# Policy Brief: From National Asset to National Ignominy: Ghana's Akosombo Dam Disaster Exposes Government Negligence and Civil Society's Heroic Response

*"Turning Crisis into Capability: Ghana's Wake-Up Call"*

## Executive Summary

The 2023 Akosombo Dam spillage in Ghana, affecting nearly 40,000 people across six regions, exposed critical vulnerabilities in the nation's disaster management framework. This brief critically analyses the disaster's causes and impacts, contrasting the government's slow, uncoordinated response with the more effective efforts of civil society and private entities. It reveals systemic failures in disaster readiness and extracts vital lessons demanding immediate action. The brief advocates for a paradigm shift towards a whole-of-society approach to disaster management, challenging policymakers to move beyond conventional, siloed strategies. It proposes bold, transformative policy recommendations to revolutionise Ghana's approach to crisis management, emphasising the need to harness the full spectrum of national capabilities to build resilience against future disasters.

## Background and Introduction

The Akosombo Dam, once a symbol of Ghana's progress, became the epicentre of a national crisis in September 2023. The Volta River Authority's (VRA) controlled spillage from 15 September to 30 October 2023, intended to protect the dam's integrity, instead unleashed severe flooding downstream, devastating communities in the Lower Volta Area and impacting communities in North Tongu, South Tongu, Central Tongu, and other districts. This disaster exposed the precarious balance between infrastructure management and disaster preparedness in an era of climate uncertainty, sparking intense debate on Ghana's disaster readiness. Yet, the government's recovery response leaves much to be desired one year later.

This Policy Brief aims to catalyse a fundamental shift in Ghana's disaster management approach. It critically examines the crisis, dissecting both immediate causes and underlying systemic failures that allowed a controlled action to spiral into a humanitarian emergency. By juxtaposing the government's delayed, uncoordinated response against the swift actions of non-governmental actors, the brief seeks to transform this disaster into a catalyst for change.

The primary objective is to propose a radical transition towards a whole-of-society approach to disaster management. This brief challenges policymakers to envision and implement a new paradigm of national resilience that integrates governmental action with the dynamism of civil society, the expertise of the private sector, and the strength of local communities. It aims to identify critical gaps, extract crucial lessons, and provide actionable recommendations to revolutionise Ghana's disaster preparedness and response capabilities.

## Causes and Impacts of the Spillage Disaster

### Causes

- **Hydrological Factors**: Climate-induced heavy rainfall and persistent upstream water rise necessitated the spillage to protect the dam's integrity
- **Inadequate Water Management**: Empirical evidence suggests better water management could have prevented downstream flooding, compounded by delayed decision-making on when to

initiate the spillage

- **Insufficient Early Warning Systems**: Inadequate early warning systems and community preparedness were inadequate, exacerbated by the lack of timely interventions and community preparedness
- **Limited Risk Assessment and Preparedness**: Insufficient risk assessments and preparedness measures by relevant authorities
- **Poor Inter-Agency Coordination**: Limited collaboration between VRA, NADMO, and the Ghana Meteorological Agency (GMet), which engaged in a blame game

### Impacts

- **Humanitarian Crisis**: Displacement of nearly 40,000 individuals across six regions, mainly in Mepe and surrounding areas (see Table 1 & Figure 1)
- **Economic Disruption and Losses**: Destruction/disruption of homes and properties, local fishing and agriculture, commercial fish farms, aqua businesses, and critical infrastructure
- **Health and Safety**: Increased health risks—snakebites, malaria, waterborne illnesses (diarrhoea, dysentery, cholera, typhoid fever), inadequate sanitation facilities, skin infections due to contaminated water sources, physical harm, injuries, hypertension, neurological symptoms, psychological trauma and social disruption for affected communities
- **Disruption of Education**: Over 14,700 children, comprising 7,431 boys (50.1%) and 7,273 girls (49.5%), and the lives of 15,182 individuals involved in teaching and learning, including 478 teachers, were impacted. Disruption of education as school facilities were used to house displaced persons (see Figure 2)

