. Organizations seem to strategically manoeuvre between multiple realities to maintain relationships (Colebatch, 2002; Hilhorst, 2003; Mosse, 2005, 103). They continuously frame and re-frame CBDRM-narratives to adapt to these changing realities.

### **Methodology: about personal constructs, and the social life of CBDRM**

My interest in the question of why there are different interpretations of CBDRM, despite the shared language in implementing agencies’ policy documents, began when I started to move

between different CBDRM worlds. From 1993 till 2001, I worked for a Philippine NGO network, the Citizens' Disaster Response Network (CDRN), which views disasters as an opportunity for social change. It attaches a political meaning to CBDRM. CDRN makes grassroots people aware of the injustices in Philippine society, explaining why they are vulnerable to disasters. From an insider's position, I was able to gain insight into how CDRN constructed its CBDRM narrative, and I was part of its everyday practices at grassroots level. In 1999 – while still working with CDRN – I gained an outsider-position as CBDRM consultant in other Asian countries. This provided me with the opportunity to take a step back from CDRN, and to critically reflect on its practices. From a real CBDRM-believer, I became more critical, allowing me to better identify the challenges of CBDRM. I got involved in the development and facilitation of CBDRM courses at the Asian Disaster Preparedness Center (ADPC) in Bangkok, together with the former director of CDRC, Zen Delica-Willison. Most participants came from international NGOs and Asian national governments, and although we tried hard to bring in a critical and political perspective, we realized that our message was received with ambiguity. The participants' worldviews, experiences and background often differed from those of the course fellows, and participants interpreted CBDRM in various ways. I had a chance to observe how a few organizations whose staff attended ADPC's courses put CBDRM into practice in their home countries, and how the political approach turned invisible. At this point in time I realized for the first time that people use the same CBDRM-language but mean different things. These people analyze causes of disasters in terms of immediate and structural factors, but in their practice they view disasters mainly as external events, while largely ignoring the wider context (Ramalingan, *et al.*, 2008: 13). I wished to understand the assumptions and ideas behind these different interpretations, and why the political perspectives, which I appreciated in the CBDRM tradition of CDRN, were absent in the CBDRM traditions promoted by the international community.

To better understand the reasons behind this diversity, I went back to the origins of the various CBDRM traditions. I did this through a *personal constructs* approach (Robson, 2002: 366), by focusing on the people who wrote about CBDRM, and whose views and ideas inspired CDRN to construct its own CBDRM narrative. I used their life histories to understand how they developed their views through their experiences. Not only did their ideas inspire CDRN, but their joint efforts also influenced the content of several UN policy documents on disaster risk reduction, including the Hyogo Framework for Action. In addition to life histories, I used *narrative inquiry methods*. I reviewed policy and workshop documents of organizations which actively promote CBDRM in Asia, such as Duryog Nivaran in South Asia and CDRN, two networks representing what I call 'home-grown' CBDRM traditions. I further analyzed texts produced by the UN-ISDR representing the CBDRM tradition promoted by the international community. Narrative inquiry methods aim to de-construct the various CBDRM narratives: how is CBDRM framed and why? What are the primary features? What are the gaps, ambiguities and

contradictions within these narratives? How one views CBDRM has consequences for CBDRM practice, the kinds of strategy and interventions one selects, and who benefits from risk reduction at the grassroots level and who doesn't. Ultimately I want to concentrate on the political process of how these choices are made and their impact. Mosse (2004:644) refers to this as looking into the 'social life' of projects, organizations and staff, or in this case, the social life of CBDRM.

### **Origins of 'home-grown' CBDRM traditions**

The origin of CBDRM-traditions is, among others, closely related to the different ways of 'seeing' disasters (Bankoff & Hilhorst, forthcoming). For a long time, experts such as meteorologists, seismologists and volcanologists have been 'seeing' disasters as sudden external events caused by nature. Loss of life and the extent of damages are regarded as a function of the magnitude, frequency and intensity of the natural hazard. This view still prevails, explicitly or implicitly acknowledging nature or hazardous events as the cause of disaster occurrence, and has been called *the dominant hazard-focused viewpoint* (Hewitt, 1983). Since the 1970s, this view has received critiques challenging the argument that disasters are natural, and has been the subject of heated debate (O'Keefe *et al.*, 1976, Cuny, 1983, Wijkman & Timberlake, 1984:125, Blaikie *et al.*, 1994, Smith, 1996, Quarantelli, 1998, Pelling and Dill, 2006:4). Phil O'Keefe, Ken Westgate and Ben Wisner, at that time linked as researchers to the Disaster Research Unit of Bradford University, analyzed global disaster statistics from diverse international organizations, government departments, academic institutions and insurance companies, and observed several tendencies. In their article "*Taking the naturalness out of natural disasters*" (1976), they first mentioned the trend of the increase in occurrence of disasters over the period 1947-1970, paralleled by an increasing death toll per disaster. Secondly, they observed that the greatest loss of life per disaster was in developing countries. In their article they explained these observations by viewing disasters as the interface between an extreme physical phenomenon and a vulnerable human population. They attributed the increasing number of disasters to the growing vulnerability of people to extreme physical events, accepting that no major geological and climatological changes took place during that period. To underscore their argument, the authors included a quote from Paul Richards - who was that time working at the Environmental Unit in the International African Institute - which emphasizes the point that the ultimate causes of people's vulnerability.... *may well be traceable to the structural imbalances between rich and poor countries, and we would be right to replace the term natural with the more appropriate term social or political disaster*" (Richards, 1975). This view greatly reflects the experiences of disaster survivors like peasants or the urban poor in Third World countries. It also suited the Philippine context, and "*Taking the naturalness out*

*of natural disasters*” was one of the few scientific sources the founders of CDRC used to construct their CBDRM narrative and legitimize its practice and direction.

Those who actively consider the social-political environment in their disaster management work are mostly people who actually experience or work closely with people living in adverse conditions prone to disasters. These real-life experiences make them realize that disasters are much more related to development - which benefit the rich more than the poor - than to natural factors. One of these people was Frederick Cuny who entered the humanitarian aid business in 1969 through voluntary engineering jobs to help with the airlift of emergency food supplies in Biafra, and in 1971 in East Pakistan (Bangladesh). Subsequently, he witnessed many relief operations and, shocked by the mismanagement and naively conducted food distributions, he was determined to improve the way in which help is offered to people in the middle of a crisis (PBS online). Like Phil O’Keefe, Ken Westgate and Ben Wisner, Cuny stressed in his book *“Disasters and Development”* (1983) that disasters should not be treated as separate events, but that they are linked to poverty and vulnerability. As a consequence he questioned – based on his experienced history - rapid, short-term relief operations, and proposed that emergency response should consider the broader development context by adding disaster prevention strategies. He particularly criticized regimes in Third World countries which perpetuated underdevelopment to maintain the status quo of their privileged class. Dole-out of relief goods after emergencies is a preferred strategy of these governments, since they believe that relief doesn’t really challenge state-society relations. However, disasters and the way relief is handled do impact on state-society relations as noticed by Wijkman from the Swedish Red Cross and Timberlake, an editor from Earthscan, in their book *“Natural Disasters: Acts of God or Acts of Man?”* (1984). They noticed *“the creative side of disasters”* (1984; 125) meaning that disasters can trigger societal change – even beneficial change.

