

Human Rights in times of Disaster: Fostering Risk Reduction, Preparedness, Resilience and Livelihoods for All

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Table of Contents

Abstract.....	3
1.0 Introduction	3
2.0 Impact of Disasters on Human Rights	5
3.0 Protecting Human Rights in times of Disaster	7
4.0 Conclusion	9
References	10

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Abstract

This paper discusses how human rights can be effectively protected and promoted in times of disaster. The paper observes that mounting global, regional, national and local disasters are a major threat to human rights. It discusses how disasters impact the attainment of human rights. Due to their negative impact on human rights, the paper posits that effective disaster prevention and management is necessary towards fostering human rights for Sustainable Development. Consequently, the paper discusses how human rights can be adequately and effectively upheld in times of disaster by fostering risk reduction, preparedness, resilience and livelihoods for all.

1.0 Introduction

Human rights refer to standards that recognize and protect the dignity of all human beings¹. In addition, human rights have been defined as basic entitlements and freedoms that belong to every person in the world, from birth until death². It has been observed that human rights are rights we have simply because we exist as human beings³. Human rights are inherent for all human beings and are not granted by any state⁴. The United Nations further observes that human rights are inherent to all human beings, regardless of race, sex, nationality, ethnicity, language, religion, or any other status⁵.

Human rights play a key role in the Sustainable Development discourse. For instance, it has been argued that human rights are central towards achieving Sustainable Development agenda since they are a necessary foundation for a peaceful, prosperous and sustainable world⁶. Further, it has been argued that without universal respect, implementation, and protection of human rights, it

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¹ United Nations Children's Fund., 'What are Human Rights?' Available at <https://www.unicef.org/child-rights-convention/what-are-human-rights> (Accessed on 17/08/2026)

² Equality and Human Rights Commission., 'What are Human Rights?' Available at <https://www.equalityhumanrights.com/human-rights/what-are-human-rights> (Accessed on 17/08/2026)

³ Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights., 'What are Human Rights?' Available at <https://www.ohchr.org/en/what-are-human-rights> (Accessed on 17/08/2026)

⁴ Ibid

⁵ United Nations., 'Human Rights' Available at <https://www.un.org/en/global-issues/human-rights> (Accessed on 17/08/2026)

⁶ United Nations Development Programme., 'Human Rights for Sustainable Development' Available at <https://www.undp.org/rollr/publications/human-rights-sustainable-development> (Accessed on 17/08/2026)

is impossible to build just, inclusive, and equal societies as envisaged under the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development⁷. The *2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*⁸ envisages a world of *universal respect for human rights and human dignity*, the rule of law, justice, equality and non-discrimination; of respect for race, ethnicity and cultural diversity; and of equal opportunity permitting the full realization of human potential and contributing to shared prosperity⁹. The Agenda envisages the pursuit of the ideal of Sustainable Development in accordance with core global human rights instruments including *Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR)*¹⁰, the *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR)*¹¹, and *International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR)*¹².

Despite the global recognition of human rights, it has been observed that challenges such as discrimination, marginalisation, inequalities within and among nations, wars and conflicts, racism, sexism and intolerance continue to persist all over the world undermining the attainment of human rights¹³. In addition, the mounting impacts of disasters that are being witnessed globally presents a major threat to human and environmental rights¹⁴. Consequently, it is necessary to uphold human rights in times of disaster for development.

This paper discusses how human rights can be effectively protected and promoted in times of disaster. The paper observes that mounting global, regional, national and local disasters are a major threat to human rights. It discusses how disasters impact the attainment of human rights. Due to their negative impact on human rights, the paper posits that effective disaster prevention and management is necessary towards fostering human rights for Sustainable Development. Consequently, the paper discusses how human rights can be adequately and effectively upheld in times of disaster by fostering risk reduction, preparedness, resilience and livelihoods for all.

⁷ United Nations Development Programme., 'Human rights as a foundation for Sustainable Development' Available at <https://www.undp.org/kazakhstan/blog/human-rights-foundation-sustainable-development#:~:text=Human%20rights%20are%20the%20foundation,%2C%20inclusive%2C%20and%20equal%20society> (Accessed on 17/08/2026)

⁸ United Nations General Assembly., 'Transforming Our World: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.' 21 October 2015, A/RES/70/1., Available at <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/21252030%20Agenda%20for%20Sustainable%20Development%20web.pdf> (Accessed on 17/08/2026)

⁹ Ibid

¹⁰ United Nations General Assembly. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR). New York: United Nations General Assembly, 1948

¹¹ United Nations General Assembly, *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights*, United Nations, Treaty Series, vol. 999, p. 171, 16 December 1966

