

Emergency preparedness and response handbook

Saving lives and protecting rights

About this section

This section outlines why ActionAid sees engaging in emergencies as a global strategic priority, and summarises some of the key principles that guide ActionAid's work in emergencies.

This section is designed as an overall introduction to the handbook, and should be read by all users – ideally in advance of an emergency.

ActionAid's strategic commitment to emergencies

ActionAid's 2012-2017 global strategy, *People's action to end poverty*, recognises emergencies as a key priority for the organisation. Strategic Objective 4 commits the organisation to:

Within this Objective, Key Change Promise 7 states that:

and Key Change Promise 8 states that:

“Build the resilience of people living in poverty to conflicts and disasters and respond to disasters with people-centred, rights-based alternatives.”

“By 2017 we will have built effective risk reduction and resilience systems and capacities in over 5000 communities.”

“By 2017 at least five million people experiencing disasters or conflicts will have been assisted in ways which respect and strengthen rights, support recovery of livelihoods, empower women and promote solutions for long-term change.”

Why are emergencies important to ActionAid?

ActionAid's core commitment is to work with people living in poverty and exclusion, particularly women. Disasters disproportionately affect these people, further violating their rights and making them even more vulnerable.

Disasters can also strip away the advances that communities and ActionAid have made in securing their rights and ending poverty through ongoing development programming, and so affect ActionAid's ability to deliver on its core commitment.

We believe that poverty is a violation of human rights: poverty underlies, and is exacerbated by, people's vulnerability and their inability to cope with shocks and hazards. In emergencies, it is people living in poverty and exclusion who suffer the most.

For example, in the 2004 Asian tsunami, an Oxfam survey found that in areas of Indonesia and India, women accounted for more than 70% of people killed by the disaster.

We believe that disaster-affected people living in poverty have the right to assistance. People without access to information and resources are less able to avoid and protect themselves from the impact of disasters, and to access the help to which they are entitled. ActionAid believes that change will only happen and be sustainable if rights holders are aware, conscious and organised to challenge power and hold the state and other duty bearers accountable.

“ My husband beats me for no reason. After we lost everything in the flood it has become worse. Around us our neighbours think that there must be a reason for him to beat me so they blame me. Once, because I couldn't bear this suffering any more I took poison. But I didn't die. ”

Anon



Disasters and conflict also threaten the gains that communities have made with the support of ActionAid's programmes and projects. For example, a major emergency can force children to drop out of school, either because the school building or transport infrastructure has been destroyed, because the family has had to flee to another area, or because the family's livelihood has been affected and they can no longer afford school fees or materials. Girls are often particularly affected, as they are burdened with additional household work and childcare for younger siblings if their parents are forced to seek alternative means of livelihood. Violence against women and other violations of women's rights often increase during and in the aftermath of emergency contexts. If ActionAid does not prepare for and respond to emergencies, the aims and achievements of the organisation's programmes risk being eroded.

“ I am here alone. My husband was killed during the war. I was also raped. I have six children, five boys and one little girl. She is in the sixth grade, but she can't finish school because there is no money. The others are here looking for petty work every day to bring something home to the family. Before the war, I sold fish in my village. But when they raped me, they tortured me. They hurt me. Now I am broken, I can no longer work. I sit in my hut. I wait. ”

Masika Tshuma, 45, DRC

What is ActionAid's approach to emergencies?

When a disaster strikes, our aim is to save lives and protect people's rights.

ActionAid supports people living in poverty who are affected by disasters not only to meet their basic needs (which we recognise as basic rights), but to overcome poverty and injustice by ensuring they can lead the process of their own recovery. We place women and other particularly vulnerable groups at the centre of all our activities.

In our responses, we aim for three core outcomes:

1. Women and women's institutions are sufficiently empowered, mobilised and engaged in decision-making processes from local to national levels to lead emergency preparedness, response and recovery efforts.
2. Communities, partners and local institutions have the skills, knowledge, systems and resources for quality emergency preparedness, response and recovery.
3. The humanitarian system at local, national and international level is more accountable to affected communities, better co-ordinated and more effective.

