

The expert view: upskilling people in disaster risk reduction & dealing with the lifecycle of disasters

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Interviewee: [Bernadette Sexton](#) – CEO, [RedR UK](#)

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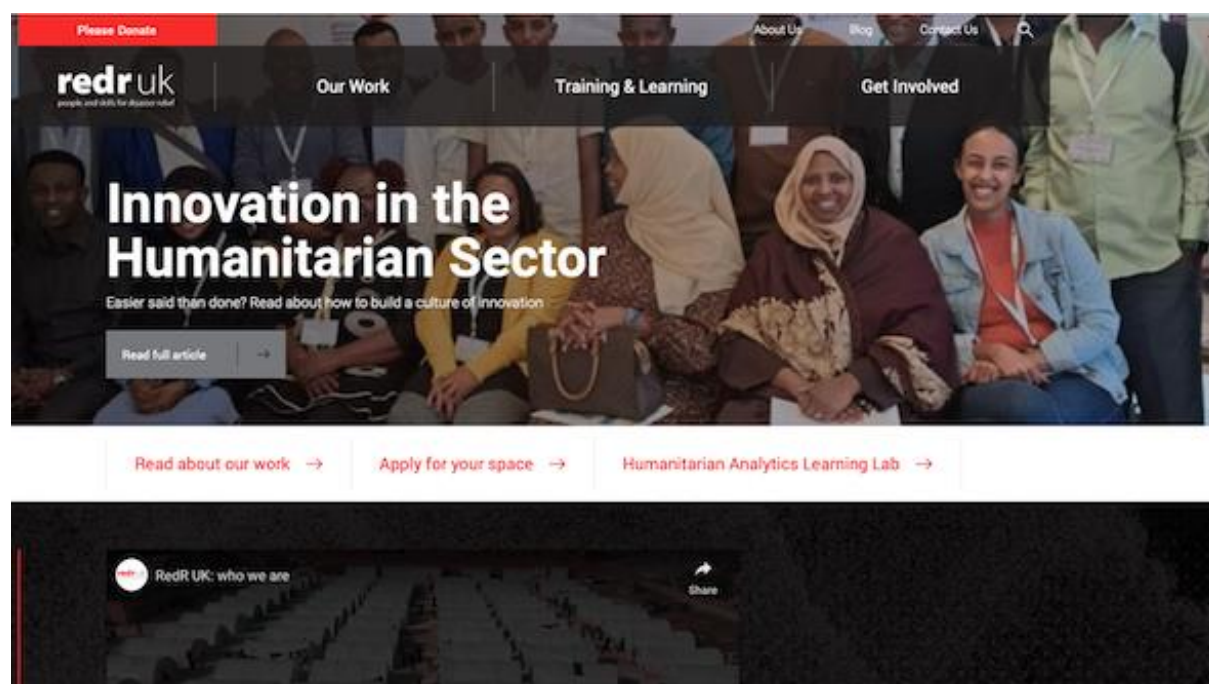


Image: the RedrUK website (Source: RedR UK)

Bernadette,

Thank you for making the time to talk with me about the work of [RedR UK](#) and your focus on providing training and technical support to Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs), aid workers and community groups who respond to disasters around the world. I am keen to hear your thoughts about the key challenges you and the teams you work with face, and what more can and should be done to ensure people are equipped and trained to avoid disasters whenever possible, and to minimise their impact when they do materialise.

Can we begin this interview with an overview of your background and how RedR UK came into being (I know it was formed decades ago, in 1980), as part of the international RedR network?

Bernadette: Thanks Gareth. RedR was established in 1980 by a British engineer, Peter Guthrie, after he had visited Viet Nam during [the refugee crisis of the 1970's](#).

The Disasters Avoided initiative highlights examples of proactive action around the world to avoid disasters.

