**INTERNATIONAL DISASTER RESPONSE**

**DEFINITION**
International disaster response occurs when foreign governments, agencies, and organizations assist a society whose government and civil institutions cannot adequately address the humanitarian needs of its disaster-affected populations. Assistance includes immediate and longer-term efforts designed to save lives, alleviate suffering, maintain human dignity, and help people prevent, mitigate, prepare for, and respond to future crises.

**SOCIAL ISSUE REPORT SUMMARY**
Investments in high-quality international disaster response present a significant opportunity for impact:
- Disasters can occur anywhere, but they pose the greatest threat to the world’s poor. While residents of the least-developed countries represent 11 percent of the global population exposed to hazards, they account for 53 percent of all casualties. For more on why disaster response matters, see page 2.
- International disaster responses are complex endeavors that require coordination among organizations whose internal cultures, mandates, and procedures are not always aligned. For more on barriers to a successful response, see pages 2-3.
- SIR has identified four essential components of disaster response that high-performing organizations incorporate into their programs. For more on these components, see page 4.

**FACTS: INTERNATIONAL DISASTER RESPONSE**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Average number of residents affected by climate disasters from 2000 to 2004</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>in developed countries</td>
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<tr>
<td>1 in 1,500</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Estimated number of people affected globally by disasters between 2000 and 2009</th>
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<td>2 billion</td>
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<tr>
<th>Estimated economic loss from natural disasters in the 1990s that could have been eliminated if $40 billion of investments in preventative measures had been made</th>
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<tr>
<td>$280 billion</td>
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**SOCIAL ISSUE INDICATORS**
Universally accepted indicators for assessing disaster response impact are presently lacking. Current response evaluations tend to rely on anecdotal evidence of reduced vulnerability, focus on the goods and services resulting from aid activities, or consider the short- and medium-term effects of such activities. These products and near-term effects are consequences — but not the ultimate goals — of disaster response. The objective of assistance is to create impact, or positive, intended, and lasting or significant changes in people’s lives.

If consistently and globally measured, decreased vulnerability and increased resilience to disaster could be two indicators of disaster response impact. Decreased vulnerability refers to a society’s reduced susceptibility to suffering from natural or man-made hazards. Increased resilience to disaster describes a society’s improved coping capacity and ability to recover its economic and social life after a crisis. Changes in vulnerability and resilience could be measured over time using indices, or collections of variables representing social, economic, environmental, and political conditions that influence survival and recovery. Such variables might include poverty level, number of people living in high-risk locations, extent of environmental degradation, and degree of inadequacy of infrastructure and public services.

Although several United Nations (UN) agencies, universities, and development banks have created international indices of disaster risk, these tools were not designed to discern changes in vulnerability and resilience attributable to disaster response. Sustainable development and improvements in governance, environmental stewardship, and social conditions unrelated to disaster response can also influence these indicators.

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1. For more on why disaster response matters, see page 2.
2. For more on barriers to a successful response, see pages 2-3.
3. For more on these components, see page 4.
The scope of this report covers disasters that prompt the leaders of nations to formally appeal to the international community for multilateral humanitarian assistance. As developed nations generally have the resources needed to conduct their own relief and recovery activities, requests for external assistance come largely from developing countries. Disaster response is one important component of international humanitarian aid.

International disaster responses require the expertise of many specialized actors, including affected government entities, militaries, intergovernmental organizations (typically UN agencies), international and domestic nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, and affected civilian populations. No single actor can undertake all facets of relief and recovery. Addressing survivors’ needs, which span health, nutrition, water and sanitation, emergency shelter, and livelihood reconstruction, frequently requires the key actors outlined in Figure 1.10,11 While all of these actors respond in some way to humanitarian disasters, not all are considered humanitarian aid organizations. In this report, NGOs and agencies that provide humanitarian assistance to disaster-affected populations (including international and local NGOs, members of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, and UN agencies active in disaster response operations) are international humanitarian aid organizations.

