The CSO network view: supporting people to be resilient

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Interviewee: Marcos Concepcion Raba – Executive Director, GNDR

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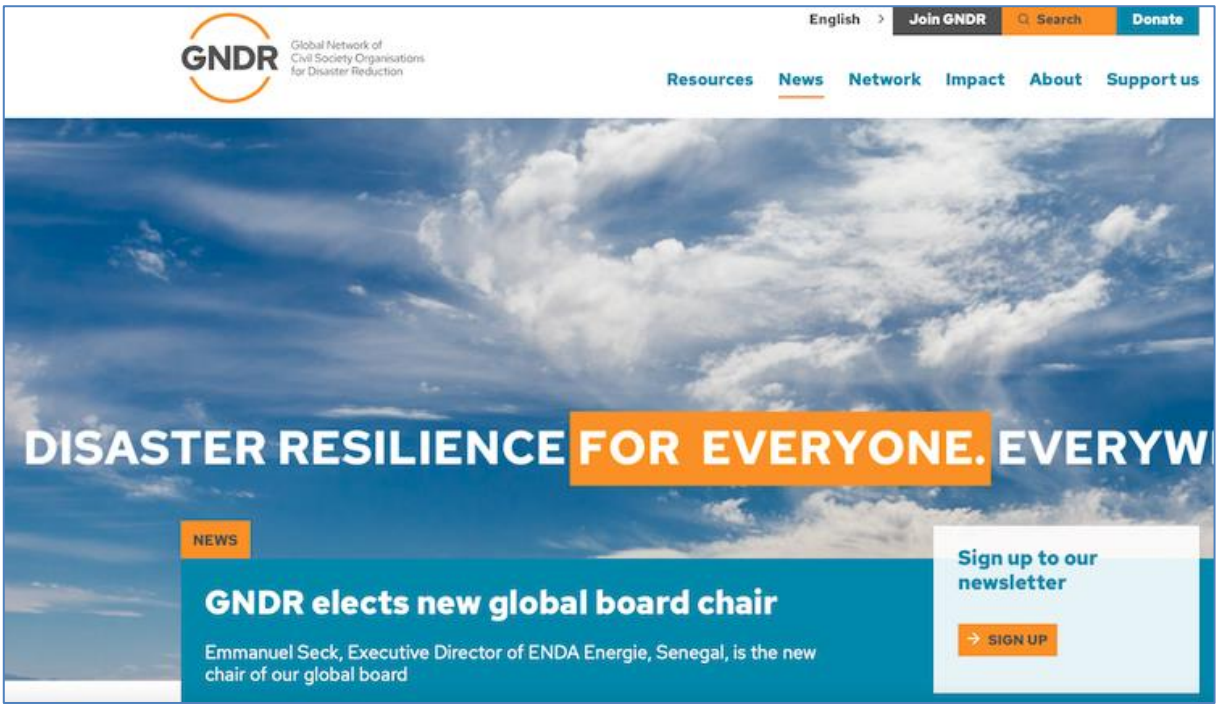


Image: the GNDR website (Source: GNDRR)

Marcos,

Thank you for making the time to talk with Ana and I about the work of GNDR, a Global Network of Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) for Disaster Reduction that we know currently has almost 2,000 member organisations spread across 131 countries.

We are looking forward to hearing about the work of GNDR and where you see it heading, the key challenges GNDR and your CSO members face, and what more can and should be done to ensure people and decision-makers around the world, in all capacities, integrate community voices into sustainable and disaster resilient development for the benefit of people, the planet and prosperity.

Can we begin this interview with an overview of your background and how GNDR came into being?

Marcos: *It is a pleasure to be here for the Disasters Avoided initiative – we appreciate your work. I have been working in humanitarian and related development for some 30 years, and I joined GNDR in 2023. GNDRs role in coordinating and supporting grassroots organisations was very appealing to me and I very much appreciate the opportunity to support GNDR and its members to work with and help communities around the world.*

To "wind back the clock a bit", back to 2005 when the Hyogo Framework for Action 2005-2015 was being developed, I remember the GNDR Executive Director at the time explaining that being part of these global negotiations and reviews felt like quite a lonely place for CSO and NGO-focused organisations. The team running the Hyogo Framework discussions tried hard to engage NGOs and CSOs, but the representation wasn't at the level we felt it should be.

