

Overcoming Disaster Through P³: Principles, Policies, Practices

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Introduction: Thinking and Doing Before it is Too Late

In a world of competing interests, short attention spans, and political games, disaster risk issues are often sidelined. After all, the event has not happened, so why worry? Then, a catastrophe strikes followed by demands about why nothing was done before the disaster.

This attitude of thinking and doing only when it is too late must be altered to create perceptions and values that accept acting beforehand. In particular, children need to be convinced about thinking and acting before the event so that it becomes part of their normal thought patterns, values, decisions, and day-to-day actions throughout their lives and careers. Then, as these children enter the workforce, policies, behaviour, and actions related to thinking and acting before an event would hopefully follow.

For convincing society about the necessity of this approach, clear and simple messages are vital regarding what could be done, what should be done, and why it should be done. One challenge is selecting the name for the overall aim. The activities we seek have many aliases including disaster risk reduction, building resilience, vulnerability reduction, risk management, adjusting to the environment, mitigation, adaptation, prevention, pre-disaster actions or activities, safer communities, and variations of each phrase. In the end, a good communicator—a simple, engaging, attention-grabbing idea—is still missing (see also Appendix 2).

A short, accurate, understandable phrase communicating the wide range of ideas and activities encompassed might not exist. Instead, a set of possibilities or a portfolio from which to choose, depending on the audience and purpose, might be useful. While suggestions are sought, this document uses flexible language despite resulting inconsistencies. The phrase used most frequently here is “Making Communities Safer From Disasters”.

Irrespective of the dilemma of the overall name—or of the need for a single phrase—the messages needed already exist in many forms. This document attempts to consolidate and summarise them in a three-level framework, termed P³ because it refers to the Principles-Policies-Practice exchange and interconnections:

1. Principles: Disaster Tenets.

A starting point for discussion is provided to suggest an overall ethos. These statements must be accepted by everyone before doing what is needed.

2. Policies: Making Communities Safer From Disasters.

Five short messages are provided followed by a sentence of explanation and then a lengthier description. These messages describe general approaches for adhering to the principles. They are guidance for determining how to achieve what is needed by providing general indications of the approach to use in practice.

3. Practice: Travelling the First Mile.

In 2003, Haresh Shah made a plea for “The Last Mile” (<http://www.radixonline.org/resources/haresh-shah-lastmile.doc>). He argues that despite the wealth of material available for making communities safer from disasters and the extensive effort which many people give towards this task, a gap exists in reaching the right people with the right strategies for disasters, risk, and vulnerability. We must use our well-known and well-understood knowledge and techniques to make a direct difference to those who are threatened or who suffer (see also the Radix “knowing *versus* doing” page <http://www.radixonline.org/knowningvsdoing.htm>).

The Last Mile has been critiqued (for example, see <http://www.fao.org/WAICENT/FAOINFO/SUSTDEV/CDdirect/CDre0026.htm> and <http://www.firstmilesolutions.com>) as placing last the people who should be considered first. While retaining the point of trying to overcome the gap to reach the right people with the right strategies, The First Mile emphasises that connecting with the people who experience disaster should be the primary step and focus, not the last endeavour.

This section lists operational actions which could be undertaken to put the policies into practice by connecting to the people are affected by disaster—including ourselves.

Principles: Disaster Tenets

(See also Question 1 in Appendix 1.)

1. Disasters are social, not environmental phenomena.

As a definition, disasters are about people and their or their organisations’ reactions to environmental phenomena or potential environmental phenomena. If an environmental event neither impacts nor worries people, it is just an environmental event, not a disaster.

2. Natural disasters do not exist.

Environmental events (often termed “natural hazards” although see <http://www.ilankelman.org/miscellany/NaturalDisasters.rtf>) happen, but the root cause of disaster is vulnerability which is created by society. Thus, disasters are created by humanity and are not “natural”. (Unless human beings and society could be considered to be natural processes...)

3. Disasters and risk cannot be understood without focusing on vulnerability.

Vulnerability dictates how society could be impacted by an event and the processes which developed and maintain the situation which permits those impacts. Vulnerability is about what humanity does to itself, including what some sectors do to other sectors. Focusing on this element is essential for understanding root causes of disasters and risk.

4. Disasters are slow-onset.

Environmental events might be rapid-onset, but the disaster results from humanity's decisions, attitudes, values, and activities over the long-term. For example, an earthquake occurs quickly, but it took a long time for the urban planning, building codes, and construction to manifest in such a way that buildings collapsed and killed people.

5. Exceptions exist (although see <http://www.ilankelman.org/miscellany/NaturalDisasters.rtf>).

The above tenets do not suggest that we (society/people) completely understand the environment nor that we can or should control the environment. Instead, they suggest that we have a duty and responsibility to understand and deal with ourselves. We have many techniques for dealing with uncertainties and unknowns, including the environment's behaviour and properties. If we fail to do so, then we should not be blaming the environment for being difficult. Instead, the responsibility rests with ourselves for our choices in priorities, values, and resource distribution which led to environmental behaviour, including the inherent uncertainties and unknowns, affecting society in a manner deemed to be detrimental.

We have a right to demand, and a responsibility to make, communities safer from disasters. The process should not be considered charity and should not occur through the benevolence of donors. Different perspectives suggest that making communities safer from disasters is about human rights or is about individual duties to society. Others appropriately note that, irrespective of a rights-based or duties-based perspective, the process is also about one's self-interest, because each person and each community gains immense advantages by making their and others' communities safer from disasters.

Policies: Making Communities Safer From Disasters

(See also Questions 2, 3, and 4 in Appendix 1.)

1. Making communities safer from disasters is relevant.

- The actions for making communities safer from disasters are for everyone, now and into the future.

Making communities safer from disasters must positively and tangibly impact day-to-day living, such as through improved water, choices, shelter, food, education, and livelihoods. Health and safety (for example, crossing the road, wearing seatbelts, house fires, safe sex, drunk driving, and smoking) are often made relevant to people. Hence, other risks and vulnerabilities (for example poverty, volcanoes, injustice, floods, inequity, avalanches, and disease) could be made relevant too. Relevance does not always translate into action, but it is a needed beginning. Introducing risks and vulnerabilities into school curricula in the same way that health and safety issues are included would be a step forward. Safety Days, as outlined at <http://www.ilankelman.org/miscellany/SafetyDay.rtf> would be one approach. These have been implemented in many locations in many different formats.

2. Making communities safer from disasters saves resources.

- Making communities safer from disasters is cost-effective, now and into the future.

For many people, particularly those with a subsistence lifestyle, a short payback period of weeks to months is too long. If people are asked to contribute to making communities safer

from disasters—such as through resources, time, effort, or attention—they must receive close to immediate payback. Meanwhile, those who can afford to wait for longer payback periods such as years, for example governments and donors, often request proof that making communities safer from disasters is cost-effective. Some evidence of resources saved through disaster risk reduction is available at <http://www.ilankelman.org/miscellany/MitigationSaves.rtf>

Decision-makers often want a policy or action to save money regardless of extreme events. A payback period which must wait for an extreme event to occur is too long. Thus, actions which prevent extreme events from becoming disasters must be part of cost-effective, long-term development and sustainability processes. Similarly, for long-term development and sustainability processes to succeed and to be cost-effective, preventing extreme events from becoming disasters must occur. Actions for preventing extreme events from becoming disasters need to have tangible development and sustainability benefits to ensure that this link is maintained. Making communities safer from disasters must be mutually reinforcing with sustainability activities.

In some cases, such projects might require funds which are independently managed and audited. Careful diplomacy would be needed to convince national governments that this approach is appropriate. As well, tainting the projects must be avoided, such as accusations of Japan using their aid money to buy the votes of small island developing states on the International Whaling Commission.

Although this guiding principle can be convincingly proven, effecting it poses other challenges. Additional further aspects to examine:

- (a) Who saves resources and who does not save resources in order to identify (i) inequities in some approaches towards making communities safer from disasters and (ii) who might oppose making communities safer from disasters because they gain, almost inevitably in the short-term only, from disasters.
- (b) The gains over multiple timeframes, both short-term and long-term.
- (c) The extent to which lack of disaster risk reduction is not about lack of resources, but about inadequate resource allocation.

3. Making communities safer from disasters is a continuous process.

- Making communities safer from disasters never stops, but is ongoing.

Making communities safer from disasters is not about single or one-off actions. The task cannot be done once and then forgotten nor can it be separated into its own, isolated realm, activities, or deliverables. Making communities safer from disasters is a process, an attitude, a paradigm, a value, and a culture. The past and future must be considered and examined in addition to the present. Questions to be answered include not only “What state are we in?” but also “How did we get here?”, “Where are we going?”, and “Where should we be going?”. Making communities safer from disasters should happen everywhere all the time by everyone as part of usual, day-to-day lives. The process is continuous.