**FIGURE 1: KEY DISASTER RESPONSE ACTORS**

- **Governments of Affected Countries**
  - Declare crisis and invite international aid
  - Assist and protect humanitarian aid workers
  - Monitor and coordinate external assistance
  - Set regulatory and legal frameworks governing assistance

- **Military Forces**
  - Domestic or international
  - May need to create secure environments for humanitarian missions or temporarily provide essential services

- **UN Agencies**
  - Provide leadership and coordination for international community’s humanitarian aid efforts

- **International NGOs**
  - Skilled staff, rapid deployment capacity, and operational flexibility
  - Includes International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement

- **Local NGOs**
  - Known locally and familiar with affected area and culture
  - Often work with international NGOs in aid programs
  - Includes national and local Red Cross and Red Crescent societies

- **Affected Populations**
  - First responders in disasters
  - Aid programs’ intended beneficiaries

Collaboration and coordination among actors are vital, enabling them to combine their specific knowledge, skills, technologies, experiences, and capacities; use resources optimally; and facilitate replication of successful solutions.12 The global web of humanitarian aid actors has been described as an inter-organizational social network with a hyperpluralistic structure and noncentralized authority dispersed among interdependent but quasi-autonomous partners.13 Some observers describe it as an “ecosystem” rather than a “system,” so as not to imply more cohesion and uniformity of objectives than actually exists.14 Besides the array of actors and postdisaster needs, comprehensive disaster responses entail multiple phases. These phases are summarized, with examples of activities, in Figure 2.

The majority of the developing world’s residents lack the physical, economic, and social protections from disaster that wealthier countries enjoy. Earthquake- and hurricane-resistant building codes and land-use restrictions do not always exist or are not well enforced. Property, business, and crop insurance markets are less sophisticated or out of reach to many. Ability to survive and recover from disaster depends not only on the disaster’s physical magnitude, but also on the socioeconomic, political, and environmental conditions in which people live.15 World Bank researchers have described poverty and vulnerability as “closely linked and mutually reinforcing.”16 When factors associated with poverty (e.g., limited access to resources, education and training, markets, and power) combine with aspects of vulnerability (such as unsafe living conditions, lack of security, low income levels, and depleted natural resources), people are left with little means of protecting themselves and recovering from disasters. Destruction of assets, loss of production capacity, and damage to trade, health, or education infrastructure can severely limit – and even undo – economic and social development gains.17 Global trends in population growth and migration; rapid urbanization in areas prone to earthquakes, hurricanes, floods, or landslides; environmental degradation; climate change; and violent conflict are driving increases in the severity – and possibly the frequency – of disasters.18 These trends make it even more vital to understand how humanitarian aid creates impact.

**BARRIERS TO A SUCCESSFUL RESPONSE**

Multiple challenges confront humanitarian aid actors, even when financial support for interventions is generous. SIR has identified two major factors, summarized in Figure 3. Understanding the barriers to successful response can help donors and funders make informed decisions about supporting disaster response work. SIR encourages donors and funders to explore how individual NGOs...
fit into and contribute to ecosystemwide efforts to reduce these barriers to creating positive impact. Connecting complementary resources to form a high-performing, integrated network of actors is not easy. Reasons include:

I. INSUFFICIENT COORDINATION AMONG ACTORS

Divergent priorities and values

Coordinated interventions require actors with very different missions to work collaboratively. However, differences in organizational structures, cultures, and practices – designed to promote each entity’s individual effectiveness – can complicate efforts to realize common objectives.

- For example, NGOs’ need to maintain their neutrality and impartiality has made them historically reluctant to share information with military forces. Military information classification practices and need-to-know restrictions, intended to protect operational security, can also hamper communication with civilian organizations.

