International Strategy for Disaster Reduction

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The Global Conference "Preventing Disasters and Minimizing Their Consequences" at Harvard School of Public Health

At the Gala Dinner at the Fogg Art Museum on Thursday, 27 April 2006, Boston, Massachusetts, USA

Mission

The ISDR aims at building disaster resilient communities by promoting increased awareness of the importance of disaster reduction as an integral component of sustainable development, with the goal of reducing human, social, economic and environmental losses due to natural hazards and related technological and environmental disasters.

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Distinguished Participants, Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is an honour and a privilege for me to be here with you this evening amongst such an interesting and diverse group of individuals from private, public, academic and, I suppose, also other sectors, and I wish to thank Harvard University's School of Public Health for inviting me to contribute to these very important discussions.

As an old Japanese proverb says, "Vision without action is but a daydream, but action without vision is a nightmare".

I represent a small but very active secretariat of the United Nations, which facilitates the implementation of the **International Strategy for Disaster Reduction (ISDR)** that was launched in 2000 following an International Decade dedicated to the subject of Natural Disaster Reduction (IDNDR, 1990-1999) that some of you may remember.

Following the Decade, Governments at the UN General Assembly agreed that the subject would require a sustained effort for a longer time and decided to launch the Strategy, which has become the centrepiece of United Nations efforts to reduce the serious and growing impact of natural hazards on communities and countries. It is being used increasingly by the United Nations and other organizations to coordinate and guide disaster risk reduction and its integration into development planning and action by Governments, international, regional and civil society organizations.

The need for a global strategy is underscored by the many disasters making international headlines as well as those that don't make it to the headlines but affect large numbers of people around the world on a daily basis. The disasters of the last two years, from the Indian Ocean Tsunami, to droughts in Africa, the hurricanes which roared onto the shores of America's Gulf Coast and Central America and typhoons triggering landslides in South East Asia, the fires and floods in Europe and the earthquake in Pakistan, are tragic reminders that reducing risk and improving the management of natural hazards needs to be of the highest priority.

In January 2005, just a few weeks after the Tsunami claimed over 250,000 lives, 168 Governments gathered at Kobe, Japan, at the second World Conference on Disaster Reduction and adopted the **Hyogo Framework for Action 2005-2015: Building the Resilience of Nations and Communities to Disasters**, a ten-year plan for engaging on specific actions to make risk reduction an essential component of development policies, plans and programmes.

The Hyogo Framework carries a strong commitment and ownership of Governments as well as regional, international, and non-governmental organizations. Its five priorities for action are to: 1) ensure that disaster risk reduction is a national and local priority with a strong institutional basis for implementation, 2) identify, assess and monitor disaster risks and enhance early warning, 3) use knowledge, innovation and education to build a culture of safety and resilience at all levels, 4) reduce the underlying risk factors and 5) strengthen disaster preparedness for effective response at all levels. The challenge is to turn these goals into practical measures and tangible activities at all levels by which progress in disaster reduction can be measured.

All too often, disasters are conceived, and responded to as singular "events" rather than the more essential requirements of seeing them as manifestations of complex

natural and human systems at work. When a tropical cyclone hits a deserted beach, it is not a disaster. But add an entire fishing community living in thatched roof homes and suddenly the number of fatalities and economic losses surge.

Although the most vulnerable communities are in developing countries, we know that no country poor or rich--as Hurricane Katrina and the floods in Europe--recently demonstrated--is immune from disasters. In poor countries however, disasters are setting back years of progress and development and inevitably widen the gap between the haves and have-nots. Currently 85 per cent of the people exposed to these hazards live in countries of medium or low development. The World Bank has estimated that the average economic cost of each large scale disaster in low-income countries since 1997 is between two and 15 percent of gross domestic product. Compare that figure with an estimate by Mr. James Lee Witt, with us tonight, who, during his time as Director of FEMA calculated that every dollar spent on disaster risk reduction saves between 3 to 5 dollars in future economic losses. Do we need more evidence than that?

In today's globalized world, all nations are equally affected by catastrophic events that take place beyond their borders. Reduced levels of production or infrastructure in one country can limit access to raw materials, energy and labour or can increase the number of environmental refugees and the spread of disease in another. Sooner or later, rich countries will end up having to spend more money responding to disasters in poorer countries if we don't act now.

In the last ten years, disasters have claimed over 600,000 lives and affected over 2 billion people. The direct economic loss is estimated at USD 700 billion. In 2005 alone, losses were at USD 220 billion after 150 disasters claimed 97,000 lives.

Why are disasters causing greater economic and human loss?