4 Making communities safer from disasters must be visible.

- Making communities safer from disasters must always be seen prominently and prominently seen to work.

A Hercules landing in a disaster zone—fully loaded with relief supplies, politicians, and journalists—yields a good news feed. Making communities safer from disasters must be made similarly visible. Following wildfires in California, the July 1998 issue of National Geographic printed a photograph of a house with fire mitigation measures implemented and which remained untouched, surrounded by the smouldering ruins of houses without fire mitigation measures. We need more such examples, although such dramatic and communicable contrasts unfortunately require a disaster to have happened. We also need to answer “why?” for these examples. In the fire mitigation case, why were fire mitigation measures implemented for that house but not for surrounding houses?

5. Making communities safer from disasters is sexy.

- Making communities safer from disasters should be exciting and interesting, so that people want to be involved.

Everyone, including the media, must understand how inspiring, useful, enriching, fascinating, satisfying, rewarding, and fun it is to make communities safer from disasters. People need to understand it, and be able to do it, on their own terms.

One example would be having media coverage of disaster mitigation to the same level of prominence as media coverage of disasters. Would it be possible to work with the media to do so, because communicating how to make communities safer from disasters should be on people's and the media's own terms.

Another example would be producing reality television programs on making communities safer from disasters. Accusations of silliness might be valid for "Big Disaster Brother": in next week's episode, whoever has not prepared for the earthquake might be going under; stay tuned to find out. Yet if an audience is captured by survival on a desolate island, why not through building a house or small community which then must withstand an extreme event? The participants would not be told in advance the nature of the extreme event.

The phrase "Making communities safer from disasters", however, does not match some of the criteria above. For instance, it is not overly sexy while using the "disaster" without context or definition might make it seem less relevant. The phrase "Making communities safer" or "Making communities safer and healthier" could be more appropriate, especially with regards to articulating an overarching vision.

Practices: Travelling the First Mile

(1) The phrase "Building a culture of prevention" is frequently used, especially to highlight the importance of promoting intangible, non-quantifiable benefits from disaster risk reduction along with the barrier of fully understanding and accepting that aspect. Could that barrier be overcome by ensuring that any disaster risk reduction measure tangibly contributes to communities? For example, not only retrofit a rural school for earthquake and flood resistance, but also add 5% to the budget to purchase learning materials (possibly books or computers, if appropriate). Thus, increased safety is seen as being exactly the same activity as a better education.

Alternatively, enlarge the school or build a new one, rather than just retrofitting a dilapidated building. Thus, rather than being specifically about the intangible disaster averted, the project is about tangible education, livelihoods, and sustainability outcomes which have disaster mitigation built in. Care would need to be taken to avoid the perception that education budgets could then be reduced or that disaster risk reduction endeavours could substitute for proper education endeavours.

If the community would not want an enlarged or new school or if the extra 5% in budgetary demands would stop the project, then the best solution balancing all these issues should be discussed and the resultant sacrifices which the solution entails should be made clear. At times, "the best solution balancing all these issues" might be doing nothing, however callous that appears.

(2) Neither Boston, USA nor Kingston, Jamaica has seen a big earthquake for a few years while neither Vienna, Austria nor Basel, Switzerland has seen a big earthquake for a few centuries. Post-disaster trips require resources which are often found quickly. Are there resources for trips to Boston, Kingston, Vienna, or Basel to check schools and hospitals for earthquake resistance, to retrofit where necessary, and to monitor progress? Are resources more effectively spent on international, interdisciplinary disaster response trips or on international, interdisciplinary disaster risk reduction trips?

(3) CERTs (Community Emergency Response Teams) amongst many other variations (see <http://www.riskred.org/fav/cst.pdf>) have achieved impressive successes. Equivalents need to be established worldwide. Rather than focusing on emergency response, they should be considered as CVRTs (Community Vulnerability Reduction Teams) or CSTs (Community Sustainability Teams). CVRTs and CSTs would have emergency preparedness and response as one task, but vulnerability reduction and sustainability processes would be ongoing. Rather than visibility and community involvement mainly during and after events, they would have continual visibility and would become a known and essential part of a community. These teams would also shift the responsibility and ownership of reducing and responding to disasters from outsiders and experts to the community while involving more players. Making communities safer from disasters would be everyone's responsibility rather than the experts' alone. Responding to events would be everyone's responsibility rather than looking towards the military or outside help.

As an example of successes, many fire departments regularly work on fire prevention, incorporating school visits and property inspections. These activities are accepted as being a normal part of community efforts at disaster risk reduction.

(4) Disaster risk reduction concepts need to be translated into street language, not only through using local dialects and colloquialisms, but also through using appropriate media. Some people prefer to read publications and to surf the web. Others have strong oral traditions, not by watching a laptop presentation in a meeting room, but by sitting in a circle, eating, gossiping, and listening to a lengthy and elaborate story or legend. Others use art, including music and dance, or engage in politics and community issues in only specific instances and venues. "Translation" means getting information and ideas to the people on their terms in their way.

(5) Elect or fairly select locals as intermediaries to bridge the gap in risk and sustainability communication between the "public" and the local authorities or administration. These intermediaries could be responsible for disseminating to the community the relevant information for specific issues and for initiatives related to making communities safer from disasters. As an intermediary, this person should be integrated into local teams such as CERTs, CVRTs, and CSTs (see paragraph (3)). If the intermediary has access to the relevant information and participates in the relevant meetings, they would become not only an interpreter or translator, but also a "multiplier" by multiplying the expanse of people which the knowledge reaches.

Dangers exist that (a) the intermediary would become just another political position, (would there be any way to deal with the power issues which would arise with such a position?) (b) the intermediary would become, or be perceived to have become, a lackey for the official line, (c) no one would have the time or interest to do the job properly, (d) the intermediary's strong involvement makes them an "expert" who cannot communicate with the "non-experts", and (e) that this approach "objectifies" external wishes and values, separating disaster risk reduction from the community and making it a process for "someone else" to consider, rather than internalizing the rationale and actions. Some of the dangers could be overcome by filling this position on an as-need basis for specific issues, e.g. a river management scheme or new street lighting, but then some of the guiding principles which led to this suggestion would be diluted or contradicted.

(6) Colleagues in Nepal <http://www.nset.org.np> use a simple shake table to demonstrate in public the difference between a normal scale-model house and an earthquake-resistant scale-model house. This powerful visual display captures interest for explaining the principles of earthquake-resistant houses and the low cost and relative simplicity of retrofitting. People then gossip to their neighbours and communities about their experience. Collecting and evaluating examples of such simple, effective exercises is needed followed by imitating them where appropriate, including for events other than earthquakes. For example, would a wind tunnel or flume have similar successes regarding storms including cyclones and other flood and wind events? Costing these actions would

be helpful in order to compare with the costs of a post-event foreign search-and-rescue team and post-event trips.

(7) A large proportion of the world population attends regular religious or cultural services which include a spiritual leader giving a speech. Could these talks regularly include advice and obligations related to disaster mitigation and community sustainability? Could international religious and cultural leaders agree on a declaration which they could interpret as a directive to their followers?

One challenge is that an obvious reason does not exist for many religious leaders to become involved. Part of their appeal is the power which they claim to have over, for example, disasters. Also giving them power over disaster risk reduction, to be enacted or avoided at their whim, has the potential of causing more damage over the long-term. Bypassing leaders—religious, cultural, and political—might be the most effective approach for long-term success.

(8) Media events of high-profile risk and vulnerability audits should be organised; for example, a team of experts conducting a risk or vulnerability audit of a mayor's, minister's, head of government's, or head of state's abode or home community. For the international press, how vulnerable is Buckingham Palace to flooding and what could the U.N. Secretary General's home town do to reduce its vulnerability? For the local press, how would the house of the chief planning officer of a rural New Zealand or California council withstand a major earthquake? One message is that the only embarrassment in such situations is doing nothing about it.

(9) In Fiji, the national stage show "Tadra Kahani" is developed by 6-19 year olds and their teachers by taking one U.N. Millennium Development Goal <http://www.un.org/millenniumgoals> and dramatising or choreographing its meaning to them. This approach should be emulated, because it reaches (in order) educators, youth, the youth's families, their wider community, the nation, and visitors.

(10) Safety Days, as outlined at <http://www.ilankelman.org/miscellany/SafetyDay.rtf> should be started. Introducing all risks and vulnerabilities (for example poverty, volcanoes, injustice, floods, inequity, avalanches, and disease) into school curricula would be needed in the same way that health and safety (for example, crossing the road, wearing seatbelts, house fires, safe sex, drunk driving, and smoking) topics are included. Understanding these issues does not necessarily translate into action, but it is a needed beginning.

