

Global Public Health: Ecological Foundations



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Disaster risk reduction and sustainable development

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Each of us has had at least one moment in time when we stop to ask ourselves: how would we perform in a disaster scenario? On a personal level, how we manage before and carry on after such an event says something about our vulnerability and our resilience. But what do these terms really mean, and how do we manage risks so as to reduce our exposure to what are still commonly thought of as acts of God? As in other aspects of human existence, scale and context matter and while an individual's experience may reflect the experience of the larger group in terms of loss, sorrow and pain, nonetheless there are steps we can take to minimize adverse impacts and outcomes.

Disaster as defined by the United Nations (UN), is a serious disruption of the functioning of a community or a society involving widespread human, material, economic or environmental losses and impacts, which exceeds the ability of the affected community or society to cope using its own resources.¹ Negative effects include harm to human physical, mental and social well-being, together with damage to property, destruction of assets, loss of services, social and economic disruption and environmental degradation.^{2,3} The likelihood of disasters is increasing mainly as a result of the growth of population and assets in at-risk areas. Migration to coastal areas and the expansion of cities in flood plains, often coupled with inadequate building standards, are among the main reasons for the increase.³ According to The World Conference on Disaster Reduction (Hyogo, Japan 2005), of concern to disaster risk reduction (DRR) as stated in The Hyogo Framework for Action 2005-2015 (HFA): are "... hazards of natural origin and related environmental and technological hazards and risks."⁴ These arise from a range of geological (earthquakes,

volcanic activity), meteorological (fog, storm), hydrological (avalanches, floods), biological (disease epidemics and insect/animal plagues), and technological sources (environmental degradation, pollution, industrial accidents), sometimes acting in combination.

Human actions resulting from faulty decision making to increase hazard levels. Termed "socio-natural hazards",¹ much of the observable increase in hydrometeorological and geophysical hazard events in recent years such as landslides, flooding, land subsidence and drought arises from the interaction of underlying natural forces with overexploited or degraded land and environmental resources. Consider the effect of desertification as a result of overgrazing, of water diversion on erosion and landslides and of deforestation on the occurrence of bush fires. Indeed, some communities are at particular risk through location, industry, and population density. Consider, for examples, low lying coastal areas susceptible to rising sea levels secondary to global warming; the sensitivity of agriculture to ecosystem damage; and poorly managed urbanization with unplanned squatter



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