These critics focused on the inadequacy of top-down and short-term relief operations, and emphasized that disasters are linked to problems of underdevelopment, to processes of marginalization and of failing government responses to disasters. *“...Reducing the vulnerability of the poor is a development question, and such question should be answered politically”* (Cuny, 1983: 7). Cuny agreed with this statement, but argued that it is still appropriate to view disasters separately from the wider context, since the political environment is complex with a lot of obstacles to society’s development. I interpret his words to mean that he distinguishes short-term interventions to save lives and relieve immediate suffering, and responses aimed to reduce people’s vulnerability in the long run. Although this distinction is useful for my analysis later on, Cuny viewed ‘interventions’ from the perspective of international aid agencies, and national governments which are assumed to coordinate aid with voluntary agencies at grassroots level. Local communities may perceive this very differently.

Andrew Maskrey was the first person to highlight grassroots efforts in reducing disaster risk from a local perspective in his publication "*Disaster mitigation: a community based approach*" (1989). Maskrey – at that time an urban planner at the National Institute of Urban Development in Lima – started to rethink his understanding of disaster management in the early 1980s, when the Peruvian government asked him to conduct an earthquake risk analysis for the city of Lima (@local.glob, 2006). He discovered that the oldest part of the inner city, built between the 17<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, was most prone to earthquakes. The houses – originally designed for rich households – had gradually been occupied by 20 to 40 poor families. Lack of maintenance and overuse resulted in unsafe housing for the poor. Maskrey realized that disaster mitigation is not just about physical measures, but includes legal measures, proper urban planning and management, and economic interventions. When the earthquake risk assessment task was completed, "*the work got stuck on the shelf [of the Peruvian government] and nothing happened!*". Together with colleagues he decided to create an NGO to work directly with local communities and local authorities. They believed that "*nothing will happen unless people themselves who are actually affected by disasters and who actually suffer, politically start demanding safety and security*" (@local.glob, 2006; 45). The principal message of his book is that disaster risk reduction is not strictly the domain of scientific and technical disciplines – the job of seismologists, meteorologists, engineers or architects – but that disasters are closely linked to development processes, and that grassroots people and local governments have a voice too in reducing disaster risks. In the following years, Maskrey got to know more people in other parts of Latin America from universities, NGOs, local governments and international organizations sharing the same perspective. They thought they could not have any impact unless they linked up with each other. The idea of the *Red de Estudios Sociales en Prevención de Desastres en América Latina* (LA RED) – The Network in short - was born. LA RED aimed to build evidence from local disaster experiences in order to advocate change in (inter)national policies that dealt with relief, preparedness and scientific research. LA RED was officially established in 1992, and has had more global contact since then.

During the 1980s we see the emergence of home-grown CBDRM traditions in disaster-prone countries. In the Philippines, *ad hoc* citizens' support to disaster survivors since the 1970s gave birth to the Citizens' Disaster Response Network (CDRN) in 1985. Ordinary people and disaster survivors criticized government handling of disasters during the Martial Law years of the President Marcos dictatorship. CDRN views disasters as an opportunity for social change, and relief as an entry-point for long-term organizing work. Relief operations are accompanied by awareness-raising activities – through music, songs and theatre - to orient people *why* they are vulnerable to disasters, referring to policies, 'development' projects and dynamics at the global level which interact with the environment. This differs from the CBDRM traditions which



emerged later during the late 1990s which limit awareness-raising to *disaster risks* and *what to do in case of an emergency*. In 1994 the Sri Lanka office of the Intermediate Technology Development Group (ITDG) - now known as Practical Action – initiated a South Asian network of organizations and individuals, called '*Duryog Nivaran*' meaning disaster mitigation. ITDG was inspired by La Red, particularly by ITDG's Peru office where Andrew Maskrey was at that time director. ITDG's Sri Lanka office sought out like-minded organization in South Asia to start the network. The Disaster Mitigation Institute in India – one of the very active organizations in the network - was one of those invited to the founding meeting that shaped the network's agenda. The overall aim of *Duryog Nivaran* is to reduce local communities' susceptibility to disasters and conflict, by promoting an 'alternative perspective' at conceptual, policy and implementation levels of disaster mitigation and development programmes in South Asia (Ariyabandu, 1999, Bhatti, 2006). CDRN, La Red and *Duryog Nivaran* share a common perspective that disasters are a matter of vulnerability; that disasters are linked to processes of underdevelopment; they all critique top-down emergency response which fails to recognize grassroots realities, and stress the importance of recognizing grassroots perceptions and efforts to respond to disasters. They all promote a 'community-based' approach to disaster mitigation.

Despite a shared critical perspective of the dominant hazard-focused viewpoint, they practice differing strategies which stem from the problems and dilemmas identified in the specific context for which each developed an alternative perspective. CDRN has its roots in highly contested state-society relations and is embedded in a broader social movement. Therefore it views disasters as an opportunity to mobilize and empower grassroots communities to not only address people's immediate survival and recovery needs, but to also address the root causes of people's vulnerability by contributing to transforming Philippine society (Heijmans and Victoria, 2001). *Duryog Nivaran* and La Red's focus is slightly different; they frame the problem as a lack of information, experiences and material for drawing up proper policy guidelines, and insufficient research into alternative technologies. They believe that building resilient communities is a matter of participatory development and proactive disaster risk reduction policies of governments and institutional reforms within the prevailing social order. Their ultimate goal is the inclusion of disaster risk reduction interventions in all development policy and planning (Ariyabandu, 1999: 38).

Before I continue the history of CBDRM by entering the International Decade of Natural Disaster Reduction in the 1990s, I will first discuss, in more detail, the roots of the Philippine CBDRM tradition and how its proponents framed their CBDRM-policy. The reason to focus on CDRN, is because I was part of them from 1993 till 2001 and observed – and sometimes contributed to – the process of formulating their CBDRM policy. This policy has certain features which are lacking in the other CBDRM-traditions which are context-specific, and which are

worth mentioning in the light of current debates on “scaling up” CBDRM efforts and building resilient communities. Secondly, representatives from CDRN – together with AIDMI and La Red - influenced policy frameworks proposed by the IDNDR, especially after the mid-term IDNDR conference in Yokohama in 1994. To grasp the compassion of these CBDRM advocates, it is necessary to understand the context from which they come, and why they frame CBDRM in a specific way.

### **CBDRM in the Philippines: historical roots of citizens’ responses to disasters**

The Philippines is one of the world’s most disaster-prone countries: it is located at the centre of typhoon, tectonic and volcanic belts, while people’s vulnerability is compounded by widespread poverty rooted in the country’s socio-economic, political and environmental context (CDRC, 1992, Luna, 2001). According to Bankoff (1999) disaster occurrence in the Philippines has been one of the ordering elements shaping state-society relations over centuries. He argues that the frequency and magnitude of past disasters in the country exacerbated the extreme differences in power and wealth in Philippine society. The majority of poor and marginalized people live at or below subsistence level, and face hardship in recovering from recurrent disasters, adopting coping strategies which often undermine the basis of future livelihoods. They enter the cycle of poverty, a process of increasing vulnerability to future disasters. The elite and powerful few, on the other hand, take advantage of disaster events, diverting relief and reconstruction funds for their own benefit and to consolidate or enhance their financial and political position in society (Bankoff, 1999: 408). The government is further responsible for destructive environmental practices such as deforestation, extracting mineral resources through open-pit-mining and consequent pollution of river basins. These human-induced changes contribute to the increasing number of disasters like landslides and floods, affecting poor and marginalized people. Environmentally irresponsible practices by powerful persons not only contribute to the increasing incidence of floods, landslides and displacement of local communities, but also to maintaining the status quo of huge social inequalities within Philippine society.