(11) A half-page resolution or convention should be agreed which requests that any donor contributing to a disaster relief operation must allocate the same amount of money for disaster risk reduction for schools and hospitals in another location. The money should be used for acting, not just for assessing what should be done—although assessment, monitoring, and evaluation are essential components of 'doing'. The past decade has seen this concept being applied to some degree, with some donors allocating 10% of a post-disaster donation for pre-disaster activities or for incorporating disaster risk reduction into recovery and reconstruction.

(12) Monitoring extreme or infrequent events, and publicising and promoting disasters which did not happen, should be implemented. For example:

- The lives and money saved in the Seattle 2001, Japan 2003, and California 2003 earthquakes should be calculated and compared to the cost of mitigation activities.
- The lives and money saved by draining the crater lake of Mt. Pinatubo in the Philippines and by degassing Lake Nyos in Cameroon, both in 2001 in order to avert a volcano-related disaster, should be calculated and compared to the cost of the projects.
- Munich Re produces an annual report on natural catastrophes including a top ten list. Could an Annual Non-Disasters Report be produced along with a top ten list of disaster costs averted?

- IFRC publishes an annual World Disasters Report. Could an annual World Disasters Prevented Report be published?
- USAID OFDA implemented a disaster mitigation project in Kinshasa which in its first year saved over \$45 for each \$1 invested. See <http://www.ilankelman.org/miscellany/MitigationSaves.rtf> for details. Imitating this project, including the economic analysis, and promoting the results would be helpful.

Regarding disasters, we know what happens and what does not happen in different circumstances. The latter needs to be as quantitative, tangible, and publicised as the former.

(13) Members of post-disaster trips should be given training on, and practice with, communicating to non-experts. As a requirement to join the trip, they should undertake to disseminate what they learned to one hundred non-experts. Such dissemination could be in the form of articles in local newspapers or newsletters, a public demonstration, an email to personal (not professional) contacts, or four visits to classrooms or university lectures with 25 students each. The members must be given extensive support in this endeavour, just as they receive extensive logistical and security support while in the field. Otherwise, this initiative could backfire.

(14) Visiting Scholar programmes should be set up in operational agencies along with Visiting Practitioner programs in academic institutions. The academics would learn about realities and how their work could and should be used on the ground. The agencies would learn the wealth of knowledge, experience, and ideas available in academia. Both would learn how to communicate with each other and would engage each other in working towards the common goal. Care would be needed to avoid this initiative causing more problems than it would solve.

Provisos

1. Universality

In this document, not all suggestions would be appropriate all the time for every location. They are merely ideas to consider. Understanding particular circumstances would be essential before implementing, or even suggesting, any of the ideas in a specific instance. In particular, much of this document has implicitly sought a single explanation, phrase, or approach. Yet there is no particular need for universality. Approaches must be adapted to local conditions and contexts and must be flexible to adjust as those local conditions and contexts change. Nothing in this document should be assumed to be “correct”, “the only way”, or “the right message”. Instead, everyone should feel free to translate and adjust them for their own situation.

2. Brevity

In the same way that there is no particular need for universality, there is no particular need for brevity. This document has tried to be efficient with language, sometimes favouring succinctness over more diplomatic language—even possibly over clarity. Directness can be disadvantageous, particularly where it appears to preach, lecture, or dictate too much—as this document does in places. Suggestions for phrases which should be replaced would be appreciated in order to avoid being too declarative or the semblance of superiority or instructions. Of course, that aspect must be balanced with the sound bite mentality and short attention span which pervades communication in many cultures.

3. Dictation

As noted under “brevity”, this document sometimes appears to take a stance of “We must make them understand” or “We must teach them”, without fully articulating the meaning and the

meaninglessness of “we” and the “them”. This tone is a result of poor writing, not a result of the attitude which is assumed or expected. The attempt is conversation, dialogue, and exchange not dictation or knowledge/idea transfer. Messages are trying to be presented and conveyed rather than adopting a lecturing or instructing attitude. This intention has not always been met in practice, so suggestions for specific phrases to alter would be appreciated.

Conclusions: Will We Ever Learn?

Nothing in this document will change the world or will save us from ourselves. Each remark and notion hopefully indicates a change in attitude, a statement of commitment, a different approach to thinking and doing, and a tweaking of the path we have been following. Each has obvious dangers, could cause problems, and might have incorrect or inconsistent aspects—but we should work together to overcome the perils and objections.

Small steps taken by individuals might be the most unnoticed, but they can be the most enduring and endearing. As James Lewis writes:

(<http://www.radixonline.org/knowningvsdoing3.htm>):

It is myriad seemingly inconspicuous measures that are the most effective for normal self-reliance and quality of life, before, between, during, and in the aftermath of disasters. Though we read of national catastrophes, they are made up of myriad community and domestic small ones.

A \$1 trillion cheque handed over at a conference of world leaders pledging to make communities safer from disasters would help. So would every individual considering what they could do to reduce their and their community’s vulnerabilities—and realising the immediate and long-term gains which would result.

Too much has been lost to disasters when, as Terry Jeggle writes, we all know what needs to be done (<http://www.radixonline.org/resources/jeggle1.doc>). Will we ever learn to do it?

Appendix 1: Questions for the Reader

This document is a work in progress and suggestions are needed. In particular:

1. Is Point 3 of “Disaster Tenets” needed?
2. The phrase “making communities safer from disasters” currently appears throughout this document. Before, “safe communities” and “building and maintaining safe communities” were used, but they were criticised as being weak, vague, or dangerous (see, for example, Appendix 4). These phrases had replaced “Stopping Disasters” which was criticised as contradictory because a disaster by definition has happened and cannot be stopped. Has any power or emphasis been lost by using “making communities safer from disasters”? Any other suggestions? See also Appendix 2.
3. For Point 2 of “Making Communities Safer From Disasters”, is there a better phrase than “cost-effective”? The first word used was “cheap”, but that was criticised as having inappropriate connotations. “Cost-effective” might communicate to policy- and decision-makers, but does it communicate to others? Is it political jargon? This question has been partially answered by changing the phrase to “Making communities safer from disasters saves resources” which also implies saving non-monetary resources.
4. Point 5 of “Making Communities Safer From Disasters” has been criticised as too superficial. Should it still be included or is it simply a distraction and a dumbing-down of the complex reality? This phrase has also been criticised as presenting a false impression. The counterargument is that making communities safer from disasters is not sexy, but it makes sense and it is practical—which does involve excitement and stimulation to some degree but not to level which “sexiness” implies.

5. The word “hazard” has generally been avoided in this document. Is that decision appropriate?
6. This document frequently uses the word “community”, yet no community is entirely coherent and strong arguments exist to suggest that a community does not and cannot exist, such as Terry Cannon’s comment that “There is no such thing as community”. Is it fair to use the word “community” as an intuitive concept, recognising its limitations implicitly, or should it be defined, with its limitations explained explicitly? What alternatives exist?
7. What are the consequences of reducing disaster risk to such an extent that risk aversion becomes too high a priority; that is, people become afraid to take any sort of risk under any circumstances? Isaac Asimov’s The End of Eternity is a useful description of a society afraid of danger. Similarly, arguments have been made that some aspects of vulnerability are positive and appropriate. Would it be possible to tackle disaster risk while retaining positive aspects of vulnerability?

Appendix 2: The Disaster Name Game

These messages are from the email list at <http://www.jiscmail.ac.uk/lists/natural-hazards-disasters.html> and are listed in the order in which they were posted to the list.

Date: Thu, 19 Feb 2004 21:10:03 +0000
 From: Ilan Kelman
 Subject: The Disaster Name Game

The activities of our field have many names including disaster risk reduction, building resilience, vulnerability reduction, risk management, adaptation, mitigation, prevention, pre-disaster actions, and variations of each phrase, often with other words used including emergency, preparedness, prevention, hazard management, and (dare I mention it?) the intriguing “homeland security”. Many of the phrases and the discussions of their meanings are appropriate in professional, scientific, and political venues.

I have yet to find a solid, meaningful phrase which can be used for publicity--to grab, engage, and maintain the interest of teachers, students, professionals in other fields, and people walking down the street. “Stopping disasters” might be reasonable, but seems contradictory because a disaster by definition has happened, so it is too late to stop it. What should be used instead? Suggestions include “Risk Reduction”, “Disaster Mitigation”, “Stopping Disaster Impacts”, and “Preventing Disasters”.

A simple yet powerful phrase, particularly one generally accepted by our community, would help the media to promote our messages while reaching out to the majority of the population. I seek neither definitions nor justifications of vocabularies; simply words that work.

Or perhaps this ideal is a waste of time to try to achieve because (a) it trivialises our work, (b) it does not exist, and (c) it would be too dependent on the whims of public opinion and public perception which cause many of the problems we face. Would it be better to retain the myriad of phrases, with selection each time based on the audience addressed and the specific interests of the speaker?