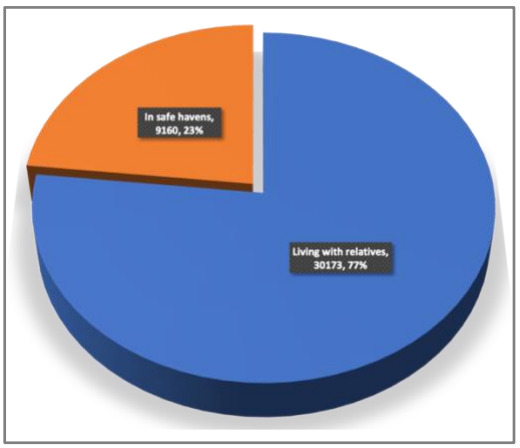
*Table 1: Disaggregated demographics of flood victims in affected districts and communities*

| Srl | District | Communities Affected | # of Safe Havens | # in Safe Havens | # with Relatives | Total Affected Persons | # of Affected Persons | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | | | | | Adults | | Children | | PWDs |
| | | | | | | | Male | Female | Male | Female | |
| 1. | North Tongu | 69 | 15 | 4216 | 8417 | 12633 | 3151 | 3285 | 2982 | 3134 | 81 |
| 2. | Central Tongu | 34 | 4 | 2773 | 6941 | 9714 | 2545 | 2780 | 1795 | 2546 | 48 |
| 3. | South Tongu | 28 | 0 | 0 | 3364 | 3364 | 989 | 1024 | 650 | 701 | 0 |
| 4. | Shai Osudoku | 14 | 4 | 1256 | 325 | 1581 | 296 | 336 | 421 | 528 | 0 |
| 5. | Asuogyaman | 6 | 5 | 325 | 1015 | 1340 | 320 | 494 | 240 | 286 | 0 |
| 6. | Ada East | 14 | 3 | 590 | 5067 | 5657 | 1518 | 1534 | 1394 | 1211 | 0 |
| 7. | Anloga | 20 | 0 | 0 | 4762 | 4762 | 1009 | 1148 | 1128 | 1477 | 0 |
| 8. | Lower Manya | 7 | - | 0 | 282 | 282 | 62 | 63 | 83 | 74 | 0 |
| 9. | Ada West | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - |
| 10. | **Total** | **192** | **31** | **9,160** | **30,173** | **39,333** | **8,867** | **10,664** | **8,693** | **9,957** | **129** |

*Source: Emergency Operation Centre (Battor), 24 October 2023*

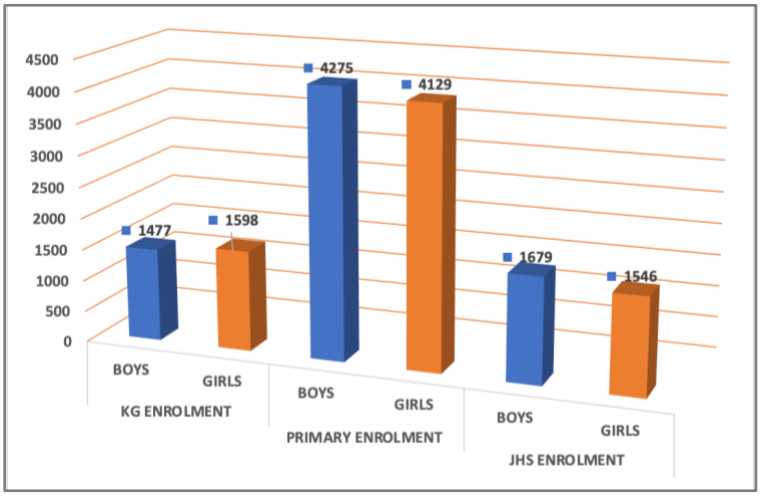
- **Social Disruption**: Disruption of community life, social events, and local economies, including decreased hotel bookings, leading to economic hardships
- **Environmental Damage**: Contamination of water sources and ecological imbalance
- **Infrastructure**: Damage to critical infrastructure, including electricity and water supply systems

*Figure 1: Disaggregated victims in safe havens/sheltering with families & friends*




*Source: Extracted from Emergency Operation Centre (Battor), 24 October 2023*

*Figure 2: Affected numbers of school children*




*Source: GES/Emergency Operation Centre (Battor), 24 October 2023*

Table 1 and Figure 1 show records of eight of the nine hardest-hit districts in the Volta, Eastern, and Greater Accra regions and thirty-two communities downstream of the Akosombo Dam.