Because of these inequalities, the Philippines has a long history of contested state-society relations, with a ‘tradition’ of peasant struggle, revolts, social protests and oppositional politics. The beginnings of a citizenry-based disaster response should be understood within this context of oppositional politics, and can be traced back to the early 1970s when peasant organizations and students took the initiative to render support to peasants affected by floods in Central Luzon. Relief goods were generated among peasants who were not affected by floods and distributed to those who were in need. Students, church-based social action workers and the academic community supported these initiatives which were *ad hoc*, and channeled through so-called People’s Organizations (POs) (Vargas, 1996, Luna, 2001). These are community-based

organizations, and in the Philippine context organized along sectoral lines representing peasants or workers, and later fisherfolk, women, indigenous people or urban poor at the grassroots level.

*Ad hoc* citizens' responses to disaster survivors started at the time when Marcos declared martial law in 1972, and when human rights were increasingly violated, fueling the contradictions within Philippine society (Lubi, 1992). Ordinary people and disaster survivors complained and criticized how the government handled disasters during the Martial Law years. Relief was used to further political agendas and to foster recipients' dependence on a patronage-political system: boxes with relief goods were pasted with labels "*Alay ni* (gift from) *Pres. Ferdinand E. Marcos* even though they were donated by a foreign government as indicated on the other side of the box (Heijmans & Victoria, 2001). Furthermore, government responses were often insufficient, inappropriate, driven by favoritism in selecting beneficiaries (excluding legitimate victims), and lacked coordination resulting in confusion, duplication of services in some areas and gaps in services in other areas. Disaster management had a low priority in the government's budget as most of the budget went to allocations to the military and servicing of foreign debt. Violation of human rights continued. The assassination of Benigno "Ninoy" Aquino, a leading oppositionist, in August 1983 was a trigger to transform a small isolated movement into a massive unified one, including people from all walks of Filipino life.

This process of a growing people's social movement was further 'supported' by a series of severe disasters hitting the country from Luzon to Mindanao: a severe drought affecting the country's agricultural production in 1982-83, followed by six successive killer typhoons in 1984, killing about 2,500 people and rendering more than 280,000 families homeless. In September of the same year Mayon Volcano erupted, affecting more than 35,000 families in Bicol region. The Government's response was negligible, raising the anger of not only the affected population, but also of concerned citizens. Ordinary people had difficulty surviving and recovering from the disasters not just because of damages to properties and livelihoods, but also due to a severe economic crisis – the worst since the Second World War - resulting in a rise in consumer prices of basic goods, and increased unemployment. The disasters fueled people's protests to express their growing discontent with the government, despite the intensified militarization, political arrests and wide-spread human rights violations of Marcos' regime (Heijmans & Victoria, 2001).

Affected peasants and urban poor approached so-called cause-oriented groups composed of the Catholic church, people's organizations, student-unions, and concerned progressive individuals like health workers for assistance. As a result, a "*Support Disaster Victims Campaign*" was launched from October 1984 till July 1985. The aim of this campaign was to mobilize and unite the greatest number of people, particularly in the urban centers and Metro

Manila to generate financial, material, technical and human resources to support the people in disaster affected areas, especially in the rural areas where there was no ready access to basic social services. The positive experience of working together in relief gave birth to the idea of institutionalizing a so-called “citizenry-based and development-oriented” approach to disaster response, in short CBDO-DR. The Citizen’s Disaster Response Network started in 1985 with two NGOs, one in Manila and one in Bicol region. The network expanded to other regions nationwide and was formally launched as the Citizen’s Disaster Response Network in 1989.

### **Social movements, framing collective action and a neutral image**

People’s discontent and grievances alone will not automatically result in mobilizing collective action to challenge authorities (Snow, 2004). Snow argues, that if a social movement should get off the ground, then *“social arrangements that are ordinarily perceived as just and immutable must come to seem unjust and mutable”* (Snow, 2004: 383). CDRC relates to similarly-minded organizations, including grassroots communities through People’s Organizations, referred to as the people’s mass movement. As such CDRC constructed meaning to disaster events and experiences around them in Philippine society aimed at convincing grassroots communities that disasters are not natural, but a matter of vulnerability for which the Philippine government is held responsible. Secondly it had to convince them that they have agency and capacities to change their situation, and show how this could be done through collective action. But equally crucial for CDRC was to create a neutral image because Martial Law had not yet ended. Before going into the details of the collective action framing, I will elaborate on the process constructing a neutral image, and how this changed over time.

### ***Community-based or citizenry-based?***

The CDRC belongs to the so-called progressive NGOs who are affiliated to the broader people’s mass movement. Hilhorst (2003), Constantino-David (1998) and Lubi (1992) all provide a detailed historical analysis of how NGOs and mass organizations developed in the Philippines inspired by the upsurge of liberation movements worldwide as a reaction to failed development strategies. Churches in particular were active in adopting progressive ideas, moving from traditional welfare projects to social action. One of the first NGOs involved in organizing peasant communities, and which took initiatives to support disaster survivors in the early 1970s, was the Philippine Ecumenical Action for Community Empowerment (PEACE). It used its church-network and the organized peasant sector. During the early years of Martial Law, when Marcos closed all ways for legal protest, forcing all legal mass organizations to go underground, only the historically traditional institutions such as the church and trade-unions were allowed some leeway in legal organizing (Lubi, 1992:25). CDRC was formed during Martial Law, and in

order to openly support disaster affected communities, it had to adopt a neutral outlook. That time, the notion “*community-based*” had a political connotation meaning ‘anti-government’. High government officials labeled, and still label, progressive NGOs like CDRC as sympathizers of the revolutionary New People’s Army, giving the military tacit approval to kill the government’s political opponents (Amnesty International, 2006). To reduce the risk of government harassment or of being forced to work underground, the people establishing CDRC favored the notion of ‘*citizenry-based*’ rather than ‘*community-based*’. ‘*Citizenry-based*’ is framed as adhering to moral duty and solidarity among citizens to help each other, recognizing that local people have agency and capacities to deal with crisis and to overcome it. ‘*Citizenry-based*’ further expresses the partnership between the vulnerable and less vulnerable sectors – called the middle forces in the language of the social movement<sup>2</sup>. The less vulnerable sectors are able to contribute resources like finances, leadership, technical skills, intellectual thinking and material resources which are much needed to sustain the social movement to achieve its vision of a just, democratic and peaceful society. This explanation worked and was acceptable for a wide range of outside actors. I valued ‘*citizenry-based*’ as a distinguishing feature compared to other CBDRM-traditions.

By the end of the 1990s, the concept of CBDRM had become a generally accepted approach by the international community, and the previous political implication of labeling ‘community-based’ as ‘anti-government’ was no longer the case. Grassroots people and community organizers increasingly critiqued the notion of ‘*citizenry*’. They argued that when analyzing local contexts, the notion of ‘citizen’ can refer to anybody, masking power differentials. In the field, community organizers had to solve this internal contradiction. They understood the meaning of ‘*community-based*’ as putting premium on organizing the marginalized grassroots, since this refers to their day-to-day work. This interpretation stems from the tradition of the social movement to start names of practices alternative to those of the government with “Community-Based”, like Community-Based Health Programs, and Community-Based Coastal Resource Management , and the meaning attached to it refers to self-reliance, building local capacities and recognizing grassroots perspectives. Local people know what CBHP means, and can therefore easily relate to CBDM. In 2001, CDRN decided to change the CBDO-DR-label into Community-Based Disaster Management (CBDM).