“ I am 45 years old and a single woman. My sister died long ago. After her death my sister's husband eloped with another woman and I took the responsibility of bringing up my sister's children. I have no ration card in my name and so, after the disaster, I did not receive any aid or relief of any sort from the government. ”

Anon, India



ActionAid sees disasters as a result of unequal power relations in society. They are not one-off events, or 'acts of god', but are part of a cycle of poverty and exclusion. **People living in poverty are often affected by numerous disasters during their lives and without sustainable and long-term recovery and resilience, each time a disaster occurs poverty can be deepened and injustices further ingrained.**

Therefore, we seek to use every opportunity brought by humanitarian crises to shift power relationships in favour of people living in poverty and exclusion, particularly women. All of ActionAid's emergency response work is linked to development, ensuring that a) disasters do not erode development investment and b) our development work does not contribute to disasters.

For these reasons, much of what it is included in this handbook goes beyond Strategic Objective 4 – in fact it would be impossible to work effectively in emergency preparedness and response without linking effectively to other Strategic Objectives. Particularly in the sections relating to emergency preparedness (**Section 6**) and linking to longer term programming (**Section 5**), there are activities which relate directly to a number of ActionAid's key change promises – emergencies are everybody's business!

" I lost everything in the disaster. I approached the village level government officer to get information on compensation, but he refused to give the information and told me to come another day. This repeatedly happened. Finally I went and met the District Secretary and he asked me why I did not come earlier - now it's too late. This was the reply I got.


Anon, Sri Lanka



Principles that guide ActionAid's work in emergencies

ActionAid's human rights-based approach (HRBA) guides our response to disasters. The following tables set out the eight core human rights principles that ActionAid follows, and contextualises these for disasters.

This handbook will not give you a step-by-step guide for implementing emergency response and resilience programmes – there is no standard template that can be rolled out in any context. What this handbook aims to do is to explain the key principles of ActionAid's approach to emergencies, and provide some practical guidance and examples from our work in different countries to help you put them into practice.

A photograph of a woman, Maha, wearing a grey headscarf and a tan patterned top, holding a young child wrapped in a red and white blanket. They are standing in front of a white container with laundry hanging on a line. The background shows a dusty area with more containers.

Maha, 29, with her nine-month-old daughter. Maha is just one of the million people who have fled the conflict in Syria. She is now in Zaatari, a sprawling refugee camp in northern Jordan that is home to more than 90,000 refugees.
PHOTO: HANNAH BURROWS/ACTIONAID

Principle 1

Putting the active agency of people living in poverty first – and building their awareness of rights

Minimum standards for ActionAid programming

- People living in poverty and their organisations have been actively involved in the drawing up of all local rights programmes.
- Programme activities or strategies exist that enable people living in poverty to analyse and reflect on the conditions and causes of poverty and inequality, linking this with rights and the violation of rights.
- We have supported the active, free and meaningful participation of people living in poverty.
- We have addressed and understood vulnerabilities, strengthened people's resilience and helped respond to basic needs in ways that are sustainable, strengthen rights and generate alternatives.
- People living in poverty have organised themselves and mobilised as rights activists.
- Our fundraising and communications work represents people living in poverty as active agents, not victims.
- Our fundraising and campaigning actively engages people living in poverty, respecting them as rights holders and giving them a voice.

Principle 1 **Putting the active agency of people living in poverty first – and building their awareness of rights**

Minimum standards in disaster contexts	
In emergency response	In emergency preparedness
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> We put people living in poverty and exclusion and affected by disasters at the centre of our response, addressing basic needs (material, psychosocial and information needs) as basic rights and combining programme and policy to build their capacity to manage the design, procurement and implementation of emergency response programming. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> We put people living in poverty and exclusion (so vulnerable to shocks and stresses) and people experiencing disasters at the centre of our preparedness work, led by women.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> We conduct assessments in partnership with disaster-affected communities in order to analyse their situation, raise awareness of their rights and mobilise them and their institutions to take action. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> We work with communities to analyse the stresses and shocks they are vulnerable to, and the structural causes behind it (including multiple denial of rights, powerlessness, etc).
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Our programme activities or strategies enable ongoing analysis and reflection on the conditions and causes of vulnerability, people's rights and rights violations and the causes of the inequality, exploitation and exclusion that underlie these, through mechanisms such as women's and youth forums. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> This analysis informs the design and implementation of disaster preparedness plans, building the necessary knowledge, skills, capacity, institutions and linkages to be able to prepare for, prevent and mitigate the impacts of disasters, at the same time building the capacity of women to facilitate this process.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Our emergency responses promote accountability to disaster-affected communities as a 'non-negotiable', building their capacity and agencies to hold us and others to account. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> We mobilise people and institutions to a) negotiate and mobilise resources to ensure our analysis feeds into state policy and action on disaster preparedness, b) implement disaster preparedness plans in collaboration with the state and others and c) act in the event of a disaster to lead an emergency response.

