Intersectionality, marginalised groups & disasters:

Bridging the gap: The role of specialised NGOs in inclusive disaster risk reduction.

A policy brief

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This policy briefing highlights the critical importance of engaging with advocacy and NGO organisations/groups who represent hyper-marginalised communities in disaster risk reduction (DRR) contexts. These communities—which can include such diverse groups as gender and sexual minorities, indigenous communities, sex workers, those experiencing homelessness, refugees, migrants, asylum seekers, and transient/nomadic populations—experience unique vulnerabilities exacerbated by societal, cultural, or economic discrimination. The uniqueness of these groups has often led to the development of specific organisations that represent or work on behalf of these communities. While their specialised knowledge may not always directly relate to disaster or risk management, these organisations are frequently the only ones actively advocating for and working with these hyper-marginalised parts of society. As such, their expertise positions them to play a key role in shaping disaster risk reduction policies and practices.

Policymakers must prioritise inclusive disaster risk reduction (DRR) strategies by incorporating specialised NGOs and advocacy groups representing hyper-marginalised communities. Recommendations include ensuring representation of these communities in all DRR stages to address their unique vulnerabilities, securing sustained funding for NGOs to continue their critical work, and promoting inclusive policy design that recognises intersectionality. Additionally, building strong partnerships between DRR institutions and specialised NGOs can enhance the effectiveness and inclusivity of disaster preparedness and response efforts.

This policy brief will explore how such specialised organisations can help design a more inclusive disaster risk reduction policy and practice landscape as well as elevate hyper-marginalised voices and champion the rights of those communities.

KEY DEFINITIONS

For the proposed of this paper, the following definitions apply:

- **Intersectionality:** First developed as an idea by Prof. Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989 [1], intersectionality or intersectional theory refers to the overlapping and compounding disadvantages individuals face due to factors such as race, gender, sexuality, class, and ability [1]. In the context of disasters, this can mean that a person's complex lived experience, cultural background and socio-economic status can mean their recovery from and response to a disaster or crisis can be fundamentally different from their neighbours, friends or others within their societal position [2].

- **Hyper-marginalised:** This term refers to any group experiencing additional vulnerabilities because of cultural and societal attitudes & discrimination including (but not limited to) gender and sexual minorities, first nation/ indigenous people, those within the informal economy (especially parts of that economy which have cultural or societal taboos applied, such as sex workers), those experiencing homelessness, refugees, migrants, and/or transient populations (traditional nomads, Romani people) [3].

BACKGROUND

Disaster risk reduction (DRR) efforts often fail to address the complex and intersecting vulnerabilities of hyper-marginalised communities [3]. In the context of DRR, these intersecting vulnerabilities can amplify the risks faced by specific groups, such as gender and sexual minorities (GSM), indigenous communities, sex workers, the homeless, refugees, and migrants [3]. The cumulative impact of these intersecting identities often leaves these groups disproportionately exposed to disaster risks, with limited access to necessary resources and support [2].

Traditional DRR strategies tend to adopt a 'one-size-fits-all' approach, which overlooks the specific needs of those at the margins of society [4]. These strategies fail to recognise that hyper-marginalised groups face unique challenges due to social, cultural, and institutional discrimination [3]. For example, GSM may be excluded from shelter due to stigma, indigenous communities may be left out of planning processes despite possessing valuable traditional knowledge, and refugees or migrants may face language barriers that prevent access to critical information and resources during emergencies [5]. This neglect of intersecting vulnerabilities not only leads to ineffective disaster responses but also deepens existing inequalities [3,4].

Advocacy groups and specialised NGOs that represent these hyper-marginalised communities play a vital role in bridging the gap between DRR planners and the populations they serve [6]. These organisations possess a deep understanding of the particular needs of these communities, and they have developed tailored interventions that can significantly enhance resilience [6]. For example, they may advocate for culturally appropriate disaster support for indigenous peoples, or create safe housing initiatives for GSM individuals during disasters.

However, despite their critical role, these advocacy groups often struggle with insufficient funding, limited representation in decision-making processes, and persistent barriers rooted in societal discrimination [6].

INTERSECTIONALITY WITHIN DRR

Intersectionality plays a crucial role in understanding disaster risk reduction (DRR) because it illuminates how overlapping and intersecting identities exacerbate vulnerabilities [2]. For instance, a refugee who also identifies as a gender or sexual minority will face unique and compounded challenges during disasters [5]. Refugees often experience barriers in accessing vital resources due to language, legal status, or cultural discrimination. When a refugee is also a GSM, the barriers multiply: they may face exclusion from shelters due to homophobia or transphobia, or they may fear seeking assistance because of past experiences of discrimination from service providers/emergency responders [3]. This compounded marginalisation not only limits these communities' ability to access critical disaster services but also places them at heightened risk of harm, both during and after the disaster [7].