¹² United Nations General Assembly, *International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights*, United Nations, Treaty Series, vol. 993, p. 3, 16 December 1966

¹³ United Nations Population Fund., 'Advancing Equity and Social Justice for People of African Descent' Available at <https://www.unfpa.org/advancing-equity-and-social-justice-people-african-descent> (Accessed on 17/08/2026)

¹⁴ United Nations., 'International Day for Disaster Risk Reduction' Available at <https://www.un.org/en/observances/disaster-reduction-day> (Accessed on 17/08/2026)

2.0 Impact of Disasters on Human Rights

Disasters have been described as natural or human-induced events which cause serious disruption to the functioning of a community, society or nation leading to widespread human, material, economic or environmental losses which exceed the ability of the affected community, society or nation to cope using their own resources¹⁵. In addition, a disaster has been described as serious disruption of the functioning of a community or a society at any scale due to hazardous events interacting with conditions of exposure, vulnerability and capacity, leading to human, material, economic and environmental losses and impacts¹⁶. Disasters can take several forms. For instance, human-made disasters result from human errors and include industrial explosions or structure failures¹⁷. In addition, it has been observed that natural disasters result from physical phenomena and include earthquakes, floods, droughts, landslides, and forest fires¹⁸. Further, some disasters can also be classified as complex and include epidemics or armed conflicts¹⁹.

The world is witnessing an alarming rate of both natural and human-induced disasters. For instance, it has been observed that environmental and human-induced factors including climate change, poor urban planning and lack of disaster preparedness, are increasingly driving and worsening natural disasters and hazards, such as earthquakes, floods, volcanic eruptions and tsunamis with severe consequences on both people and planet²⁰. In particular, climate change has been identified as a major disaster risk driver since it alters the hydrological cycle and intensifies the frequency and severity of extreme weather events such as floods, intense droughts and severe storms²¹. The United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) estimates that over 90 per cent of disasters are climate and weather-related²². These disasters include drought and aridification, wildfires, storms and floods²³.

The impacts of disasters affect both human and environmental rights. It has been observed that the effect of disasters can be immediate and localized, but such effects are often widespread and could last for a long period of time²⁴. In addition, it is anticipated that the frequency, complexity

¹⁵ Republic of Kenya., 'National Disaster Risk Management Policy' Available at <https://repository.kippira.or.ke/xmlui/bitstream/handle/123456789/559/NATIONAL%20Disaster%20Risk%20Mannagement%20POLICY%20APPROVED.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y> (Accessed on 18/08/2026)

¹⁶ United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction., 'Definition: Disaster' Available at <https://www.undrr.org/terminology/disaster> (Accessed on 18/08/2026)

¹⁷ What Is Disaster Management? Understanding Emergencies from Prevention to Mitigation., Available at <https://publichealth.tulane.edu/blog/what-is-disaster-management/> (Accessed on 18/08/2026)

¹⁸ Ibid

¹⁹ Ibid

²⁰ United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization., 'Disaster Risk Reduction' Available at <https://www.unesco.org/en/disaster-risk-reduction> (Accessed on 18/08/2026)

²¹ United Nations Environment Programme., 'Disasters and Climate Change' Available at <https://www.unep.org/topics/fresh-water/disasters-and-climate-change> (Accessed on 18/08/2026)

²² Ibid

²³ Ibid

²⁴ United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction., 'Definition: Disaster' Op Cit

and severity of disasters is likely to worsen in the future due to factors such as climate change, displacement, conflict, rapid and unplanned urbanization, technological hazards and public health emergencies²⁵. The United Nations observes that the prevalence of disasters globally is a growing threat to economic prosperity and Sustainable Development, with costs underestimated and unsustainable²⁶. It has been observed that disasters in whatever form disrupt communities and can take a serious toll on people, property, economies, and the environment²⁷.

Disasters can therefore severely impact human rights. In particular, the loss of life, livelihoods, infrastructure and social amenities due to disasters fuels grave human rights violations²⁸. In addition, disasters leave vulnerable populations at the risk of famine, food insecurity and poverty undermining human rights and Sustainable Development²⁹. In particular, it has been observed that the right to life, right to food, right to shelter, right to clean water and sanitation, right to health and right to property are among the fundamental human rights that are most threatened in times of disaster with disproportionate impacts on vulnerable populations³⁰. The immediate impacts of disasters can therefore affect fundamental human rights including the right to life, food, water and housing³¹. In addition, it has been observed that destruction of critical amenities, including schools, hospitals, water and energy systems, during disasters affect the rights to education, health, clean water and sanitation and energy among others³².