Principle 2 **Analysing and confronting unequal power**

Minimum standards for ActionAid programming

- We have analysed and understood the impact of unequal power relations within groups of people living in poverty, and between them and other actors/duty bearers.
- We have challenged all forms of discrimination and prioritise working with those who are most excluded.
- We have specifically analysed and understood power relations between women and men and worked on strategies to address them.
- We have analysed the impact of our own power in partnerships and alliances.
- We have a clear critical pathway, laying out how change will happen, based on a thorough analysis of power and rights.
- Comprehensive power analysis informs our campaigns, which seek to shift power.
- Our fundraising narrative recognises the role of unequal power relations in causing poverty and the importance of addressing this.

Principle 2 Analysing and confronting unequal power

Minimum standards in disaster contexts	
In emergency response	In emergency preparedness
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ActionAid and partners have a solid understanding of the unequal power relationships that perpetuate and exacerbate the vulnerability of people living in poverty and exclusion to the stresses and shocks which lead to disasters. Our analysis recognises that disasters exacerbate existing discrimination and power imbalances. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Our analysis recognises the power relations between men and women. We build the capacity of women to lead emergency preparedness and response work.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Our programme framework clearly articulates how we intend to work in partnership with disaster-affected communities to move them from a context of disaster (caused and exacerbated by powerlessness) to a context of resilience. Integrating resilience building into emergency response and recovery is a key component of this. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> We understand the power relations between various groups, and how vulnerability exacerbates power imbalances (e.g. people living with disabilities and ethnic and religious minorities etc). Our preparedness analysis examines vulnerability from their perspective.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ActionAid and partners put in place mechanisms to counteract the traditional 'aid/recipient' relationship between humanitarian agencies and disaster-affected communities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> We analyse state preparedness planning from the perspective of facilitating the security or promoting the insecurity of people living in poverty and exclusion (so vulnerable to shocks and stresses) and people experiencing disasters.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> We use disasters as an opportunity to redress power imbalances between men and women. Unapologetically we promote the leadership of women in emergency response, recovery and resilience building. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> We work in collaboration with different actors, including communities and wider civil society, to put right the inequalities which underlie vulnerability and power imbalances.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Our fundraising and communications activity during emergencies articulates the role of unequal power relations in causing the disaster and/or exacerbating its impact on the poorest and most excluded. 	

Principle 3 **Advancing women's rights**

Minimum standards for ActionAid programming

- We have ensured that women have the confidence to identify and challenge different forms of subordination and exploitation.
- We have supported the capacity development of women living in poverty and their organisations.
- We have confronted unequal power relations between men and women, including within our own organisation.
- We have carried out gender analysis and gender budget analysis to cement this commitment.
- We have connected women living in poverty and their organisations with others to build solidarity and strengthen the movement for change.
- Our fundraising and communications work is gender-aware and challenges stereotypes.