## Analysis of Government Disaster Readiness, Preparedness and Response

Although the VRA conducted a flood simulation exercise (SIMEX) in May 2023 involving various agencies, its preparedness and initial response demonstrated significant shortcomings:

1. **Preparedness Shortcomings**:
    - **Inadequate Risk Assessment**: Failure to anticipate the scale of potential disaster
    - **Insufficient Resource Allocation**: Limited budget for NADMO (less than 2% of national budget). VRA's initial humanitarian aid budget of GH₵20 million (GH₵9 million released by October 2023) was inadequate. Generally, slow and insufficient mobilisation of emergency funding and resources for relief and recovery, including limited pre-positioning of relief supplies and resources, leaving evacuation centres lacking essential amenities
    - **Lack of Comprehensive Planning**: Absence of a detailed disaster preparedness plan
    - **Inadequate Early Warning Mechanisms**: Failure to effectively alert and prepare communities, including about evacuation
    - **Weak Coordination**: Poor coordination between government agencies
    - **Military and Security Forces**: Despite its immense resources, the Ghana Armed Forces were not adequately involved. The Ghana Navy played a significant role in evacuating and transporting relief items, deploying ten boats and rescuing over 8,000 victims. The Ghana Army (48 Engineer Regiment) played a limited role compared to the Navy, deploying six aluminium boats
2. **Response Failures**: The government's response was largely reactive rather than proactive. Key actions included:
    - **Delayed Action**: Establishing an Inter-Ministerial Committee on 13 October 2023, rather than

immediately after the SIMEX and before the spilling commenced on 15 September 2023; announcing a three-pronged strategy on 30 October (rescue, relief, rehabilitation), which lacked substantive programmatic recovery and restoration information

- **Insufficient Resource Mobilisation**: Slow and inadequate deployment of emergency funds and supplies; allocating GH₵220 million for relief efforts (November 2023 budget), the Ministry of Finance released GH₵80 million (36.4%) out of the pledged amount by March 2024[1]
- **Insufficient Relief**: The VRA continued to donate relief items well into 2024, while the Agriculture Ministry provided about 13,000 victims with rice, onion, pepper, and tomato seeds and fertilisers to revitalise farming communities under the Emergency Support to Rural Livelihoods and Food Systems (ESRF).
- **Poor Coordination**: Lack of effective collaboration between government agencies
- **Inadequate Utilisation of Military Resources**: Limited involvement of the Ghana Armed Forces
- **Reactive Rather Than Proactive Approach**: Focus on post-disaster relief instead of prevention

Given the scale of the disaster, these efforts were primarily viewed as insufficient. Overall, the government faced criticism for not declaring a state of emergency, its slow and uncoordinated response, and its refusal to accept blame and responsibility for the crisis.

## Other Stakeholder Responses

In contrast, Members of Parliament (MPs), the media, civil society organisations, private entities and individuals demonstrated more proactive and impactful responses:

- **Members of Parliament (MPs) and Local Officials**: MPs and officials engaged in media blitzes to explain the necessity of the spillage, facilitate aid distribution, and establish support funds. The North Tongu MP, for instance, led local relief efforts and advocated for more significant government action supported by the ECG, Judiciary and the Judicial Service of Ghana, etc
- **Media Houses**: Media groups like Citi FM, TV3, and Multimedia launched fundraising campaigns, mobilised aid materials and undertook relief projects
- **Private Sector**: Funding, equipment, and expertise for relief efforts (e.g., Engineers & Planners, First Sky Group); the Volta Regional Chiefs, National House of Chiefs, tertiary educational institutions and student unions, religious bodies and clergy/imams, political organisations (NDC) and political party members, banks, performing artists, foundations, commercial businesses, construction firms, and citizens, also stepped up to the plate to assist the relief efforts.
- **Civil Society Organisations**: Mobilisation of donations and volunteers
- **Religious and Traditional Institutions**: Mobilised donations and volunteers
- **Community Members**: Crucial role in assisting and accommodating victims
- **International Organisations (IOs)**: IOs like the UN, supported with technical assistance

These non-governmental actors often provided more timely and targeted assistance, highlighting the importance of a whole-of-society approach to disaster response.

[1] It provided some food, water and temporary shelter to displaced persons, but the pace of work was slow. Almost a year later, 1,350 victims still lived under tents, although civil society organisations (CSOs) and individuals had helped to build houses in seven weeks for 800 victims and rented accommodation for over-65s.