Whether labeled ‘*citizenry-based*’ or ‘*community-based*’ the nature of the approach didn’t change. ‘*Community-based*’ refers to the agency and capacities of the most needy, deprived,

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<sup>2</sup> By the less-vulnerable sector is meant social workers, health and medical workers, food and drug sector, church-related organizations, teachers and students, scientists, technologists, media, and even managers and entrepreneurs.

least served and poorest segments in a village, whose socio-economic conditions make them highly vulnerable to hazards and disasters. It is also framed in a slogan as “Helping people helping themselves” referring to a traditional Filipino spirit of community cooperation called *bayanihan*. Community here does not necessarily refer to the whole village, or a village administration unit. It rather refers to a particular group of people facing the difficulty of surviving in adversity, and who find themselves committed to contributing time and resources to change societal structures locally and beyond their community.

### ***Framing and re-framing CBDO-DR policy in a dynamic environment***

As said earlier, people weave their CBDRM narratives from different sources. They assemble and collate slices of observed, experienced and documented “realities” (Snow, 2004: 400). The CBDO-DR policy of CDRC is a blend of scientific knowledge, critical disaster research, cultural traditions, and the different ‘master-frames’ used by the social movement to mobilize a broad mass base. The latter refers to the values and beliefs of environmentalists, anti-imperialists, peasants, workers, indigenous people, and other sectoral groups. CDRC framed and re-framed its CBDO-DR policy strategically to manage relationships with different actors. During the seven years I worked within the Field Operations Department of CDRC, I noticed the shifts between frames during department meetings, planning and year-end assessment meetings and during field visits. We talked ‘social movement’ language when internally discussing project work about the dilemma between prioritizing organizing work for social change vis-a-vis improving people’s livelihoods through social and economic projects. When writing proposals, we used language from disaster management literature and science, which resonates with CDRC’s political view on ‘disaster’ and ‘vulnerability’ and which provides CDRC with a distinctive identity and mandate to the network, and a framework to communicate with donors. Humanitarian language is used tactically vis-à-vis government forces and the military to create access to disaster and conflict affected communities, The pulling and hauling between these multiple realities – common in all organizations – often results in discomfort, and in contradictions between people’s ideological beliefs and their day-to-day practices.

It took CDRC several years to frame and re-frame its CBDO-DR policy. In 1993 CDRC produced its first policy document to present its CBDO-DR policy to the wider public (CDRC, 1993). Over time, CDRC adjusted this policy document due to a changing context, or created new frames to enhance the mobilization of resources. Despite these changes, CDRC sticks to several beliefs and values, which are highlighted in six distinguishing features (CDRC, 2001; Heijmans & Victoria, 2001; CDRC 1999):

- (1) it views disasters as a question of people’s vulnerability;
- (2) it recognizes people’s existing capacities and aims to strengthen these capacities;

- (3) it seeks to contribute to addressing the roots of people's vulnerability and to transforming or removing the structures generating inequity and underdevelopment;
- (4) it considers people's participation essential to disaster management;
- (5) it puts a premium on the organizational capacity of the vulnerable sectors through the formation of grassroots disaster response organizations;
- (6) it mobilizes the less vulnerable sectors into partnership with the vulnerable sectors in disaster management and development work.

The first four features resemble the CBDRM-language of the Hyogo Framework of Action. However, underneath this language, you will find a blend of different values, views and experienced realities, which are specific to the Philippine context, and will lose their meaning when transplanted to other places.

***Feature 1: views disasters as a question of people's vulnerability***

When I started working with CDRC in 1993, the coordinator of the Field Operations Department gave me the following publications, and asked me to read them in order to understand CDRC's view on disasters and the purpose of its operations: "*Taking the naturalness out of natural disasters*" (O'Keefe et al., 1976), "*Disasters and Development*" (Cuny, 1983), "*Natural disasters: Acts of God or acts of Man?*" (Wijkman & Timberlake, 1984) and *Rising from the Ashes* (Anderson & Woodrow, 1989)<sup>3</sup>. The authors' views and experiences suited the Philippine context and matched the values and beliefs of CDRC. These sources were very important in framing CDRC's alternative agenda using disaster studies language to legitimize CDRC's practice and directions to both the social movement and foreign donors. This literature shows how people are changing their environment, making people more vulnerable to disasters, and argues that short-term disaster relief can't provide the adequate answer. Instead, the authors argue that disaster assistance has to be a development process that improves the conditions of both the natural environment and many millions of poor people. In Wijkman and Timberlake's book, CDRC reads further that disasters can actually become a 'vehicle for change' and that relief and development should be linked to long-term programming.

CDRC blended disaster science with social movement frames emphasizing that disaster response should be people-based and people-oriented, critiquing the Philippine government and its politics. In 1986, CDRC published "*The Philippine Disaster Situation: a Question of Vulnerability*" which was largely inspired by the political ideas of the people's mass movement and the previously mentioned literature. This document explains why disaster response goes

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<sup>3</sup> The literature arrived at CDRC through several staff who attended disaster management courses at ADPC in Bangkok.

*beyond the emergency relief assistance....The task of preparing people for disaster events implies and includes the effort of shifting the locus of social power into the hands of the majority for their own benefit – in this case the marginalized of Philippine society (CDRC, 1986:2).* The document provides a so-called ‘National Situationer’ explaining why Filipinos are so vulnerable to disasters, substantiated by government’s statistics and reports. This national situationer is regularly updated and still serves as a means to raise the awareness of communities at risk to convince them that disasters are not natural, but due to injustices in Philippine society, and that they themselves can change that. Raising people’s awareness of disasters means orienting people *why* they are vulnerable to disasters, referring to policies, ‘development’ projects and dynamics at the global level which interact with their local environment. This differs from the CBDRM traditions which emerged later during the late 1990s which limit awareness-raising to *disaster risks and what to do in case of an emergency.*

In the mid-1990s, CDRC included ‘development-induced disasters’ in its definition of ‘disaster’ giving it the term *“development aggression”* which was already used during Marcos’ time by progressive NGOs (Lubi, 1992). During Fidel Ramos’ presidency (1992 - 1998) development projects resulted in increasing numbers of displaced communities (due to mining operations, construction of power plants and hydro-electric dam projects, plantations, oil exploration, demolition of urban slum areas for shopping centers and infrastructure, etc). Local people perceive ‘development aggression’ as worse than typhoons or floods, since they lose not only crops or livestock but their homes, land, livelihoods, and it further negatively affects their identity and roots (Heijmans, 2004). Ramos’ policy of liberalization, and economic reforms like privatization further marginalized the already vulnerable majority of the Philippine population. During this period too the nature of the government’s warfare changed, particularly in Mindanao, using aircraft for bombing, causing refugees to seek protection in urban areas and along highways, since forests no longer provided protection. To change or oppose these policies and operations, the *“development aggression”* frame generated a broader mass base ranging from human rights activists to environmentalists, lawyers, economic experts, students, and grassroots people who were directly affected. In this way CDRC and its members could become more effective in advocacy and lobby at the national level.

