

Applying an intersectional lens to risk-informed development

Everyone is vulnerable to disasters. However, certain people, groups, and communities are more at risk of being affected by disaster impacts than others. Factors such as gender, income, location, age, ethnicity, disability as well as their intersections influence how disaster risks unfold.

Existing socio-economic conditions, forces of oppression and power structures shape risks and our capacities to prevent, prepare for, cope with, and recover from disasters. Intersectional thinking challenges ‘one size-fits-all’ approaches to capacity building by exposing explicit and implicit assumptions about predefined social categories. Against this background, this factsheet takes a closer look at applying an intersectional lens to strengthen risk-informed development.

Why do we need an intersectional lens?

The aim of Germany’s feminist development policy is to eliminate structural inequalities, unequal treatment, and discrimination through advocating for equal participation by all people in social, political, and economic life. This approach is in line with SDG 5 on Gender Equality and SDG 10 on Reduced Inequalities as well as the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction (SFDRR), which calls for engaging “women, children and youth, persons with disabilities, poor people, migrants, indigenous peoples, [...] and older persons in the design and implementation of policies, plans and standards” to reduce risks. Considering that inequalities increase risks by exacerbating vulnerabilities and exposure to hazards, consistent participation, and inclusion of all members of society is the basis for effective risk-informed decision-making, prevention, and preparedness efforts as well as safeguarding development achievements.

What is risk-informed development (RID)?

The RID approach integrates a broad understanding of risks linked to climate, health, economy, environment, and various other sectors and fields. Addressing the systemic and interconnected nature of risks, RID is an interdisciplinary, strategic, and flexible guiding principle to support risk-informed decision-making towards more resilient and sustainable development. RID recognizes that risks are influenced by our activities, capacities, and choices. ([UNDP, 2022](#)).

What is intersectionality?

Intersectionality “recognises that people’s lives are shaped by their identities, relationships, and social factors. These combine to create intersecting forms of privilege and oppression depending on a person’s context and existing power structures such as patriarchy, ableism, colonialism, imperialism, homophobia, and racism.” ([UN Women, 2021](#))

Inequalities and disasters

Disasters have the potential to create or reinforce existing (gender) inequalities, discrimination, and social exclusion. This can manifest in limited access to information, risk communication, resources or suitable transport and thus lower likelihood of being able or willing to evacuate.

After the cyclone Gorky in Bangladesh in 1991, for instance, 14 times more deaths were recorded among women than men. As a consequence, the country tackled the underrepresentation of women in disaster risk management (DRM): Women were trained to become community mobilizers and transmitters of early warnings, and cyclone shelters were adapted to their needs. When hurricane *Sidr* hit the coast of Bangladesh in 2007 the positive impact of this shift was evident as the

disaggregated mortality rate dropped to five women for every man. This example of shifting the perception of women towards agents of change shows how following a more inclusive approach and capacity building can reduce risks and, thereby, the negative impacts of disasters.

Today and increasingly in the future, we face systemic, persistent, and interconnected challenges. Thus, addressing risks has to go beyond the field of DRM and take a more holistic point of view, framed under the concept of *risk-informed development*. Likewise, there has been a shift in gender equality policy from a predominantly women-centered to an intersectional approach. Such an intersectional approach provides an analytical tool to enable a more nuanced understanding of people's needs, interests, capacities, and experiences.

Applying an intersectional lens to theory and practice in international cooperation

Development worldwide is taking place in a dynamic environment of risks. This complex system of risks is exacerbated by gender inequality, climate change, conflict, unplanned urbanization, and other risk drivers. For risk-informed development, we need to continuously apply an intersectional lens to development decision-making across all sectors. This means to consider ways in which social categories and power dynamics influence risks in context-specific settings. To strengthen resilience, we need to understand and include **both inequality considerations as well as a shifting risk landscape**, to tailor policies, projects, and interventions.