There was a clear need for a unified voice globally on disaster risk and resilience from both the NGO and CSO spheres, and it became clear that we needed a vision to clearly articulate this consolidated voice. The need for a clear vision led to GNDR being formed – it was established in 2007 and formally registered in 2008. Our vision was, and still is, to amplify the voices of the local communities to influence policies and practices. Today, most members in the GNDR community are small and grassroots organisations, many with less than 10 people who are, it is important to note, typically volunteers. They are small teams with limited budgets, and they are highly committed groups of people who are dedicated to helping their communities. Since our formation in 2007-8, the GNDR team has focused on providing a community voice for, and helping to deliver, disaster risk reduction and resilience frameworks, including the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015-2030.

Gareth: Thanks for outlining your background, Marcos, and for providing some context to why GNDR was formed.

I'd like to follow up on the point about the small average size of your network members. I have found it very insightful to speak with people who work for different types and sizes of NGOs and CSOs around the world about their work in disaster risk reduction and resilience. Is membership of the GNDR Community Platform free for members? I have found the Resources section of the GNDR website interesting to review – there is a lot of good material here that is freely available.

Marcos: *The nature of our membership model means that there is no membership fee for our members. We feel it is crucial that all our members have the opportunity to be part of the network and to be engaged as much as they can. Our members have access to all the resources we make available. Our Community Platform is a digital space where members can find each other, share information and experiences and, we hope, find ways and solutions to tackle their challenges. As a group, GNDR is always looking at funder and donor opportunities to support what we do and to ensure we can provide the best services for our members.*

Our membership is very diverse, and we want to ensure that through our platform they can connect and learn from each other. Some of our members are focused on education, others on health, others on climate action. The disaster risk reduction and resilience arena is a transversal and diverse space.

GNDR operates a governance structure, and we strive to ensure the network is open and member led, with meaningful direction from the bottom up. We have national focal points (across our current span of 131 countries), with national coordination meetings held in person or virtually. We also have regional representatives who oversee national members in our regions, of which we have 13 at the moment. Our members elect national and regional focal points through our governance structure. We hold a Global Summit (which functions as a General Assembly) every two years; and through the Global Summit we review the implementation of our strategy and discuss our strategic direction.

Our members are mostly from low-income countries, but we do have members in medium and higher income countries also (for example, such members have been involved in dealing with floods and fires in the northern hemisphere). It is worth also noting that at a local level, the distinction between humanitarian and other disciplines is not so important – these groups of people tend to get involved in and support many things.

Gareth: Are some of your CSO network members located on SIDS (Small Island Developing States)? Ilan and I do some work to support SIDS, and we are always on the lookout to support people on SIDS and to help make connections where possible. I remember speaking with some CSOs as part of some support work for ODI about SIDS in March 2024, and we published a Disasters Avoided Newsletter focused on SIDS in May 2024.

Marcos: We do have members located on SIDS. It can be complicated for small CSOs in SIDS that are working in complicated situations to be fully engaged in our network, but we do provide an open space for them to be part of what we do. Indeed, some SIDS and CSOs from these countries are pioneers in integrating disaster risk reduction and climate change adaptation and mitigation.

Gareth: We appreciate that GNDR is involved in a range of global and regional development and disaster risk reduction (DRR) and resilience forums, including with UN agencies that support disaster risk reduction and resilience such as UNDRR and UNDP. Is the CSO representation and engagement at a global level working as well as it could – are there opportunities for improvement to ensure global programmes and initiatives that are ongoing and are being conceived with civil society in mind?

Marcos: *To be honest, I think there is more that can be done in this space. We do have a good relationship with UNDRR and UNDP (and others), I must stress, and we recognise the value all these organisations provide and their efforts to engage, and ensure others also engage, at the local level.*

However, from consulting and discussing with our membership, we find that the local CSO and community level is not always engaged as well as it could be in global processes and initiatives. As I mentioned earlier, consultation with our membership is key to our bottom-up approach, and an example of our consultation is a survey we conduct with our members which includes asking them about this very point (as part of an annual survey we run). In our last survey we found that 84% of our CSO members do not feel suitably involved in policy and process work at the local authority or at the national level in the implementation of local or national DRR strategy, and the links into the Sendai Framework.

I want to stress that we do appreciate the engagement effort and activity led by UNDRR and others, but one of the key pinch points we see is that many governments at a national level are not taking into account the local community level and how to engage effectively with community stakeholders, which includes CSOs. This is a key matter we feel needs to be fully addressed. Perhaps it may evolve through the future iteration of the Sendai Framework. I think we – the CSO community – could contribute more towards achieving the Sendai Framework implementation and its main targets if there can be a greater level of engagement with us. And, of course, this links into your focus of how to avoid disasters. We strongly believe that when DRR and disaster resilience initiatives are co-owned and led by communities, they are more effective and sustainable.

