

Poverty, Sustainable Development and Disaster Reduction

What is the problem?

Progress in poverty reduction has experienced stark differences among and within regions over the last decade. Overall, South Asia remains one of the world's poorest regions with the largest number of poor people, despite advances in the 1990s. Also Africa faces enormous poverty with widespread stagnation across most countries and an increasing number of people suffering in the 1990s.

Poverty has even tripled in the Europe/CIS region combined with dramatic reductions of life expectancy. A more positive trend could be observed in Latin America and the Caribbean, where human development in many places reaches almost the level of rich countries, despite of slight increases in poverty. Countries in East Asia and the Pacific are performing well across the board, with some exceptions, and poverty fell by almost 15%. The 1990s have experienced unprecedented progress in some places, while others have stagnated and reversed to an extent not seen in previous decades.

The UNDP Report *Reducing Disaster Risk: A Challenge for Development* has demonstrated that disaster risk is higher in low human development countries. This was the result of a review into the relationship of development and disaster risk: while only 11 percent of the people exposed to natural hazards live in low human development countries, they account for more than 53 percent of total recorded deaths. Compared with the situation in high human development countries, these have 15 percent of people exposed, but only 1.8 percent of total recorded deaths.

The progress since 1994

Since 1994 there has been growing acceptance of the linkages between poverty and natural disasters, and poverty reduction strategies refer increasingly to disaster vulnerability as a contributing factor aggravating poverty. Poverty assessments, however, still do not yet sufficiently include disaster vulnerability indicators into ongoing surveys, which would deepen our understanding of the relationships and linkages.

The main challenges

There is a close correlation between disasters, poverty and environment. As the poor exploit environmental resources for survival, disaster risk increases. The connection between destruction of the environment - forest, soil, wetlands, and water sources - and disaster risk can be quite significant.

Landslide, drought and flood patterns are altered in many parts of the world due to climatic changes and environmental management actions. At the same time, major disasters, such as the cyclones and floods in Mozambique, Madagascar and Haiti, can have a long-lasting negative impact on the environment, increasing the risk of future disasters. Demographic pressures result in an intensified utilization of marginal land in many poor countries. Such land, by its very nature is likely to be more vulnerable to adverse weather conditions.

In poor countries rates of population growth are highest. Combined with high disaster risk, as for example in Bangladesh, Cambodia, Ethiopia, and Haiti, the numbers of affected are likely to further increase over the next decades, unless serious measures are taken to protect them. In view of population pressure being on the rise, it can be expected that also disaster vulnerability will increase as these people will have an increasingly limited access and entitlement to resources.

Repeated exposure to disaster can lead to chronic poverty. Households and communities can often get through the first year of a drought reasonably well but if repeated, losses quickly mount and cannot be absorbed easily. Recurring economic stresses caused by natural calamities induce fluctuations in income, compelling households to sell productive assets and to sacrifice potential investment. In turn, economic pressures increase vulnerability, often forcing people to live in dangerous locations, overriding the more remote threat of disasters. Sub-Saharan Africa has continued to suffer natural disasters and political upheavals. These events remind us what is hidden in poverty statistics: that the conditions of poverty are closely linked to disaster vulnerability. Many households in Africa are regularly exposed to risks from poor weather conditions, diverting resources to emergency response and reconstruction, taking a serious toll on what the national economy can allocate on other development programmes.

What's need to be done in the next 10 years?

Poor households and poor nations throughout much of the world face two disadvantages: the inability to generate an income and the vulnerability to physical, social and economic downturns. Drought, flood, conflict, inflation, disease and recession hit these groups and countries hardest. Furthermore, repeated exposure to these downturns reinforces the conditions of poverty. The circular nature of poverty and vulnerability does not preclude action. There is considerable scope for reducing disaster risk, particularly in poor countries through the application of appropriate disaster mitigation, preparedness and rehabilitation programmes.

Such measures should not be viewed as discrete activities undertaken by specialist government agencies but as measures that must be incorporated in development projects, economic activities and government policy more generally. Broader government development policy and sector plans can readily recognize the potential threat disasters pose to sustainable equitable development and focus attempts to reduce vulnerability. The degree of public sector and donor commitments to such issues should not be measured in financial terms alone. More specific actions could focus on the following areas:

- Integrate disaster reduction onto relevant development programmes in high risk areas.

- Incorporate disaster reduction measures into all post-disaster recovery programmes.
- Utilize existing instruments for assessment and planning at country level for greater attention to disaster risks.
- Increase the commitment to support national capacity building with particular emphasis on human resources development and governance.

For more information:

Angelika Planitz – UNDP/BCPR Disaster Programme Specialist - +41 (022) –9178703

www.undp.org/bcpr/disred/index.htm