

Connecting Humanitarianism and the Sendai Framework after 10 years

Keywords

Humanitarian action; Sendai Framework; Disaster Risk Reduction; Early Warning Early Action; International Disaster Response Law

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Summary

The Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction (SFDRR) was adopted in 2015 and will be revised in 2030. It sets out a series of targets and priorities that aims to mainstream Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR) activities and inspire greater adoption of DRR principles. The final goal of the Sendai Framework is “preventing new risk, reducing existing risk, and strengthening resilience” (UNDRR, 2015, p. 5).¹

To mark 10 years since its adoption, IJDRS organized a special issue to which HSC Deputy Director Dr. Rodrigo Mena contributed to by reviewing the adoption of and interplay between the framework and the humanitarian sector. The study has revealed several undercurrents to the relationship between humanitarianism and the Sendai Framework, including gaps between the worlds of humanitarian and disaster management, the bridge-building functions of Early Warning Early Action (EWEA) programmes, and the importance of International Disaster Response Law.

This research brief is a compressed summary of a full journal article, [available at this link](#)², which expands far beyond the elements discussed in brief here.

Methodology

The study was multi-method, including a systematic literature review, a mapping exercise, and expert interviews. The literature review utilized several set keywords and key-phrases, and included grey literature by various humanitarian organisations. This initial literature review and mapping exercise pointed to Early-Warning-Early-Action strategies as a likely bridge-builder between the humanitarian response and DRR spheres.

The expert interviews included two academics and two practitioners, from a variety of backgrounds and geographical specialties (Colombia, India, Switzerland, Italy). The interviews were then subjected to three iterative rounds of thematic analysis.

Findings

1

The Sendai Framework is generally considered to be useful for humanitarian response, but precisely how it should be used or integrated remains an open question

In general, the study shows that there is a sliding scale that exists on how much the SFDRR should be integrated into crisis response, hinging on the magnitude of a crisis. The SFDRR is considered most relevant for crises that can be handled by “everyday emergency response teams”. Indeed, Priority 4 of the SFDRR specifically calls for training existing emergency management agencies, workers, and organisations. This suggests that the Framework is more useful for, or indeed intended to be used by, the everyday emergency services of a country, and is supported by the existence of the DesInventar inventory of disasters/crises, which promotes the recording of all crises, not just major events.

Many of the reviewed documents that focus on humanitarian crisis response tend to refer to the SFDRR as a good framework for preventing and reducing risks, but not for responding to crises. Even more interestingly, the various UNOCHA Global Humanitarian Overviews often refer to DRR and other anticipatory action frameworks, they have only very rarely mentioned the Sendai Framework. This is not to say that the SFDRR text itself focuses only on anticipating and reducing risk, it actually specifically refers to its critical role during disaster response.

A limiting factor for integrating the SFDRR into the humanitarian sphere may come from the lack of references to conflict-related aggravating factors in the text.



The SFDRR and Humanitarianism are generally considered related, even if indirectly, but the links are usually weak, as three interviewees also asserted (Mena, 2025, p. 24).

The patchy adoption of the SFDRR's guidelines into the humanitarian sphere seems counterintuitive to some actors, and may constitute a false barrier, or 'silo-isation' between disaster risk management and humanitarian response. As the ALNAP State of the Humanitarian System report from 2018 states, humanitarian responder and disaster risk managers consistently navigate the intricate relationship between ongoing conflicts and disaster impacts.

2

The SFDRR's (lack of) widescale adoption by the humanitarian sphere is a symptom of a wider 'disaster/humanitarian' divide

“Two interviewees who work with UN humanitarian agencies at the headquarters level, including OCHA, shared that while these actors may know of the SFDRR, they often lack a detailed understanding of its specific goals and implementation mechanisms (Mena, 2025, p. 25).

As mentioned above, a potential limiting factor for the Sendai Framework's adoption by the humanitarian sphere in general may be symptomatic of a wider (imagined) divide between the disaster management and humanitarian aid spheres or sectors. This research examined the contours of such a divide: “when humanitarian action and disaster (and, by extension the SFDRR) are referenced, they are often seen as different sets of actions or happening a different moments” (Mena, 2025, p. 25). Furthermore, humanitarian aid professionals often see disasters as being immediate impacts that require a rapid response, rather than being part of a wider 'disaster cycle'.

Several interviewees revealed that the SFDRR is better considered or integrated by the UN office for disaster risk reduction (UNDRR) and the UN Development programme (UNDP). This lack of knowledge of the Framework in the wider humanitarian sector is borne out by Dr. Mena's own experiences working on humanitarian responses in South Sudan and Afghanistan, where many practitioners were aware of the SFDRR, but not fully aware of its contents.

Why does the humanitarian sector often ignore long-term planning tools like the SFDRR?

