

Saving lives: What are we waiting for?

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In 2005 nearly 90,000 people died and over one hundred million more were affected by disasters caused by natural hazards. The hurricanes in Central and North America, wildfires and flooding in Europe, drought and the aftermath of locust invasion in Africa, the South Asia earthquake and continued spread of avian flu demonstrate that natural hazards affect us all, from our economic prospects to our environment.

A year ago, just one month after the Indian Ocean tsunami struck, representatives of 168 countries gathered in Kobe Hyogo, Japan and pledged to make the world better prepared for and less vulnerable to natural hazards. They adopted the Hyogo Framework for Action, a global plan for disaster risk reduction over the next decade.

In the Hyogo Framework, governments agreed to make disaster risk reduction a political priority and to invest in measures such as national and local risk assessments, people-centered early warning systems, public awareness and education, better urban planning, safer building construction codes and well-rehearsed evacuation plans.

If the Indian Ocean tsunami was our "wake-up call" to invest in and focus our efforts on disaster preparedness and risk reduction, then the Hyogo Framework is our blueprint on how to move forward. Since its adoption a year ago, more than 40 countries have revised their policies and launched new initiatives that put disaster risk reduction at the top of their national political and development agendas.

Indonesia, for example, has enhanced its national disaster management institutions. Countries of the Indian Ocean rim have moved quickly to put in place a tsunami early warning system. Revised national school curricula in India and Uganda now include disaster awareness and risk reduction.

In addition to setting aside a fixed percentage of its development investments for risk reduction projects, India has introduced stricter building construction codes in seismic hazard zones. African governments have established a disaster readiness action plan for the continent while countries belonging to the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) recently held their first regional evacuation exercise that mobilized personnel and emergency equipment across national borders.

In Costa Rica, Venezuela, and elsewhere in Latin America, local citizens have gained more control over the allocation of public works budgets, allowing them to prioritize safety. Caribbean and Central American nations affected by the hurricanes in 2004 and 2005 are revising and strengthening their warning systems and also, as in Jamaica, linking water resource management to management of hurricane-related hazards such as landslides and floods.

These are all very good first steps but we must accelerate our efforts. Additional threats such as climate change, environmental degradation and rapid urbanization have made millions of people more vulnerable to natural hazards in the past decade.

Although most people who are especially vulnerable to natural hazards live in developing

countries, Hurricane *Katrina* provided a stark reminder that no country, rich or poor, is immune. We know that the next big hazard event is only a matter of time. But it is better policies, increased resource commitments and greater international coordination and cooperation that will prepare our communities and provide them with the know-how to save lives.

With no early warning system in place, the Indian Ocean tsunami caused over 200,000 deaths in 12 nations in just 24 hours. Yet in the small Simeulue Island community in Indonesia, all but seven of its 87,000 residents were spared because traditional knowledge handed down over generations had taught people to run to higher ground when the ocean water abruptly receded.

At the start of each hurricane season, Cuba activates a nation-wide early warning system and preparedness plan--when Hurricane Michelle reached Cuba in 2001 with wind speeds of up to 220 kilometers per hours, nearly 90,000 civil defense volunteers and 5000 vehicles were mobilized to evacuate 700,000 people and an equal number of animals. Hurricane Michelle was the strongest to hit Cuba in 50 years but only five fatalities and 12 injuries were reported.

We have sufficient evidence that local and national readiness in the face of a natural hazard spares lives and reduces economic and environmental destruction. Safer construction and adherence to codes, for example, minimized damage to buildings in an earthquake that registered over seven on the Richter Scale in Hokkaido Japan in late 2004. Only eleven people were injured.

The 2005 South Asia earthquake that was of a similar magnitude, destroyed over 5000 mud-brick schools in Pakistan, killing 16,000 children. Low cost designs for stronger schools exist, but greater efforts are needed to get them widely used.

We already possess the skills and knowledge to make the world safer and better prepared for natural hazards. The life-saving and economic benefits are clear and the commitment to act is greater than ever before. Let us seize this opportunity to reduce risk and make our communities less vulnerable to natural hazards.

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