Although this debate is in English, suggestions and ideas from other languages (preferably with an English explanation--apologies!) would be highly relevant. Many thanks for any thoughts,
 Ilan

Date: Thu, 19 Feb 2004 14:18:54 -1000
 From: Robert E Alexander
 Subject: Re: The Disaster Name Game

if you want really “down to earth” lingo, i find that i get the most positive non-verbal cues (rather than glazed eyes or hints of the need to walk away) when i talk of the need to: “make decisions about unacceptable risks”.

this is not only great because people seem to latch onto it but because they seem to latch onto the whole "it". rather than just saying "disaster risk assessment", "disaster risk reduction", or "disaster management" and leaving people with 1/3 of the puzzle, that one phrase seems to incorporate all three "prongs" of disaster risk management as appropriate for them:

* disaster risk assessment: the need to assess the interaction of hazard risks with other risks and determine (hopefully in a participatory manner) what types/levels of risk are acceptable/unacceptable

* disaster risk reduction: the need to decide which tools will best meet all locally relevant criteria for preventing/mitigating deemed unacceptable risks

* (and hopefully also) disaster management: the need for preparedness/coping and relief/recovery plans for those times when risks deemed acceptable result in disastrous events

personally, it seems a natural extension for people to make the small leap from personal risk management decisions of whether or not to apply sunscreen / shovel the sidewalk / wear a seatbelt to thinking of disaster risk management on a slightly larger scale when they think of "making decisions about unacceptable risks". i look forward to hearing suggestions of others - and hope we can find agree on something truly engaging.

hopefully,
bob alexander

Date: Fri, 20 Feb 2004 09:13:23 +0100
From: Brugnot Gérard
Subject: Re: The Disaster Name Game

In French prévention/prevention applied to risks seems to be a good compromise. It generally includes preparedness and excludes crises management and recovery. It is used in the field of health "médecine préventive" vs "medicine curative". The meaning might be slightly different in English.

Gérard Brugnot

Date: Fri, 20 Feb 2004 10:51:09 +0200
From: David Sanderson
Subject: Re: The Disaster Name Game

It's been a good development to apply the phrase 'disaster risk reduction', as something that is more understandable than preparedness or mitigation, which, as technical terms, aren't.

The livelihoods and insurance worlds give shocks and stresses, which are useful for disaggregating sudden impact from slower but often no less ghastly events.

Vulnerability is a helpful and understandable word - being vulnerable is a pretty clear concept that implies both an external issue that causes vulnerability (the risk), and that you can perhaps do something about it to be less vulnerable.

David Sanderson

Date: Mon, 23 Feb 2004 17:04:05 +0530
From: anshu sharma
Subject: Better safe than....

Aren't terms like prevention, mitigation, risk or vulnerability reduction suitable for processes? And those too as viewed by practitioners and academicians? A little too clinical for the public? If the aim, as put by Ilan, is 'to grab, engage, and maintain the interest of teachers, students, professionals in other fields, and people walking down the street', why not use positive terms like 'to be safe....' ?!

Anshu Sharma

Date: Mon, 23 Feb 2004 15:31:28 -0000
From: "Musson, Roger MW"

Subject: Re: Better safe than....

It's a shame that "mitigation" is considered too difficult a word, because it is so accurate. It is "making things less bad". While I tend to be reticent when using this word to journalists, I have found recently that they are generally happy with it. Perhaps the phrase "mitigating circumstances" is so well known that the concept of mitigation is deemed to be widely understood despite the number of syllables. I have to say I don't think "vulnerability" is in any way an easier word.

The trouble with some attempts to formulate a phrase in a positive way is that one loses the gist. "Community safety" has the right sense, but is too general (it suggests an anti-crime programme), and attempts to make it more specific end up being unwieldy: "Community safety from disasters".

I think one really has a choice between "disaster mitigation" which is punchy and unambiguous, or phrases that are necessarily rather longer, like "making communities safer from disasters".

Roger Musson
BGS

Date: Mon, 23 Feb 2004 11:23:28 -0600

From: "Pena, Ray"

Subject: Re: Better safe than....

I'm always amazed by this topic. Emergencies and disasters are inherently interesting. We work awfully hard to make it boring.

I use "emergency management," which I define this way:

Emergency management is the continuous process by which all individuals, all groups and all communities manage hazards and the effects of disaster. The process involves mitigation and preparedness (pre-event/event) and response and recovery (event/post-event). Actions taken depend in part on perceptions of risk and event-generated need(s); effectiveness depends in part on how well activities are integrated. Activities at each level (individual, group, community) affect the other levels.

Individuals, groups and communities define hazard and disaster for themselves. They may not know the word "mitigation" (including prevention) but they know what it means.

It works well enough.

Ray Peña

Date: Mon, 23 Feb 2004 12:24:58 -0500

From: Nicole Rencoret

Subject: Re: Better safe than....

I agree that when we start throwing around the words such as "mitigation", "risk" and "vulnerability", it becomes irresistible to introduce the less-than-understood jargon that those outside the circle have difficulty getting their heads around.

I personally like the idea of "safer communities", for two reasons:

1. Being safe is the hot topic of the moment - safer sex, safer streets, safer spending. If we jump on the bandwagon we have a greater chance of our cause being recognised and understood.
2. The world is feeling more and more like one large community made up of numerous smaller communities. We are all living on this planet together, therefore we should cooperate to make it the best and safest place possible.

There was a conference not so long ago whose theme was "Safer Sustainable Communities", which brings a third concept into the picture - sustainable development. Any thoughts on this?

Nicole Rencoret
UN/ISDR

Date: Mon, 23 Feb 2004 19:42:33 +0000

From: Ilan Kelman

Subject: Re: The Disaster Name Game

The message below is from Scott Miles who has given me permission to post it. Thank you for all the responses so far which have generated a fascinating discussion. I am learning plenty.

Ilan

From : Scott Miles

A worthy exercise!

I think it's important to accentuate the fields positive intent and actions, while making linkages to concerns of everyday life.

Ilan suggested "building resilience", but this seems to evoke construction of a fortress... really not what our collective actions are about, except perhaps if you're concerned about "homeland security."

So perhaps, then from Kates and others "building sustainability / sustainable communities" But William McDonough points out that "sustainable" isn't very sexy. Think about if you asked your friend how their marriage was and they reply: "It's sustainable."

McDonough suggests, for lack of anything better, "quality of life" instead of "sustainability"

So then perhaps "building/bettering/enhancing quality of life"

But as Bob Alexander pointed out, we need to complete the picture about how we do this...

I might then suggest: "building quality of life through decisions about policy and technology"

...or has this taken us too far away from a hazards perspective?

Peace,

Scott

Date: Tue, 24 Feb 2004 10:21:38 +0800

From: Riki Marten

Subject: Re: The Disaster Name Game

Ilan,

in your original request you asked for a phrase that could be used.....i have been working with 'safe lives, safe world' or just Safeworld....this covers a multiple number of cultural and individual definitions..and i can just tell people that i'm working for a Safeworld...it's been a great week's reading, thanks to all

Cheers,

Riki Marten

Date: Tue, 24 Feb 2004 10:55:30 +0530

From: anshu sharma

Subject: Re: Better safe than....

It is true that "mitigation" is a very accurate term for what we are trying to convey. However, we also need to consider the target audience. Terms like mitigation and vulnerability may work well with english speaking communities in developed countries, but they create problems when dished out to local people in the developing world. We have faced problems of a very basic nature, when we tried to look for equivalent terms in local languages and couldn't find any!

Anshu Sharma

SEEDS, India.

Date: Tue, 24 Feb 2004 02:16:10 -1000

From: Robert E Alexander

Subject: Re: Better safe than....

another potential problem with "mitigation" is the confusion among many people regarding whether mitigation is only post-event (mitigating the losses) or pre-event and continuous (mitigating unacceptable risks).

perhaps those of us who are in this line of work may be getting closer to consistency in terminology (e.g., the recent glossary at the ADRC website [among others]), but getting such common understanding among local stakeholders should prove to be much more difficult (especially given the difficulty with language noted by anshu sharma) unless less ambiguous words are used.

hopefully,
bob alexander

Date: Tue, 24 Feb 2004 13:39:44 -0000
From: David Crichton
Subject: Re: Better safe than....

Dear all,

I can't resist adding some comments. In the climate change community, "mitigation" is taken to mean reduction in greenhouse gases, in order to reduce the long term increase in hazard, while "Adaptation" is used for such matters as reducing exposure and vulnerability. Apparently this was due to mix up in the White House some years ago, but it is a useful distinction, even if it causes all sorts of confusion on the rare occasions that disaster mitigation and climate change experts happen to talk to each other. (I know, I've chaired such a meeting!)

Another term I still can't get to grips with is "disaster reduction" - which seems to me to imply to people that you can reduce the number of disasters, but how can you reduce the number of disasters without tackling the exposure issue?