RedR was originally conceived as a register of engineers for disaster relief, and this remains an important part of our focus and our activities. Through our evolution to today, we have become a leading learning & development provider, bringing expertise to places that need it and equipping people with the skills for dealing with disasters. To give you some recent examples of our work, we are supporting people in Ukraine, we have provided a response to the Turkey and Syria earthquakes in 2023 and to the Libyan floods and the Morocco earthquake also of 2023. Our main offices are located within the Arup offices in London, I want to add (I'll return to our linkages with international engineering organisations later).

To give you an overview of my own background, I have spent the last twenty years working in the international humanitarian space. I sit on the board of [Concern Worldwide](#), where in the UK I am their Vice-Chair. I also worked at McKinsey for a number of years as their Impact programme lead. I have a History & Politics degree and an MBA.

Gareth: Thanks for outlining your background, Bernadette, and for providing some context to how RedR was formed and your recent and current work to support people around the world.

You mentioned your support activities in Libya just now – I read [a powerful real example of how your support to people](#) is making life-changing differences, in the story on your website about a mental health physician in Libya, Yousra, who has worked with you to develop her skills in online training delivery, learning how to interact and engage with participants so that they get the absolute most from the training she provides. The flooding in Libya, caused by the failure of two dams following Storm Daniel on 11 September 2023, caused widespread psychological trauma for those affected by the flood, and for responders. It's poignant to see your support making a tangible difference and a real impact to people's lives.

Bernadette: *Thanks for mentioning that article. In Libya we have trained over 400 responders across different technical and humanitarian topics, ranging from rapid damage assessment to community engagement and how to stay effective in an overwhelming situation. This last point is key, because the people who respond are typically local people and they are impacted by disasters and major events in different ways – many of them very directly. Testimonies including the one you mentioned provide us with valuable evidence about the importance of responding in the context of the specific needs that communities have. We take their voice very seriously – there is no such thing as universal needs. Regarding our work in Libya, our emergency coordinator, Mohammed, is Libyan and he has an in-depth understanding of the country and its needs. We work hard, in Libya and everywhere else, to ensure we have good connections with local networks of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and civil society organisations (CSOs) to connect and inform what their learning needs are, and to tailor the training to ensure that it is most relevant.*

Gareth: I have found it very interesting to speak recently with people who work for NGOs and CSOs in different parts of the world about their work in disaster risk reduction and resilience – for example, people who work for international NGOs such as Plan UK and local NGOs such as Doers in northern India (whom I met in Delhi to discuss their work in January 2024) and CSOs supporting people on small island developing states (SIDS). I am guessing that you have linkages with many international NGOs as well as the linkages and bonds you have with local NGOs?

Bernadette: *We do indeed have relationships with, and we work with many international NGOs, including Plan International, Save the Children, the International Red Cross (IRC) and others.*

This brings me on to describe how we typically work. One of our core delivery mechanisms is through International NGOs, who come to us with requests to support them with training in certain areas of expertise. We also provide support for local NGOs and communities (including community support organisations) as well as the local branches of International NGOs, with localised support that is free of use for individuals. Our networks intersect with International NGOs and local NGOs as well as multilateral and bilateral organisations and trust foundations, and individual supporters too. We also liaise with corporate partners, especially in the engineering and insurance sectors, who are interested in our climate change adaptation and disaster risk and resilience work and experience for engineering in emergencies.

Gareth: Just picking up on your point about engineering support, I liaise regularly with people in engineering organisations – ranging from businesses (and you mentioned that your offices are in the Arup offices in London) and NGOs such as Engineers Without Borders. I have a construction and engineering background myself. I am sure that people in this sector have a lot to offer to support the work of RedR.

Bernadette: *This is certainly the case, and we greatly value the role engineers play. We have a variety of linkages across the global engineering community, and we are the charity partner for a number of engineering organisations. For example, on 13 March I attended [the Rankine Lecture](#) at The British Geotechnical Association, for which we are a charity partner. We are a charity partner to [The British Construction Industry Awards](#), we are supported by the Institute of Civil Engineers in the UK and we are engaged with the Institute of Structural Engineers as well. There is a direct link between the engineering community and the work that we do.*

Right now, we are currently working with some private sector engineering partners on the third edition of [the Engineering in Emergencies Handbook](#). This Handbook is a key document for people who provide engineering support in humanitarian situations. It's a technical handbook for people who are responding to emergencies, wherever their work happens to be in the cycle of the disaster – from resilience and prevention through to response and rebuilding.

