

# **PHYSICIAN, HEAL THYSELF?**

## **The politics of disaster mitigation**

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### **1. INTRODUCTION**

My interest is not in the scientific aspects of *hazards* but in the ways that society and its institutions manage

The impact of disasters is not felt evenly within countries, either. Studies have shown that in general it is the weaker groups in society that suffer worst from disasters: the poor (especially), the very young and the very old, women, the disabled, and those who are marginalised by race or caste.

### **3. VULNERABILITY**

The difference between a *hazard* and a *disaster* is an important one. We are concerned about natural hazards because they might lead to disasters. A disaster is the impact of a hazard on a community/society – usually defined as an event that overwhelms that community/society's capacity to cope.

In other words, the impact of a disaster is determined by the extent of a society's *vulnerability* to hazard. Vulnerability is the human dimension of disasters. To understand what makes people vulnerable, we have to move away from the hazard itself to look at a much wider, and a much more diverse, set of influences: the whole range of economic, social, cultural, institutional, political and even psychological factors that shape people's lives and create the environment that they live in.

For example we do not look at the mere fact that people live in flimsy houses in hazardous locations, but why they live there – which could be the product of poverty (itself the result of local, national or even global economic forces), demographic processes such as population growth or migration to towns and cities, legal-political issues such as land rights, and other political features such as the weakness of government and civil society institutions in protecting citizens. In other words, vulnerability is socially constructed.

Recent major 'natural' disasters provide plenty of examples of these aspects of vulnerability. Two illustrations are given here: Hurricane Mitch (1998) and the Turkish earthquake (1999).

and demographic trends had created something of a housing boom in many towns – encouraging rapid construction of apartment blocks and putting pressure on the regulatory system.

Few of these aspects of vulnerability are normally considered part of disaster management but all have a profound bearing on a disaster's impact. These are very complex issues of sustainable development and this is why natural disasters in developing countries are often described as 'unsolved problems of development'.

Complex problems demand equally complex responses, going well beyond the remit of traditional disaster managers and emergency planners. They require concerted action by multilateral agencies, national and local government agencies of many different kinds, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), scientists and other technical specialists – and, of course, communities.

#### **4. DISASTER MITIGATION: RHETORIC AND REALITY**

It is generally accepted that disaster mitigation pays. For example, the World Bank and United States Geological Survey once calculated that economic losses worldwide from natural disasters during the 1990s could be reduced by \$280 billion if \$40 billion were invested in disaster mitigation and preparedness – a ratio of \$7 saved for every \$1 spent. The Federal Emergency Management Agency in the USA reckons that every dollar spent on natural disaster preparedness and mitigation saves it \$2 in emergency relief expenditure.

The United Nations decided that the 1990s should be the International Decade for Natural Disaster Reduction (IDNDR). National governments, and international aid and donor agencies, all signed up to the Decade and its aims. Reading the public statements of such agencies, and the resolutions of recent UN conferences, one could be forgiven for assuming that there is a massive international drive to implement risk reduction measures, yet, as UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan conceded in 1999 when he addressed the IDNDR's closing conference, 'the number and cost of natural disasters continue to rise'.

Why is this? A charitable view would be that it is too soon to see the impact of the efforts that have been made, but it is also clear that many of the international community's commitments were little more than rhetorical. Kofi Annan pointed to this problem in his speech in 1999. He said: 'We know what has to be done. What is now required is the political commitment to do it.'

Is this true, and if so what is it that weakens the will of decision makers and practitioners in the aid industry to reduce the risk of future disasters? I believe that Kofi Annan is right, and that, while we must concede that the scale and complexity of the problem are inhibiting, other causes can be found within the attitudes and cultures of the different kinds of institution involved in disaster reduction work.

In support of this assertion, I would like to highlight four features exhibited by different actors in the aid and disaster industry and to suggest that they are all, in different ways, *political*.

**(i) The politics of response**

This feature is common to many institutions but can be seen particularly well among international aid and donor agencies, and national governments.

One of the best indicators of the international aid community's commitment to resolving an issue is the amount of money they spend on it. To the major humanitarian aid donors, disaster mitigation and preparedness are marginal. For example, the European Union is the world's largest humanitarian aid giver, yet over recent years the European Community Humanitarian Office's disaster preparedness budget line has accounted for less than 1% of its total spending on disasters. In Britain, the Department for International Development's disaster mitigation and preparedness budget line has in recent years generally accounted for about 3% of its total spending on disasters. In both ECHO and DFID, disaster mitigation is falling even further from favour now that the IDNDR is over.

In contrast, international donor agencies often spend large amounts of money on humanitarian relief – emergency aid budgets rocketed during the 1990s, and large amounts of relief aid are generally available whenever a major disaster strikes. Donor agencies respond to disasters because of moral pressure, from the media and public, to do something. This pressure makes the immediate consequences of the disaster a short-term political issue requiring attention; but there is no similar impetus to address that disaster's causes and its long-term effects.

The media are not blameless here either. They are no less responsive to events, and their overriding interest in technical details, body counts and any political rows/scandals during a disaster (e.g. over the cost of helicopters for Mozambique after the floods, or Clare Short's 'golden elephants' jibe during the Montserrat crisis) diverts attention from analysis of why the disaster took place.

National governments, too, often wait on events rather than anticipating them. The Montserrat crisis that began in 1995 is a good example of this. A recent major evaluation of the British Government's response to the volcanic emergency on Montserrat saw the problems as essentially those of governance. It found that there was apparently no contingency planning for how the Bdisa7 2guerndT# of g



- fragmentation along disciplinary and institutional boundaries (one of the key fault lines being between those who work on hazards and those who work on disasters)
- a lack of understanding between different disciplines, and often a lack of mutual respect
- a lack of dialogue between different actors (often accompanied by lack of mutual respect) – e.g. between physical and social scientists; between governments and NGOs; between so-called ‘experts’ from developed countries and people in developing countries
- a culture of competitiveness and professional jealousy (fuelled by competition for funds)
- insufficient humility in the face of the disaster problem; a greater readiness to talk than to listen

Another critical failing is that disaster specialists and people working on long-term sustainable development programmes tend to act in isolation from each other. Long-term risk/vulnerability reduction must become an integral part of development programmes, but to date development workers have thought only in terms of one-off disasters, which they have seen as a problem for the humanitarian aid sector. One of the biggest disappointments of the IDNDR was its failure to draw the development community into the movement for disaster reduction.

#### **(iv) Participation and accountability**

The USA is a very hazardous country, but copes well with its many hazards. This is partly because it is a wealthy country that can afford extensive disaster reduction measures, but also because it has a relatively open democratic system and a tradition of active citizenship that leads to citizens’ demands that its government (at all levels) protects them. Those who work in disaster management should accept that they bear a heavy responsibility to those who live at risk but do not have the same resources or opportunities to attain security. However, one sees little recognition of this.

We could all be made more aware of our responsibilities if we spent more time in contact with vulnerable people – or at the very least, those who work with them. Representatives of developing countries are all too rare at international expert gatherings, and come mostly from government and top research or scientific institutes. Representatives of civil society, especially grass-roots organisations, are very rare indeed. The resulting imbalance of influence leads to narrowly conceived international disaster reduction initiatives that often fail to address the real problems of vulnerable people.

Those who work in long-term development have learnt over the years, slowly and sometimes painfully, that without a thorough contextual understanding of local communities – their needs, skills, structures and cultures – even the most well-meaning attempts at aid are likely to fail. Vulnerability, and local skills in coping with hazard, are part of this context. The only way to acquire this understanding is by learning from the communities themselves. The most effective of today’s development initiatives are those where community members are participants in