Firstly, rising urban populations is increasing vulnerability very rapidly. We have 6.5 billion people in the world today and that number is likely to increase to 9 billion by 2050 with over 50% expected to live in urban areas. In developing countries, as populations driven by poverty move into cities in search of employment, they will settle in low cost, hazard-prone areas such as flood plains and unstable hillside slopes.

Secondly, environmental degradation: our economic activities are taking a severe toll on our soil, our fauna and flora. The recent mudslide in Leyte Island in the Philippines that buried more than 200 school children occurred on land that had been heavily deforested.

A third reason is global warming, and increasingly so, research is showing that the number and intensity of some extreme, weather-related events such as floods, windstorms and droughts is due to such warming of the atmosphere as well as the oceans.

These challenges are not likely to go away anytime soon. Reducing vulnerability and risk begins by considering how and where people live and work, and the potential hazards to which they are exposed. And we need to do this when the sun is shining – precisely at and during the times when people's minds are not concentrated on potential hazards or imminent threats.

The good news is that, across the developing and developed world, the knowledge, expertise and resources exist to protect communities during natural hazards. Even the poorest countries have the assets and resources necessary to raise awareness, build hazard resistant buildings, put in place early warning systems and respond to disasters.

Take Bangladesh, where repeated loss of life due to tropical cyclones in coastal areas have brought together NGOs, Government, local district administrators, and the scientific community monitoring and forecasting weather. Cyclone forecasting is relayed to local communities in easy to understand warnings, through local administration and networks of more than 5000 community and Red Cross/Red Crescent volunteers. As a result, death rates have dropped significantly. Elsewhere, Mexico, Romania, Cuba, Vietnam and others have made teaching disaster-related subjects in school a mandate by law in order to ensure that risk awareness begins in childhood.

Fundamentally, disaster risk management must be embraced as a public and personal good, one that requires the collective engagement of Governments and communities, and those working in the key sectoral and professional disciplines such as planning, environment and natural resources management, public administration, engineering, education, media/advertising, communications and information technology.

Because disaster risk reduction is a collective issue and not the matter of one agency or authority, Governments, first and foremost, have the responsibility for the welfare of their communities by providing the legal and institutional framework for disaster risk management. There must be a mandate to ensure that the various agencies at federal, national and local levels understand their roles in disaster risk reduction and coordinate their efforts.

Such a framework also needs to allocate and ensure the sustainability of funding for disaster risk reduction, such as taxation for spending on specific risk reducing measures. India, for instance, set up a 10 % fund to implement risk reduction in development programmes and plans. That funding has helped build dams, roads and disaster resilient schools. It has also helped diversify income options in poverty programmes to insulate the poor and vulnerable and provided better assets build-up through microfinance.

A growing number of countries are establishing national platforms for disaster risk reduction to provide public visibility, professional engagement and concentrated official authority across disciplines and sectors. However, there are still very few examples where members of the corporate or private sector have taken a leading role in associating wider commercial interests with public sector disaster risk reduction initiatives.

Reducing risk and vulnerability require actions in many sectors and by many disciplines. Many are the practical measures that are needed.

For example, a systematic and strategic approach to mitigating disasters needs a sustained commitment and ability to conduct hazard and vulnerability assessments or risk mapping of communities. This data is vital and allows for critical analysis to

translate “the facts” into decisions of where to invest to reduce human suffering and physical destruction in the future.

At the same time, setting up early warning systems to empower individuals and communities threatened by hazards to act in sufficient time and in an appropriate manner is also needed. In order to be effective however, early warning systems need to be “people-centred”, and therefore, communities must actively participate in their development and implementation. In Guatemala, communities alongside the Coyolate River had undertaken a joint flood assessment, put in place an alarm system and built evacuation shelters so that when Hurricane Mitch struck in 1998 there was no loss of life and the impact of the storm on the inhabitants was minimized.

By the way, we have been privileged to have President Clinton, as UN Special Envoy for Tsunami Recovery, dedicating his wise leadership to convince heads of Governments of the affected countries to focus on reducing risk and has championed the idea of “building back better” as a complement to his efforts to ensure rapid but effective recovery and to develop an Indian Ocean Tsunami Warning System.

Another form of real “early” warning is risk awareness and education. It is always best to start in primary and secondary public education in order to build generational knowledge of local hazards and risks. Incorporating risk-related topics into existing curricula can help children play an important role in saving lives and protecting members of the community in times of crisis. When the Indian Ocean Tsunami struck, a British school girl, Tilly Smith saved many lives by urging people to flee the shores of Phuket Island in Thailand: her geography class in Britain had enabled her to recognize the first signs of a tsunami, same at a community, Simileue, in Indonesia where grandparents transmit traditional knowledge about earthquakes and tsunamis to grandchildren and where most of the population saved their lives. Allocating funds to support disaster risk reduction training for teachers and systematic evacuation drills help build greater awareness of the issue in communities. The media, NGOs and community organizations and the private sector all play important roles in this respect.