Principle 3 **Advancing women's rights**

Minimum standards in disaster contexts	
In emergency response	In emergency preparedness
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> We consciously take sides with women in emergency responses, prioritising their material, psychosocial and information needs. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ActionAid, partners and communities we work with understand ways in which women are disproportionately affected by disasters.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> We promote women's leadership during all phases of emergency response, recovery and resilience building. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> We support the capacity development of women living in poverty and their organisations, so that women can lead the process of immediate relief and recovery.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> We bring women and women's institutions together to participate in the design, planning and implementation of emergency responses. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Our preparedness work facilitates and promotes the role of women as leaders in their communities.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> We programme women's rights into our emergency responses as a cross-cutting issue. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> We invest in building the capacity of women and their institutions to analyse their own vulnerabilities and devise strategies to reduce the impact of disasters.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Our fundraising and communications work in emergencies portrays women as active agents of change, whilst presenting the reality of their situation as hardest hit. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> We mobilise women and women's institutions (e.g. community based women's groups) to participate in disaster preparedness and engage governance to make the state accountable at local, national and international levels.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> We engage women and their institutions (e.g. community based women's groups) in policy work. 	

Principle 4 **Building partnerships**

Minimum standards for ActionAid programming

- We have identified strategic partners who can help us achieve our goals.
- We are prioritising partnerships with organisations that are constituted by, genuinely represent or strongly connect with people living in poverty.
- We have built credible partnerships based on our principles, building trust and mutual understanding and developing clear agreements.
- We have identified partners with the capacity or the potential to implement high quality and high impact programmes.
- We have supported our partners' organisational and institutional capacity development.
- We are linking our partners with others at all levels, from local to national and international (especially facilitating connections with social movements and engagement in international advocacy and campaigns).

Principle 4 **Building partnerships**

Minimum standards in disaster contexts	
In emergency response	In emergency preparedness
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> We work in collaboration with others including partner I/NGOs, social movements/community organisations, and with the state, local government and relevant authorities. We also work with disaster-affected communities (particularly women and women's institutions). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Our preparedness planning process is undertaken in collaboration with partner organisations, at both country and LRP levels.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> We support enhanced co-ordination by working with government and relevant humanitarian co-ordination mechanisms, both in the disaster-affected country and internationally. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Our preparedness planning process identifies and addresses capacity gaps at partner level.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> We implement our emergency response alongside both existing partner organisations and new organisations that can add strategic value to our response in line with our HRBA in emergencies. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Our preparedness work is increasingly implemented through consortia with a view to increasing collaboration and co-ordination.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> We use disasters as an opportunity to build the capacity of partners to implement emergency preparedness and response work that respects and strengthens rights, supports recovery of livelihoods, empowers women and promotes solutions for long-term change. 	

Principle 5 **Being accountable and transparent**

Minimum standards for ActionAid programming

- We can show evidence of our primary accountability being to people living in poverty.
- We are satisfying all relevant secondary accountabilities.
- We can show the impact of all our work on children.
- We have fulfilled the requirements of our open information policy, by making information about our programmes and budgets available to all stakeholders in accessible formats.
- We are using our own accountability as a foundation for strengthening people's ability to hold their governments to account on their rights obligations.

Principle 5 **Being accountable and transparent**

Minimum standards in disaster contexts	
In emergency response	In emergency preparedness
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • We can show evidence that our primary accountability is to people living in poverty and exclusion and affected by disasters. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Preparedness plans are developed in partnership with people living in poverty and exclusion (vulnerable to shocks and stresses). Plans are shared with the affected people for feedback and updates.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Our responses adhere to international humanitarian standards and codes of conduct, e.g. Humanitarian Accountability Partnership policies (e.g. on the prevention of sexual exploitation and abuse by aid workers), Sphere, People in Aid, and we orient our policies to align with these. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Budgets and plans for specific preparedness projects (e.g. DIPECHO) are made available to all stakeholders in accessible formats.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • We establish complaint mechanisms as standard in our emergency responses. 	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • We develop and use tools for delivering accountability to disaster-affected communities (e.g. social audit), and share these with others. 	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • We can show how our emergency responses positively impact the lives of children affected by disasters. 	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • All parts of the organisation understand their responsibility to ensure their actions do not negatively impact on ActionAid's reputation and/or compromise our ability to support disaster-affected people. 	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Key documents relating to our emergency programmes and budgets are accessible to all stakeholders. 	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • We assess and work to meet the information needs of people affected by disasters, so they have the means with which to hold us and others to account. 	

