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Title of the Session: Avoidable Deaths

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Summary

Natural hazards and disasters have the potential to cause deaths and injuries. However, due to advancements in weather forecasting systems, human-built environments, and economic and policy developments worldwide, disaster deaths are avoidable.

When avoidable deaths continue to happen, despite these advancements, this is 'event violence'. Violence is commenced by the relevant actors and organisations in failing to save lives.

How can deaths be reduced?

To reduce disaster deaths, the UN should promote the idea of 'justice' and a 'goal to reduce deaths' at the heart of all disaster management activities.

This will make the system accountable, sustainable and resilient.

Context

Disasters and Deaths: Scope for Avoidable Deaths

Natural or environmental disasters are understood as hazards which are natural in origin (such as floods, cyclones, tsunami, typhoons, heat waves, and lightning) but have the potential to cause deaths and injuries. 300,000 human deaths were reported in the Indian Ocean Tsunami in 2004; 15,844 deaths in the Great East Japan Earthquake in 2011; and 6,000 deaths in the super typhoon Haiyan in 2013 – to mention a few.

There is an indication that the number of deaths arising from natural disasters is decreasing (with the exception of 2004), despite an increase in the number of disasters from approximately 90 annually in the 1970s to approximately 450 annually more recently (IFRC, 2013; UNISDR, 2015a). Yet, the poor and vulnerable in developing countries continue to die disproportionately from disasters when compared to developed countries (Coppola, 2011; DFID, 2013). Between 1980 and 2000, 53 per cent of the deaths due to disasters occurred in poor countries, although these countries only accounted for 11 per cent of the world's 'at-risk' population (Coppola, 2011). This merits the questions: *Why do deaths occur in disasters?* and *How can they be reduced?*

Most of the deaths in disasters are 'avoidable'. Avoidable deaths are preventable deaths due to: advancements in disaster management science and weather forecasting systems; increased sophistication in human-built environments; and ongoing economic and policy developments worldwide (Farmer, 2004; Sen, 2003; Lalonde, 2011; UN, 2015; UNISDR, 2015a, 2015b). Nonetheless, avoidable deaths continue to happen despite these advancements in developed and developing countries in particular. According to Roberts (2008: 9), avoidable deaths are not accidents "but are instead end points in a causal chain

created by human beings". Farmer calls these preventable deaths 'stupid deaths' (Whiteford *et al.*, 2009). When these stupid deaths continue to occur, they become 'violence' (Galtung, 1969; Farmer, 2004; Rylko-Bauer *et al.*, 2009) or, in the case of disasters, a concept which is called 'event violence' (Ray-Bennett, 2018).

'Event violence' occurs because of: pre-existing social, financial and organisational vulnerabilities that exist in the form of class/gender/caste/race; structures and processes of neo-liberal financial institutions; and poor coordination, communication and conflicting worldviews in disaster management systems (Bradby, 1996; Roberts, 2008; Bradshaw and Fordham, 2013; Ray-Bennett, 2018). These pre-existing structures and processes often perpetuate existing vulnerabilities. Cockburn (2004) calls this a 'continuum of violence' which gets magnified during war, military violence or, in this context, during natural disasters.

How can disaster deaths be reduced? A way forward

Since the declaration of the UN's 'International Decade for Natural Disaster Reduction' in 1990, ensued by the 'Hyogo Framework for Action' in 2005, the efforts to avoid disaster deaths have indirectly been focused on by enhancing structural and non-structural mitigation measures. However, with the declaration of the first Global Target being to '**substantially reduce global disaster mortality by 2030**', the 'Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction' in 2015 has brought the agenda of avoidable deaths to the fore. It is anticipated that this Global Target will lead to new actions, funding, and research. It will also lead to the systematic collection of mortality data at national and international levels, which is currently lacking (Ray-Bennett, 2017, 2018).

To reduce disaster deaths, efforts are now required:

- i) Advance multi-hazard early warning systems for the generation of accurate early warning messages and information, as well as effective *coordination and communication* of this information with the relevant responders to develop an effective response system. Coordination and communication, in particular, are identifiable because they can help organisations to manage labour, knowledge, and gaps in disaster management activities. In this light, the disaster management system needs to be conceived as a system that works in the interface with humans and technology (a socio-technical system). As such, policy makers and UN bodies should invest in both technology and capacity development in order to promote effective coordination and communication.
- ii) Introduce the 'goal' of avoiding disaster deaths 'at any cost' for the entire disaster management system. In management science, "the goals are called the objectives or objective functions to be maximized" (Pfeffer, 1981: 19). Setting a goal for avoidable deaths will bring clarity in everyday disaster management practices, especially in resource-poor contexts.
- iii) Involve political leaders to adopt and implement the 'goal' of avoidable deaths through national and local policies and programmes. When and where there is

proactive political leadership, a disaster response system can be aligned with the 'goal' of saving lives. Political leadership can also promote a culture of disaster preparedness. All these are essentials for avoidable deaths.

- iv) Highlight that deaths in disasters are a developmental issue. They result in both a humanitarian loss and a loss of human capital (Lass *et al.*, 2011; Agarwal, 1990; Ray-Bennett, 2009). Without reducing human deaths, UN (2007) have firmly asserted that it is unlikely that a country can ever achieve sustainable human development. Indicators for avoidable deaths are therefore suggested. Indicators can act as targets to be achieved by the international, national and state disaster management authorities (UN, 2015; Wahlström, 2015).

Some ideas as how to conceive these indicators through the instance of *avoidable deaths* and *unavoidable deaths* have been suggested by Ray-Bennett (2018). Anything less than ten deaths is considered as *unavoidable deaths*. *Avoidable deaths*, on the other hand, are deaths beyond the number ten and are potentially avoidable from the impact of environmental disasters. These indicators have both quantitative and qualitative elements. Depending on the economy of a country (developed, developing, least developed or middle income), indicators will vary, much like the Sustainable Development Goals.

- v) Mainstream the 'theory of justice' (Sen, 2009) at the heart of disaster management practice in order to complement the 'goal' of avoiding disaster deaths. The theory of justice should usher 'accountability' to improve our 'mode of understanding' on: what actors and organisations do, or do not do, to save lives; and how deaths can be reduced.

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