Another example is the experience of disabled women from indigenous communities. These individuals may already encounter societal discrimination due to their gender, disability, and indigenous identity. In a disaster context, they may be left out of emergency planning efforts, unable to access shelters or early warning systems due to physical barriers or language differences [8].

Traditional DRR frameworks often overlook these intersecting vulnerabilities, leading to responses that fail to meet the specific needs of individuals facing multiple layers of disadvantage [9]. This lack of recognition deepens pre-existing inequalities and puts these groups at even greater risk. Addressing these intersecting identities within DRR policies is essential for creating truly inclusive and effective disaster responses [9].

THE ROLE OF SPECIALISED NGOS AND ADVOCACY GROUPS

Advocacy groups and specialised NGOs representing hyper-marginalised communities should play a pivotal role in shaping disaster risk reduction (DRR) strategies [10]. Their grassroots engagement and deep understanding of the unique vulnerabilities these communities face should be a useful tool for government agencies and international humanitarian agencies to utilise when dealing with DRR policy [10].

These organisations possess specialised knowledge, often cultivated through years of working closely with and within their target populations [10,11]. Their expertise allows them to facilitate the design of DRR initiatives that address the specific needs of communities often excluded from mainstream disaster planning [11]. This localised and nuanced knowledge is essential for creating interventions that are not only effective but also culturally appropriate, ensuring that disaster preparedness and response are equitable and inclusive [11].

Specialised NGOs working with these communities have long advocated for the integration of this knowledge into formal DRR strategies [12]. By promoting culturally appropriate disaster support that respects indigenous practices and governance systems, these organisations help ensure that DRR interventions do not view those communities as homogenous groupings and instead reflect the diverse and complex societal and cultural systems found within those communities [10,12]. Advocacy groups representing less culturally 'accepted' groups, such as gender and sexual minorities have pioneered safe housing initiatives that cater specifically to the needs of individuals who might otherwise face discrimination in conventional disaster shelters [11]. These initiatives create inclusive and safe spaces during emergencies, mitigating the risk of harm for a group that is often hyper-marginalised in crisis situations.

These specialist organisations have knowledge and expertise that would often not be needed within a mainstream response and as such, is niche in its scope [12]. Organisations working with refugees, migrants, and nomadic populations often focus on legal issues arising from disasters such as status concerns, asylum applications and human rights abuses within the refugees country of origin that mean specialist DRR response is needed [5]. By addressing such specific barriers,

advocacy groups and NGOs not only protect these communities but also strengthen the overall resilience of society by creating a more inclusive and comprehensive DRR framework [10].

While specialised NGOs play a critical role in addressing the unique needs of hyper-marginalised communities in disaster risk reduction (DRR), it is essential to recognise the inherent structural limitations of the NGO model itself [13]. Many NGOs rely on short-term project-based funding, which restricts their ability to engage in long-term planning and limits their capacity to implement sustainable DRR initiatives [13]. This dependency on short-term funding cycles often results in a focus on immediate outputs rather than strategic, long-term resilience building. Furthermore, NGOs frequently face capacity constraints, such as limited staff, resources, and technical expertise, which hinder their ability to scale interventions or engage in comprehensive policy advocacy, this is especially present during times of crisis and or disaster [10]. These constraints are exacerbated by societal discrimination, which can further marginalise the communities they represent and limit their influence in decision-making processes [14].

To overcome these limitations, policymakers within government (local, central or international) and funding organisations must adopt measures that strengthen the capacity of NGOs to engage in sustained DRR efforts [15].

Multi-year funding streams, for instance, would provide NGOs with the financial security needed to plan and execute long-term initiatives that build community resilience over time. Additionally, capacity-building initiatives —such as training in DRR frameworks, advocacy skills, and technical expertise - could enhance NGOs' ability to influence policy and design more effective, scalable interventions [14,15]. By addressing these structural limitations, policymakers can elevate the research and influence of NGOs to fully realise their potential as key actors in inclusive and equitable disaster risk reduction, ensuring that their vital work is not undermined by the very systems meant to support them [14,15].

Addressing these challenges is essential for ensuring that these groups can fully contribute to building disaster resilience in a way that leaves no one behind.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR POLICYMAKERS

As governments and institutions increasingly acknowledge the need for more inclusive DRR strategies, it is crucial to harness the unique expertise of specialised NGOs and advocacy groups representing hyper-marginalised communities.

These policy suggestions highlight the importance of representation, sustained funding, inclusive policy design, and strong partnerships to ensure that DRR strategies address the complex and intersecting vulnerabilities of these communities.