Principle 6

Monitoring, evaluating and evidencing our impact

Minimum standards for ActionAid programming

- We are tracking relevant indicators and have credible baseline data so we can measure change, showing the outcomes and impact of our work. This applies whether we are working in a local rights programme, a multi-country campaign or fundraising.
- We are cost- and carbon-conscious in all our work, being careful how we use both ActionAid's resources and natural resources.
- We are monitoring and reflecting on change processes in a participatory way on an ongoing basis.
- Our future plans are informed by what we are learning and evidence of what is effective.

Principle 6 **Monitoring, evaluating and evidencing our impact**

Minimum standards in disaster contexts	
In emergency response	In emergency preparedness
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Each new emergency response builds on our learning from previous responses. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Preparedness plans at country and LRP level are dynamic documents, updated regularly to remain relevant to changing contexts.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • We use data from rapid and needs assessments (undertaken by ActionAid and others) to generate baseline indicators used to monitor our response. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • We share lessons from our preparedness work across countries and contexts, to facilitate ongoing sharing of best practice.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The success of our preparedness work in minimising disaster deaths and material/economic losses for people living in poverty is evaluated as standard during evaluations of emergency responses. 	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • We put in place high quality management systems such as Oversight Groups to guide and monitor our response. 	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • We conduct regular evaluations including real time evaluations to examine our progress and generate learning to feed back into ongoing and future responses. 	

Principle 7

Linking work across levels to address structural change

Minimum standards for ActionAid programming

- We are working towards lasting gains at the local level and beyond by tackling structural causes of poverty and rights violations (for example, changes in law, policy, procedure or budget allocation in favour of people living in poverty).
- We are connecting local rights violations to national and international factors and to recognised human rights legal frameworks.
- We are connecting local struggles with national and international movements, and connecting local issues to national civil society change processes.
- We are connecting work on different objectives/key change promises and connecting grassroots programme, campaigning and fundraising work.
- We are facilitating communication and information flows between local, national and international levels.

Principle 7 **Linking work across levels to address structural change**

Minimum standards in disaster contexts	
In emergency response	In emergency preparedness
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Our analysis of disaster contexts recognises the links between local rights violations and contributing factors at national and international levels. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Our preparedness plans are rooted in an in-depth analysis of the structural causes of poverty and vulnerability in any given context.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> In emergencies we mobilise and strengthen the agency of people affected by disasters, particularly women, creating the horizontal links necessary to facilitate such work. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> We build capacity at community, local, national and international levels to prepare for, prevent and mitigate the impacts of disasters.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> We link these groups and institutions to national level forums (disaster management forums, national platforms) who review state level policies and practices. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Evidence from our preparedness work at local level is used to inform policy-advocacy at local and national levels (e.g. on the need for improved early warning systems, formalised government compensation schemes for disaster survivors).
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> We develop and share examples of best practice with international level actors, advocating for changes in laws, policies, procedures or budget allocations in favour of people living in poverty and affected by disasters. 	

Principle 8

Being solutions-orientated and promoting credible and sustainable alternatives

Minimum standards for ActionAid programming

- We are putting forward credible alternatives to challenge dominant models and paradigms that undermine people's rights.
- The alternatives we propose and support are sustainable, being cost- and carbon-conscious.
- We have developed these alternatives with people living in poverty, our partners and allies.
- We encourage innovation and experimentation and are not afraid of failure – but are quick to learn.
- We are connecting our work on alternatives in different areas.
- We have created some space for dreaming and visioning the future.

In all our emergency preparedness, response and resilience work we seek to integrate the seven core components of ActionAid's HRBA in emergencies:

1. women's leadership in disaster preparedness, response and resilience building
2. accountability to disaster-affected communities
3. local partnerships in emergency preparedness, response and resilience building
4. combining scientific information with community experience and traditional knowledge
5. adequate funding and aid effectiveness
6. linking emergency response to resilience, building longer term change processes
7. creating a loss and damage framework to enable disaster-affected people to claim their rights.

This represents an alternative to the traditional top-down humanitarian model. These alternatives are designed and implemented with people living in poverty and affected by disasters, our partners and allies.



FURTHER READING AND RESOURCES

ActionAid strategy: *People's action to end poverty 2012-2017*. <http://goo.gl/AJd8uD>