Ana: Is it reasonable to say that the reasons for the challenges of local level engagement are diverse and different in different countries and their circumstances?

Marcos: *That's right, the reasons for the lack of CSO and community involvement do differ around the world, and we appreciate this fact. Global frameworks of course need to include everyone, across all countries, which we know is challenging. We are advocating that when we define reporting and implementing national strategies, engagement at the local level, including with CSOs and communities, is key. All country should recognise this. There are ways to make it happen, appreciating that it does require effort.*

For example, countries in South Asia have made huge progress by working with local communities and CSOs. We need to learn from all the good experiences that occur.

Ana: Perhaps we have an opportunity to highlight this point through the Disasters Avoided initiative, including through case studies that show the importance of including NGOs and CSOs in disaster risk reduction and resilience.

Gareth: That's a good point, Ana. We have held discussions with small community-led NGOs and CSOs, including in South Asia (in India for example), which has allowed us to learn first-hand about their locally driven work that is making a real difference at the grassroots level. Sometimes we come across examples in the media of how a community and a volunteers' network is helping to avoid disasters, which is great to see, but we don't always then see the details behind it.

Marcos – linked to this point about learning from examples and case studies, I have noted on the GNDR website your Urban Living Laboratories guide, which describes learnings from using your Urban Living Laboratory approach relating to displaced persons living in informal urban settings. Are urban environments and the engagement at a city level with local authorities a key part of your focus at GNDR and for CSOs to help to coordinate the views of communities and citizens of cities and towns? I do quite a bit of work in urban resilience and sustainability, and this is an area of interest for me.

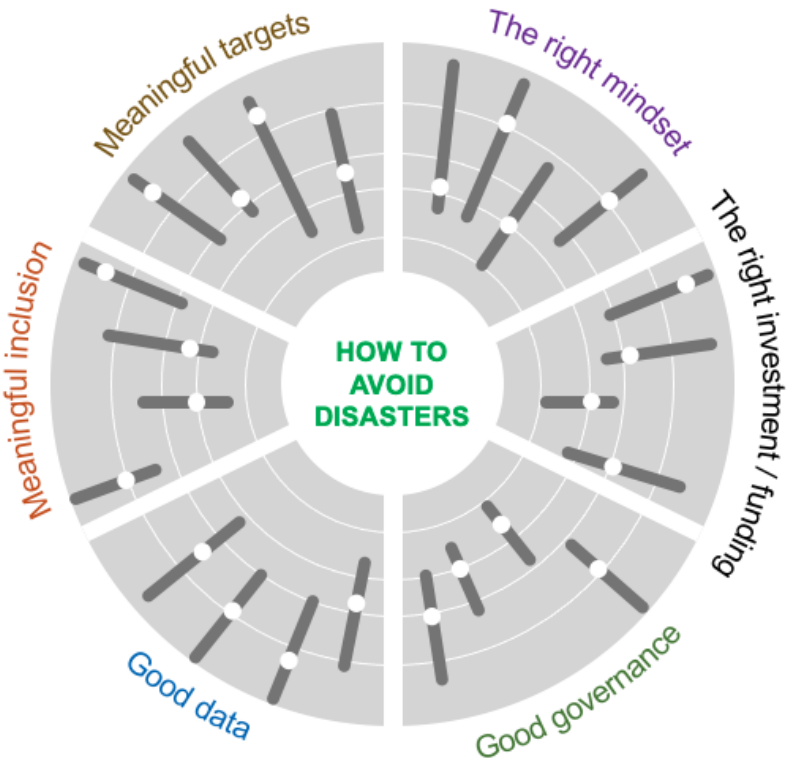
Marcos: *The urban context is typically complex, and it is a vital area for us to be involved in given the extent of the world's population living in urban areas, and how it continues to grow. The ethos behind Urban Living Labs was to draw everyone together to discuss the key areas of concern. We have found great value through the ability to link different stakeholders together in this initiative. Part of our activities has been to create a space to convene and make decisions together with local authorities, academia and others, and we believe this is a good way to approach these critical discussions.*

GNDR's Urban Living Labs is part of a bigger project we have set up which is focused on making displacements safer for people. I mention this because enhancing the resilience of displaced communities most at risk in urban areas is a key matter for our time. Many displaced communities have had to leave one environment for another, for various reasons (such as conflict, climate change, political pressures and others), and it is very challenging for them to be able to deal with it.

