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Title of the Session: Effecting Change in Disaster Risk Management (DRM) by Addressing Political Economy and Risk Governance Challenges.

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Summary

We live in a world where scientific solutions can prevent losses from hazardous events. Yet, increasingly, we witness un-necessary and preventable loss of lives and destruction of livelihoods. This dual reality, i.e. the existence of scientific solutions that can prevent losses and the increase in reported losses due to disasters, seems counter intuitive as improvements in scientific knowledge should lead to a decrease in losses.

Indeed, this reality can only be explained by examining 1) The unequal distribution of benefits and risks arising from development and investment projects, and 2) The unequal access to power, and the decision making process.

Context

While examining current disaster risk losses, on a world-wide scale, it is possible to make the following observations:

- Scientific knowledge exists to prevent losses arising from a variety of hazardous events, including the destruction of schools during earthquakes, flooding of homes during rainy seasons, collapse of homes due to landslides amongst others.
- Yet, as our scientific knowledge on how to build livelihoods and infrastructure improves and the number of available solutions increases, so too do the losses arising from disasters.
- According to recent statistics (Views from the Frontline-VFL, 2013) 57% felt losses had increased over the last five years, compared with only 21% who felt disaster losses had decreased.
- The majority of disaster losses are due to small-scale recurrent disasters, primarily related to weather related hazards (VFL, UNISDR, 2013). (The fact that they are small scale implies that they are easily preventable).

Furthermore, while examining current Disaster Risk Management strategies, on a world-wide scale, it is possible to make the following observations:

- Risk has been accumulating over the past few decades due to a variety of reasons, including the fact that the development projects by the public sector and the investments by the private sector only recently started accounting for disaster risk.
- Vulnerability, due partly to development and investment initiatives, is not random. Indeed people are vulnerable because they are politically, socially or economically excluded, and hence have little access to resources, influence, information or decision making (OXFAM 2013).

- In most countries, especially poor countries where losses tend to be concentrated, most DRM efforts are targeted at response to disasters. Some effort is directed at developing laws and legislation to prevent disaster risk from accumulating in the future, even if this is not always properly enforced (e.g. seismic building codes, building in flood plains and on unstable slopes amongst others). Furthermore, the least effort is directed at reducing current levels of existing risk.

There is a need to understand the above phenomena in order to be able to devise realistic and practicable solutions to reduce disaster risk and corresponding losses to lives and livelihoods. This can only be done by looking beyond the physical factors (i.e. the strength of buildings, schools and infrastructures) and natural factors (i.e. the frequency and severity of hazardous events such as earthquakes, floods, storms, etc.) that contribute to vulnerability, and expanding our investigative lens to include the social, economic and institutional factors that contribute to vulnerability. Furthermore there is a need to understand the decision making process related to the use, production and distribution of resources, and the corresponding distribution of benefits and risks arising from these activities.

Indeed by addressing political economy and risk governance challenges in Disaster Risk Management practices we are able to answer questions like:

- Why is investment targeted at response to disasters more than at legislation against disasters or at reduction of high levels of risks?
- Why is it that risk and vulnerability are unequally distributed and significantly concentrated among the poorest of the poor in the world, and this includes the poor in prosperous societies.
- Why is it that in this day and age people still die or lose their livelihoods due to small scale hazardous events, whereas losses from these events can easily be preventable.
- What are the common pitfalls in some of the popular risk management strategies, including for example earthquake master plans?
- Why do children still die in schools due to a multitude of hazardous events including landslides, earthquakes and floods and how can this death and suffering be prevented?