

Letter

Letter: Investing in prevention pays off and saves lives

From Mami Mizutori, UN Secretary-General's Special Representative for Disaster Risk Reduction

After 1m people died in Cyclone Bhola in 1970, the government of Bangladesh put in place a robust cyclone preparedness programme © AP

7 HOURS AGO

Regarding Tim Harford's column "[Why we fail to prepare for disasters](#)" (April 18): the UN Office for Disaster Risk Reduction would like to highlight the following.

First, as Mr Harford points out, political leaders and governments must shoulder the heavy lifting in prevention and preparedness. The greatest single driver of disaster risk is weak governance and lack of political commitment to invest in prevention. This is clear from the various runaway disaster risks we keep ignoring: greenhouse gas emissions, unplanned urbanisation, population growth in disaster-prone settings, failure to invest in public health infrastructure, and the list goes on.

Second, the [Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction](#), the global blueprint for reducing risk and disaster impact adopted five years ago by UN member states, included biological hazards because memories were still fresh of earlier outbreaks of Ebola, Sars, Mers and H1N1. Now governments must walk the talk and include pandemic preparedness front and centre in their national and local strategies for reducing disaster risk.

Third, there is abundant evidence that investing in prevention pays off and saves lives. Fifty years ago this November, 1m people died in a cyclone that hit Bangladesh. Last November, when Cyclone Bulbul hit the same country, the death toll was less than 20. The difference was a robust government-run cyclone preparedness programme put in place using early warnings and an array of measures to reduce loss of life.

When there is a political will to follow the evidence and act on science, we can reduce existing risk and avoid the creation of new risk. In a world where economic growth is insatiable, risk has become systemic and embedded in all aspects of what we call “progress”. One type of risk can transform into another, exposing and exacerbating existing vulnerabilities. We see this with Covid-19: a biological hazard making clear the precarious systems upon which trade, food, energy, transportation and social safety nets rely.

If we do not lift our game, the Covid-19 pandemic will be viewed by our children as nothing but a warm-up act for the wilful destruction of the planet.

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UN Secretary-General’s Special Representative for Disaster Risk Reduction