

Op-Ed

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Rich or Poor: Disasters Connect People

Today, August 19, the world celebrates the 2nd World Humanitarian Day (WHD). Though this day was first observed in 2009, the United Nations has made great strides in humanitarian efforts since 1945. This day, the UN agencies and their partners renew commitment to life-saving relief efforts—and remember those who have died while serving this noble cause.

Disasters are a global problem and require global solutions. Disasters connect people across the world. Disasters affect all countries—developing or developed. Communities, rich or poor are exposed to floods, droughts, heatwaves, cyclones, typhoons, conflicts and earthquakes. From New Orleans, Haiti, Pakistan, Somalia, Russia to Kenya, disasters never choose. The poor people, who usually live in the most exposed and dangerous places in their lives are mostly disrupted by calamity. Disasters make the poor more vulnerable and deprive them of any development gains.

Kenya has never been spared by disasters. In the past couple of decades, Kenya has faced incidences of disasters such as the post-election violence after the disputed presidential election in 2007, droughts, floods, inter-ethnic conflicts, food insecurity and cholera. These crises have caused deaths, loss of property and internal displacements.

These major disasters and humanitarian emergencies periodically summoned call for compassion, donations and active support from individuals, NGOs, UN and governments around the world. Through the moving images of the suffering of remote others, the humanitarian community and the government have worked together to reduce the suffering of the affected population.

As we join millions of people across the world to celebrate this day, let us pay tribute to all Kenyans who died in the post-election violence, drought, floods, cholera and conflicts across the country. The UN agencies and partners continue to maintain their institutional ethos appropriate to humanitarian response.

As the humanitarian community, we commit to continue working closely with the Government and people of Kenya in mitigating against some of these disasters. This is through harmonized coordination and information sharing for early warning and early action.

There is compelling evidence that Kenya has benefited both positively and negatively from these crises. The reason is simple. The government has been able to strengthen coordination structures/institutions to respond to disasters: For example the Crisis Response Centre (CRC), National Disaster Operation Centre (NDOC) and National

Steering Committee on Peace building and Conflict Management. These institutions have come handy in responding to conflicts, drought, floods and cholera.

As partners, we will continue to support the government in strengthening local and national structures to deliver timely relief and development support to the affected populations. This in turn, will reduce the loss of lives, displacement, deprivation and cost of humanitarian response.

In humanitarian aid, Kenya has received close to US\$ 324 million dollars in 2010 for humanitarian assistance. This amount reduced from US\$ 534,354,346 donated in 2009 after the drought that affected close to 10 million people. The collaboration between the government and humanitarian community helped reduce the suffering from drought, floods and cholera victims.

Most of these crisis reverse efforts by government to achieve long term development. However, after the PEV experience, the Kenyan government established coordination mechanisms that successfully responded and reached the affected population with relief assistance.

The conflicts experienced in pockets of the country, particularly in pastoralist areas require government attention. Though incidences of killings have reduced from 181 to 63 killings reported in 2009 and June 2010, concerted effort and attention is needed in these areas. Incidences of cattle rustling restricts access to development and relief agencies in accessing those affected in these regions. We encourage the government to restore peace and security and initiate meaningful sustainable development in these areas.

Right next door in Somalia, the conflict situation is wanting and Kenya remains a safe haven for people fleeing from the conflict. Kenya hosts 395,708 refugees in Dadaab, Kakuma refugees' camp and Nairobi.

Since early 2010, cholera has affected 34 districts nationwide with 3,229 cases and 63 deaths. So far the outbreaks have been contained in 32 districts.

We recognize the hospitality and efforts of the Kenyan government in helping disaster victims from the region. Despite Kenya hosting refugees from the neighbouring countries, it has its fair share of disasters that cause humanitarian concerns.

Kenya remains a significant partner of the humanitarian community, especially in hosting UN agencies and other partners delivering aid to the neighbouring countries.

Each of the individuals and organizations in this country work collectively towards life-saving relief, reducing the suffering of those affected by disasters and bringing the world ever closer to achieving basic human needs.