

From Disaster Response to Resilience: Why the Indian Ocean Needs Stronger Regional Cooperation

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For countries around the Indian Ocean, disaster risk is no longer a question of if, but when, where and how severely. Cyclones, floods, storm surges, tsunamis, earthquakes and coastal erosion have long been part of the region's geographical reality. But climate change, rapid urbanisation, environmental degradation and growing dependence on critical infrastructure are changing the scale and complexity of these risks.

This is precisely why the Indian Ocean Rim Association's (IORA) work on Disaster Risk Management deserves greater attention. The IORA Action Plan 2022–2027 provides strategic direction for regional cooperation, while the Working Group on Disaster Risk Management brings together disaster management officials and experts from member states to strengthen practical coordination and capacity. With France/Reunion chairing the Coordinating Group for Functional Mechanisms and Madagascar serving as the coordinating country for Disaster Risk Management, the region has an important institutional foundation on which to build.

Yet the changing disaster landscape demands something more ambitious: a shift from managing disasters after they happen to building resilience before they happen.

The Indian Ocean is home to some of the world's most vulnerable coastal and island communities. Many economies depend heavily on activities such as tourism, fisheries, agriculture, shipping and ports, all of which can be severely affected by extreme weather and other natural hazards. At the same time, population growth and urban development are increasing exposure. A major cyclone or flood can now disrupt not only homes and livelihoods, but also electricity, telecommunications, transport, water supplies, ports and regional supply chains.

This makes disaster risk management much more than an emergency-response issue. It is fundamentally a development issue.

One of the most important contemporary developments in disaster risk management is the growing recognition that resilience must be built into infrastructure and investment decisions from the beginning. For too long, countries have often been forced into a cycle of disaster, destruction, reconstruction and renewed vulnerability. Rebuilding infrastructure exactly as it existed before a disaster simply reproduces the same risks.

IORA can help promote a different approach: build back better, but, more importantly, build better in the first place. Roads, bridges, hospitals, schools, ports and telecommunications systems should be designed with future climate and disaster risks in mind. Regional cooperation can help member states share technical expertise, develop common standards and mobilise investment for infrastructure that can withstand increasingly severe hazards.

Resilience, however, is not only about concrete, steel and technology. Nature itself can be an important form of infrastructure.

Mangroves, coral reefs, wetlands and seagrass ecosystems provide natural protection against coastal flooding, erosion and storm surges while supporting fisheries, biodiversity and local communities. Protecting and restoring these ecosystems can therefore deliver several benefits at once: reducing disaster risk, supporting livelihoods, strengthening the blue economy and addressing climate change.

This is an area in which IORA is particularly well placed to make a difference. Its broader focus on the blue economy provides an opportunity to connect disaster risk reduction with environmental sustainability. Instead of treating these as separate policy areas, the region can recognise that healthy marine and coastal ecosystems are part of its resilience infrastructure.

Technology also offers enormous potential. Early-warning systems have transformed disaster preparedness, but technology alone is not enough. An early warning is effective only when it reaches people in time, is communicated clearly and leads to appropriate action.

This places communication at the heart of disaster risk management. Governments, emergency services, communities and the media all have roles to play in ensuring that warnings are understood and trusted. In a region as diverse as the Indian Ocean, communication strategies must also reflect differences in language, culture, geography and levels of digital connectivity.

IORA can strengthen this area by promoting the exchange of knowledge and best practices in risk communication, early warning and community preparedness. The objective should be to move towards a culture in which people do not simply wait for governments to respond, but are equipped to understand risks and take action themselves.

Another priority should be regional disaster data. Hazards do not respect national borders, yet information about risk and disaster impacts often remains fragmented. Countries can learn enormously from one another if they are able to share data, assessments, experiences and lessons from previous emergencies.

A stronger regional approach to data and risk information would allow countries to identify common vulnerabilities and anticipate emerging threats. It could also improve planning for disasters that have consequences far beyond the country in which they occur, particularly when ports, shipping routes, food systems and energy supplies are disrupted.

Ultimately, the success of IORA's Disaster Risk Management agenda should not be measured simply by the number of meetings, workshops or programmes undertaken. Its real measure of success should be whether communities across the Indian Ocean are safer and better prepared as a result of regional cooperation.

The region needs to move decisively from a culture of reaction to one of anticipation. That means investing before disasters occur, strengthening infrastructure before it fails, protecting ecosystems before they are degraded, communicating warnings before communities are in danger and sharing knowledge before countries are forced to learn the same lessons independently.

IORA has an important role to play in making that transition possible. The Action Plan 2022–2027, the Working Group on Disaster Risk Management, capacity-building initiatives and the engagement of member states provide the building blocks for a stronger regional system of resilience.

The Indian Ocean cannot prevent every disaster. But it can reduce the human and economic cost of those disasters. That should be the ultimate ambition of regional disaster risk management: not simply to respond better when disaster strikes, but to ensure that the next disaster is less destructive than the last. In an era of climate uncertainty and growing interconnectedness, resilience is no longer an option. It is a prerequisite for sustainable development. For the Indian Ocean region, cooperation through IORA offers an opportunity to turn that principle into collective action.