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REPORT CARD

Global Assessment Report on Disaster Risk Reduction

Global disaster risk is increasing worldwide due to unsafe cities and the combined impact of environmental destruction and climate change which jeopardize the lives of hundreds of millions of people, says a landmark UN report published on 17 May.

Across low- and middle-income countries, recurrent disasters are destroying livelihoods, driven by a lack of government attention, unplanned urbanization and deplorable economic conditions. The Report notes that damage to housing from such persistent, low intensity events has quintupled since 1980.

"Disaster risk is rising in an alarming way, threatening development gains, economic stability and global security while creating disproportionate impacts on developing countries and poor rural and urban areas," said UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, launching the first *Global Assessment Report on Disaster Risk Reduction*. "While we cannot prevent natural phenomena such as earthquakes and cyclones, we can limit their consequences. Pre-emptive risk reduction is the key. Sound response mechanisms after the event, however effective, are never enough."

The document peels back the layers of disaster to reveal previously unidentified trends and data analysis, which will help refocus risk reduction priorities worldwide and push climate change adaptation even further up the international agenda.

The Report's foundation is a massive database drawing together from a cross-section of UN, governmental, scientific and academic sources, the specifics of various hazard types -- including droughts, floods, cyclones, earthquakes and tsunamis -- over a 32-year period, 1975-2007. The data has then been 'crunched' to provide an unprecedented series of global disaster risk trends, maps and related tools on which the Report is based.

In particular the 200-page volume identifies three primary 'risk drivers' -- unplanned urban development, vulnerable livelihoods and ecosystem decline -- each underpinned by climate change. Left unchecked, these are resulting in dramatic increases in disaster risk and poverty prevalence. Among the Report's key findings:

- In absolute numbers -- and even assuming constant hazard levels -- global disaster risk increased between 1990 and 2007, by 13 per cent (mortality) and 35 per cent (economic loss), in the case of floods; due to rapid world population and GDP growth. In disaster-prone areas, in relative terms the trend is stable and may even be falling.
- Global disaster risk is highly concentrated in poorer countries with weaker governance. The most intensive risk is found in a very small portion of the earth's surface. Just three countries -- Bangladesh, China and India, each heavily populated -- account for 75% of the mortality risk from floods.
- Further, global disaster risk is unevenly distributed, configured by a range of drivers related to a country's economic and social development. Japan and the Philippines have roughly equivalent population exposure to tropical cyclones -- even so, 17 times more people would die in the Philippines than Japan.
- Countries with small and vulnerable economies, such as many Small-Island Developing States and land-locked developing countries, have the highest economic vulnerability to natural hazards, low resilience to disaster and often extreme trade limitations which impair development. Vanuatu in the Pacific Ocean has the greatest projected number of annual fatalities to tropical cyclones per million inhabitants in the world.
- A build up of 'low intensity events' -- where less than 50 people are killed and fewer than 500 homes destroyed -- can be a sign of a major disaster 'in waiting'. Frequent low intensity losses often highlight an accumulation of risks which will be realized when an extreme hazard event occurs.
- Deprived communities suffer a disproportionate share of disaster loss. Poor households are usually less resilient to loss and are rarely covered by insurance or social protection. Nearly two million houses in Mexico have been damaged by disaster since 1980, mainly in recurrent weather-related events -- a disproportionate number in impoverished communities.
- Weather-related disaster risk is expanding rapidly both in terms of the territories affected, the losses reported and the frequency of events. In 12 countries across Asia and Latin America, 97% of municipal disaster loss reports were linked to weather-related hazard.
- Climate change is already changing the geographic distribution, frequency and intensity of weather-related hazard and threatens to undermine the resilience of poorer countries and their citizens to absorb loss and recover from disaster events. Climate change therefore magnifies the impact of disasters on people and assets in developing countries.
- The manner in which countries manage disaster risk reduction often fails to integrate risk into development.
- At both national and international levels, policy and institutional frameworks for climate change adaptation and poverty reduction must be better linked to those for disaster risk reduction.