- Similarly, some NGOs perceive that donor government use of humanitarian aid funding as a foreign policy tool weakens the distinction between humanitarian activity and military or political action, which is critical to upholding humanitarian law and protecting aid worker safety.

Limitations to mandates

Vulnerability and resilience, closely related to economic and social systems, also depend on governance. Addressing the latter, however, is beyond the purview of most actors. Adherence to the principles of independence and neutrality prevents international aid NGOs from challenging the authority of sovereign nations, even to redress political, economic, and social disparities underlying vulnerability.

Unaligned information collection and sharing processes

To plan and implement aid programs, actors need information on the affected country, crisis analysis, and details of changing conditions on the ground. Because interventions are complex and dynamic, timely data collection, analysis, and information dissemination are vital to responder decision making and coordination abilities. Actors are finding, however, that data collection and sharing processes remain highly individualized, and efforts to standardize these processes are not yet adequate.

Inexperienced staff and organizations

Organizational and individual staff experiences are key to building working relationships with other aid actors and local communities, and these relationships take time to develop.

- When many inexperienced NGOs arrive on disaster scenes, they can complicate relief and recovery efforts by acting unilaterally or by producing poor-quality work.

- Experienced NGOs face difficulty in recruiting and retaining qualified staff. Loss of institutional memory can reduce disaster response program quality. High turnover can threaten an organization’s retention of knowledge and relationships unless mechanisms exist to preserve them.

II. LIMITED INVOLVEMENT OF AFFECTED POPULATIONS AND GOVERNMENTS IN RESPONSE

Affected populations’ perceptions of needs not driving programming

International aid actors strive to develop networks of community based organizations, national NGOs, and public and private sector resources to support and facilitate local ownership of disaster responses. Although the importance of allowing affected populations to guide aid program design and evaluation, and the need for local institutional involvement in aid implementation are recognized, such practices are not universal. Donor reporting requirements do not always compel NGOs to consider affected populations’ perceptions of needs and program impact in their accountability procedures.

Governments not accountable or responsive to citizens’ needs

Whether affected governments implement the necessary disaster risk reduction (DRR) components of aid programs depends on their responsiveness and accountability to their citizens. As public goods, DRR and increased resilience to crisis cannot be procured through private or voluntary markets alone. Adequate government investment in and organization of the infrastructure, human capital, and legal institutions necessary to promote and sustain disaster preparedness and resilience is fundamental. However, the poverty, social inequity, internal conflict, and environmental risks often present in vulnerable countries are symptoms of poor governance and unresponsiveness to citizen needs.

Denial of aid to populations in crisis

In extreme cases, authoritarian regimes, military juntas and warring political factions deny foreign humanitarian aid to populations in crisis. In certain instances, hostile authorities go beyond prohibiting external aid organizations from assisting people in need by expelling aid workers or even attacking them.
International disaster response is a complex issue best understood and addressed at a broad level. However, donor and funder support for humanitarian aid ecosystem efforts are often expressed through contributions to individual NGOs immediately following a disaster. Therefore, this report aims to assist donors and funders in identifying NGOs most capable of working within the broader ecosystem. In the following discussion, “effectiveness” and “impact” are distinct concepts. While effectiveness measures performance of functions toward objectives, impact measures the ultimate effects on the lives of affected people in a wider socioeconomic and political context.26

SIR has identified four essential qualities required for NGOs to effectively contribute to disaster response interventions capable of creating positive impact.