- The Humanitarian sector remains focused on responding to crises rather than preventing them
- There is also a wider lack of intergration of the disaster response, recovery, rehabilitation, and reconstruction phases
- Missed opportunities (due to immediate needs) in response phases hinder anticipating risk during reconstruction

Other factors contributing to a general lack of uptake of the SFDRR include general issues of including disaster risk reduction considerations in humanitarian programme planning, governments prioritizing their national frameworks and engaging in independent reporting (thus outside of the SFDRR's own mechanisms), and a lack of agreement about the main goals and roles that disaster managers and humanitarian actors play.

3

Anticipatory action as a bridge between the Humanitarian and Disaster spheres



Anticipatory action:

“Acting ahead of predicted hazards to prevent or reduce acute humanitarian impacts before they fully unfold” (OCHA, in Mena, 2025, p. 26).

Considering the patchy take-up of the SFDRR by humanitarian organisations, and its underlying potential causes, there is an area of this study that provides cause for optimism: anticipatory action, which is also referred to across humanitarian (grey) literature as ‘forecast-based humanitarian action’. This also encompasses ‘early warning, early action’ programmes, and resilience building through the strategic deployment of resources and preparedness interventions prior to a disaster.

The study notes that a particular focus area for anticipatory action is at the intersection of humanitarian crisis and climate risk; particularly where there is a rapid onset of multiple hydrometeorological hazards, in areas of high vulnerability (whether technical, social, economic, or others). However, it is not only more vulnerable societies that are using this approach, more wealthy and stable countries such as Japan, the US, and Australia.

Across the humanitarian sector, more and more people and organisations are utilizing an anticipatory action-informed approach to minimize risks in relation to disasters. One interviewee for this study noted that “while there is little that can be done to prevent displacement related to conflict, much can be done to reduce the risk of displacement related to disasters. Here, DRR plays a key role and by extension Sendai” (OCHA, in Mena, 2025, p. 26).

There are some drawbacks to this area of positive engagement, including a fear of affecting ongoing conflicts through anticipatory actions, and a slightly distanced approach to disasters, which do not take into account the everyday practicalities of humanitarian response.

However, despite these drawbacks, anticipatory action remains a vital bridge to integrating proactive and forecast-based interventions into both the disaster preparedness and humanitarian realms.

4

International Disaster Response Law as a mediator and legal framework

International Disaster Response Law (IDRL), collated by the IFRC, can act as an important bridge between the disaster response and humanitarian spaces by providing a legal framework through which international assistance can function. The presence of IDRL helps to address the ‘scale of disaster’ gap mentioned earlier, and enshrines several elements of the SFDRR and DRR-led thinking. National-level disasters can be led by national-level policy and law, and where a disaster spills over international borders, or requires a coordinated international response, IDRL can provide a framework that harmonises disparate national legal regimes.

Similarly, IDRL also begins to enshrine international solidarity as a *modus operandi* of international humanitarian assistance, and tries to bring in a basis for working through collaborative approaches. The area of law is not without its critics, but is one of a growing number of legal frameworks (including the framework on protecting people in disasters) that brings in the SFDRR and its related ideas to the disaster and humanitarian space.

Conclusion and recommendations

1. The SFDRR is frequently cited as a relevant framework for humanitarian actors, but is not yet integrated into humanitarian discourse and programming in general
2. Where it is integrated and mentioned by various organisations' literature, it is particularly in reference to post-disaster reconstruction and rehabilitation
3. In order to be better adopted, the SFDRR (or its follow-on framework) should also consider (violent)conflict and adopting a conflict sensitivity approach.
4. The lack of take-up of the SFDRR highlights a wider gap between the worlds of disaster management and preparedness, and humanitarian response
5. When a disaster is of a sufficient magnitude to overwhelm local or national responders, it is usually considered to be in the realm of the humanitarian system rather than disaster beyond the relief moment of it.
6. Humanitarians would be well-served to learn the language of DRR and the applicability of frameworks like the SFDRR, whilst disaster management professionals should include humanitarian programming in their disaster management and preparedness work
7. The humanitarian and disaster management spheres can look to the successes of anticipatory action programming to further bridge gaps in the 'humanitarian~ disaster' parallelism.

References

1. UNDRR. (2015). 'Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015-2030', 18 December 2019, accessed at: <https://www.undrr.org/media/16176/download?startDownload=20250328>
2. Mena, R. (2025). 'Humanitarianism and the Sendai Framework: A 10-Year Review of Converging and Diverging Paths', International Journal of Disaster Risk Science, 16, pp. 20–32. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13753-024-00595-1>

Referencing notes

Please consider reading and referencing the original source, the article 'Humanitarianism and the Sendai Framework: A 10-Year Review of Converging and Diverging Paths'.

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