## Key Lessons Learned

The **twelve** critical lessons from the disaster and its management are:

1. **Proactive Preparedness is Vital**: Waiting until a crisis occurs leads to inadequate reactive responses.
2. **Need for Comprehensive Risk Assessments**: Regular and thorough risk assessments are crucial for effective disaster preparedness.
3. **Early Warning Systems**: Accurate weather forecasting and early warning systems are crucial for timely disaster preparedness and response.
4. **Infrastructure Resilience**: Regular maintenance, inspection of critical infrastructure and climate-adaptive upgrades can prevent or mitigate disaster impacts.
5. **Inter-Agency Coordination and Collaboration Mechanisms**: Improved coordination and collaboration among government agencies, private entities, and CSOs are necessary for effective disaster management. Clear communication and collaboration protocols are needed before disasters occur.
6. **Community Engagement**: Public/community education, awareness campaigns, and involvement are vital for building community resilience—preparedness, effective disaster management, and reduced disaster impacts.
7. **Dedicated Funding and Resources**: Disaster preparedness and response require dedicated funding and pre-positioned resources to be effective.
8. **Leveraging the Strengths of Non-Governmental Stakeholders**: Integrating diverse stakeholder strengths is essential in significantly enhancing disaster preparedness and response capabilities.
9. **Climate Resilience and Adaptation Strategies**: Climate change increases disaster risks, necessitating long-term strategies for environmental resilience.
10. **Vulnerable Group Prioritisation**: Special attention is needed for at-risk populations, like children, older people and persons with disabilities, in disaster response.
11. **Military Integration and Lead Role**: Leveraging the organic capabilities of the Armed Forces significantly augments disaster preparedness and response capabilities.
12. **Long-term Planning and Investment**: Protecting critical infrastructure like dams requires long-term planning and investment.

## Conclusion

The 2023 Akosombo Dam spillage disaster laid bare the deep-seated vulnerabilities in Ghana's disaster management framework, revealing a critical failure of foresight, preparation, and coordinated action. This crisis not only challenged the nation's ability to protect its citizens but also highlighted the urgent need for a complete overhaul of Ghana's approach to disaster preparedness and response. Within this failure lies an opportunity for transformative change.

The lessons drawn from this disaster demand a paradigm shift in disaster management. They emphasise the integration of the Armed Forces as a critical component and adopt a whole-of-society approach. The proposed recommendations offer a comprehensive roadmap for this transformation, advocating a shift from reactive, siloed approaches to a proactive, integrated strategy that leverages the full spectrum of national capabilities.

Implementing these changes will require unprecedented political will, significant investment, and a cultural shift in perceiving and practising disaster management. It necessitates breaking down institutional barriers, fostering genuine cross-sector collaboration, and prioritising community resilience in national development strategies.

As Ghana faces an increasingly uncertain future marked by climate risks and infrastructure vulnerabilities, the time for incremental change has long passed. The Akosombo disaster must serve as the watershed moment propelling the nation towards a new era of disaster resilience. By embracing a whole-of-society approach and implementing the outlined recommendations, Ghana can better safeguard its citizens and set a new standard for disaster management across Africa.

The path forward is clear but demands courage, commitment, and concerted action from all stakeholders. The critical question now is not whether Ghana can afford to make these transformative changes but whether it can afford not to, as the nation's safety, security, and prosperity hang in the balance. This disaster should be a final wake-up call for Ghana to prioritise and revolutionise its crisis management and national resilience approach.

## Broad Policy Recommendations

1. **Enhance Disaster Preparedness and Response**:
    - **Enhance Early Warning Systems**: The government should invest in advanced multi-channel weather forecasting and early warning dissemination systems to ensure timely and accurate information dissemination to all stakeholders. This includes upgrading early warning systems with AI technology for real-time monitoring and communication
    - **Improve Water Management**: Implement better water management practices to prevent future flooding
    - **Community Engagement and Education**: Strengthen community engagement and education programmes to raise awareness about disaster preparedness and response. This should involve enhanced joint regular public education and awareness campaigns and disaster preparedness drills, training sessions, and public awareness campaigns to foster partnerships among local organisations, businesses, and community groups and involve them in disaster preparedness efforts
    - **Strengthen Public-Private Partnerships**: Foster strong public-private partnerships to leverage resources, expertise, and technology from the private sector in disaster preparedness and response efforts
    - **Increase Resource Allocation**: Ensure timely and adequate allocation of resources for disaster response and recovery
    - **Develop Comprehensive Disaster Plans**: Develop and regularly update comprehensive, multi-level disaster preparedness and response plans at national, regional, and local levels.
    - **Central Role of the Armed Forces**: Integrate a lead armed forces role into disaster preparedness and response strategy to leverage their significant capabilities
2. **Strengthen Institutional Capacity**:
    - Increase NADMO's budget and staffing
    - Increase budget allocation to other relevant agencies for disaster preparedness and response