*“Vulnerability”* is the key-concept of CDRC, and borrowed its definition from Anderson and Woodrow’s *“Rising from the Ashes: Development Strategies in Times of Disasters”* (1989). CDRC defines vulnerability as long-term factors and conditions adversely affecting the ability of a community or society to respond, to cope with or to recover from the damaging effects of the occurrence of hazards or disaster events. CDRC uses the term *“vulnerability”* to make grassroots communities understand the Philippine disaster situation and the reasons why they are vulnerable, using methods for critical consciousness raising, which look like the Pressure



and Release model developed by Blaikie *et al.* (1994). Vulnerability refers to multiple interdependent *processes* interacting between global and local level generating adverse and unsafe conditions at the community level for the poorest segments in society (Hewitt, 1998; Wisner *et al.*, 2004). Hence, vulnerability to disasters is related to location and powerlessness.

***Feature 2: recognizes people's existing capacities and aims to strengthen these capacities***

Despite people's vulnerabilities, the history of CDRC proves that people still have capacities and are not helpless in times of disasters. CDRC finds this confirmed in the literature of Cuny (1983) and Anderson (1989). CDRC particularly stresses here Filipino values like family and community cooperation, the *damayan* and *bayanihan* spirit. Also being "*madiskarte*" (resourceful) coupled with Filipino wit and humor enables Filipinos to deal with hardship (Heijmans & Victoria, 2001). These capacities mainly refer to social and motivational resources people have, and it is particularly these two dimensions of capacity which are highlighted in CDRC's practice. There are several arguments for this. In a context of recurrent and increasingly damaging disasters, physical and material vulnerabilities presently far outweigh capacities, and it is more viable and durable to strengthen people's organizational and motivational resources. Skills, knowledge, positive attitudes and beliefs are assets that stay with people, regardless displacement, can be shared, transferred, and are believed by CDRC to reduce grassroots vulnerabilities in the long run and are instrumental in accumulating material capacities. Interventions to strengthen organizational and motivational capacities are closely linked to features 3 and 5. They deal with leadership development, negotiation skills, speaking in public, awareness raising on human rights and paralegal training, and are part of the organizing work to strengthen the people's mass movement. A second argument is that a grassroots orientation allows CDRC to define disasters from a people's perspective which differs from how outsiders and experts define disasters, and people's vulnerability.

***Feature 3: seeks to contribute to addressing the roots of people's vulnerability***

Initially CDRC promoted the disaster cycle model as being a developmental framework. In the 1980s most aid agencies put emphasis on relief while the disaster cycle showed a more comprehensive set of responses and included preparedness and mitigation. Staff realized however, that this model still focuses on the hazard and disaster event, and not explicitly on addressing people's vulnerability. Additionally, in a disaster context of recurring hazards like the Philippines, the phases of the cycle overlap: post-disaster response is at the same time pre-disaster assistance, causing rehabilitation, mitigation and preparedness to become integrated with the aim of reducing disaster vulnerability. The work of Anderson and Woodrow (1989) facilitated the conceptual thinking of CDRC to view disaster response as a long-term *process of community capacity building*. CDRC acknowledges that community capacity building can not be achieved through one or two 'projects', but is a series of interventions which link grassroots

actors to macro-level institutions as a precondition to addressing the root causes of vulnerability. This is not a linear process, but one with opportunities and set-backs. CDRC does however, distinguish short-term interventions to save lives and to relieve immediate suffering, and responses aimed to reduce people's vulnerability in the long run. Relief and disaster preparedness are entry-points for long-term capacity building and not one-time events. According to Cuny, it is appropriate to provide relief and invest in disaster preparedness measures, because the political environment is complex with a lot of obstacles to address the roots of people's vulnerability. However, CDRC poses strongly that this shouldn't become an excuse for doing only short-term interventions at community-level, losing sight of problems requiring long-term efforts. CDRC integrates disaster vulnerability reduction into a broader agenda to transform the socio-economic and political roots of people's marginalization on one hand, and of irresponsible depletion of natural resources on the other hand. By addressing the root causes of vulnerability, CDRC – jointly with other issue-based organizations and groups - hopes to achieve social equality, justice, peace and responsible governance.

***Feature 4: considers people's participation essential to disaster management***

Central in this long-term development perspective is people's empowerment. CDRC emphasizes that people's participation is not limited to the process of consultation in coming out with appropriate interventions from data gathering, situational analysis, identification of interventions, implementation and assessment. These activities are embedded in a long term process of conscientisation and learning, of strengthening organizational and social capacities, of developing leadership competencies, and developing people's knowledge, potential and confidence. In this way vulnerable groups will be able to challenge policies and decisions taken by authorities which negatively impact their lives. This is given higher priority than extractive forms of participation like data gathering and getting access to local, indigenous knowledge which is useful mainly for outsiders. In line with Maskrey, CDRC argues that disaster management is not the sole domain of experts and scientists, but that grassroots people play a major role too. Particularly in demanding 'safety' and 'protection'. People affected by disasters are not passive victims or recipients of aid, but powerful claimants with rights (Heijmans, 2004). CDRC further recognizes that villages are socially heterogeneous. Therefore a community organizer must spend ample time to integrate into a community and meet people, to get to know who is who, the problems in the community, who are the local elite, who the most marginalized, and who has potential to become leaders of a People's Organization? This process of social analysis is biased towards deprived groups in the community, and the resulting interventions may exclude local elites in terms of benefitting from it. Power plays are acknowledged to be part of reality and discussed, and where possible dealt with properly to reach the most marginalized groups.

***Feature 5: puts a premium on the organizational capacity of the vulnerable sectors through the formation of grassroots disaster response organizations***

This feature distinguishes CDRC from most current CBDRM practices in that it views disasters not only as a matter of vulnerability, but also *as an opportunity for political organizing*. Disasters serve as a magnifying glass for development that went wrong. With the Philippines experiencing recurrent disasters and mounting vulnerability due to a government's development framework being defined by a privileged minority, relief was viewed as an entry-point to organize disaster affected communities for social change (CDRC, 1986). This means that addressing the immediate suffering of disaster survivors is not an end in itself, but that it regards as the most important task to assist grassroots marginalized Filipino people in identifying and addressing the root causes of their vulnerability. This requires a long-term process which goes beyond the artificial boundaries of isolated short-term CBDRM-projects, and beyond a focus on natural hazards. While the work of Anderson and Woodrow (1989) offered a "disaster science frame" for addressing the root causes of disaster vulnerability (feature 3), CDRC links the grassroots disaster response organizations' frame to the language of the social movement. Grassroots disaster response organizations are functional in disaster preparedness, but additionally in enhancing *collective bargaining capability* to reduce people's vulnerability. Community organizing is meant to enhance representation of vulnerable groups beyond community level, *and* to serve as a mass base which can be mobilized for collective action. These grassroots organizations link up with each other enabling communities to raise common issues beyond community-level. CDRN's mitigation measures are mostly non-physical in nature, strengthening the social and organizational capacities of people at risk (Victoria, 2001).