In addition to affecting human rights, disasters also take a huge toll on the environment. For example, it has been observed that environmental destruction and degradation due to disasters affect the ability of nature to sustain and provide essential ecosystem processes and services³³. Disasters usually threaten environmental rights by fuelling water and soil contamination, death of wildlife, destruction of forests, coastal erosion and biodiversity loss³⁴. According to UNEP,

²⁵ The International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies., 'What is a Disaster?' Available at <https://www.ifrc.org/our-work/disasters-climate-and-crises/what-disaster> (Accessed on 18/08/2026)

²⁶ United Nations., 'International Day for Disaster Risk Reduction' Op Cit

²⁷ What Is Disaster Management? Understanding Emergencies from Prevention to Mitigation., Op Cit

²⁸ United Nations., 'International Day for Disaster Risk Reduction' Op Cit

²⁹ United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction., 'Building Disaster Resilience in Sub-Saharan Africa' Available at <https://www.preventionweb.net/resilient-africa/home.html> (Accessed on 18/08/2026)

³⁰ United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction., 'Disasters are threat to human rights' Available at <https://www.undrr.org/news/disasters-are-threat-human-rights> (Accessed on 18/08/2026)

³¹ Ferris. E., 'Displacement, Natural Disasters, and Human Rights' Available at <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/displacement-natural-disasters-and-human-rights/#:~:text=The%20problems%20that%20are%20often,durable%20solutions%20for%20their%20displacement.> (Accessed on 18/08/2026)

³² Ibid

³³ Environmental Degradation., Available at <https://www.preventionweb.net/understanding-disaster-risk/risk-drivers/enviromental-degradation> (Accessed on 18/08/2026)

³⁴ The Environmental Effects of Natural Disasters., Available at <https://www.theenvironmentalblog.org/2020/07/the-environmental-effects-of-natural-disasters/> (Accessed on 18/08/2026)

disasters including droughts, floods, aridification and wildfires take a huge toll on the environment leading to ecosystem degradation, biodiversity loss and pollution³⁵.

In light of the foregoing, it is imperative to uphold both human and environmental rights in times of disaster in order to promote Sustainable Development.

3.0 Protecting Human Rights in times of Disaster

Due to their adverse impacts on people and planet, it is imperative to protect both human and environmental rights in times of disaster. The *Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction*³⁶ was adopted as global blueprint for effective disaster management for Sustainable Development. Under the Sendai Framework, states commit to address disaster risk reduction and the building of resilience to disasters with a renewed sense of urgency within the context of Sustainable Development and poverty eradication, and to integrate, as appropriate, both disaster risk reduction and the building of resilience into policies, plans, programmes and budgets at all levels and to consider both within relevant frameworks³⁷. In particular, the Sendai Framework recognises the impact of disasters on human rights. The Framework seeks to ensure that managing the risk of disasters is aimed at protecting persons and their property, health, livelihoods and productive assets, as well as cultural and environmental assets, while *promoting and protecting all human rights*, including the right to development (Emphasis added).

In order to effectively promote and protect human rights in times of disaster, it is imperative to foster risk reduction. Disaster risk reduction is both a concept and practice of reducing disaster risks through systematic efforts to analyse and reduce the causal factors of disasters³⁸. It has been observed that disaster risk reduction aims at preventing new and reducing existing disaster risk and managing residual risk, all of which contribute to strengthening resilience and therefore to the achievement of Sustainable Development³⁹. It has been argued that disaster risk reduction is an integral part of social and economic development, and is a vital global agenda if development is to be sustainable for the benefit of both present and future generations⁴⁰. Through effective disaster risk reduction strategies, it is possible to reduce the risk of disasters through systematic efforts to analyze and manage the causal factors of disasters including through reduced exposure to hazards, lessened vulnerability of people and property, wise management of land,

³⁵ United Nations Environment Programme., 'Disasters and Climate Change' Op Cit

³⁶ Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015-2030., Available at <https://www.undrr.org/media/16176/download?startDownload=20240430> (Accessed on 18/08/2026)

³⁷ Ibid

³⁸ United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization., 'Disaster Risk Reduction' Available at <https://www.unesco.org/en/disaster-risk-reduction> (Accessed on 18/08/2026)

³⁹ United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction., 'Definition: Disaster Risk Reduction' Available at <https://www.undrr.org/terminology/disaster-risk-reduction#:~:text=Disaster%20risk%20reduction%20is%20aimed,the%20achievement%20of%20sustainable%20development.> (Accessed on 18/08/2026)

⁴⁰ Disaster Risk Reduction., Available at <https://sdgs.un.org/topics/disaster-risk-reduction> (Accessed on 18/08/2026)

environment and natural resources and improved preparedness for adverse events⁴¹. It is therefore imperative to strengthen disaster risk reduction policies and practices in order to reduce the vulnerability of both people and planet to disasters towards protecting human and environmental rights.