The Handbook's chapters include detailed guidance for providing shelter, WASH ([water, sanitation and hygiene](#)), and how to coordinate teams in an emergency.

The current second edition has been available since 2002, and I continue to have discussions with people who tell me they still use it as a guidance book. I want to mention this point because whilst we are engaged on the humanitarian side of disasters, to be effective with this engagement we are bringing global expertise in engineering – the two areas of focus work together. For example, Arup and Mott McDonald are helping us with technical content of chapters of the new (third) edition of this Handbook, and we highly appreciate their input. We are working with engineers to bring engineering expertise and communicate it in a way that is relevant for the humanitarian sector, which we think is a powerful approach to helping people to avoid disasters, and to recover effectively from disaster events when they occur.

Gareth: On the point you made about focusing on WASH, I have liaised for some time with engineering organisations about how to provide the most impactful solutions in this area, for example through interviews with Engineers Without Borders Australia in 2019 and 2023.

How many people have you trained to date, and how do you track metrics on your deliverables and activities? Also, when is the new Handbook due to be launched?

Bernadette: *We have trained a lot of people since 1980. To give you a current snapshot, in 2023 we trained just over 6700 people around the world, across our three thematic areas of engineering in emergencies, climate change and humanitarian services. This has been at a time when we know that one in 22 people around the world are in need of humanitarian support.*

In terms of how we measure the effectiveness of the learning and training we provide, we follow [the Kirkpatrick model](#) which has four levels – the initial reaction of it, the actual learning looking at the degree to which participants acquire skills and commitment, the third level is focused on behaviours and how participants apply what they learn in their work, and the fourth level focuses on results. We use a number of metrics including pre and post assessments, where we get a sense of skills, knowledge and attitudes in advance of and then after the training. We also engage in surveys to get a sense of training content and delivery methods, to bring back into our future training works and how to improve them. We also do follow-up checks with those we have trained to see what the perspective is like in terms of knowledge retention and the longer-term impacts it has.

The third edition of the Handbook is due to be launched in early to mid 2025. We are looking forward to hearing feedback on how people use it.

Gareth: You mentioned earlier that RedR was founded in 1980 following some engineering support that was provided by the founder in Viet Nam. I was in Viet Nam in 2023 and I had the opportunity to liaise with people involved in a UNDP-GCF coastal resilience project to create 4,000 flood-resilient homes and implement solutions for coastal resilience, including improvements to mangrove areas.

Given your work with multilateral organisations, do you get involved with projects like this to help organisations such as UN agencies with a training component (such as how to do things, equipping local people with skills for ongoing management of implemented solutions)?

Bernadette: Yes, absolutely. We have provided, and continue to provide, extensive support to UN agencies which includes UNICEF, UNHCR, IOM and the WFP, and other organisations such as International NGOs (which we touched upon earlier) as well. Our work for international organisations is often carried out on a country-by-country basis. For example, we are currently supporting UNICEF in Ukraine. We support these organisations with actual training and also with standards development and setting, for example helping them to establish or revise standards, and to apply these standards within and for their organisations. With local and national NGOs and CSOs, we help them to create capacity development.

To give you some examples, we have recently completed a 14-month capacity strengthening engagement of local NGOs in Somalia. We have worked with the International Rescue Committee (the IRC) in Syria, where we have been supporting the strengthening of capacities to prepare and respond to emergencies. We have recently reviewed and adapted training courses for the International Organisation for Migration on protection from sexual exploitation and abuse, which has involved designing bespoke workshops and simulations for the Red Cross and the Red Crescent Movement to review and improve their Standard Operating Procedures.