***Feature 6: mobilizes the less vulnerable sectors into partnership with the vulnerable sectors in disaster management and development work***

While the most vulnerable people are the main actors in CBDRM, CDRC considers the support of and partnership with less vulnerable sectors as an essential feature of sustaining and scaling up CBDRM efforts. The less vulnerable sector extends assistance to disaster survivors, and manages volunteer groups - the 'core' of the less vulnerable sector - fulfilling tasks to sustain and improve voluntary services during and beyond emergency periods (CDRC, 1987; Dulce, 2003: 111). In this way, CDRN<sup>4</sup> can be viewed as a network of networks, which despite the limited number of regular staff, is able to conduct large operations and deliver continuing support to communities and people's organizations. Organized disaster affected communities

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<sup>4</sup> CDRC has an average of about 20 paid staff members, while the Regional Centers have between 4 to 10 paid staff each.

are not isolated entities, but linked to institutional mechanisms created beyond community level, both horizontally and vertically, which facilitate raising grassroots voices and entering the political arena to demand safety and protection, although with varying success.

In summary, CDRN's roots grew during a period of social protests, recurrent disasters, and mounting vulnerability as a critique of the Philippine Government's disaster framework. This experience largely determined why CDRN views disasters as a matter of vulnerability, as the outcome of bad governance, and therefore as a window of opportunity for political organizing, for demanding safety and protection in the broad sense. Over more than 20 years, CDRN has kept on analyzing and adapting its interpretations and models to a changing social and political environment. Through its regional networks CDRN has the flexibility to analyze people's vulnerability and capacities by linking macro policies and processes to grassroots realities. This results in a diversity of regional 'translations' of CBDO-DR policy framed by CDRC. What works in Mindanao for internal refugees may not be of priority for lahar-affected communities in Central Luzon. CBDO-DR practice is very contextual to be effective, and therefore its outcomes are difficult to replicate in other localities. What they have in common though is a shared analysis and vision, and crucially a shared network which can mobilize collective action to "scale up" local initiatives.

### **Risk or vulnerability reduction?**

CDRC does not use 'risk' language, deliberately. While vulnerability is the product of *past* political, economic and social processes, risk is a concept which links the present with the uncertain future. When reviewing the glossary of handbooks of humanitarian aid agencies, risk is mostly defined as the "probability" of a disaster occurring, resulting in a particular level of loss. Risk is here objectively measured using statistical formulas (considering intensity, frequency, related damage, etc. of a particular hazard), translating 'uncertainties' into 'probabilities' (Althaus, 2005). In this definition, *the sources of risk are placed outside society "in the environment" as presumed accidental unscheduled forces that "erupt" within* (Hewitt, 1998, pp78). This risk definition is deeply rooted in the technocratic and scientific view of disasters, blaming nature and hazards as the cause of people's vulnerability, which fluctuates according to the intensity, magnitude and duration of external events (Anderson, 1995). As a consequence, 'risk reduction' is mainly dealt with in aspects that are susceptible to technical solutions (Cannon, 2000) while the social, economic and political origins of disaster vulnerability are ignored (Bender, 1999; Blaikie et al, 1994). And this is the reason why CDRC doesn't favour this notion of 'risk' and prefers to focus on *vulnerability* reduction in its most holistic meaning.

## **Brief history of UN-led disaster risk reduction policy**

While Andrew Maskrey published his book on CBDM, and while in the Philippines CDRC was institutionalized, the UN General Assembly took the initiative in 1987 for the International Decade for Natural Disaster Reduction (IDNDR) from 1989 to 1999. The basic idea behind the IDNDR was the unacceptable rising levels of losses due to disasters on one hand, and the existence, on the other hand, of a wealth of scientific and engineering know-how which could be effectively used to reduce losses resulting from disasters. Initially, governments promoted a strictly technocratic and scientific approach to reduce losses, while the mid-decade IDNDR conference in 1994 in Yokohama, put socio-economic aspects as components of effective disaster prevention into perspective (IDNDR, 1999). It was recognized by the participants, mainly from governments and the scientific community, that social factors like cultural traditions, religion, economic standing and trust in political accountability are important factors as well, and should be recognized when reducing social vulnerability. The ability to do this requires knowledge and understanding of local conditions, which can - in most cases – only be provided by local actors referring to non-governmental organizations and the participation of local communities (IDNDR, 1994; Wisner *et al.*, 2004). Hence the Mid-term Review in Yokohama recommended to UN-member states to develop National Platforms to adjust the general disaster risk reduction objectives to local conditions. Since the end of 1990s the international community has started to promote community-based approaches as a complementary strategy to national and international efforts to reduce risks. However, the meaning governments attach to community-based approaches rather refers to making disaster response efficient than to genuinely addressing social injustices underlying people's vulnerabilities (Warner *et al.*, 2002).

Representatives from La Red, AIDMI and CDRC attended UN-conferences during the IDNDR and joined the group of critical and concerned observers at that time. Initially they felt marginalized, since the 1994 Yokohama conference was not designed to have their inputs. Several representatives of NGOs from different continents met in one corner to discuss how their voice could be heard by a wider audience. Their shared aim was to change the dominant technocratic disaster management framework promoted by the IDNDR (Bhatt, 2007: 5; Maskrey, 2006; Davies and Myers, 1994). They decided to form the Global Forum of NGOs for Disaster Reduction (GFNDR) to share experiences, and to promote the agenda of progressive disaster risk reduction through training and local and international advocacy work, choosing Zenaida Delica, director of CDRC, as president (Shaw, 2003, Delica-Willison, 2007). Unfortunately, the Global Forum ceased to exist after having participated in the closing meeting of the IDNDR in 1999. The GFNDR was born out of frustration with the UN-meetings, and the main reason why it ceased was that such global initiative requires intensive preparations and thoughts about purpose, strategy, structure, management and finance. The GFNDR felt there was a lack of

facilitation from the IDNDR secretariat to support civil society actors to participate in UN-conferences, and therefore questioned IDNDR's commitment to considering local agendas (Delica-Willison, 2006, 2007). However, La Red, Duryog Nivaran and CDRN continued voicing their alternative disaster management agenda at subsequent disaster risk reduction conferences, as well as through ADPC and various UN institutions where some of their members found positions later on.

After the IDNDR, the UN General Assembly decided to continue its activities in disaster reduction and established the Inter-Agency Secretariat of the International Strategy for Disaster Reduction (ISDR). The Secretariat's mandate is to engage with as many different actors as possible, and as such it encourages an open debate, allowing different views on disaster management within the UN-system (Christoplos, *et al.*, 2005). Civil society actors from disaster-affected countries in particular perceive the secretariat as an ally in advocating CBDRM approaches within the UN-system and in reforming traditional disaster management structures. In the process to prepare for the World Conference on Disaster Reduction (WCDR) in Kobe in 2005, the secretariat collected comments from civil society actors on the WCDR draft programme outcomes. Some of them are integrated in the official HFA declaration, adopted by 168 governments.