I like "adaptation". We know that hazards will grow due to climate change, so all we can really do in the short term is to adapt, until the world comes to its senses and accepts something like Aubrey Meyer's contraction and convergence principles. A relatively new one from the UN FCCC is "maladaptation" which is all about what society is doing wrong, for example building flood defences which encourage more people to live in floodplains. (see: <http://unfccc.int/sessions/workshop/120503/present.html>) [NOTE: this website no longer exists; it is now http://unfccc.int/meetings/workshops/other_meetings/items/1044.php]

Regards,
David

Date: Tue, 24 Feb 2004 17:06:24 +0300
From: Esteban Leon
Subject: Re: Better safe than....

What about "reducing the risk of disasters"?

Is it not what all of us are trying to do? It also sounds very well in Spanish. Don't know French.

It's true, I don't really like "mitigation", I never know if its before or after the event.

Cheers,
Esteban

Date: Tue, 24 Feb 2004 17:26:40 +0200
From: James Lewis
Subject: Better safe than

Once upon a time and for many years, probably commencing in times and places of colonial governments, there was "disaster relief", to which, because disaster relief didn't seem to be changing things in the longer term, came to be added "disaster prevention" - but this was a tad too presumptuous. So then there was "mitigation" which was more realistic and, being in place of prevention, meant measures taken before to limit disaster impacts. This was when things were simple.

In all of this, I believe there is a difference to be respected between participants - ie: potential and actual victims, and practitioners, on the ground - and academics. I feel confident in

suggesting this having been, from time to time, all three ! This distinction I think can take account of Anshu Sharma's important point re language. What has always concerned me most of all is another category - the policy makers who, if we fail to reach them, can either destroy or remake the world.

Can we return to the simple - I doubt there is a need to coin more phraseology, don't we have enough ? "Better safe than sorry" is good in English and has been well tested (what is it like for others ? "mieux sauf que regretter" ??? etc). English also has "a stitch in time saves nine" but that's getting specialist, and "an ounce of prevention is better than a pound of cure" has outdated terminology and is too long.

Sorting the verbiage is long overdue; Ilan has again struck an important cord - may the comments flow.

James

Date: Tue, 24 Feb 2004 18:02:39 -0000

From: "komal.aryal"

Subject: Re: Better safe than....

anshu,

I have same problem. Recently i was in nepal. My grand uncle asked me simple meaning of vulnerability. It took me nearly an hour to explain its meaning in the nepalese context.

regards,

komal

Date: Wed, 25 Feb 2004 10:33:15 +0200

From: David Sanderson

Subject: Re: Better safe than....

Risk reduction remains pretty clear. If risk is the threat of a future disaster, then it may be possible to reduce the scale of that event.

The concept of risk is also probably understandable by most, as being part of everyday life.

Appendix 3: Remarks from Valerie Bode on Version 1 (18 February 2004)

Introduction

I think you have a fascinating approach here which without doubt deserves further attention.

Question 1

Definitely. I have encountered many people outside the disaster community who are not aware of vulnerability at all. I believe it is the key!

Question 2

I suggest "Preventing Disasters" because it best describes the fact that action can be taken to eliminate the disastrous element hazards might have on society if not anticipated. You actually prevent the disaster from taking place—this is what we are talking about here.

Question 3

Maybe something like "Stopping disasters pays off" or "Stopping disasters economises", "Stopping disasters is affordable and profitable", "Stopping Disasters is not a luxury", "Stopping disasters is low-cost/high effectiveness"... Maybe "low-cost/high benefit"?

Question 4

It should still be included but toned down. Maybe adventurous, captivating, thrilling?

Other Comments

- Maybe you should mention that an agreement on disaster terms is highly needed first within those organisations working in this field!
- For The Last Mile's (2b) [now The First Mile's paragraph (7)], I think this is a nice idea but I seriously doubt this to be possible, for the simple reason that especially religious beliefs have disseminated the picture of disasters being God-given actions of wrath or punishment etc. They therefore have substantially contributed to the populations' often passive stance. I do not see how we can change the philosophies of religious beliefs.
- For The Last Mile's (2c) [now The First Mile's paragraph (8)], great idea, I am pretty positive that this could work. But we must get the media to write about it.

Appendix 4: Remarks from Tina Plapp on Version 1 (26 March 2004)

Introduction

Your wonderful text is a personal challenge for me, because it is so systematically positive thinking. In general, I am trained to think critically why things in societies go wrong and to look sceptically at recommendations on what should be done (and how they could backfire...). I tried to keep these criticisms and scepticism short when reading the text and I tried to break through my typical thought pattern and think positively. That's also what I have to learn when I speak about disasters.

In particular, I like the idea of "annual reports of disasters avoided" and I think it is important to find/develop/establish methods how "prevented disasters" could be counted and how the "avoided impacts" could be measured. Imagine what a press release "IFRC publishes World Disaster Prevented Report" or "Munich Re Releases Annual Non-Disasters Report" could do: a completely different framing of information that "mitigation saves"; prevention as issue in the media!

As you have stated at the end of the text, there are enough pitfalls in "overcoming disasters". In some points I could not resist thinking critically and I pointed out some issues that I think should be taken into account. Most notably, "Safe Communities" provoked me [the reader should note that the title has now been changed to "Making Communities Safer From Disasters"].

Question 1

When I read the text first I thought that point 3 and 4 could be summarized in one point: Stopping disasters is continuous and visible, or is visible and thus continuous.

Question 2

Even if "safe communities" is only a working title, I have problems with "safe". On the one hand, I think it is a great slogan because it is positive and creates a "sexy", attractive, friendly vision of the future. And survivors of disasters need positive visions. Therefore I like it very much. Besides, it is quite a fashionable and popular word these times. "Safety" and the right to safety apparently have become an issue or a psychological basic need in a world that is challenged with bad news of disasters and terrorist attacks.

On the other hand, I have doubts if the message “safe communities” is suitable to evoke changes in attitudes, risk awareness, and corresponding behaviour as intended, e.g. for a Safety Day. Is the usage of “safe” in the field of disaster reduction/prevention (or however we name it) a false promise for security that—in the end (= in a disaster)—no one could ever keep or guarantee? Does “safe communities” create a false sense of security? Of course, “safe communities” is the aim, but I doubt that the use of “safe” is the appropriate vehicle language offers to reach this aim.

One of the most important achievements in risk communication in the field of technological hazards is that risk has to be communicated to the public. That means that although risk management measures are in place, there is no 100% safety; there is always uncertainty and people should be aware of these uncertainties. Simplified, this lesson was learned from incidents in nuclear power plants (Three Mile Island, Chernobyl), and other “accidents” with hazardous materials. Before these events, the message conveyed in risk communication (a mainly top-down-approach) was rather calming: “you are safe”. I think we should keep that in mind when we look for a good general name of the aim.

Do the aims of “safe communities” and the message of risk communication “there are uncertainties and there are risks that need to be managed and handled” interfere with each other or even conflict? On a theoretical or political level that links disaster policies and risk communication, there are no contradictions, because the two messages have basically a common purpose. Despite common purposes on a theoretical or political level, I think that the message “safe communities” could be misinterpreted too easily when communicated to “the public”. I try to avoid following interpretation or equation in “the public”: safe communities means that we live in safe communities that means we have nothing to do to change it because we are already “safe”.

The point is that a short and crisp formulation should convey the message that building safer communities is a process. This process or development needs actions by all actors and groups of society, be it local or regional, be it administrative bodies, NGOS, other organisations/groups—and every person as an active part of a civil society and as part of “the public”. Thus, instead of “safe communities are for you”, I prefer “we need you for safe communities” or “safe communities need you”.

I have used unknowingly the words “building safer communities” in the paragraph above. Maybe the usage of the comparative degree “safer” could solve my problem a little. The aim is “safer communities”, because we would like to improve safety for everyone. “Safer” instead of “safe” might indicate that “safer” is a stage we aim at, but a stage we have not yet reached.

My personal preference for a word is “prevention”, and I especially like “culture of prevention” when talking to people outside the “disaster camp”. I agree with Gérard Brugnot who suggested “prevention” and explained it by preventive and curative medicine. Keeping the analogy to medicine, I would also add “aftercare”. The important message is that steps to avoid disasters must be done in advance, that is “thinking and doing before it is too late”. Thus, I would suggest “preventing disasters” or the wonderful phrase “building a culture of prevention”.

Interestingly, when I try to translate “disaster mitigation” in German, I intuitively use the German translation “disaster prevention” (“Katastrophenvorsorge”) to translate the message enclosed in “mitigation”. The DKKV has “Katastrophenvorsorge” in its German name (Deutsches Komitee für Katastrophenvorsorge), in the English translation it is: German Committee for Disaster Reduction.

Question 3

My idea for a better word than “cheap” is to point out the huge effect of small steps using antonyms such as “little”, “small”, and “great” to add an impulse through language. I am sure that better alternatives do exist than “little investments for a great future”, but I have no better idea at the moment.