Gareth: On the subject of migrants and refugees, we know that so often they are placed in areas that are vulnerable to hazards (be it flooding, wildfires, landslides, earthquakes or a combination). These people face very challenging conditions, and it feels like the number of migrants living in perilous situations around the world is increasing in comparison to recent years.

Bernadette: I think it is fair to say that the number of migrants who are under this type of pressure is growing. Take for example what is happening in Ukraine. The entire country had to shift into a humanitarian response very quickly, which required all types of local actors working with international organisations to respond. One of our responses in Ukraine has been to design 20 free to access training modules that local practitioners on the ground identified as the most pressing needs. These modules cover a range of areas, from humanitarian programme cycle management to protection from sexual exploitation and abuse, and humanitarian ethics and principles. This type of training is important for the very reason that you have mentioned, in that migrants face tough circumstances when they are having to leave their homes and their communities. They face significant risks, gender-related risks being one important area of focus for us. Gender-based violence in situations of armed conflict has always been a problem, and this has been a focus for us in Ukraine. Through this training, in different languages, we have been able to reach over 5,000 people in Ukraine and in neighbouring countries. We have been able to bring these types of training to first responders in other recent disaster situations as well, including for the floods in Pakistan and Libya and Syria, and the earthquakes in Turkey and Morocco. Gender-related risks and problems are often under-reported: they are not always given the attention that they need.

Gareth: The Financial Times article in which RedR UK is [named in December 2023](#) (reader note: this link may be restricted access) as one of twenty organisations that are helping to rebuild lives and communities that are devastated by disasters states that, by the end of 2022, there were over 108 million people who were displaced from their homes by conflict and climate-related disasters in that year, and that in 2023 the number is expected to have increased significantly. With the numbers of people being displaced from their homes continuing to be very high, this must be putting stresses and strains on the relief and support network that is dedicated to helping these people.

The point you made just now about the first responders makes me think about how they are “the first mile”, not “the last mile” when it comes to considering how to prevent and respond to disaster situations. Sometimes the media reports about the valuable role these people provide. For example, I have been looking for some time at the work of local community volunteers and first responders in Bangladesh. The work of these people is crucial to keeping people safe in places like the capital city of Dhaka, and the Bay of Bengal including Cox’s Bazaar, is absolutely critical.

Bernadette: *You are absolutely right about the ongoing challenge of people being placed in harm’s way and requiring humanitarian support. I have worked extensively in the country you have just mentioned, Bangladesh – and in my view the network of community-based organisations in this country is quite remarkable. These dedicated and driven people know the vulnerabilities their communities face in their low-lying and flood-prone areas. They know what’s required to be resilient against the threats and the hazards, for example their work to build resilient homes and support their communities is key to the country’s overall resilience.*

Linking back to my point about gender risks, when people in these communities are impacted by flooding and cyclones, there is a disproportionate effect on women and the income-generating assets they have, for example their cow that they use to sell milk to market. There is a lot of research that describes how support for these people to be resilient has a positive impact on the health indicators for themselves and, crucially, for their children and their ability to maintain a good education when disaster events occur. A child that is in a family that can withstand the impact of flooding is more likely to be healthier and able to keep their education going, which is absolutely critical to them. The work of community-based organisations in Bangladesh is key to this. Our climate change adaptation disaster risk resilience course is being used with these types of organisations. We have held in-person training for climate change adaptation disaster risk resilience in Dhaka in mid-April 2024, at a climate centre that has been established locally in the city.