Since the start of the IDNDR, governments have met every five years to discuss strategies and progress made to respond effectively to disasters. The HFA document should be interpreted as part of this process, and builds on previous documents like *Strategy for a safer world in the 21<sup>st</sup> century* (IDNDR, 1999) and *Living with Risk: a global review of disaster reduction initiatives* (UNISDR, 2004). Coming from governments' predominant practice of top-down reactive emergency responses, the focus – as presented in the HFA document - shifted towards disaster preparedness, which is a positive development in reducing, at least, people's *physical* vulnerability. The HFA reflects a growing coherence in ideas and views - at least at policy level. Civil society actors like Bhatt (2007) argue, however, that the HFA is still a top-down, UN and donor-driven process, and although many civil society actors are currently involved and consulted, "*the process is still decided at the top, not according to local agendas*" (Bhatt, 2007: 5). He refers to realities, where state-civil society relations in the context of disaster risk reduction are ambiguous and complex, and vary from contested to cooperative relationships (Wisner & Haghebaert, 2006: 2). I want to stress here again that policy on disaster risk reduction rather functions to mobilize and maintain political support – to legitimize policy – than to orient practice (Mosse, 2004: 648). This applies both to States and civil society actors. Therefore, I look at the HFA as an interactive process – a process of pulling and hauling between CBDRM advocates and resistant members within the UN-family.

## **The social life of CBDRM: diversity in meaning and perspectives of actors**

The HFA is a negotiated document, a compromise on numerous issues. Bisiaux *et al.* (2005) provide insight into the various debates and views during the WCDR. The cluster panel on reducing underlying risk factors, for instance – in which CBDRM advocates participated – highlighted the challenge of a lack of common terminology and of differing frames, which hampers creating effective partnerships in disaster risk reduction. By looking into the backstage dynamics and negotiations among various actors leading to the HFA, and through narrative inquiry of policy documents, I will analyze what meaning governments attach to CBDRM and its goals. Here I focus on the various concepts which make up CBDRM like ‘disaster’, ‘community’, ‘participation’, ‘vulnerability’, ‘risk’, and ‘partnerships’. Till now CBDRM is not yet fully incorporated in the UN policy on disaster risk reduction. By establishing what is in the texts and what is not, what is vague and what is clear, we can find who is in and who is out (Fairclough, 2003, Lakoff, 2000).

### ***Disasters as external events***

In Resolution 1 of the HFA, the governments state that *“We are convinced that disasters seriously undermine the results of development investments in a very short time, and therefore, remain a major impediment to sustainable development and poverty eradication”* (UNISDR, 2005: p. 3). Governments view disasters as an interruption of development, of normalcy. In their view disasters are external events. Compared to the IDNDR, disasters are not necessarily ‘natural’ anymore. During the WCDR, participants debated about the ‘naturalness’ of disasters and whether the framework should include natural hazards only, or those induced by human processes as well. The final document definitions and scope refer to both types of hazards, although they are not regarded as political events.

The HFA frames the problem of disasters in terms of losses due to a lack of disaster risk awareness, and more implicitly the lack of legislation and poor coordination between different actors at various levels in society. Since solutions and strategies flow from a problem definition, the HFA proposes five priority areas to substantially reduce disaster losses (UNISDR, 2005, p. 11-18):

- (1) Ensure that DRR is a national and a local priority with a strong institutional basis for implementation;
- (2) Identify, assess and monitor disaster risks and enhance early warning;
- (3) Use knowledge, innovation and education to build a culture of safety and resilience at all levels;
- (4) Reduce the underlying risk factors;
- (5) Strengthen disaster preparedness for effective response at all levels.

### ***Grassroots people as 'proper beneficiaries'***

How governments view grassroots people, their communities, and what is expected from them is not univocally formulated in sequential policy documents. 'Community' is defined as "A social group which has a number of things in common such as shared experience, locality, culture, heritage and social interests (UNISDR, 2004: 177). "Politics and financial disparities exist in most villages and neighbourhoods so, it becomes important to identify shared values and concerns" (UNISDR, 2004: 186). These quotes imply that governments focus their attention on 'the common good'. Emphasizing shared values, community cohesion and common interests is functional for mobilizing purposes, and leads to an apolitical formulation of community problems (Pelling, 2007: 378). But who are then mobilized? Not all community members have equal access to community institutions and resources. Particular subgroups like landless workers, migrants, women, or minority ethnic groups have distinct priorities or competing interests, which tend to be subsumed by decision-making processes that are 'consensus-based' and framed as serving 'the common good'. The ones mobilized for decision-making are usually prominent community people like local leaders, local elites and their kinship networks.

The *Living with Risk* publication further mentions that "Communities cannot implement community-based disaster mitigation plans on their own" (UNISDR, 2004: 177-178). This quote could mean that UNISDR either views grassroots people as incapable, unable to protect themselves and dependent on government response; or that governments do not *allow* local people to take initiative, which is definitely true in some countries. The text explains that the initiative for CBDRM is located at the local government level which will decide how to involve citizens and which citizens. Here, 'community' has an administrative identity and a formal leadership structure with an elected village head and appointed councilors (Allen, 2006: 84). The text further implies that local government officials control the participatory process to assess risks rather than sharing power to debate and define risk together with grassroots people while recognizing their – often differing - risk perceptions (Warner, 2007).

### ***Participation as a policy tool***

The HFA considers scientific and technical knowledge essential to reduce risk, but mentions that this information does not reach local populations automatically (UNISDR, 2004: 180). Therefore public awareness is one of the priority actions where experts provide information to local people in a culturally appropriate manner. On the other hand, "over-reliance on technical experts and one-way communication is ineffective", and "special effort is required to recall locally-valued traditional coping mechanisms" (ibid). Community participation here is a policy tool, a necessity for appropriate management giving grassroots people 'the chance to influence decisions and manage resources to reduce their vulnerability' (UNISDR, 2004: 180). Implicitly,



participation means consultation, not questioning or confronting power inequalities. People's local knowledge may be used, local perspectives not necessarily.

Increasingly, international NGOs look beyond a hazard event, and focus on people's perspectives, by taking into account how hazards interact with their experiences of vulnerability and their livelihoods. However, in discussions with government, the scope of risk assessments is an ongoing debate. *"Let us focus on natural disasters only, otherwise our work becomes too complex!"* was a serious remark of one of the organizers of a workshop on good practices in CBDRM and strategies to partner with local governments. Taking a hazard-focused viewpoint in CBDRM means a simplification of reality, concealing the everyday life-worlds and interests of local poor people (after Li: 2000).

### ***Again: Risk or vulnerability reduction?***

The HFA uses 'risk' language more frequently than the term 'vulnerability'. 'Risk' is defined as *"the probability of harmful consequences, or expected losses (deaths, injuries, property, livelihoods, economic activities disrupted or environment damaged) resulting from interactions between natural or human-induced hazards and vulnerable conditions* (UNISDR, 2004b: 6). This risk definition matches the technocratic and scientific view of disasters, which I discussed earlier in this paper. And what are these vulnerable conditions? The *Living with Risk* document explains that the reason why especially poor people are worst affected by disasters, *"is because the poor outnumber the rich and live in greater density in more poorly built housing on land most at risk"* (UNISDR, 2004, p. xi). This implies that HFA views vulnerability in terms of *numbers, poverty, and physical exposure* to hazard events, not in terms of marginalized and powerless segments of society like Maskrey did when he made the same observation in Lima, Peru.