**CHARACTERISTICS OF HIGH-PERFORMING ORGANIZATIONS**

- **Aid Appropriateness:** NGOs responding to disaster provide appropriate assistance when they:
  - Abide by the core principles of humanity, neutrality, impartiality, and independence. That is, they take steps to save lives and relieve suffering wherever it is found; act solely on the basis of need and without discrimination; do not take sides in armed conflicts or other disputes; and ensure the autonomy of humanitarian action from any political, economic, religious or military interest.27
  - Respect and promote international humanitarian, refugee, and human rights laws
  - Work with host government leaders responsible for initiating, organizing, and implementing aid where possible
  - Use assessment tools to identify, prioritize, and address specific needs of affected populations, accounting for cultural, religious, and environmental contexts, and with sensitivity to gender, age, and disability status
  - Recognize that disasters do not affect all people in the same way, and design aid programs accordingly. As crises exacerbate existing inequalities among different socioeconomic classes, ethnicities, genders, or people of otherwise vulnerable status, international NGOs can help defend marginalized people’s rights to relief and recovery assistance by partnering with local NGOs already serving these populations

- **Contribution to Impact:** NGOs contribute to impact creation when they address affected populations’ immediate or long-term needs and enable them to rebuild their economic and social lives. Addressing immediate needs is the first stage in a progression of activities that creates impact over the long term. Before recovery and risk reduction activities can be accomplished, attention to needs such as health, malnutrition, or temporary shelter may be required.

  Assistance must address the underlying sources of risk and causes of vulnerability to disasters. While it may not resolve the social, economic, and political issues at the root of vulnerability, aid should endeavor to enhance resilience by improving affected populations’ ability to prevent, prepare for, mitigate, and respond to crises.

- **Relevant Skills and Experiences:** Comprehensive disaster responses attempt to address all facets of a society’s recovery. NGOs maximize their contributions to multiactor interventions by:
  - Adhering to the highest standards of practice in their specific sectors of humanitarian aid
  - Using frameworks, procedures, and technologies that facilitate cooperation with other aid actors in the field
  - Establishing relationships with local actors, other international NGOs, the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, host governments, and UN agencies
  - Developing procedures and practices to protect disaster survivors and aid workers from violence during humanitarian operations

- **Connectedness:** Because the capabilities and degree of coordination among actors affects the speed, scope, and quality of aid delivery, NGOs most able to contribute to impact creation:
  - Develop relationships with local NGOs and government entities in vulnerable regions prior to disasters
  - Procure material and labor from local markets where possible, do not undermine local institutions, and avoid creating aid dependency
  - Facilitate affected communities’ participation in planning, implementing, monitoring, and evaluating aid programs to promote responsiveness to local needs, minimize susceptibility to political manipulation, build local capacity, and maximize equity.28
  - Contribute to ecosystem capacity, accountability, or quality improvement efforts through participation in industry working groups or research projects
Attempts at quantifying financial return on disaster response and risk reduction investments have estimated that $1 spent on preventative measures saves up to $7 in emergency response and rehabilitation. The full return on investment, however, will be realized when affected populations experience not a return to “life as normal,” but a life with improved physical safety and economic possibility. Ideally, the activities and outcomes of aid programs that incorporate disaster response and disaster risk reduction would lead to positive social, economic, and environmental changes evidenced by indicators such as the following:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>BEFORE (HIGH VULNERABILITY/LOW RESILIENCY)</th>
<th>AFTER (LOWER VULNERABILITY/GREATER RESILIENCE)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Little understanding and awareness of risk factors among decision makers or general public</td>
<td>Understanding of hazards and vulnerabilities to disaster, enabling knowledge-based action to be taken</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No culture of safety or resilience</td>
<td>Infrastructure, scientific, and institutional capacities to study and forecast hazards, vulnerabilities, and disaster impacts</td>
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<tr>
<td>Inadequate government leadership and investment in DRR capacity</td>
<td>Strengthened policy, technical, and institutional capacities in disaster management</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economic and social development set back to level of earlier generations following disastrous event</td>
<td>Reduction in damages and losses from extreme events</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Damage and loss from extreme events contribute to ongoing poverty nationally</td>
<td>Economic and social lives restored more quickly after crises</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DRR not a national or local priority with strong institutional basis for implementation</td>
<td>Culture of safety and resilience promoted through information collection and exchange and education and training on hazards, risks and DRR</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>— Absence or lack of enforcement of hazard-resistant building codes</td>
<td>Establishment and maintenance of early-warning systems and appropriate building codes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>— Lack of early-warning systems</td>
<td>— Sustainable use and management of natural resources and better land-use planning</td>
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<tr>
<td>— High-risk natural resource and land management practices</td>
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**COMPARISON: NEGATIVE IMPACTS OF EARTHQUAKES IN HAITI AND CALIFORNIA**