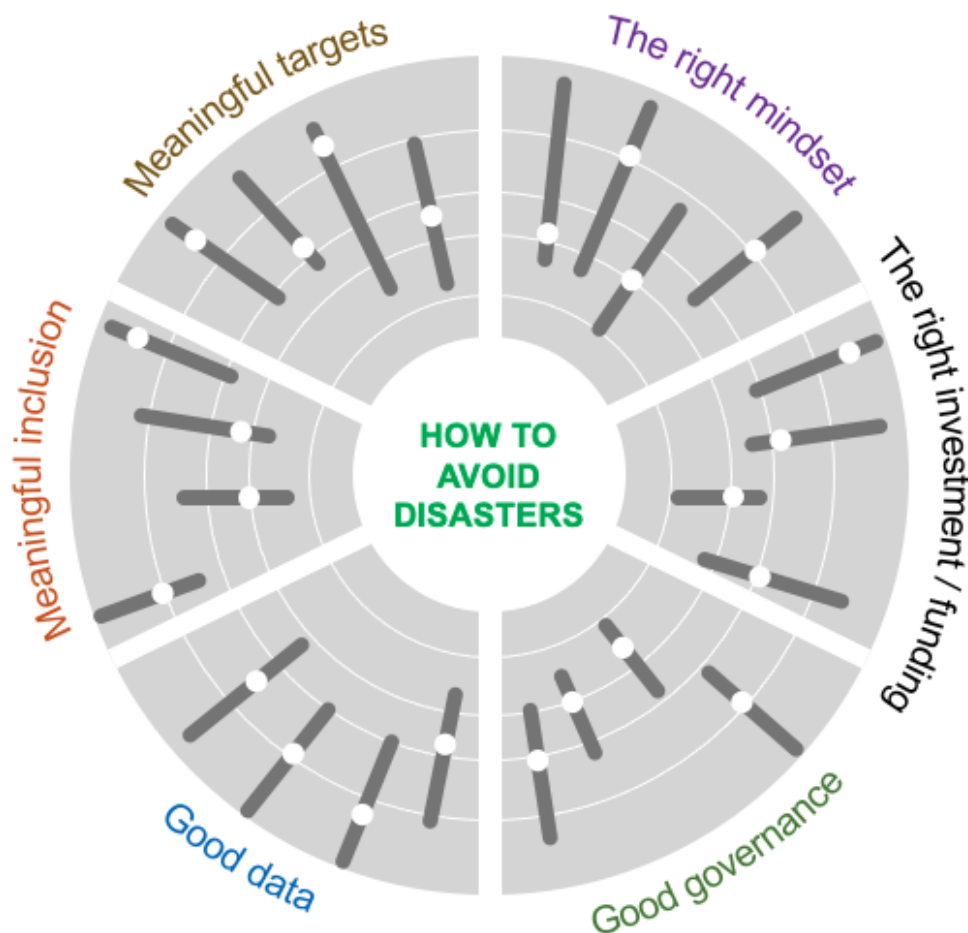
Gareth: I really appreciate these insights about your direct experience and work in Bangladesh, Bernadette. I am full of admiration for the activities that many people undertaken in this country – we have profiled some of this good work through our Disasters Avoided activities.

On the subject of education, I know that some of the schooling and education facilities in Bangladesh double up as cyclone shelters when required.

The role of local emergency volunteers to ensure communities trust in the use of these shelters when they need to evacuate their homes (for example, before a cyclone strikes their local area) is key, isn't it.

Bernadette: *This is certainly true. There is a disaster cycle that typically happens. Providing support to communities and also policy makers to ensure preparation and preventative action is taken is a critical part of resilience, and to avoiding disasters whenever possible.*

Gareth: This brings me onto the Disasters Avoided model that we have developed and are testing. I would be interested in your views on how any or all of [the six points in our model](#) are relevant to the work of RedR UK (such as having the mindset to avoid disasters, the right kind of investment in aspects such as training and preparedness on the ground, and other points).



[The Disasters Avoided model](#): G Byatt, I Kelman & A Prados

Bernadette: *This model strikes a chord with me, and I can see its relevance to the work of RedR UK and RedR around the world. The model point about good data is one that I'd like to focus on first. Having good data is key to helping us understand and have a clear picture of what resources will be required when an event or a situation occurs that we need to deal with (which links to the right investment / funding point of the model).*

The Disasters Avoided initiative highlights examples of proactive action around the world to avoid disasters.

