Preparing for natural disasters in Western China

Disasters strike people, their livelihoods and their environments. The magnitude of impact is directly related to the intensity and scale of the hazard and the vulnerability of the individuals and communities. Over the past 20 years, natural disasters in China have affected 300 million people, destroyed more than 3 million houses and forced the evacuation of more than 9 million people on average annually, resulting in direct economic losses that have exceeded USD 36.2 billion per year. UNICEF works in three disaster-prone counties in Western China to strengthen the capacity both of the communities and of the local, provincial and national authorities to withstand, respond to and recover from natural disasters, reducing disaster risk for vulnerable children and their families.

**DURATION:** 2015-2018  
**CHALLENGE:** Emergency Response  
**COUNTRY:** China  
**PARTNER:** UNICEF

**CONTEXT**

Over the past 20 years, natural disasters in China have affected 300 million people, destroyed more than 3 million houses and forced the evacuation of more than 9 million people on average annually, resulting in direct economic losses that have exceeded USD 36.2 billion per year.

Severe and frequent natural disasters are increasingly becoming a major humanitarian concern: they impede food production, threaten already-scarce water resources, damage energy security and have significant and sometimes irreversible consequences for the livelihoods of the most vulnerable communities, especially children.

However, exposure to disaster risk can be mitigated and the negative impacts minimized if communities and the responsible authorities embrace the principles of disaster reduction and prevention, and take steps to reduce local disaster risks and vulnerabilities. When appropriate
actions are taken before a disaster strikes, the loss of life can be prevented, and the extent of
the negative social and economic impacts on the affected populations can be significantly
diminished. The Government of China has strong capacity to provide immediate emergency
relief and response for the vast majority of natural disasters that the country faces. However,
key challenges remain in scaling up disaster risk reduction (DRR) interventions, systematizing
preparedness and early warning for adverse events, and responding to the needs of the most
vulnerable communities.

**ACTION**

UNICEF’s pilot programme aims to strengthen the capacity of both the communities and the
local, provincial and national authorities to withstand, respond to and recover from natural
disasters, reducing disaster risk for vulnerable children and their communities in three either
earthquake-prone or drought-prone counties in Western China. The provinces and regions
under consideration are Sichuan, Yunnan, Qinghai and Gansu. A child-centred risk assessment
and mapping is currently being undertaken to identify the geographical areas exposed to
significant disaster risk that also have a large vulnerable child population. The programme follows a comprehensive approach which integrates county and provincial-
level interventions that feed into national level policy dialogues:

*At community level:*

- It builds-up a “disaster risk reduction model” to:
  a. Clearly define the roles and responsibilities of key actors to ensure their effective
     coordination during emergencies, building up information-sharing mechanisms
     and putting contingency plans in place.
  b. Assess local community needs, ensuring social services for children (health,
     nutrition, immunization, child protection, education, and water and sanitation) are
     adapted to reduce disaster risks and contribute to the establishment of resilient
     systems.
  c. Increase awareness and knowledge of disaster risk management in community
     members to stimulate behaviour change through a proper understanding of
     disaster risks and how to mitigate their negative impacts.
- As disasters disproportionately impact children, the programme promotes a child-
  centred strategy to reduce risks for children through a number of specific activities
  organized in schools, maternal and child health centres, and Child Friendly Spaces
  (physically safe areas where children can learn and play in everyday situations and
during emergencies) located in the disaster-prone areas. The activities include
  emergency evacuation drills, safety mapping, disaster preparedness training for
  teachers, principals and service providers, the dissemination of disaster risk reduction
  manuals and tools, and the provision of self-protection and skill training sessions for
  children. These activities can have a significant impact both by increasing the immediate
  safety of children and by serving as a catalyst for similar efforts in the wider community.
At provincial level:

- It improves disaster preparedness through the establishment of a resource centre that provides regular training and technical support for health workers, educators, social workers, Child Friendly Spaces staff and community leaders, ensuring they are better prepared to deliver the necessary services during and after a disaster. The provincial resource pool of frontline workers could also support other provinces when major disasters happen in the future.

At national level:

- It updates, strengthens and improves disaster risk reduction policies, standards and coordination mechanisms, advocating for policy changes or readjustments when needed and supporting the Government of China to implement and replicate pilot interventions in the longer term.

The three programme components are also intended to be interactive. The results and experiences of the pilot initiatives will help inform the development of appropriate emergency policies and the related provincial resource centre training curricula.

EXPECTED RESULTS

- Disaster preparedness is advanced in three counties.
- A community-based model of disaster risk reduction that reaches vulnerable children is successfully piloted.
- Materials on disaster risk reduction are available, and children, parents and community members have improved knowledge of disaster prevention, advanced self-protection skills and increased capacity to withstand, respond to and recover from natural disasters.
- A provincial-level resource centre that provides advanced training and regular capacity building and technical support to key front line workers is fully operational.
- Specific policies, standards and mechanisms have been created or updated to support the Government of China’s disaster risk management efforts.

LONG-TERM STRATEGY

Partnering with the Government of China to pilot demonstration models is one of the key ways that UNICEF seeks to support national policies and programmes for children and women. The positive results demonstrated at local level are utilized to leverage government funding and advocate for the replication of successful approaches on a larger scale. To enhance preparedness, reduce disaster risk and build up resilience among disaster-prone communities, UNICEF works closely with government counterparts in the fields of health, nutrition, water and sanitation, child protection and education, including the National Health and Family Planning Commission, the Ministry of Water Resources, the National Patriotic Health Campaign Committee Office, the National Working Committee on Children and Women, the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Civil Affairs.