There is also need to strengthen disaster preparedness and resilience in order to effectively protect human rights in times of disaster. In particular, it has been observed that early warning systems can strengthen disaster preparedness and resilience by providing timely and informed alerts on disasters thus enabling individuals, households, communities and nations to effectively anticipate, respond and recover from disasters therefore reducing the impact of disasters on human life, the environment and economic development⁴². Early warning systems can provide timely and actionable warnings of impending disasters such as cyclones, floods, droughts, heatwaves or wildfires thus enabling effective and timely responses that can reduce disaster risks and build resilience⁴³. The United Nations notes that strengthening multi-hazard early warning systems that lead to early action is vital in disaster preparedness, prevention and management by reducing risk and building resilience⁴⁴. It is therefore necessary to invest in early warning systems in order to strengthen disaster preparedness and resilience towards protecting human rights. Technology provides effective solutions towards realising this goal. For example, it has been observed that the integration of AI into early warning systems is advancing monitoring and forecasting capabilities, optimizing warning dissemination and communication so that important information reaches people at risk of disasters in time for them to act and avoid the worst impact of disasters such as severe storms, floods and landslides⁴⁵. Integrating AI and other modern technologies into early warning systems can therefore bolster preparedness and resilience towards safeguarding human rights in times of disaster.

Protecting livelihoods is also necessary towards upholding human rights in times of disaster. One of the core aims of the Sendai Framework is the substantial reduction of disaster risk and losses in lives, *livelihoods* and health and in the economic, physical, social, cultural and environmental assets of persons, businesses, communities and countries⁴⁶. Protecting livelihoods is key since the impacts of disasters can disrupt basic services and damage sources of livelihood in the affected

⁴¹ Republic of Kenya., 'National Disaster Risk Management Policy' Op Cit

⁴² International Labour Organization., 'The importance of early warning systems in disaster risk reduction' Available at <https://www.ilo.org/resource/article/importance-early-warning-systems-disaster-risk-reduction> (Accessed on 18/08/2026)

⁴³ United Nations Development Programme., 'What are early warning systems and why do they matter for climate action?' Available at <https://climatepromise.undp.org/news-and-stories/what-are-early-warning-systems-and-why-do-they-matter-climate-action> (Accessed on 18/08/2026)

⁴⁴ United Nations., 'United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction (UNDRR)' Available at <https://www.un.org/ldcportal/content/united-nations-office-disaster-risk-reduction-undrr> (Accessed on 18/08/2026)

⁴⁵ Enhancing Early Warning Systems with Artificial Intelligence., Available at <https://www.itu.int/itu-d/sites/digital-impact-unlocked/enhancing-early-warning-systems-with-artificial-intelligence/> (Accessed on 18/08/2026)

⁴⁶ Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015-2030., Op Cit

area⁴⁷. It has been observed that there is need to strengthen locally-led adaptation to disaster risks in order to enhance the resilience of local communities to stresses and shocks on livelihoods as a result of disasters⁴⁸. By strengthening adaptive capacity at the local level, communities can sustain themselves and effectively confront disaster threats and risks to livelihoods⁴⁹. Financial protection and support for individuals, communities and nations affected by disasters is also necessary towards enhancing resilience, supporting livelihoods and enabling better recovery from the impacts of disasters towards promoting human rights⁵⁰.

Through the foregoing initiatives, it is possible to effectively protect human rights in times of disaster.

4.0 Conclusion

With disasters mounting all over the world with adverse effects on people and planet, it is imperative to ensure that human and environmental rights are effectively and adequately protected towards Sustainable Development. In particular, fostering risk reduction, preparedness, resilience and livelihoods is a pertinent agenda towards promoting and protecting human rights in times of disaster for Sustainable Development.

⁴⁷ United Nations., 'Disaster- Definition and Facts' Available at <https://indonesia.un.org/en/306494-disaster-definition-and-facts> (Accessed on 18/08/2026)

⁴⁸ Uddin. M. S et al., 'Disasters threaten livelihoods, and people cope, adapt and make transformational changes": Community resilience and livelihoods reconstruction in coastal communities of Bangladesh' *International Journal of Disaster Risk Reduction.*, Volume 63, September 2021

⁴⁹ Ibid

⁵⁰ International Organization for Migration., 'Taking Sendai Forward: IOM Strategic Work Plan on Disaster Risk Reduction & Resilience' Available at https://www.iom.int/sites/g/files/tmzbd1486/files/our_work/DOE/humanitarian_emergencies/Disaster-Risk-Reduction-Strategic-Action-Plan.pdf (Accessed on 18/08/2026)

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