Question 4

I do not think this point is too superficial. Nevertheless, I am not sure if this point can be easily applied to disasters—but it can be applied in other, less complex fields of risk-taking behaviour, e.g. environmental education, health education, and driving. Since the effects of better, more attractive environmental or health education could help build resilience or reduce vulnerability in some aspects, it could lead to an indirect effect for disaster mitigation.

Making prevention exciting and fun works well in the myriads of daily and recreational activities which are “small-scale” compared to a disaster. Especially when activities are already associated with fun, prevention can be sold as fun, too. One example is promoting alpine safety in mountaineering, especially for the increasing popular activity skiing or snowboarding off-piste.

Or big signposts along highways that remind you to behave such that risk is minimised in a provoking but funny, smart, and “inviting” manner (issues include wearing seatbelts, reducing speed, taking a break when tired, keeping your distance, and others. One example from German highways: four vultures sitting on a dead branch and the slogan “speeder, we wait for you”).

But I think that there is another difference, apart from “small-scale” individual behaviour:

- If I take the risk to die in an avalanche because I want to have fun on slopes covered with wonderful, fresh, powder snow or in risk-taking driving, smoking (voluntary risk taking), or
- If I live in a hut on a slope in a shantytown in a developing country and have no chance to live in a safer place—because the safer places are used for business districts, industrial areas, or agriculture—and I do not have the means or opportunities to move to another place.

Both cases have different conditions of risk exposure and vulnerability and thus different methods are necessary to overcome the situations. In the case of the skier or risk-taking driving, an educational campaign using “interesting, fun, exciting, and hip” is suitable for the targeted audience. In the case of the inhabitant of a shantytown, I would apply the message “stopping disasters is interesting” only if this message would be the last addition (with lowest priority) in a large bundle of strategies to reduce vulnerability: access to drinking water and enough food, access to electricity supply, access to education, access to health care, the right to vote and freedom of expression, a change of the land use system, political reforms, etc.

The idea that stopping disasters is attractive, exciting, and interesting is fine and perhaps the message “stopping disasters is sexy” can be applied as a guiding principle when the world has changed for the better in x (?) decades. For the moment, I would not recommend it as a guiding principle in disaster prevention, but as an idea in certain activities that can be easily associated with fun, hoping that the many small steps taken would end in fewer deaths and injuries. These areas could be a test field for “stopping disasters is interesting”. In these areas, good examples that are told by friends or neighbours could cause others to take preventive steps.

Concerning that prevention should be in the media, media do have their own rules on what is worth being news and what is not worth being broadcasted/printed. Sadly, a disaster is 100 times more “mediagenic” than mitigation / prevention measures and examples of (local) mitigation strategies. How to get out of this? We cannot change that system and these “rules” in one day, but whenever we speak to the media, we can speak of prevention, prevention, and prevention.

Reaction to the use of “brainwash” instead of “educate” and “convince” in earlier drafts

“Educated” or “brainwashed”? Surely education is one important key to changes, and it is one of the highest challenges, but it is so complex that “brainwashing” sounds too simple. “Brainwashing” was sometimes used in risk communication, e.g. concerning nuclear energy. In top-down approaches, the public should be “educated” (=brainwashed) to judge risks similar to the experts’ view. Ignoring the fact that non-experts or “lay-people” use different concepts to assess and to judge risks, the concept of “objective risk”, represented by numbers yielded from calculation of probabilities, was used to calm the public that they should not worry about the risk. Lay-people’s risk perception was sometimes even regarded as “irrational” or “insubstantial”.

Brainwashing, or the attempts to do so, did not succeed. It sometimes even evoked the opposite: more “irrational”, “distorted” risk perceptions than before “brainwashing”. Dialogue, participation, and mutual respect are better vehicles for risk communication and risk education from a bottom-up-approach. But these approaches take a long time to yield visible results.

It is very good that risk communication and risk education are prominent issues in disaster mitigation / prevention. But there are further matters that have an influence on behaviour which cause “inappropriate” actions of people although they are well-educated and have appropriate risk awareness: there are situational and structural factors of life that have an influence on spontaneous priority setting and choosing what could and should be done. These factors should also be taken into account, although they are difficult to tackle. Education is not all, even though it is a beginning. Consciousness determines social existence, and social existence determines consciousness at the same time.

Other comments

- We need more examples such as the National Geographic one and we need them in the mass media. How many people read National Geographic compared to people watching TV, reading daily newspapers printed or via the web, and listening to the radio? We need “prevention” as an issue in the mass media.
- CVRTs and CSTs = Safer communities need you.
- For The Last Mile’s (1d) [now The First Mile’s paragraph (4)], could the internet be used? Personally I am not convinced of this idea, because I think that many people in industrialised societies using / depending on information technology, especially younger people, have to learn again that nature and conditions of vulnerability are no “virtual reality” that can be changed to the default settings with a mouse click. But I think it should be discussed if and how information technology could be used for awareness and knowledge that otherwise could not be achieved.
- For The Last Mile’s (2b) [now The First Mile’s paragraph (7)], before religion can be used in that manner, the idea that humans themselves can influence their future (= the idea of prevention and risk reduction that follow the ideals of The Enlightenment) has to be a concept accepted and supported by the canons of the respective religions—and in the services of local spiritual leaders. If life is karma or fate, thus predestined according to the laws of the religion or the spiritual group, how could that match with the idea of disaster prevention? Influencing the future as a human or individual right and not as blasphemy might not be accepted everywhere.

Besides, if religious or faith-based organisations educate people, they might include their own explanations or interpretations of disasters and might promote their own principles in a prevention strategy. Religious explanations, and prevention inspired by religious rules or world views, are not necessarily those we have in mind with our western, liberal perspective (committed to the ideals of The Enlightenment).

Of course, it is necessary to reach people at all levels and religious services are important and influencing for many people’s lives. It would be nice if religion could be a way to reach

people to promote disaster prevention. But religion provides powerful “lenses” to look at the world and its problems and should thus be treated or “used” carefully.

Perhaps I break a taboo when I pose the question “does everyone in the world want prevention, development, or disaster mitigation?”. Of course, everyone wants to have a safe life and the right to safety should be protected, but what does “safe” mean in different socio-cultural, religious, and individual contexts? And what is every person willing to invest/contribute to “be safe”? These questions are posed relating to discussions in the field of development work and are driven by caveats and “lessons learned” in personal experience in development work: the aims of those promoting development are not always or necessarily the aims of those “being developed”.

My point is that there are competing or conflicting views on disasters as a problem in different cultures and subcultures. We have our views and we should be aware and respect that others have other understandings and other needs and priorities, although we agree that everyone wants to live “safely”.

- For The Last Mile’s (3d) [now The First Mile’s paragraph (14)], that requires openness in academia and agencies plus mutual respect and understanding. In some countries, you can forget your academic career if you have been outside a university for too long. As well, academics and practitioners work on completely different time scales. In academia, projects run for two, sometimes three years. In agencies, a project has to be finished and a practical solution has to be provided, usually within weeks.

Appendix 5: Remarks from Donna Franklin on Version 1 (14 May 2004)

Introduction

I thought “Overcoming Disasters: From Principles to Practice” was insightful and thought provoking. There were excellent comments from previous readers and I agree with many of them. A few more. . .

Question 1

Absolutely. The tenets are critical.

Question 2

We’ve been struggling with the right words for such a long time. Although “mitigation” and “vulnerability” are appropriate for officials and academics, they are often lost on much of our target audience. Clear, plain language is most effective. I agree that “safe communities” sounds a bit vague, and “stopping disasters” is contradictory. Can the phrases be linked into something clear and convincing? Maybe “Reducing Risks Through Safe Communities” or “Making Communities Safe From Disasters” or “Reducing Risks Through Safe Communities”. These phrases are also action-oriented which invite participation from those who read/hear about the effort.

I especially like your point about getting school children involved. This is where we have the most influence. Take the example of fire safety in the U.S.A. From the first year of elementary school, children are taught fire safety rules. Ask almost any school child and they’ll know the fire safety rule “Stop, Drop and Roll”. Fire safety is built into the curriculum and reinforced by annual fire safety week observances and drills. The children learn these safety rules and go home and talk to their parents about it.

Using this effective campaign as an example, the National Weather Service has adopted a new campaign to reduce deaths due to floods. The #1 cause of weather-related deaths in the U.S.A. is floods with most of those from people who drive into flooded roads. “TURN AROUND. DON’T

DROWN” is meant to send a clear, strong message and is being added to school curriculum in many schools. See <http://www.srh.noaa.gov/tadd>

I love the idea of publishing lists of “avoided disasters”. There are examples. We just need to find a better way of communicating them. There is one clear example of a disaster avoided in the U.S.A. on 10 November 2002. Because of a grassroots program called “StormReady”, more than 50 people, mostly children, were saved from certain death/injury. This “good news” story got national attention, but we need more! See the story below.