Becoming more risk-informed is an intricate task, as hazards and risks are subject to the setting and ever changing. Accordingly, the vulnerability, coping capacities, and resilience of individuals, groups, and communities vary with root causes in the social system and power structures. An additional challenge is the **lack of disaggregated data**

leading to the invisibility of minority, vulnerable and marginalized groups in risk and disaster data, models, and analyses. For example, in the main database for disaster losses, DesInventar, only 13 of 85 reporting countries register disaggregated data by gender or age. Disaggregated data allows for **more tailored interventions that are closely aligned with needs and local conditions** but also consider existing power structures and role perceptions, following the do-no-harm-approach and the **leave-no-one-behind principle**.

Strengthening risk-informed development is a governance effort at heart as risk itself cannot be separated from the complex power dynamics in place. Resilience relies on equal access to information, resources, and participation. Risk governance needs to be:

- (1) based on a common understanding of the systemic nature of risks,
- (2) tailored to the setting, for instance, community-specific needs and capacities, and
- (3) carried out by a cross-sectoral and multi-level alliance of actors, which takes time, resources, and political commitment.

Understanding the impact of norms, roles and socio-cultural and economic factors within a given culture and society and their intersections is critical to reducing disaster risk and foster risk-informed development. We need instruments and better data that address these intersections and ensure that existing inequalities and vulnerabilities are not exacerbated. Overall, the risk-informed development as a guiding principle can provide a foundation for transformative, needs-based action to reduce differential impact, leaving no one behind. Most international cooperation projects and programmes entail opportunities to prevent, mitigate, reduce, or manage risks with an intersectional lens. The table below lists some approaches to help identify them.

Entry points for applying an intersectional lens to risk-informed development

Allow for contextual complexity

- **Refrain from simplifying a context.** Acknowledge the complexity. Avoid generalizations—recognise intra-group difference in terms of risk exposure and that communities are neither homogenous nor static. Find measures to ensure the involvement of individuals and groups who are in particularly vulnerable situations.
- **Favour tailored solutions** – not the quickest.¹ Try to identify opportunities to include RID measures.
- **Raise awareness** that risk is systemic and that if intersectionality and (gender) inequality are not addressed, vulnerabilities are increasing.²

Relevant data is key

- Find, collect, and share as much **disaggregated data** about the context as possible to track existing social inequalities, risks and intersecting modes of discrimination that include categories such as gender, age, disability, income, ethnicity, etc. You don't have to reinvent the wheel here—use existing data or analyses on inequality as a starting point to find entry points.³
- Design and share data collections and data bases which are **accessible, practical, and user-friendly**.
- Conduct **qualitative** interviews and multistakeholder dialogues where quantitative analyses leave blind spots.

Build bridges and use synergy effects

- Broaden your project horizon and **prioritise collaboration** internally: Align action to target intersectional inequalities.⁴
- **Identify entry points or gaps** in existing programming with partners. Be “opportunistic” – identify low hanging fruits, i.e., sectors or topics where partner organisations are willing and eager to pilot an intersectional approach.
- Allow for and empower a **wide and continued participation** of civil society. Ensure that the community addressed and those in vulnerable situations are involved in decision-making processes, which deal with risks including those related to intersectionality.
- Include trusted stakeholders and gatekeepers as **allies**, who know the local settings and can advocate better in the communities.
- **Monitor** how power structures and intersectional categories in a context change depending on stressors such as climate change, fragility, or disaster impacts.

¹ [Project Cycle Toolkit](#) can be used as a starting point.

² BMZ Factsheet “[A feminist approach to climate policy—The need for a feminist development policy to address the climate crisis](#)”, 2022

³ i.e., by the [United Nations Statistics Division](#), [Washington Group on Disability Statistics](#), [WHO](#), or [WHO Health Inequality Monitor](#)

⁴ The SP “Agenda 2030, Reducing Poverty and Inequality” offers an [LNOB online training](#) in collaboration with the AIZ.

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