

**Expert:** Terry Jeggle

**Title of the Session:** Organizational or institutional interests in applied disaster risk management (DRM) policy issues, internationally

**Date:** 15/09/2014 to 21/09/2014

## **Summary**

After 25 years of advocacy for disaster risk reduction (DRR), there are examples whereby some organizations or institutions – public or private – have been motivated to pursue a greater emphasis in applying disaster risk management or DRR principles in the course of their own routine practices and subject interests. This contrasts with still many other specialized national disaster service agencies or government departments which remain less inclined to proceed beyond traditional “disaster management” capabilities of responding to crisis situations as or when they occur. In their activities they display correspondingly less understanding or fewer commitments to prevailing or future disaster risks. The theme will invite both queries and comment regarding the conducive set of circumstances, or internally generated organizational values that lead to forward looking and capacity-building attributes that advance the realization of applied DRM beyond disaster-denominated roles or organizations.

## **Context**

### **The Background**

*If every effort is described as ‘using a nail’, then we will always reach only for a hammer.* This is often the case as we continue to talk about disasters, and then look towards disaster management abilities as the historically defining context for advancing DRR accomplishments. Why are we surprised that by always “nailing disasters”, it remains so challenging to instill and advance the quite other issues associated with reducing disaster risks – before disasters occur ?

It is possible that “natural” hazards (e.g. as implied too often by the inaccurately referred expression of “natural disasters”) may come to mind most readily, but the larger concerns on our workbench are a wider range of risks and locally distinctive hazards. These may additionally be referred to by individual professionals or other commentators as being technological, environmental, public health, “human-induced” or even cascading or “concatenated” when they combine with or induce others, and people are exposed to them. Hazards exist repeatedly, so they are seldom totally “unknown” or “unexpected” – even if they do occur in different places or at different times.

But the hazards and the risks they pose are not themselves unfamiliar if we think about them as *being recurrent, dynamic or changing features shaped by the very visible changes and growth in our societies*. Some segments of the population in every country also are more *vulnerable on a full-time and continuing basis* to the same hazard than others, a feature easily overlooked in the dramatic reporting of the aftermath of “disasters”. The crucial issue about them for this discussion is that various examples of all of these types of

risk can threaten *human security* and therefore should concern and motivate people in *all* societies – throughout their daily routines. If we, or governing authorities and local leaders wait for them to occur as disasters, it is too late. We will have failed before we started, in “managing the disaster”.

These are some underlying challenges that have complicated and frustrated proponents of disaster risk reduction (DRR) since the subject’s *viewpoints* became a recognized topic on the international political agenda in 1990. Then, it was motivated in part by the declaration of the novel idea for a UN International Decade for Natural Disaster Reduction (1990-99). The subject has been refined, promoted at some cost, and the audience certainly has expanded considerably through the next 15 years of the successor arrangements and the International Strategy for Disaster Reduction (2000-2015). Yet, the international discourse *still* persists in talking about disasters ever since.

### **The Discussion, Resources at Hand**

My familiarity and continuing interest in the evolution of more comprehensive disaster risk management awareness and practices have convinced me of the importance of both long-term national policy commitments, and the essential growth of multiple professional and institutional capacities. Most of these institutions do not even have the word “disaster” in their names, and despite their relevance to applied DRM they often do “other things” on a full-time basis. But what they already do, or can do more of, collectively has a huge bearing on identifying and working with risk conditions, and engaging many different types of people in the process.

All of these dispersed efforts take time and sustained effort, but they can be sustained by foresight. Once they are more publicly recognized, the work of these institutions can also create or mold public values. (Think of the scope of the multiple campaigns to reduce smoking over the past 50 years, for the many reasons beneficial to people’s well-being – and as reducing a public risk issue.) These organizational and institutional abilities all take time to grow; their specific abilities thrive in numerous, and different professional environments. Just like trees. The fruits and benefits come later, and conditions have to be continuously cultivated to ensure quality, abundance and protection, too. Shocks and disruptions will still occur, but they also galvanize new directions, pointing to previously unconsidered opportunities.

There are abundant existing resources – in skills, abilities, techniques, accumulated local knowledge and determined leadership – which if tapped could propel more effective measures of applying DRR through existing organizations and institutions.

