



Guidelines for PSI Emergency Response Work

Natural disasters, epidemics and pandemics, war and conflict (hereafter referred to as ‘emergencies’) impose serious challenges to communities and to public service workers, especially first responders and frontline workers. These emergencies are made worse by the negative impacts of “man-made disasters” such as austerity/budget cuts, privatization, outsourcing, short staffing, and lack of regular trained staff.

Climate Change

Climate change is causing more frequent and extreme weather events (hurricanes and tornadoes, wildfires, heat and cold waves, flooding and drought) which become disasters when they encounter human settlements, especially our cities. The changing climate is also facilitating the spread of diseases and epidemics such as Zika, Malaria and Dengue, as well as waterborne infections. Overall, the cost in lives lost and property destroyed is skyrocketing. A range of organisations, including many agencies of the UN, as well as the privateers and the financiers are paying attention to emergencies and disasters. Public service unions need to coordinate their work on climate with that on emergencies.

Conflict

Conflicts are spreading and changing. Whereas previously conflicts were between states, we are now seeing many more internal conflicts, and increasing terror attacks. In conflict situations, it is imperative that first responders, especially health workers, are accorded the protections enshrined in UN statutes and conventions. Civil protection is paramount, and essential services such as food, water, health, energy, education, transportation and housing are more difficult to guarantee. Both civilians and public services are becoming ‘legitimate’ targets, a situation which PSI strongly decries.

Migrants and Refugees

As a result of emergencies (with particularities for each specific kind), we are seeing increasing waves of refugees and migrants. These ‘victims’ are placed in situations of extreme precariousness, fleeing their homes, often crossing borders without their identification documents and resources. The movement of migrants and refugees also places burdens on the communities and public services that receive them. PSI work on the rights of migrants and refugees should also be coordinated with that on emergencies.

PSI’s main focus in emergency response will be to help affiliates position themselves to influence policies in both the preparation or anticipation phases and in the rebuilding. PSI wants to support unions to ensure that public service workers : 1. Are not exposed to unnecessary health and safety risks while performing their jobs of saving lives and protecting property; 2. Have adequate staffing levels and are properly equipped and trained to provide the protections that communities need, and 3. Are able, post-crisis, to build stronger, more resilient unions and to advocate for quality public services which support just and equitable societies.

Emergency and disaster preparation

PSI recognizes that preparation, anticipation and prevention are essential to dealing with emergencies. Preparedness before a disaster occurs is the best way to minimize casualties and damage. It also helps in the quick recovery. Trade unions should be able to help first responders and frontline workers to assess the level of preparedness based on experience of previous emergencies (including from unions in other cities or countries), to ensure that workers have access to appropriate training and exercises; availability of personal protective equipment; necessary community preparation, including evacuation; appropriate emergency plans for facilities; necessary emergency communications tools which function without access to electricity and internet networks, etc. The checklists for emergency preparation can be complex, and workers and trade unions should be actively involved in their elaboration, updating and monitoring - as our expertise can contribute to ensure continuity of services during emergencies. We should also support community-wide and region-wide preparation, including coordination between different agencies, with the business sector and other relevant stakeholders.

Responding to emergencies

PSI believes that union input into rebuilding/reconstruction (or Build Back Better) to create stronger and more resilient public services is essential to protect our unions, their members, and their communities. In doing so, unions will need to use each crisis to expose weaknesses in readiness systems and to advance trade union and QPS agendas in post-disaster rebuilding. Unions will need to demonstrate that first responders and frontline workers show the highest level of professionalism and dedication to saving lives and protecting infrastructure and property, in order to build their credibility for participation in post-emergency decision-making.

Unions should work to ensure participation in all relevant rebuilding decision-making:

- Ensure respect for trade union rights for first responders and frontline workers (rebuilding includes a lot of dangerous work, including clearing rubble and repairing damaged infrastructure)
- Advocate for systematic investment in worker training, safety equipment and tools in order that workers can do their jobs safely and effectively – including in response to future emergencies
- Ensure safe staffing levels in all first responder services, including in health care
- Establish work rules for local government employees at emergencies, along the lines of those used by firefighters as well as police officers.
- Address mental health issues for workers engaged in rescue and reconstruction work (post-traumatic stress disorders)
- Guard against excessive reliance on volunteers and precarious workers replacing skilled professionals
- Work to ensure coordination of public administrations and first responders in different sectors as a measure of preparedness
- strengthen work with the communities and ensure all rebuilding programs address the most vulnerable, including women, children, elderly and disabled, and migrants and refugees
- Preserve quality public services; invest in public infrastructure, public health systems and other services
- Be vigilant to the encroaching of private capital in the rebuilding phase, which may lead to privatization of public services

PSI and trade union advocacy

All of the above activities will require sustained advocacy work relative to policymakers (local, regional, national and global), as well as new areas to consider in workplace collective bargaining (such as ‘greening’ the facilities and preparing emergency evacuation plans).

So far, it is rare that workers and trade unions are involved in emergency planning and decision-making, despite the fact that first responders and frontline workers regularly risk their lives, and have acquired in-depth knowledge in the field. At the global level, to the extent that ‘workers’ are even considered, the focus is most often on volunteers. Hence, PSI and affiliates need to engage in significant awareness-raising of the role of well-prepared and trained professional public sector workers.

PSI will develop specific tools to help unions conduct post-disaster assessments, gather member input, develop analyses and engage in advocacy.¹ We will also support activities to raise the profile of emergency and disaster workers, such that they can have an increased credibility with the community and with civil servants and elected officials (who will be leading the Build Back Better processes). This will include collecting personal testimony of the ‘heroic’ actions of members.

Disaster Relief activities: Note that **PSI is not an aid agency**; we do not have the expertise to move personnel or material over long distances into disaster zones, nor to ensure that they are allocated effectively, equitably and safely. This is the task of a number of specialized agencies, with specific logistical expertise. PSI will seek to have input with some of these agencies in order to ensure that the affiliates and their families are also able to receive emergency care and assistance. We understand that a number of unions will want to use their funds to provide rapid relief support. PSI’s role in such circumstances will be to provide contacts for unions in disaster-affected countries. We also need to recognize that public sector workers are expected to continue providing all the essential services without interruption during emergencies, while they themselves can also be victims of the disasters.

¹ Union tools include : developing overall union strategies; documenting evidence (testimony, photo, media, analysis) of the strengths and weaknesses of workplace disaster response mechanisms; preparing and delivering awareness-raising with members, management, community; media relations and outreach; input to government rebuilding activities.