We have learned from our Urban Living Labs to use this same engagement methodology for climate projection workshops, to ensure that communities (in rural areas as well as urban ones) have a good space to meaningfully engage with local authorities, Met offices and others. We need good frameworks for local community engagement to make sure initiatives and their outputs are sustainable. To link to our discussion earlier about UNDRR, MCR2030 (which is part of UNDRR) and the Resilient Cities Network (RCN) and others are doing a good job at mobilising actors in the urban space, and we need to maintain the ante on this. A challenge for GNDR is that we lack the resources to continually engage with everyone, but we do think and hope the Urban Living Labs model is a useful engagement approach that we can replicate for new urban needs and other needs.

Gareth: Thanks for this explanation, Marcos. What you have said makes me think about the range and diversity of urban initiatives that are continuously taking place around the world, and how well (or not) they are engaging with CSOs and local communities from the beginning to help in the design and scoping of the work required to deliver sustainable long-term needs.

This brings me onto our Disasters Avoided model, and the right mindset which is the first point of our six-factor model, which this seems to be key to ensuring that CSOs and communities are involved early enough, and in a meaningful way.



The Disasters Avoided model: © G Byatt, I Kelman & A Prados

Marcos: *I do agree. We need to contextualise each case, of course, and I understand that for local authorities and private sector initiatives sometimes it's difficult to sit at the same table with other actors such as CSOs, but this effort needs to happen, and it helps ensure good outcomes. We know that it's a good, sustainable way of achieving a common goal. We need to agree on the right mindset, and also on common language to agree how to achieve something together, which requires focus. It's important that we gather as many good practices as possible that we can gather in this space. I am a strong supporter of the Disasters Avoided model by the way; I think it covers all bases.*

Ana: One of the six factors that is in our model is meaningful inclusion, including of course at the local level. What you have described is a key part of what we had in mind when we thought about this factor. It's an area for us to think about some more.

Marcos: *Meaningful inclusion is certainly a key point for all our engagement with other parties and groups. A key point to think about is that when we talk about the need for inclusion, we need to resource inclusion appropriately so that it can happen, bearing in mind the context of the small-sized CSO members we support.*

To give you an example, GNDR is part of CADRI (the Capacity for Disaster Reduction Initiative). We are pleased to be part of this initiative, and we are thankful to be invited to this inter-agency missions. In theory everyone agrees to the engagement approach, yet there can be obstacles to the involvement of grassroots people in these initiatives, because too often there is no funding allocated for CSOs and community groups to participate in such initiatives.

CSO and community-led organisations are often run by volunteers, and unlike local authorities and private business that have the funding means to participate in missions, these people cannot afford to leave their regular work and participate in projects / actions for a set amount of time, and they often afford to join meetings and be involved when they need to maintain on their livelihoods. It is not all about money, for sure, but the right mindset includes making sure that inclusion is part of the reality, which means CSO and community involvement has to be appropriately funded if CSOs' perspective is wanted to be included. We must always remember that it is difficult for some actors to be involved if their specific circumstances are not taken into account.

Gareth: We appreciate your feedback on our model and examples of using the factors it contains, Marcos. You raise a key point about funding, which draws in our model factor of ensuring the right investment / funding. There can be good intentions by different actors without thinking through the details (in this case, funding needs) of what is required to ensure that everyone, including community groups, are at the table, and to ensure that no one is left behind.

Marcos: *What you say makes total sense. Perhaps when projects and initiatives are being conceived with Concept Notes and indicative costings, the people who are overseeing them can think about the funding required to ensure all stakeholders are engaged properly… that's the way of enabling participation.*

Ana: On the data side of things (another of our model factors), do you provide technical assistance and support in how to use different sources of data, for example with climate change scenarios and modelling? We appreciate that for local CSOs they have limited capacity (which is something that I see).

Marcos: *We very much appreciate the importance of good data. One of the flagship projects of GNDR is "Views from the Frontline", and obtaining good actionable data is a key part of this initiative. Countries have committed to international targets and frameworks for building community resilience, but there is still a huge gap between these global policies and what happens at the local level. We work with our members to ensure the local perspective is clearly communicated, and using local data is a key part of this.*

The last capture of Views from the Frontline was done in 2022, and we are intending to work on a new iteration soon. We have a lot of local-level data, and we are working on an initiative to see how we can use AI to connect and interpret all data from the local level to other sources of data. Our idea is to make sure that, as well as communities having the capacity to generate data from their own reality, they can also easily connect their own knowledge and data to other sources. We are reviewing how we might be able to make this happen. Views from the Frontline was an innovative project when it first launched, and it is an initiative we continue to value. We see it as an important part of understanding how disasters occur and how to avoid disasters as well.