Technical developments change societies and alter human behavior, providing essential new material and human resources for DRR, if they are applied. Consider the impacts, for example, of the 24 hour global news cycle over the past 30 years. Routine use is now made of satellite imagery, quantitative data modeling techniques and advanced telecommunications for previously unimagined weather forecasting, benefiting even the most impoverished countries of the world. Current instant messaging, crowd-sourcing and public reporting capabilities of social media are only beginning to drive more informed

public involvement, with increasing expectations for official accountability in risk governance. There are many opportunities, and they all encourage more use of existing organizations and institutions to weld these features into greater public awareness and DRR potential on a routine basis.

Disaster management thinking assumes too much about “lessons learned”, even as they are seldom acted upon in practice. “Temporary shelter” remains an expedient and expensive failure repeatedly following disasters. Schools that are technically able to be made safer and strengthened, collapse regularly in earthquakes because they have not been. People who live by the sea did not understand tsunamis or the potential force of typhoon storm surges. Effective public health systems cannot be supported or fail to exist at all in some countries, until it is “recognized” that they are unable to prevent uncontrolled international plagues of far greater cost. At what expense do societies squander the potential DRR resources of their existing organizations and facilities because they are not defined explicitly in terms of disasters?

Against \$862 billion in disaster losses in developing countries from 1992 to 2012 (equal to one-third of all international development aid for the same period), the international donor community spent only \$13.5 billion (1.6 percent of the losses) on explicit DRR expenditures. (Kellet, J., and Caravani, A. *Financing Disaster Risk Reduction: A 20 Year Story of International Aid*. 2013. [www.odi.org.uk/sites/odi.org.uk/files/odi-assets/publications-opinion-files/8574.pdf](http://www.odi.org.uk/sites/odi.org.uk/files/odi-assets/publications-opinion-files/8574.pdf)).

### **What to Do ?**

Historically educators and technical learning have contributed to the growing public recognition and professional abilities required for disaster risk management and DRR practice, even if their direct influence on policy development has been more modest. This is in contrast to the more publicized but less effective emergency preparedness and response activities routinely identified with international humanitarian action. While both the political and operational dimensions of each of these domains are critical for all societies to address, the respective roles, responsibilities and emphases are very different. Unfortunately, emergency or crisis management driven by specific events, and the growing imperatives for more expansive and professionally dynamic disaster risk management responsibilities still remain conjoined in too many countries. This will continue to create serious imbalances in resource allocations or sustained policy commitments for fulfilling their respective responsibilities .

It is time to buffer a continuing dependence on disaster terminology and expectations for disaster management-grounded organizations or agencies to absorb and promote DRR through newly adopted disaster risk management postures. This prevents a true understanding of DRR and continues to limit the engagement of the much wider requirements of technical skills and abilities needed to foster extended professional relationships spanning entire societies. A continued reliance on disaster-driven characteristics and commanding operational requirements in DRR policy discussions obscures the need for transforming means to access policy and operational capabilities that can implement the identification, awareness, monitoring, management and transfer of

national risks. As presently constituted there are few disaster management service organizations that are managerially, technically or operationally structured to assume or coordinate major disaster recovery and rehabilitation responsibilities.

Such a shift in outlook, and foresight should disclose many other *existing* institutional and organizational facilities, technical and educational institutions which can become more closely involved with advancing DRR. Disaster managers have an important role to play, but it is time to question if they are the best suited planners and implementers of DRR. Where are the “mainstreamers” located, those people who are invoked to situate DRR squarely within national development strategies, and to be implemented by the various development sectors ? For such a departure from disaster-driven thinking to succeed, a forceful expression of reorienting DRR and associated incentives to motivate alternative institutions will be required from the highest levels of political authority.

The present online discussion of this subject welcomes and challenges interested discussants to consider:

1. The benefits or limitations of repositioning the subject of advancing DRR *in practice* with less direct association to “disaster-denominated” contexts, responsibilities and requirements in order to obtain greater opportunity value from more sectoral collaborators throughout a society.
2. Examples, queries or suggestions of ways and means by which additional organizations and institutions (technical, educational, professional, economic, commercial, public interest, etc.) may be engaged as closer collaborators and contributors to DRR *in the course of their otherwise on-going activities*.
3. Are their particular governance matters or concerns that could either encourage or prevent the development of more results-driven DRR commitments beyond the more circumscribed professional responsibilities commonly associated with disaster-related mandates or responsibilities ?
4. Reference to either positive or negative examples of more expansive national approaches to DRR engagement, especially involving existing or atypical organizations or institutions is encouraged (other than the establishment of national platforms or similar central policy driven coordinating mechanisms).