Reducing the underlying risk factors is one of the priority actions in the HFA. It promotes strategies which deal with institutional reform, like improving communication channels, land-use planning, access to safety-nets, or are physical in nature. They leave existing power relations unchallenged. Local government officials particularly prefer engineering and physical projects since these are visible showing the electorate and potential investors that government is responding to risk (Pelling, 2003: 49). These physical projects do not threaten the status quo, but neither are they apolitical. Pelling (2003) argues that contractors and even political leaders benefit economically from such investments, and in this way reinforce existing power disparities in society. An example is the construction of the "Mega-Dike" in the Philippines which ought to serve as catchment for lahar coming from Mount Pinatubo after its eruption in 1991, directing the lahar to the sea. The mega-dike collapsed yearly due to faulty design, and ignoring scientists' recommendations to take different measures. As a result the lahar-flow

turned uncontrollable and affected many villages and valuable agricultural lands displacing many lowlanders. Meanwhile much profit was made by contractors and local politicians (Rodolfo, 1995: 88; Bankoff, 1999). This example further illustrates that risks are often not reduced, but redistributed to poorer, marginalized and social excluded segments of society. These are not voluntary risks but rather a structural outcome of development serving the wealthy (Lebel *et al.*, 2006).

### ***Platforms and partnerships***

Forming National Platforms for Disaster Risk Reduction, networking, building links, cross sector coordination and partnerships are key-words used to express intentions for more inclusive and effective collaboration. *The spectrum for collaboration varies from sharing information to undertaking joint strategic planning and programming* (UNISDR, 2004; 223). According to Warner (2007) the international community perceives platforms and networks for cooperation as problem-solving institutional innovations: involving multiple voices is a new way forward to address complexity and diversity, and is believed to be broadly accepted. This approach, however, raises questions about mutual trust, the nature of participation of grassroots people, about representation and power dynamics (Warner, *et al.*, 2002). Therefore, we shouldn't simply see these platforms and partnerships as the ultimate goal to ensure that all stakeholders are involved. Grassroots representatives could only benefit from such platforms if they have the capacity, confidence and opportunity to negotiate with local government officials and local elite to have their voices reflected in the decisions taken to obtain protection. This doesn't happen overnight given power inequalities, limitations to genuine participation and differing mindsets.

One area where partnerships have proven their value is early warning. Therefore the HFA stresses the importance of *"institutional capacities to ensure that early warning systems are well integrated into government policy and decision-making processes"* at different levels (UNISDR, 2005: 13). The death toll of cyclones in Bangladesh significantly went down thanks to early warning mechanisms and involvement of community people. But whereas the number of disaster deaths has gone down by 30% over the last two decades, the number of people affected by disasters has gone up by 59%, despite technical fixes like warning systems, better communication and cyclone shelters (Wisner and Walker, 2005). This increase can be attributed to people's increasing vulnerability to disasters due to unfavorable economic policies related to processes of liberalization, privatization and globalization, to environmental degradation, to increasing occurrence of violence, and to erratic weather conditions due to climate change (Wisner *et al.*, 2004).

In summary, the worldview and values behind the CBDRM-tradition developed by the international community is an approach initiated and led by the local government, where

grassroots people are educated on what to do in case of a disaster or how to best prepare for it. CBDRM activities that will reduce disaster risk consist of influencing people’s awareness and behaviour in times of disasters, and technical measures. Volunteers groups and committees to take on specific disaster preparedness measures are formed – following more or less a standard format. When these actions are taken, the government intends to restore ‘normalcy’. In essence, this CBDRM-tradition still resonates with the dominant, top-down, hazard-focused approach to disaster response. Figure 1 shows the implicit interpretations and worldviews behind the CBDRM-tradition promoted by the international community and the home-grown CBDRM-tradition.

**Figure 1: Nature of CBDRM traditions expressed through its primary features on a continuum**

Origin	Donor- driven	←→	Home-grown
View on disasters	External event	←→	Matter of vulnerability – Opportunity for social change
Purpose	Reduces people’s physical exposure to hazards	←→	Social transformation
Focus	Natural hazards restoring normalcy,	←→	Integrates everyday’s livelihoods, security concerns <b>with</b> preparing for disruption/disaster/ conflict
Priority in intervention	Physical measures, early warning, awareness raising	←→	Strengthening community institutions, creating collective action
Participation	Consultation, project -focus	←→	Empowering, process-focus
Levels involved	Community, isolated from larger context	←→	Multi-level and broad collaboration of actors
Community	Administrative unit of local government, “common good” approach	←→	Most vulnerable groups, recognizing local elite
Resources	External funds	←→	Locally generated resources, voluntarism, political commitment, external funds
Longevity	On-off	←→	Durable, although dynamic and adaptive due to changing context

In reality, CBDRM-practice switches according to where the power bends between the two CBDRM extremes as visualized through their features on the continua presented in figure 1.

Seeing the continuum as a volume-bar of a radio, one can hear some voices louder than the others, when moving the volume-bar between the features of the home-grown and HFA CBDRM-traditions. In Indonesia, for instance, government, experts and practitioners translate the imported HFA CBDRM tradition to local concerns (Lassa, 2008).

## **Conclusion**

The origins of CBDRM lay in the critique of the top-down, single-event relief operations of governments. Since the end of the IDNDR, the UN has recognized the importance of involving local communities in disaster risk reduction, but the worldview behind this CBDRM-tradition still resonates a lot with top-down, short-term and isolated responses. In particular, the political connotation that was essential to the original conception of CBDRM has become marginal to mainstream CBDRM. Behind a shared CBDRM language and promoting a similar set of actions to address people's vulnerability to disasters, home-grown and mainstream CBDRM-traditions represent different origins that attach radically different meanings to CBDRM and the related concepts. The home-grown CBDRM views disasters as the outcome of bad governance, while the mainstream CBDRM views disasters as external events disrupting and undermining development investments (Bankoff & Hilhorst, forthcoming). Both CBDRM-traditions support people to build their resilience to disasters. The mainstream CBDRM does so through risk awareness raising, disaster preparedness, physical measures, safety-net mechanisms and institutional reforms, among others, while the home-grown CBDRM regards disasters as an opportunity for social change, therefore viewing CBDRM as a long-term community capacity building process to enable vulnerable groups to demand safety and protection. CBDRM is therefore a contested approach, not simply because people can not agree on a common definition, but because they have different worldviews and intentions in mind that determine their actions. This causes – like what happened to Alice and the Sheep –misunderstanding and confusion but also irritation and agony.

To manage these uneasy relationships, governments intentionally adopt civil society language in their policy documents, which is then presented again as “common sense”, as a general frame we all feel comfortable with, and accepted by the majority of influential people (Lakoff, 2000: 49). But we shouldn't be too optimistic regarding governments who are expected to create enabling political and legislative environments. As in the Philippines, many governments do not prioritize, or are most reluctant to change policies or legislation which favor vulnerable communities. Their primary aim is to maintain the status quo, and to return to 'normalcy' after a disaster hit. Equally, involving disaster-affected communities in local decision-making will also not automatically lead to reducing their vulnerability, if we don't ask ourselves *whose* risks are

being prioritized and *who* decides *which* risk reduction measures will be implemented. Christoplos *et al.* (2001) mention the need for a shift from a focus on *which* technical solution works, towards a concentration on the *political process* of how these choices are made and their impact.

There is a need to become more conscious about the divergent views on CBDRM, particularly about the intentions behind them, meaning a more explicit recognition of the contested nature of CBDRM. We need to concentrate on the political process of all the choices we make. If we accept that 'doing' CBDRM is a political process, it may bring us closer to finding a match between technical solutions and institutional responses to create safer communities on the one hand, and on the other hand the need for grassroots' collective action beyond community level to change the political climate in favor of the most vulnerable on the long run.

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