I really like your idea of changing the focus of CERTs to CVRTs/CSTs, becoming a more visible and integral part of the community.

Your idea of involving faith-based organizations in helping get the “preparedness” message out is excellent. I know of at least one organization that has a very robust “Emergency Preparation” program for its members. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints encourages it’s members to “be prepared” and provides comprehensive resources and specific recommendations. See <http://www.providentliving.org/channel/1,11677,1706-1,00.html>

I love the idea of organizing high profile media events such as determining how vulnerable Buckingham Palace is. With the plethora of reality TV shows, you’d think we might be able to find a niche. People love reality shows right now. This has great potential!

Question 4

Maybe “Making communities safer from disasters is sexy” is superficial, but we’ve got to keep getting the word out. People can make a difference in their own communities. They need to know that. People often want to help make a difference, but don’t know how. They feel overwhelmed and don’t even know where to start. A program like the American “Citizens Corps” can provide resources, information, contact information, etc., to help people get interested. BUT, as you state, education is the most important. People must buy into the tenets before they’ll do anything. They need to know that they can make a difference.

I believe we need to not only get the safety information out, but we need to empower people. They are often overwhelmed. They need to know that they can make a difference, they can take steps that are simple and effective. They need to believe that they can make a difference. I’ve learned that people want to be involved and help, but they often just don’t know how to do it or whom to ask for direction -- they feel inadequate and intimidated because they’re not “experts”.

Conclusions

What a great paper. Thanks for the opportunity to comment. You’ve embarked on an important and exciting area, and one that is ever so slowly getting more attention.

StormReady

See StormReady <http://www.stormready.noaa.gov> and TsunamiReady <http://www.tsunamiready.noaa.gov>

From <http://www.crh.noaa.gov/iwx/climate/cli/nov10/vanwert/awards/index.shtml> on 14 May 2004 [this website no longer exists; it is now http://www.crh.noaa.gov/iwx/program_areas/events/2002/11_10_02_tornadoes/vanwert/awards/index.php].

StormReady Community Hero Award Ceremony
1:30pm Tuesday December 10, 2002

January 10, 2002, through the efforts of Van Wert County Emergency Manager Rick McCoy, and the support of the Van Wert County Commissioners and the city of Van Wert, Van Wert County, Ohio was in the first group of Ohio counties to be certified as StormReady by the Ohio StormReady Advisory Board. StormReady is a program sponsored by the National Weather Service that helps community leaders improve their hazardous weather operations by improving communication systems and through public education. StormReady communities place NOAA Weather Radios, or other alert devices, in public facilities, and have community-wide public education programs to teach people how to protect themselves at work, school, on the road, or at home.

On November 10, 2002, Van Wert County was hit by a violent F4 tornado. Early tornado warnings from the National Weather Service Forecast Office in Syracuse, Indiana, broadcast on NOAA Weather Radio from a transmitter located in Fort Wayne, Indiana, allowed Van Wert Emergency Manager Rick McCoy to activate the warning alert systems located in public locations.

These alerts prompted Van Wert Cinemas assistant manager Scott Shaffer to lead more than 50 patrons of the theater to secure locations, and allowed other citizens of the county to seek shelter. Thanks to the StormReady program many, many lives were saved.

This ceremony was held to honor these heroes.

The National Weather Service presented the first-ever StormReady Community Hero Award to Mr. Rick W. McCoy, Emergency Manager, Van Wert County, Ohio, Mr. Gary D. Adams, Chairman, Van Wert County Commissioners, and in absentia to Mr. Stephan P. Gehres, Mayor of Van Wert, Ohio. Due to health issues, the mayor was unable to attend, so Acting Mayor and the President of the City Council, Tom Strickler, accepted the award on Mayor Gehres' behalf.

Timothy R. E. Keeney, Deputy Assistant Secretary for Oceans and Atmosphere, National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, Department of Commerce was the Keynote Speaker for the ceremony. Dale Shipley, Executive Director of the Ohio Emergency Management Agency, and Dennis McCarthy, Director of the National Weather Service's Central Region, also spoke.

In addition, Scott Shaffer, Assistant Manager of the Van Wert Cinemas, was honored for his life-saving efforts on November 10, 2002.

Appendix 6: Remarks from Lisa Mitchell on Version 2 (10 June 2004)

What impressed me most about this document was the dialogue it has solicited, which in the end is really the point of any piece of writing—to both inform and provoke discussion. I'm impressed by your ability to generate discussion by sharing your work and actively inviting feedback. This brings a dynamic quality to the text. Rather than a static file or piece of paper, it becomes a catalyst for collective analysis.

Similar to what you have done in your paper, I think that the key to promoting “safe” or “strong” communities is engaging community members in defining what this means for them. In the words of Brazilian popular educator Paulo Freire: “It is not our role to speak to the people about our own view of the world, nor to attempt to impose that view on them, but rather to dialogue with people about their view and ours” (Freire, 1970, p. 96).

I taught a community course on climate change, in southern Bolivia, where we attempted to create a dialogue around safe communities, or as we called it “strong communities” and “strong ecosystems”. Initially, in English, I talked about “resilient communities”, but translated into accessible Spanish, I used the term “comunidades fuertes” which translates into “strong communities”. During the course, we used games and activities that encourage the participants to develop their own criteria for a strong community and strong ecosystem.

To introduce the idea of safe communities we asked people to break into small groups. On a large piece of paper they created two columns—one entitled strong communities and the other entitled weak communities. They brainstormed a list of possible characteristics for each. Some of the ideas that came out of this exercise included:

Strong Communities are those where:

- people work together to excel at their activities.
- people protect the vegetation and forests.
- people are informed and well organized.
- people work together and share work through work bees.
- people are organized and have the knowledge and support to put into practice their plans and ideas.

Weak Communities are those:

- that don't know what they want for the future.
- where there is infighting and people don't work together.
- that don't care for the vegetation and burn the trees.
- where the people do not have information.
- where the people work individually instead of cooperatively.
- where there is no organization.
- where there is no support from the authorities.

The ideas of the community members on strong communities can be broken into four categories that exist in some of the literature around building resilience: organization, knowledge, leadership, and solidarity.

To reinforce these ideas we asked each small group to create a skit that demonstrated their community's reaction to a recent disaster: i.e. flood, drought, or hailstorm. As one group performed, the audience (composed of the other small groups) were asked to note down elements of their reaction that had demonstrated qualities of a strong community. We later discussed how to build upon these strengths.

To open the discussion on strong ecosystems, we provided each group with two posters. One showed a strong ecosystem with abundant vegetation and water, the other an area where the soil was unprotected and eroding and there was little or no water. After explaining the concept of ecosystem we asked people to identify which poster displayed a strong ecosystem and which had a weak ecosystem, and to decide why. Out of this discussion the groups developed their criteria for each. Their ideas included:

Strong Ecosystems

- absorb water.
- have multiple uses.
- protect the soil.
- are resistant to climate change.
- have abundant biodiversity.

- are used appropriately and not abused.

Weak Ecosystems

- have no cover or defences.
- have little biodiversity.
- Are used inappropriately.

Their ideas can be summarized as follows: In strong ecosystems there is a high level of biodiversity, adequate soil coverage, and appropriate use that maintains the balance of nature.

To apply these concepts we asked each small group to produce a large map of their community, and to identify what areas they considered to be strong and which were weak. They identified areas with an abundance of vegetation as strong, and regions with strong levels of erosion and little land cover as weak.

During an earlier session we had given each community a disposable camera. We asked people to take photos of the natural areas in their community that had radically changed in the last ten years. They added these photos to their maps and considered whether the areas that had changed radically could be considered part of strong or weak ecosystems.

As a result of this analysis, three of the communities implemented projects to strengthen their communities and ecosystems. Two chose to reforest their cemeteries while another replicated the climate change course in their local school.

Initially, I thought the cemetery reforestation projects were rather odd, but in retrospect, I see that they were very clever. Both of the cemeteries were located in the hills behind the communities, on grounds highly susceptible to erosion. The community members had the legitimate concern that “la erosión iba a llevar los muertos” (the erosion would take the dead). Further, the cemeteries were without shade, making them extremely inhospitable to the living, who had to stand unprotected beneath the scorching sun to be with their loved ones. Everyone had a stake in the project as all had relatives in the cemetery—or would eventually end up there themselves. By appealing to people on a rational, spiritual, and religious level, the group convinced over 75% of the community members to take part in the reforestation project.

By discussing the concepts of strong communities and strong ecosystems the people took ownership over the ideas and were able to translate them into projects that were appropriate for their communities.

Reference

Freire, P. 1970. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. New York: Continuum.