Recommendation One:
Ensure representation

Incorporating representatives from hyper-marginalised groups in all stages of risk reduction planning and policy development is essential to creating equitable and inclusive strategies. These groups, such as gender and sexual minorities, indigenous populations, sex workers and refugees, face unique vulnerabilities and intersectional challenges that are often overlooked in traditional DRR frameworks. This unawareness in mainstream policy means that inclusion ensures specific needs and lived experiences are acknowledged and addressed in policies and interventions. By embedding these communities' voices in the policy process, governments can develop DRR strategies that are not only more responsive but also more effective, as they reflect the realities faced by those at the margins of society.

Moreover, representation in decision-making processes goes beyond tokenism; it elevates these communities to take ownership of DRR initiatives and fosters a sense of belonging in broader resilience efforts. Representation also helps dismantle systemic barriers rooted in societal discrimination, which often marginalises these groups in times of crisis. For instance, many GSM individuals are denied access to emergency shelters due to stigma, and incorporating their representatives into DRR discussions can lead to the creation of safe, inclusive spaces. Similarly, indigenous communities bring invaluable traditional knowledge of land

and resource management that can significantly enhance disaster preparedness and recovery. Governments and major organisations must, therefore, adopt frameworks that ensure these voices are present at every stage—from policy design to implementation and evaluation.

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Furthermore, inclusive representation fosters mutual trust between DRR institutions and hyper-marginalised communities. Trust is a vital component of successful disaster response, particularly in communities that have historically been excluded or discriminated against. By engaging these communities in meaningful ways, DRR institutions can create stronger networks of support that are not only responsive during crises but also proactive in building resilience before disasters strike. Ultimately, ensuring representation strengthens the overall inclusivity, equity, and effectiveness of DRR efforts, leaving no one behind.

Recommendation Two:
Strengthen funding mechanisms

Allocating specific funding for NGOs and advocacy groups that represent hyper-marginalised communities is crucial for enabling their sustained engagement in DRR. These organisations play a vital role in bridging the gap between hyper-marginalised communities and formal DRR structures by offering grassroots insights and targeted interventions. However, their ability to consistently contribute to DRR efforts is often constrained by

financial insecurity. Specialised NGOs working with groups such as migrants, refugees, and sexual minorities frequently operate with limited funding, which restricts their ability to scale their initiatives or engage in long-term planning.

Governments and international institutions must, therefore, establish dedicated funding streams to support the critical work of these organisations. Without reliable financial resources, these groups are unable to fully engage in advocacy, capacity-building, or service delivery, which are key to protecting at-risk populations during disasters. Furthermore, the lack of consistent funding leaves many hyper-marginalised communities without the specialised support they need to navigate the complexities of disaster recovery, thus exacerbating existing inequalities. By providing targeted financial support, governments can ensure that NGOs and advocacy groups have the capacity to continue their vital work and expand their impact within the DRR space.

Sustained funding also enables these organisations to develop innovative, culturally appropriate DRR strategies that are tailored to the specific needs of the communities they serve. For example, advocacy groups working with transient populations, such as nomadic groups or migrants, can design and implement flexible DRR interventions that consider the unique mobility patterns and legal challenges these communities face. By investing in these organisations, governments not only support the resilience of hyper-marginalised groups but also strengthen the overall disaster preparedness of society, as these groups often represent the most at-risk sectors of the population.

Recommendation Three:
Promote inclusive policy design

Inclusive policy design is foundational to disaster risk reduction (DRR) strategies that truly address the needs of hyper-marginalised groups. Traditional DRR frameworks frequently adopt a 'one-size-fits-all' approach, which fails to consider the intersecting vulnerabilities faced by groups such as indigenous populations, sex workers, and those experiencing homelessness. By developing policies that explicitly recognise the complex ways in which factors like race, gender, class, and ability overlap

to compound risk, governments can create DRR strategies that are more responsive and equitable.

Intersectionality underscores the importance of addressing these overlapping disadvantages. In the context of DRR, hyper-marginalised groups often face heightened risks due to the structural inequities embedded in societal, cultural, and economic systems. For example, refugees and migrants may encounter language barriers that prevent access to life-saving information, while indigenous communities may be excluded from emergency planning despite their traditional knowledge of disaster mitigation. By incorporating these realities into policy design, DRR strategies can better target the specific vulnerabilities of these groups, ensuring more effective disaster preparedness and response.

Inclusive policies also strengthen societal resilience by fostering greater equity in disaster response systems. When DRR strategies recognise and respond to the diverse needs of hyper-marginalised communities, they are more likely to be successful in protecting the entire population. Moreover, promoting inclusive policy design helps address the long-standing inequalities that hyper-marginalised groups face, not only in times of disaster but also in their everyday lives. Governments and international bodies must prioritise intersectional approaches to policy development if they are to create DRR frameworks that truly leave no one behind.

