UNITED NATIONS INTERNATIONAL STRATEGY FOR DISASTER REDUCTION

Contribution to the 2014 United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) Integration Segment

ECOSOC Integration Segment

Achieving sustainable development: integrating the social, economic and environmental dimensions

Inputs by UNISDR

Accumulation of Disaster Risks in Urban Centers

Fast growing cities and urban areas of the world are engines of growth and wealth accumulation. This growth has positive results in social improvements, cultural, educational and other positive impacts. On the other hand, evidence demonstrates that fast economic growth, combined with fast population expansion in urban areas, also increases disaster vulnerability and exposure.

The IPCC in 2012[1] noted that in the next few decades, a major driver of the increasing economic damages and losses from disasters will be the increasing concentration of people and assets in hazardous locations, especially in urban areas. The IPCC in 2014[2] noted that a high proportion of the world's population most affected by extreme weather events is concentrated in urban centres. These urban centres lack both local governments with the capacity to reduce disaster risk, and much of the necessary infrastructure to deal with these risks.

Disaster risk continues to increase globally, with more people and assets located in hazard prone areas. Over the past 30 years, the proportion of the population living in flood-prone river basins increased by 114 per cent and on cyclone-exposed coastlines by 192 per cent.[3] More than half of the world's large cities, with populations ranging from 2 to 15 million, are currently located in areas of high risk of seismic activity.[4]

The 2011 World Urbanization Prospects[5] highlighted that approximately 890 million people were living in areas of high exposure to disasters with most of them from cities in Latin America, in Northern America and especially in Asia. Flooding is the most frequent and greatest hazard that affects cities or urban agglomerations; at least 250 cities are located in or are close to areas that with high risk of flooding – potentially affecting 663 million inhabitants.

Internalizing Disaster Risks in Development

[1] http://ipcc-wg2.gov/SREX/
[2] http://www.ipcc.ch/report/ar5/wg2/
[3] UNISDR, 2011: Revealing Risk, Redefining Development. Global Assessment Report on Disaster Risk Reduction 2011.
[4] UNDP. April 2011: "Supercities face high quake risk". Newsroom UNDP. Accessed: 4 October 2011. <http://content.undp.org/go/newsroom/2011/april/supercities-face-high-quake-risk-says-undp-expert.en>
[5] esa.un.org/unup/

Latest evidence and analysis in the UN Global Assessment Report on Disaster Risk Reduction (GAR) has shifted and sharpened understandings of disaster risk reduction. It is now clear that the world's efforts must be directed not simply at shielding social and economic development against "external" events and shocks, but should concentrate on addressing the underlying factors that generate and reproduce disaster risk, which could be driven by social and economic development actions themselves.

The Global Assessment Report on Disaster Risk Reduction 2009 (GAR09)[6] notes that poor urban governance drives urban risks. Cities' commercial, industrial and residential locations prove to be livelihood centres for the urban poor, who left with no choice but to settle on dangerous locations subject to natural or man-made hazards.

In addition, Global Assessment Report on Disaster Risk Reduction 2013 (GAR13)[7] have shown that paradoxically business investments that aimed to strengthen competitiveness and productivity may have inadvertently contributed to increasing disaster risks. The estimated exposure of economic assets in thirteen of the most populated cities in the world that are also vital global supply chains is expected to increase between 2005 and 2070 from USD 416 billion to USD 3,513 billion in Miami, USD 8 billion to USD 544 billion in Dhaka and USD 84 billion to USD 3,557 billion in Guangzhou.

In managing risks today and planning for the future, a combination of approaches is needed to minimize impact through both public and private investments. These approaches need to be in terms of both reducing and managing existing risks, and avoiding future ones through improved sustainable development practices.

Ways Forward: Disaster Risk Management to integrate the Pillars of Sustainable Development

Over the coming years, trillions of dollars of new public and private investment are set to pour into hazard-exposed urban centers around the world. How public and private investments are made more resilient will largely determine how much disaster risk is accumulated and how underlying risk drivers are addressed.

The capacity to reduce urban disaster risks will therefore depend on how cities and businesses are able to invest wisely and in a more resilient manner. The transformation of the global economy over the last forty years has led to an unsustainable accumulation of disaster risks, which are not adequately reflected in the balance sheets of either governments or businesses.

[6] http://www.preventionweb.net/english/hyogo/gar/2009/
[7] http://www.preventionweb.net/english/hyogo/gar/2013/

The post-2015 framework for disaster risk reduction that will be adopted at the 3rd United Nations World Conference on Disaster Risk Reduction in March 2015 in Sendai Japan, will be a key milestone to address some of the above concerns by focusing strongly on resilience building action in particular at the local level.

However, the real paradigm shift needed to address the growing accumulation of disaster risks now and in the future in urban centers requires political, social, ecological and economic innovation, and these need to be addressed within the pillars of sustainable development.

In conclusion, it is now clear that disaster risk management is a critical tool to promote the integration of the three pillars of sustainable development. Practical ways that this can be promoted as suggested by local governments in more than 60 consultations on the post-2015 framework for disaster risk reduction include:

Deal with urban risk, as this is a core driver of future risks for countries. In regions like Asia or Africa, urban risks are already or will pose the greatest driver of disaster risks for countries. The assessment of urban risks and the development of appropriate programs to reduce these risks including land-use planning, building codes and regulations, environmental management and local development will bring together the three pillars of sustainable development at the local level.

Build stronger linkages between disaster risk reduction and climate change efforts for local implementation. Acknowledge that national development decisions have serious implications on building and addressing local risks, national development planning should therefore promote, support and facilitate the integration of disaster risk reduction and climate change adaptation at the local level. This will cover ecological, social and economic aspects.

- o O o -