Appendix 7: Remarks from Carlota Schneider on Version 2 (2 October 2005)

I respond to “Appendix 1: Questions for the Reader”:

1. ‘Disaster Tenets’, Point 3 (vulnerability).

This is a key point and should be retained. Whether a hazard puts a community at risk and ends up in a disaster is ultimately determined and unleashed (along with the magnitude and degree of exposure) by that community’s inherent and endemic kind and extent of vulnerability.

2. ‘Making Communities Safer from Disasters’.

Whilst it is true that a five-word title waters down the effect on listeners and readers, I cannot think of a more accurate description. But maybe some new ideas will crop up in the middle of the night—a distinctive ‘Carlotian’ feature for mitigating disasters: most solutions come to my mind when the small hours strike.

3. ‘Making Communities Safer from Disasters’, Point 2 (cost-effective).

Indeed, I do agree cost-effective is more of a technical term and less ‘catchy’. I think that, in view of the fact that most regional and local governments are permanently riddled with cash problems, ‘Making Communities Safer from Disasters (also) Saves Money’ would be quite unambiguous and effective. It would also play with the terms safe and save.

4. ‘Making Communities Safer from Disasters’, Point 5 (sexy)

I think elaborating on this issue is as relevant as it is innovative and maybe the main way to attract enthusiasm and involvement at all community levels. The wisdom of associating the word ‘sexy’ to disaster is debatable. Some may perceive it as inappropriate cynicism, although I personally would not. But I fully approve of the other adjectives used, such as interesting and exciting. Some emphasis should be given to the term ‘rewarding’, which would be in line with Point 2. Furthermore, also ‘challenging’ may be an attractive option to sell.

5. ‘What to Do: Travelling the Last Mile’, Point (2b) [now The First Mile’s paragraph (7)] (appeals by religious leaders)

This is a marvellous suggestion which could reach and mobilise millions easily without having to put entirely new structures in place. More importantly, it really has the potential to engage hearts and minds and thus to elicit commitment. Whilst I am not quite sure all religions would be suited to advance this preparedness in the proper way, it would certainly be in the Jewish-Christian and Buddhist philosophy of assuming responsibility, both individually and collectively, for averting evil from humankind and ensuring its well-being. The objections put forward by some regarding the supposed religious penchant for justifying disasters as a means of punishment or a proof of divine omnipotence—even if some groups amongst the religions cited before would consider those disasters as castigation, they would be a consequence of people’s negligence in fulfilling their duties to protecting human lives—is a generalisation and is certainly not universally valid.

As to the arguments presented in the name of Enlightenment, certainly an enduring and most precious fundament of Western culture, they do not disavow the suggestion of involving religious leaders either. Moreover, precisely after having been recently confronted with the helplessness also of ‘developed’ nations when faced with natural extreme phenomena, the limits of purely ‘enlightened’ thinking have been laid painfully bare, by demonstrating the foolishness and hubris of believing that human rationality could make everything predictable and doable and, by implication, reduce people’s suffering.

Concluding Words:

My full recognition and admiration goes to Ilan for having conceived the idea of triggering such a comprehensive dialogue and for having created such a coherent and thought-provoking analytical framework to carry it out. Of particular mention is his honest willingness and ability to question his own propositions by posing such apposite questions which truly address the ‘heart of the matter’.

My sincere thanks for sharing his work with all of us.

Appendix 8: Remarks from Susanna Jenkins on Version 3 (16 February 2006)

The notion that one phrase needs to be coined and applied universally to specialists and the general public alike is idealistic. I believe it is a noble cause and probably necessary but I am not sure that

it will happen. We are asking for an easy "grabbing" catchphrase which doesn't confuse, has the same connotations in many languages and cultures, and most importantly, conveys the idea.

However, such simple terminology will not be adequate in the academic world. I think academics will still find it necessary to continue to use the ever-growing range of available terminology to describe each individual facet of the overall terminology coined for general public usage. Thus, when academics write or speak in the public domain, the opportunity to misinterpret what they are saying and also to transfer the more complex terminology to the general public will always exist and we will be back at square one.

It is not reasonable or fair to ask academics and specialists in the field to stick to the one phrase for two main reasons. It will unavoidably incorporate many different subdivisions which will obviously have their own definitions and these subdivisions will be discussed in academic papers, lectures, and personal communications. In trying to separate the academic and general public language, the barriers between scientist and community we try so hard to break down regarding trust, honesty, and openness will once again be raised. Therefore, is terminology really so important? Surely getting the message across in all the different cultures is more important--not a globally acceptable "grabbing phrase".

If I were to support one phrase, I would select "disaster prevention". Whereas it has been criticised as presumptuous, I believe it is promoting the aim of the game, even if it is, at present, a rare result. The point of this discussion is that disasters can be prevented if mitigation actions are implemented. I also feel "mitigation" and "vulnerability" are not words that would easily be understood by the public. They come across as long words made up to sound clever--or that's the gist I get from people I speak to who are not disaster researchers.

I think some of the document's ideas are brilliant and you are owed much credit for bringing them into the light. This work is valuable, although I assume you're also putting this much effort into discussing these subjects with the general public and not just all the academics with so many differing ideas and ideals!

I agree with the majority of the document but there were other parts which I wish to comment on:

1. Disaster tenets.

Always good to reinforce the terminology used in research, but "natural disasters" as a term, whilst maybe not absolutely literally correct, has been used a lot in the media. It is a widely accepted term and somewhat of a buzzword now. I think it is important to take advantage of that. Now, I believe, is a perfect time to be trying to get "natural disaster prevention" issues into the spotlight.

With the amount of highly-publicised disasters, (especially those impacting the USA), now is the time people will listen to and fund prevention issues. After a house fire, the first thing people will do is to install a smoke alarm. After a volcanic eruption, tsunami, or hurricane, governments will plough money into that field of research until the next disaster. I assume the American government is fully aware of how easily the humanitarian disaster following Hurricane Katrina could have been avoided? That fact should be reinforced more in the public domain, not as "told you so" but as "listen here, we're trying to help".

2. Making communities safer from disasters.

Again, as in your point 4, bringing disaster prevention, its aims, methods, and rationale into the general reading spotlight is hugely important to the success of this objective. I think more

academics should be writing in mainstream publications, e.g. the Times, the Sydney Morning Herald, and USA Today, by offering a short article on their research. If it doesn't get accepted, at least the editors will realise this growing field exists. The articles will be accepted eventually and the media exposure would greatly aid this work.

Point 5: I'm not sure sexy is the right word. However it is done, prevention is never sexy! Rescue and response may well be, but the plodding along of daily prevention is not. It is simply necessary and sensible. Maybe I'm wrong, but I will always find a physical hazard and the related disaster more interesting and exciting than mitigation measures that are implemented before. The mitigation measures become more interesting to me when we discuss the actual disaster they prevented! I suspect the general public is the same in that we are reactive not proactive creatures by design and everyone, the media especially, is more interested in misery and loss than joy and prevented loss. Changing the fundamental way of thinking in young children is an admirable but adventurous and possibly over-ambitious task.

3. Travelling the first mile.

I particularly agree with paragraph (4) of Travelling the first mile. Scientific documents, especially the ones concerning public safety and disaster prevention, need to be translated into the specific language and colloquialisms of the society at risk. We need to interest people enough to want to work in this area and thus relate the expert information they have into their own particular language and culture.

4. Travelling the first mile for people.

I particularly agree that we need to collect and evaluate examples of simple, effective exercises and also compare the cost of mitigation action with post-disaster relief costs. Again, this is already known and stating what should be done could be seen as passive action. Rather than actually spending the time discussing what should be done, why doesn't someone just do it? Especially when we're talking about getting the work out into the public eye. The work has been done, so why doesn't someone work harder to promote it? I find that theme rather frustrates me throughout. Although I'm sure I'm missing a point somewhere and it probably is being done continually!

5. Omitting the word hazard is correct here because the document is not concerned with the hazard, simply society's response to it.

Appendix 9: Remarks from Kimberly Eriksen on Version 5 (27 November 2008)

Regarding specific terms to frame the overall message of vulnerability and natural disaster, naturally this is subjective and freedom of choice is each person's based upon their own intuition. My stance is simple: I would not use the word "sexy". For me personally, it sends an over-the-top message. I believe it is fashionable, yes. However, it does not seem to capture the essence of this subject matter.

I believe there are other ways to inspire, motivate and capture the humanitarian imagination to ignite incentive for action toward these serious issues and the potential tragedy and loss of disaster victims. If you wish to make it exciting and attractive, do so. Nonetheless, I think it would be unnecessary to take it a step further with an obvious marketing splash in this particular context and risk tainting the message with its multiple meanings. Less is more.

Do an internet search and see what the mainstream feed is on the word.

Also here is Oxford English Dictionary's definition:

sexy

-adjective (sexier, sexiest) 1 sexually attractive or exciting. 2 sexually aroused. 3 informal very exciting or appealing.