
Disaster prevention

Time for a new era

Thomas Loster

Earthquakes, floods, droughts – the large number of natural disasters in 2011 have once more brought home to us the fact that prevention is more important than ever. However, to minimise risks in the long term, it is not enough to implement projects in isolation. An approach that uses the combined strengths of partnerships has a greater likelihood of success.

In 2011, natural catastrophes again assumed unimagined proportions. Torrential rain triggered huge floods in eastern Australia, several earthquakes in neighbouring New Zealand caused massive damage, and a tsunami wiped out vast areas in Japan. Amidst all the disaster reports, it almost went unnoticed that Pakistan had again been hit by massive flooding following last year's hundred-year flood. And in the Horn of Africa millions are suffering the effects of the worst drought in 60 years.

If we consider for how long the global community has endeavoured to optimise disaster prevention, it becomes clear that the time has come for a completely new approach. Developing countries, in particular, are frequently though not unexpectedly hit by natural disasters for which they are often insufficiently prepared. This does not mean that the efforts to date have been without success: in declaring the 1990s the International Decade for Natural Disaster Reduction, the UN has raised awareness of the social, ecological and economic consequences of ever-increasing extreme natural events. As a result, important institutions, instruments and guidelines have been established to improve disaster risk management and, following its inaugural meeting in 2007, information has been exchanged and alliances formed at the biennial world conference "Platform for Disaster Risk Reduction" in Geneva.

Massive rainfall triggered the worst floods in Thailand's history in October and November. Losses were well over US\$ 40bn, and a thousand lives were lost.





With increasing losses from disasters, the UN General Assembly has launched a number of initiatives to improve disaster risk management. Despite every effort, global coordination is still lacking.



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More players, greater efforts

Adaptation measures and risk management are also coming increasingly to the fore in the political discussion surrounding climate change. This aspect is not usually mentioned whenever the media and environmental associations bemoan the apparent failure of the world climate summit. Over the years, numerous work programmes have been established to enhance disaster prevention and reduction. The latest programme of the Secretariat of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, called "Loss and Damage", has been set up to analyse the loss potential of weather-related natural catastrophes caused by climate change. Another of its goals is to develop risk management options and build resilience, particularly in poorer countries. A practice that has been around for decades in traditional insurance in the developed world is now finding its place on the political agenda for the developing world.

For the time being, it does not look as if there will be a shortage of money to fund the programmes: up to US\$ 30bn have been earmarked to finance climate adaptation projects – by 2020 it is even hoped to scale this sum up to US\$ 100bn a year. This can help improve risk management and raise disaster prevention in many regions to a new level. These are also the goals of the RISK Award launched by the Munich Re Foundation, the Global Risk Forum and the UN Secretariat of the International Strategy for Disaster Risk Reduction in May 2011 in Geneva. The award, offering the highest international prize money for disaster prevention, promotes innovative approaches to disaster prevention (see also page 28).

Networking strategies – Following a global master plan

Despite all the progress, one problem remains: there is a lack of coordination, even where different projects are engaged in a similar context. Of course, people's ability to adapt and their needs, gender aspects and, ideally, justice and self-determination should always be the main issues. Good programmes integrate factors such as local know-how and adaptation techniques that have evolved over time.

Many frictional losses could be avoided and synergies deployed if projects were interlinked and if they were set up and treated collectively. It is also important for local community measures to be fully embedded within a national or even an international prevention strategy. National programmes and initiatives need to be liaised across ministries and departments. International institutions should be better coordinated and deploy global master plans to evaluate milestones and progress. Ultimately, it is about partnership between political institutions and between public and private sector.

A new era is possible

Only if disaster prevention is coordinated on a broad basis, strengths pooled and successes communicated is there a real prospect of sustainable success. If the link to the overarching political level that determines the scope of action is also right, disaster prevention will have entered a new phase. This new era will not be able to influence the whims of nature. But we will at least ensure that the people at risk are better prepared.