Poor people are the real losers

Weather-related catastrophes: Greater frequency and severity.

| Thomas Loster

Nine of last year's ten severest natural catastrophes in terms of victim numbers were weather-related, and all affected developing or emerging countries. Gradual trends like heatwave and drought often pose an even greater threat than individual catastrophes.

In 2007, over 16,000 lives were lost in a total of nearly 1,000 natural catastrophes worldwide, the biggest caused by Cyclone Sidr, which devastated coastal areas of Bangladesh in mid-November, resulting in 3,300 deaths and leaving 50,000 injured and more than three million homeless. In the previous July and August, the monsoon had brought extensive flooding to India, Nepal and Bangladesh, causing over 2,000 deaths.

Photo: Prof. Gerhard Berz

Farmer on arid land in Yemen

The long-term trends are also clear: recent years have seen a dramatic increase in the frequency and intensity of weather-related natural catastrophes, with windstorm and flood losses on the advance. Weather records worldwide are being shattered. The highest one-day precipitation level in 2005 was recorded in Mumbai, India. That same year in the Caribbean, Wilma recorded the lowest central pressure of any hurricane, whilst temperatures in the tropical Atlantic reached new highs. Climate change has dramatic consequences: faster-rising sea levels, retreating glaciers and changes in the seasons.

The Assessment Reports published by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) show that developing countries and the poorer sections of the population will be hit particularly hard. Their prospects of fair access to food, clean water and other resources will continue to deteriorate and their health will suffer. New scientific studies such as the Climate Change Index (CCI) published in 2007 by the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology make the same point: the poor suffer disproportionately from climate change. It is always more difficult for them to adapt to changed circumstances and their situation is already bleak.

Although the headlines in recent years have been dominated by major events such as the Izmit earthquake in 1999, which claimed 20,000 lives, the Bam earthquake in 2003 with 30,000 deaths and the 2004 tsunami with a death toll of over 200,000, the gradual onset of heatwaves and drought is often more dangerous. Over the years they lay waste to vast tracts of land. Millions are already affected in poorer countries. On the African continent, for instance: in Ethiopia alone, some 600,000 died in the 1970s and 1980s and seven million people were exposed to long periods of drought. Sudan, Malawi, Chad and Mozambique also struggled with conditions of extreme aridity. According to World Bank estimates, around 100 million

people in Africa suffered drought in the 1980s and 1990s and that figure is thought to have doubled in the space of a few years.

If we examine the distribution of the humanitarian consequences of global weather-related catastrophes, we note that many countries in the early stages of development are already well in the forefront. The World Bank categorises countries into groups 1 (rich) to 4 (poor) according to their GNP. The following conclusions can be drawn from the figures for the period 1980–2007:

• Approximately half of the world's 14,500 recorded weather-related natural catastrophes occurred in highly developed countries (G1), a third in groups G3 and G4.

• Over two thirds of the one million deaths they caused are accounted for by the lowest-income countries (G4), whereas only 12% relate to high-income countries (G1).

• Whilst, as expected, monetary losses arose for the most part (74%) in G1 and G2 countries, the poorer group G3 and G4 countries bore 26% of the burden. There is a serious lack of insurance cover to mitigate losses in the poorer countries, a mere 1% of insured losses being recorded in group G3 and G4 countries.

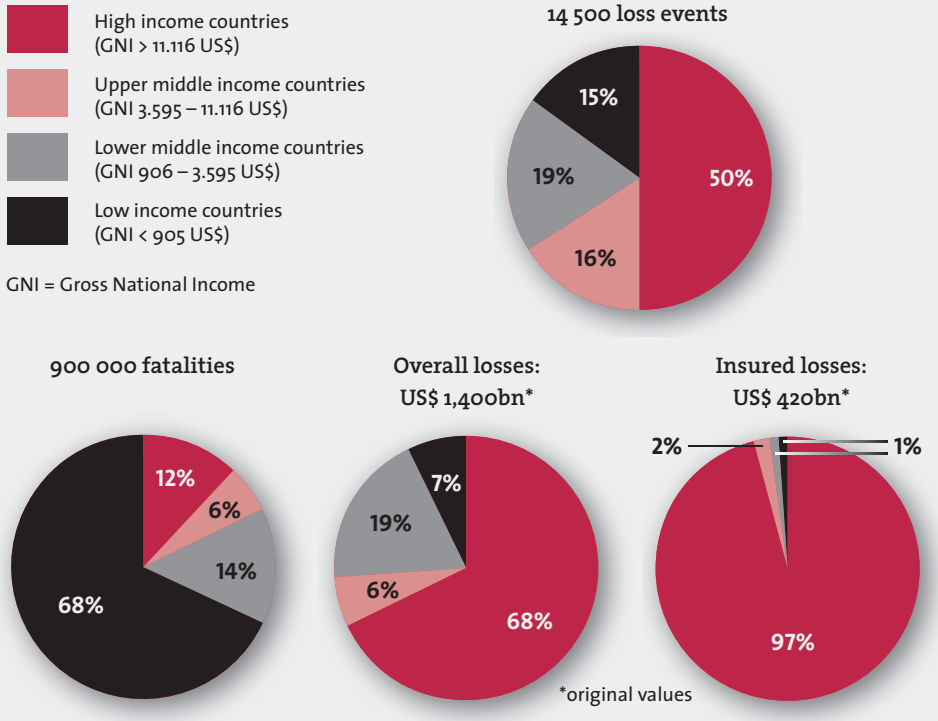
The IPCC's fourth Assessment Report, published in 2007, puts far greater emphasis on the link between global warming and the greater frequency and intensity of extreme events than its 2001 predecessor. There is a considerable weight of scientific evidence to show that flood and drought will further increase. In many regions, the expected rise in sea levels will cause flooding in low-lying coastal plains, river deltas and archipelagos; many parts of Bangladesh as well as Tuvalu and the Marshall Islands in the Pacific, for instance, will soon be uninhabitable. Whilst wealthy countries can afford to build dykes and other engineering constructions to protect themselves, millions in poorer countries are helpless in the face of the looming threat. With no less than the future of entire regions at stake, efficient early-warning systems and other disaster-prevention measures are extremely important. Ultimately, the United Nations Millennium Development Goals can only be achieved if schools, hospitals and infrastructure in developing countries are not constantly being destroyed by disasters. With loss events placing already threadbare social networks under even greater strains, existing solidarity schemes are failing.

Although experts no longer believe that climate change can be stopped, it is at least within our power to slow it down, by using no-regret, win-win and similar strategies to conserve precious resources and reduce energy consumption. Greater energy efficiency has a key role to play. One way to achieve this is to pave the way for the global energy paths of the future to which all countries can commit. The Kyoto Protocol and agreements regarding its successor are a first step in this direction. The Kyoto Protocol calls on the 36 industrialised nations to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. In all, emissions are to be cut by at least 5% during the period 2008–2012 against 1990 levels. Negotiating rounds conducted by the United Nations have already led to the adoption of an agenda to guarantee that emission reductions continue unabated when the initial commitment period ends in 2012.

However, a global climate protection agreement will have to be far more comprehensive and far-reaching. We can only move on if a global deal is struck, involving clear commitments on the part of those responsible for climate change. One thing is clear: in our globalised world, only sustainable strategies forged between partners in accordance with the precautionary principle will ensure more winners overall. It is now above all up to the industrialised nations to assume their responsibilities. ||

Worldwide weather catastrophes 1980 - 2007

Distribution according to economic development (%)



Sources: Munich Re NatCatSERVICE (loss information, 3/2008); Worldbank (country classification, 6/2007)

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