Contrasting earthquakes that occurred in Haiti and California illustrates the differences between a highly vulnerable society with a low level of resilience and a far less vulnerable society with a high level of resilience. While not directly comparable for geophysical, seismological, and other geographical reasons, the negative impacts of Haiti’s 7.0 magnitude quake in January 2010 and Northern California’s 6.9 magnitude quake in October 1989 were striking in their differences. The Haiti earthquake caused more extensive death and destruction than the Loma Prieta earthquake. Many of these differences are related to prevailing conditions in each region, which are described in the table below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ECONOMIC PROFILE</th>
<th>HAITI: JANUARY 2010</th>
<th>CALIFORNIA (LOMA PRIETA): OCTOBER 1989</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Poorest country in the Western Hemisphere; prior to quake, 67% of residents living on under $2 a day</td>
<td>10th wealthiest state in the world’s wealthiest nation</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SOCIOPOLITICAL CONDITIONS</th>
<th>HAITI: JANUARY 2010</th>
<th>CALIFORNIA (LOMA PRIETA): OCTOBER 1989</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>History of political and criminal violence, economic instability, dictatorship, government corruption</td>
<td>Democratic governance, economic stability, high standard of living</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PROTECTIVE INFRASTRUCTURE</th>
<th>HAITI: JANUARY 2010</th>
<th>CALIFORNIA (LOMA PRIETA): OCTOBER 1989</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No national building codes</td>
<td>Strict earthquake-resistant building codes</td>
<td></td>
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<thead>
<tr>
<th>FATALITIES</th>
<th>HAITI: JANUARY 2010</th>
<th>CALIFORNIA (LOMA PRIETA): OCTOBER 1989</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Estimated 220,000 to 230,000</td>
<td>63</td>
<td></td>
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<thead>
<tr>
<th>INJURIES</th>
<th>HAITI: JANUARY 2010</th>
<th>CALIFORNIA (LOMA PRIETA): OCTOBER 1989</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Over 300,000</td>
<td>Under 4,000</td>
<td></td>
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<thead>
<tr>
<th>BUILDINGS DAMAGED OR DESTROYED</th>
<th>HAITI: JANUARY 2010</th>
<th>CALIFORNIA (LOMA PRIETA): OCTOBER 1989</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>280,000, including 105,000 homes destroyed and 208,000 damaged</td>
<td>100,000</td>
<td></td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PEOPLE DISPLACED</th>
<th>HAITI: JANUARY 2010</th>
<th>CALIFORNIA (LOMA PRIETA): OCTOBER 1989</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Estimates range from 1 to 2 million</td>
<td>12,000</td>
<td></td>
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</table>

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>OTHER INFRASTRUCTURE DESTROYED OR DAMAGED</th>
<th>HAITI: JANUARY 2010</th>
<th>CALIFORNIA (LOMA PRIETA): OCTOBER 1989</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Over 50 hospitals or health centers, over 1,300 educational institutions, most ministerial and public administration buildings, and key land, air, and sea transportation facilities rendered unusable</td>
<td>Structural failures of several bridges and highways, including Bay Bridge</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sources: BBC News, U.S. Geological Survey Hazards Program, Tulane University Disaster Resilience Leadership Academy, Government of the Republic of Haiti, United Nations Human Development Index
NGOs capable of appropriately and successfully participating in international disaster responses present donors and funders with opportunities to create significant social benefit. The ability to systematically measure intervention impacts – and trace them back to specific NGO programs - remains limited. Nonetheless, supporting NGOs using the recommended approach to disaster response is one means of promoting improved practices in the field.