Gareth: We appreciate the context to Views from the Frontline, Marcos. Continuing on with the discussion about globally-led initiatives and local involvement, and the use of good data, I believe GNDR is involved in the UN-led Early Warnings for All (E4All) initiative?

Marcos: *Yes, we are involved in the EW4All initiative, particularly Pillar 1 (disaster risk knowledge) which is led by UNDRR, to make sure that the local level is included and that views and data from the frontline is included. We want to make sure that for action to be led by the community, they need to be ready to work with and use good and different sources of data available to them.*

Of course, by nature, our members are part of pillar 4, "Preparedness to respond", and let me stress again in this respect the need for further progress in localisation. This approach is key to being successful in preparedness and early action. As we discussed before, to be effective it has to be locally led.

Gareth*:* I'd like to discuss your exploration of how you may be able to use AI. I'll draw in the SDGs to this point, and the detail behind them (including the SDG Global Indicators). Have you heard of the SDG AI lab, which is a joint initiative of UNDP Nature, Climate, and Energy Team, UNDP Finance Sector Hub, and UNDP Istanbul International Center for Private Sector in Development (IICPSD)? I wonder if it may have some useful touchpoints and areas of interest for you, relating to the use of AI.

Marcos: *This is an interesting initiative to hear about, thanks. As well as our focus on supporting the Sendai Framework and how it may evolve, we also want to be part of other processes, including towards climate change and the SDGs, so that community needs for disaster risk reduction and resilience are being appropriately addressed by such global policy spaces and agreements.*

We have been taking some of our members (that is, CSOs from countries) to the UN High Level Political Forums (HLPFs) and to CoPs to review and discuss progress on SDGs and other matters. For some of the countries that are reporting at the UN HQ in New York on SDG progress, we want to help bring the local level perspective on what's happening. Our CSO members are, in general, not consulted through country-level SDG progress updates, and we think there is an opportunity to change this. It's important that the local community narrative and evidence, including the data we capture, is used through these types of progress updates, to help bring people together to generate evidence that can lead to better policy work. It can help contribute towards national level strategies for disaster risk reduction and resilience, including the effort put towards leveraging the SDGs and acting to address climate change. If the focus at the local level is insufficient, progress will be difficult.

Gareth: This gets me thinking again about our earlier discussion on urban environments and about the local level implementation of sustainable development projects, in a way that ensures all actors, including local communities, are meaningfully engaged and involved.

Marcos: *We are strong believers in a constructive approach for sustainable development projects, which logically, we believe, have to be risk-informed. Our members are here to help them succeed. In general, many of our projects do include resources and capacities, but on many occasions, there is a gap in funding for making some of the known requirements become reality.*

Gareth and Ana: We'd like to quickly get your view on a particular point relating to how people describe disasters. In our Disasters Avoided work we are advocates for the movement to stop calling disasters "natural", which is supported by UNDRR and the #NoNaturalDisasters campaign. Our premise is that a hazard can be natural, but a disaster is not. I wondered if you both had any thoughts on this. We focused on this point in our September 2024 Newsletter, including interviews with Anita van Breda of WWF and Kevin Blanchard who helped start #NoNaturalDisasters.

Marcos: *I fully agree that disasters are not natural. The campaign about it has our full support. More effort needs to be made to keep talking about this, we need to keep advocating for more ambitious action in this sense. For example, we know that disaster risk reduction and resilience spending is too low. Pre-arranged finance is far too low, perhaps 2.5-2.7% of total funding allocated, partly because many people continue to think or read that disasters are natural, therefore, inevitable. We need to invest in resilience to avoid disasters. We know that natural hazards will be present, yet this doesn't mean people have to die or that people have to lose their livelihoods. This is not just about pre-arranged finance; it is about having the right mindset (as we have discussed earlier). And we know that it is a matter that must continue to be addressed in developed countries as well as developing countries. The whole action cycle required to avoid disasters must be continually focused on, and we cannot lay the blame on a disaster being natural; as a society we must take responsibility and prevent hazards from turning into disasters.*

Gareth: Finally, what is the number one thing that you want to see improved over the next few years, and leading up to 2030?

Marcos: *Thank you very much for the discussion. I just wanted to stress again that local communities, particularly marginalised groups such as women, people with disabilities and indigenous peoples, have the power, personal and community resources and knowledge to drive their own resilience strategies, yet they do need our support to do this. GNDR will continue to work in this direction, and we invite all actors involved in disaster reduction to join us in this effort.*

Gareth and Ana: Thank you very much for your time, Marcos. We look forward to seeing more examples of GNDR's work. We have signed up to your Newsletter for starters.