We need to equip policy makers, NGOs, unilateral and bilateral agencies with the knowledge to make evidence-based decisions. Using available good data, we can do things like ensure effective early warning systems in place. Predicting where and when disasters may happen, who may be worst affected and how many people could be affected is very important. It allows governments and other agencies and parties to review their plans and to assess whether they have got things appropriately linked up (which speaks to your model point about good governance and meaningful inclusion). We can then spot where there are gaps in knowledge.

All other parts of the model are important, the point on good data is one that I wanted to highlight as an example of how we can apply it. A common challenge I think we all need to work on is that we continue to see the immediate aftermath of disaster events such as floods, wildfires and earthquakes, but what we don't usually see reported on is what disasters didn't happen but could have done, had there not been good resilience measures in place. The more we can show these examples, the better.

Gareth: The point you make about communicating examples of the benefits of action to avoid disasters, and articulating the benefits in an impactful way, is something we talk about quite a bit with most people we liaise with – how can we communicate with people the success stories of disasters avoided and the work to ensure people are prepared. Sometimes we see these stories in some of the media, but oftentimes it is overtaken by the sudden news story. Plus, much of the media continues to call such events “natural disasters”, whilst we prefer to say that events happen, but disasters occur when we put people in harm's way. We adhere to [UNDRR's campaign No Natural Disasters](#) on this point.

You mentioned emergency warnings just now. Are you involved with the UN-driven [Early Warnings for All \(E4All\) initiative](#) or similar initiatives?

Bernadette: *We do provide training on early warning. One of our funders is US Aid, and they are looking at data literacy project, where they want to provide support around the world on data training to enable decision-makers to make more effective decisions. Within this, one of the training considerations we are thinking about is how to use this for training on climate change and early warning, and what kind of module we can put together for this training so that provides first responders with the means to make good decisions. It could be how to interpret properly a weather or Earth observations report. This is very interesting.*

Gareth: It's good that you mentioned weather and Earth observations data, which links to our model point about having good data to act on. How we can best use Earth observations is part of the focus of our Disasters Avoided initiative. Organisations such as NASA, the ESA, JICA and others make Earth observations data available, and they offer training on how to use them. I have seen some good examples of people using this data for early warning and preparedness purposes.

Bernadette: *I agree that it is important. I was recently in Washington DC at a partner dialogue with US Aid with various partners. There was a discussion about open data and how to take and use it, including with generative AI which should have a major impact on how people use data to make decisions. If we can take these data sources and use them to make good humanitarian decisions, everyone will be better for it.*

Gareth: Continuing on our discussion point about using data, you have sparked a question in my mind about data that is gathered and used by insurers – a sector that you mentioned you work with at the start of this interview. We know that private sector insurers collect various data, and I know there is an organisation called the [Insurance Development Forum](#) that is [helping to support humanitarian needs](#). With insurance and reinsurance, they provide a lot of models and are looking at insurance options such as parametric insurance ([I interviewed Guillermo Franco about this in December 2023](#)). I'd be interested in your views on how the insurance industry supports your work.

Bernadette: *I think they have an important role to play. I can give you an example within RedR. We have a long-standing partnership with AXA, who have provided extensive support to our climate change adaptation disaster risk resilience training. We have delivered this training for communities in places such as Bangladesh, the Philippines and Uganda, and we are discussing further opportunities with another insurance provider to extend it to Afghanistan and Somalia (two of the most climate vulnerable countries in the world, which are also in war torn situations). What is also interesting is that we are benefitting from insurance knowledge support, and we are also working in conjunction with local organisations to extend our training. For example, in Uganda we are working with [Makerere University](#) and we have a partnership with the Uganda Institute for Professional Engineers. This is interesting because, within the university they are running their undergraduate courses and we have added a module to it for them on climate change adaptation for people studying engineering. These students will go out to the world of work hopefully with some useful knowledge about climate change. This is an example of global expertise and localising it for on the ground impact.*

You mentioned parametric insurance. I know there are broad discussions about partnerships with private sector insurance, so there are some interesting things happening in this space.

Gareth: When it comes to funding, there is a lot still said about the low levels of investment in preventative measures (the UNDRR continues to highlight this).