Donors and funders can also invest in strengthening the humanitarian aid ecosystem’s capacity to create more and better impact. This includes supporting efforts to develop evaluations that describe, in evidence-based ways, how aid ultimately affects disaster survivors, what aid achieves, and why. This knowledge is crucial for learning and improvement efforts and for developing accepted methods for measuring impact. Such an evaluation methodology could require construction of disaster risk indices that assess changes in vulnerability attributable to international intervention risk-reduction programs. Impact evaluation methodologies are beginning to emerge within specialty research organizations—perhaps the entities best able to impartially and objectively collect and analyze intervention-related data.

NGOs’ use of the recommended approach is necessary but not sufficient to advance the field of disaster response because intrinsic features of the ecosystem limit the NGOs’ ability to invest in research and development or strengthen their internal capabilities. It takes partnerships between independent research organizations, academic institutions, and alliances of aid actors to promote ecosystem learning, facilitate coordination, and increase impact through research and development of practice standards and methodologies.

SIR recommends providing unrestricted or flexible funding to NGOs that are implementing the recommended approach. This allows them to use funds for a wide range of activities, including delivering programs, building their infrastructure, and spreading best practices. NGOs may seek to implement a more rigorous data tracking mechanism to improve program effectiveness or choose to engage in research, publishing, and convening to spread information about a particularly successful program to others in their field.

**TAKE ACTION**

SIR’s investment recommendations include the following:

- Support specific disaster response efforts of individual NGOs capable of contributing to impact within coordinated, multi-actor interventions. For examples of such organizations, please refer to the SIR organization reports. For tips on identifying legitimate and qualified NGOs and how to contribute to their work, see SIR’s international disaster response guide to giving.

- Help strengthen the general capacity of individual NGOs to respond to disasters by contributing to internal efforts aimed at, for example:
  - Enhancing support for employees in the field
  - Improving the recruitment, development, and retention of qualified staff
  - Participating in interorganizational committees or working groups convened to improve quality, collaboration, accountability, or other aspects of international disaster response

- Contribute to ecosystem-building initiatives by investing in:
  - The work of research centers specializing in disaster response studies
  - Research efforts to measure the ecosystem’s effect on vulnerability and resilience
  - The development of indicators and measurement tools and improvements in data quality and coverage

**FIGURE 4: COMPONENTS OF THE RECOMMENDED APPROACH**

- **Aid Appropriateness:** NGOs abide by the core humanitarian principles (humanity, neutrality, impartiality, and independence); respect international humanitarian, refugee, and human rights laws; and use assessment tools to identify, prioritize and address affected populations’ needs; and defend marginalized peoples rights to relief and recovery assistance

- **Contribution to Impact:** NGOs address immediate or long-term needs, address underlying sources of risk and vulnerability to disasters, and enable rebuilding of economic and social lives

- **Relevant Skills and Experiences:** NGOs adhere to the highest practice standards, facilitate cooperation among actors in the field, work with a variety of actors, and develop procedures and practices to protect disaster survivors and aid workers from violence during humanitarian operations

- **Connectedness:** NGOs establish relationships with organizations in the regions they serve, engage local actors, resources, markets, and institutions, employ community-based approaches to aid, and participate in industry working groups or research projects
REFERENCES FOR FURTHER RESEARCH


7. Ibid.


Social Impact Research (SIR) is the independent research department of Root Cause, a research and consulting firm dedicated to mobilizing the nonprofit, public, and business sectors to work together in a new social impact market. SIR aggregates, analyzes, and disseminates information to help donors and funders identify and support the most effective, efficient, and sustainable organizations working to solve social problems. Modeled after private sector equity research firms, SIR produces research reports, analyzes philanthropic portfolios, and provides educational services for advisors to help their clients make effective and rigorous philanthropic decisions.

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