- Equip the Organisation with modern disaster management technologies
- Establish regional response hubs with pre-positioned supplies
- Provide specialised training for disaster management personnel
- Establish a Central Emergency Response Fund to ensure quick and efficient allocation of resources during disasters. This fund should be managed transparently and be readily accessible

3. **Develop a Comprehensive National Disaster Preparedness Strategy**:
    - Conduct nationwide risk assessments
    - Create detailed contingency plans for high-risk scenarios
    - Establish clear roles and coordination mechanisms for all relevant agencies. Foster better coordination and cooperation among all stakeholders to ensure a coordinated disaster response
    - Involve communities in disaster preparedness and response planning
4. **Adopt a Whole-of-Society Approach to Disaster Preparedness and Response, Ensuring the Inclusion of All Stakeholders**:
    - **Inclusive Stakeholder Engagement**: Create formal mechanisms to integrate all stakeholders in disaster preparedness and response planning
    - **Volunteers**: Establish a national disaster volunteer corps
    - **Partnerships**: Develop public-private partnerships for disaster response
    - **Traditional Leaders**: Leverage traditional and religious leaders for community mobilisation
    - **Capacity Building**: Provide training and capacity-building programmes for all stakeholders to enhance their disaster response capabilities
    - **Public Awareness Campaigns**: Conduct public awareness campaigns to educate communities about disaster preparedness and response measures
5. **Improve Infrastructure Resilience**:
    - Conduct regular comprehensive inspections and maintenance of critical infrastructure vulnerabilities, including hospitals, emergency response centres, and transportation systems
    - Conduct comprehensive risk assessments to identify vulnerable populations and critical infrastructure
    - Develop and implement climate adaptation plans for critical assets like dams
    - Invest in nature-based solutions for flood mitigation
    - Upgrade building codes and enforce them in flood-prone areas
6. **Enhance Regional and International Cooperation**:
    - Strengthen transboundary water management agreements
    - Participate in regional disaster response exercises
    - Share early warning data and disaster management best practices
    - Seek membership in the World Bank's West Africa Coastal Areas (WACA) Programme to enhance the country's resources and strengthen its climate resilience within a coastal West Africa

framework

7. **Implement Long-term Environmental Strategies**:

- **Redesign Alternative Spillways**: The VRA and government should redesign alternative spillways to improve water channelling for irrigation, energy generation, and drainage into the sea. They should examine the possibility of expanding the dam or creating adjoining reservoirs to harvest excess water, which could be used for other purposes, including agriculture
- **Construct Irrigation Dams and Fields**: The government and relevant stakeholders should construct irrigation dams and fields downstream across the Accra Plains and upstream across the Afram Plains, among others, to hold water and help control the adverse effects of dam spillage by the VRA and other authorities
- **Implement Ecosystem-Based Approaches**: The government should implement ecosystem-based approaches—reforestation and wetland preservation—to help absorb excess water and reduce the risk of catastrophic flooding. This would contribute to long-term flood mitigation and improve the resilience of affected areas
- **Explore Feasibility of Relocating Communities**: The VRA and government should explore the feasibility of permanently relocating communities in the waterways of the spilt water or effluents
- **Strengthen Climate Resilience and Adaptation**: The VRA and government should strengthen climate resilience and adaptation efforts as a long-term strategy through concrete steps to mitigate the frequency and severity of extreme weather events, including heavy rains and floods, which could lead to dam spillages and other natural disasters. They should consider the theoretical possibility of the dam's destruction in the event of unpredictable rainfall because of climate change
- **Develop Community Resilience**: Develop and implement community-based disaster preparedness programmes, including integrating disaster preparedness into school curricula, to build resilience at the local level,

8. **Ensure Accountability and Learning**:

- **Institute an Independent Probe**: The government should institute an independent probe to examine the circumstances, decisions, indecisions, and actions and inactions surrounding the spillage. The probe should target potential criminal negligence and liability against persons with responsibilities to prevent or manage such disasters to serve as a deterrent for such criminal negligence
- **Revise Stakeholder Mapping and Develop ERP**: VRA and NADMO should regularly revise stakeholder mapping and emergency response plans (ERP) based on a Whole-of-Society Approach. They should conduct post-disaster assessments to build upon data captured from the lessons learned to inform future preparations

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