Bernadette: *In the model that you have, one of the standout points you have is to agree on meaningful targets. If there is a target with corresponding investment, you should be able to tangibly measure it. It should also allow governments and agencies to put in place strategies and corresponding plans to measure against it. We know that a key challenge to this is being able to articulate and recognise and get buy in that it saves a lot of money. This is the same for all sorts of policy decisions that are*

being discussed. Early engagement work to tackle obesity has the same challenge in this respect as early engagement work to reduce the risk of disasters.

Gareth: When it comes to meaningful targets for RedR, what kind of targets do you report on and track against? Do you use the SDGs for example?

Bernadette: *On the SDGs, SDG 5 on gender equality cuts across all of our work and training. We support goal 2 (zero hunger) through providing services relating to the value of nutrition, we focus on goal 6 (clean water and sanitation), goal 9 (our work on engineering and shelters links to industry, innovation and infrastructure) and goal 11 (for sustainable cities and communities), plus of course goal 13 on climate action.*

Gareth: Relating to SDG 5, one of the things we focus on in our Disasters Avoided work, and in our model, is the importance of meaningful inclusion. This includes ensuring that the knowledge, advice and views of local people and everyone who is in the community is properly incorporated into all plans and efforts to reduce disaster risk. Is there enough of this happening at the moment, or are too many disaster risk policies and plans conceived centrally with insufficient engagement in shaping them by people who live in these places?

Bernadette: *For example, SDG 5 on gender equality cuts across all of our work and training. We are always capturing metrics on this. Statistics show that women are, I think, fourteen times more likely than men to die when a major disaster occurs. when I talked about our engagement in learning assessments, we are doing learning needs analysis to get the voices of people who are not always included in discussions and decisions about what to do (which links to your model point about meaningful inclusion). We recognise that there is a disproportional impact on marginalised and under-represented groups. This is very important to us as a focus area. For example, on managing refugee camp planning we partnered with UN Women in mid 2023 to design and deliver a learning programme on gender equality for CSOs.*

Gareth: It strikes me that SDG 17 on partnerships is probably one that you inherently help to work towards as well, given the number of partnerships that you have with other organisations.

One of the points you mentioned just now is under-represented groups. In terms of under-representation at a state level, Ilan and I are involved with supporting the needs of Small Island Developing States (SIDS). Are there any SIDS initiatives that RedR UK is working on at the moment / has planned? A major conference takes place for SIDS in May 2024, called [SIDS4](#).

Bernadette: *The RedR Australia and Indonesia teams do engage with a number of small islands. RedR UK focuses more on climate change and disaster risk work at the moment. We have been involved in supporting Haiti in the past, after the earthquake struck.*

You mentioned UNDRR earlier. I have met with them a few times recently, and their conferences are relevant for getting technical people together, part of which is to discuss learning needs.

Gareth: In [our interview with the former head of UNDRR, Mami Mizutori, in November 2023](#) we discussed the value of knowledge sharing, which I can see relates very much to this point.

Is RedR training made available online for people to look at and potentially use? Also, if people want to stay informed about your activities and / or contribute in some way, I presume there are ways for them to do so?

Bernadette: *We have a suite of online training, [which is available on our website](#). We also have a communications solution.*

*People can subscribe to our newsletter here: [RedR UK newsletter subscription](#)
Anyone wishing to donate can give to the work of RedR here: [Support our work by making a donation - RedR](#)*

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

Bernadette: *I will focus on learning and development, which is the engine on what makes us effective and where RedR is distinctive. I would like RedR to be providing learning opportunities that are relevant and contextualised to first responders across the disaster cycle to allow them to be impactful in their role.*

Gareth: Thank you very much for your time, Bernadette. I appreciate that [there are various ways for people to get involved in supporting RedR UK](#). We look forward to seeing more examples of your work to strengthen the capacity of agencies, aid workers, and affected communities to prepare, respond and recover from complex humanitarian crises and other types of disasters.