Recommendation Four:
Build partnerships

Collaborative partnerships between DRR institutions and specialised NGOs are essential for leveraging the expertise of those who work directly with hyper-marginalised groups. These organisations possess unique, localised knowledge that can significantly enhance the inclusivity and effectiveness of disaster preparedness and response efforts. However, many DRR frameworks fail to engage with these organisations in meaningful ways, resulting in strategies that overlook the needs of those most at risk.

Building strong, long-term partnerships with NGOs allows DRR institutions to tap into a wealth of specialised information and culturally relevant solutions. For instance, indigenous organisations can contribute traditional ecological knowledge that enhances resilience against environmental

disasters, while advocacy groups working with GSMs can ensure that disaster shelters and emergency services are inclusive and safe for those minorities. These partnerships are not merely a one-way exchange of information; they enable NGOs to shape DRR strategies in ways that reflect the lived realities of hyper-marginalised communities.

Moreover, fostering partnerships with NGOs helps to build trust between DRR institutions and the communities they serve. Many hyper-marginalised groups, such as migrants or those experiencing homelessness, may distrust formal institutions due to past experiences of discrimination or exclusion. By working with organisations that have established relationships and credibility within these communities, DRR institutions can more effectively engage and support those at risk. Partnerships also facilitate a more holistic approach to disaster resilience, combining the technical expertise of DRR institutions with the grassroots knowledge and advocacy power of specialised NGOs. This collaborative approach is key to building disaster-resilient societies that truly include all voices and perspectives.

CHALLENGES OF INCLUSION

The inclusion of specialised NGOs in government or UN disaster risk reduction (DRR) work is often fraught with challenges. One of the primary barriers is a deep-seated distrust from NGOs towards those in positions of power, where many of these organisations who represent hyper-marginalised communities have experienced the historical neglect or mistreatment by government institutions and international agencies. This history fosters scepticism regarding the intentions and effectiveness of governmental or UN-led initiatives [12]. NGOs may fear that their work will be co-opted or diluted, leading to tokenistic engagement rather than meaningful inclusion in policy development [13,14,15]. This mistrust is further compounded by the bureaucratic and hierarchical nature of government or UN processes, which can seem opaque and unresponsive to the specific, nuanced needs of the communities these NGOs represent [15].

Another significant challenge is the difficulty in facilitating effective communication and collaboration between two such different entities [12]. Specialised NGOs often operate on the ground, with a deep understanding of

local contexts and the lived experiences of marginalised groups. In contrast, government and UN agencies may have broader mandates, making it difficult to tailor responses to specific needs [12]. Bridging this gap requires not only technical expertise but also a willingness to navigate complex social, cultural, and political dynamics. The bureaucratic language and slow decision-making processes typical of governmental organisations can frustrate NGOs, whose capacity is often already stretched thin [12]. Additionally, many NGOs lack the resources or time to engage in lengthy policy discussions, as they are frequently focused on immediate service delivery and advocacy, leaving little room for policy writing or high-level strategy meetings [13,14]. These constraints make it difficult for NGOs to fully participate in shaping DRR policies, despite their vital role in advocating for the inclusion of hyper-marginalised voices.

CONCLUSION

As the evidence presented in this policy brief underscores, disaster risk reduction strategies that fail to account for the complex and intersecting vulnerabilities of hyper-marginalised communities will remain incomplete, ineffective, and inequitable. Specialised NGOs and advocacy organisations working directly with these communities are uniquely positioned to provide the insights, culturally appropriate solutions, and grassroots connections necessary for an inclusive DRR framework. Their involvement ensures that the specific needs of communities such as GSM, indigenous populations, refugees, and other at-risk groups are not only acknowledged but addressed in ways that elevate their voices and protect their rights.

To move towards more equitable and resilient societies, DRR policymakers and practitioners must take decisive action. The recommendations offered in this briefing—ensuring representation, strengthening funding mechanisms, promoting inclusive policy design, and building partnerships—serve as critical steps for fostering an inclusive approach to disaster preparedness and response. By embedding the expertise of these specialised organisations into every stage of DRR planning, from policy creation to implementation, governments and institutions can ensure that no community is left behind in times of crisis.

The path forward is clear: DRR strategies must evolve to be more inclusive, intersectional, and grounded in the lived realities of those most at risk. Policymakers must actively engage and

collaborate with specialised NGOs to harness their knowledge and bridge the gaps between formal DRR structures and hyper-marginalised populations. This shift is not just an ethical imperative; it is a practical necessity for building disaster-resilient systems that truly protect all members of society. The time to act is now—by championing the inclusion of these organisations, DRR institutions can lay the foundation for a more just, responsive, and effective disaster risk reduction landscape.

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