I mentioned earlier that in 2005, 97,000 people lost their lives to disasters. Well, 18,000 of those people were young students who were crushed to death as schools crumbled during the Pakistan earthquake. Establishing regulations and ensuring compliance with resilient construction techniques, building codes, land-use planning and zoning are other specific measures that radically minimize loss of life. Turkey, Cuba and Nepal are three countries that have focused their efforts on retrofitting schools, hospitals and other public facilities with a view to save lives and ensure the continued functioning of critical services in the event of a natural hazard.

Environmental policies need to recognize and strengthen the capacity of ecosystems to withstand the impact of natural hazards. Wetlands are important retention basins, reversing deforestation, preventing destruction of mangroves, coral reefs and other natural defences, as well as switching to renewable energy sources and other measures to mitigate and adapt to climate change. These are all essential risk reduction measures. Appropriate environmental management can ensure sustained economic productivity, such as agriculture and fishing, for example, without increasing vulnerability to disasters.

Because single disasters can wipe out livelihoods of many people, especially the poor, micro finance tools such as micro credits and micro insurance should be made widely available to help households transfer risks and recover more quickly. In low income countries, only one per cent of households and businesses have access to some kind of disaster insurance compared to 30 percent in rich countries.

Good disaster risk reduction strategies incorporate strong public private partnerships. This requires a positive enabling environment for doing business that stimulates risk reduction measures by small domestic businesses as well as larger and foreign investors. The private sector is a key service provider and it is estimated to provide 9 out of 10 jobs in most countries.

Private sector investments in disaster risk reduction can also improve companies' public image and reduce risks of loss of commercial value. Government authorities, particularly at local levels are affected by the need to respond to popular pressures. For example, they will not forcibly remove hutment slums from hazardous flood or mudslide zones to safeguard votes in these colonies. However, central government in collaboration with technical bodies, like space application or land use planning centres, can create a national vulnerability atlas, as done by India, and through national land-use zone plans, provide incentives to local authorities to make hazardous settlements resilient through redevelopment. Private sector can facilitate such a process through building loans and construction industry participation.

Similarly in Aceh, Indonesia, Government is providing incentives, tax breaks for private investment in seismically safe construction, and local authorities provide land in safer zones that benefit communities in their jurisdiction.

These key actions and experiences are only a few of what can and needs to be done. Part of the ISDR's mandate is to serve as an information clearinghouse of disaster risk reduction initiatives. Many existing tools and resources as well as lessons learnt are being compiled and made available on our website from the Indian Ocean tsunami of 2004 to the recent reports on Hurricane Katrina describing the many measures that should be taken to improve preparedness and response.

At the regional level, when trans-border issues are involved, complementary and mutually reinforcing actions are required among organizations before, during and after disasters. Regional mechanisms for common natural resource management motivate a common approach to shared issues because of geography, political alignment, or cultural/historical affinity amongst neighbouring or proximate countries.

The Indus Valley agreements between India and Pakistan, brokered by the World Bank and borne out of a common incentive, for example, motivate both countries to conserve watershed and share data and information on flows for mutual benefit. Similar agreements exist for other major rivers such as the Mekong and the Nile.

Regional approaches can also act as a "flywheel" to maintain collective momentum, when a country changes Government, or suffers a disaster. Sharing of resources, information, education, training and analysis are all facilitated by building a broader group approach. Following the Indian Ocean Tsunami, the UN Secretary-General called for a global early warning system to be established and steps have so far been outlined to begin to develop such a system of systems.

Ladies, gentlemen, distinguished participants, these are only some of the important actions that are needed in hazard prone countries to alert communities to hazards, strengthen institutions and mechanisms and make disaster risk reduction central to national and local development planning. The Hyogo Framework clearly spells out the responsibilities of Governments, regional and international organizations, including the UN system and the ISDR's overall facilitating role. The challenge remains on how we can each translate these responsibilities in concrete actions with tangible results in our respective areas of authority and professional capacities at the national, regional and international levels.

I trust this Conference will spark greater interest in the subject of reducing risk to disasters and I very much look forward to staying in touch on its follow-up. I hope that some of the thoughts shared tonight will help us generate more action in this regard in order to prevent natural hazards from turning into large scale catastrophes.

Many thanks for listening.

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