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Disasters: why the poor suffer most

by Pieterneel Gruppen, 4 February 2003

Earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, flooding and other natural disasters have claimed 1.5 million lives worldwide in the past 20 years. Developing countries have been hardest hit, and many lives could have been saved if they had been better prepared, according to a report by the United Nations Development Programme out this week.



Rescue workers bring out the wounded from **the Iranian city of Bam**, devastated by an earthquake that caused 43,000 deaths six weeks ago

When the earthquake in Bam killed 40,000 people last December, the immediate concern was to help the survivors. But inevitably, thoughts turned to the question of who was responsible and what, if anything, could have been done to prevent the massive loss of life. Poor countries in particular should do more in the way of disaster risk analysis, according to the UNDP in its latest report on disaster preparedness.

Prevention

Much of the death and destruction could be averted by better planning, it says. Many governments in the developing world, for instance, allow urban areas to grow in areas prone to earthquakes. The impact of disasters therefore isn't determined by nature, but by poverty, explains Mark Pelling, one of the report's authors.

☞ "One of the central messages that we want to get across with this report is that natural disasters are in fact social disasters waiting to happen that may be triggered by a particular natural force."

Disaster risk statistics

The report contains some hard facts to prove its point: poor countries represent only 11 per cent of the population exposed to natural disasters, yet they account for over 53 per cent of the deaths. In addition, UNDP researchers measured the risk of exposure to natural disasters in individual countries on a per capita basis.

☞ "We call it the disaster risk index. The country risk is identified

by measuring the extent to which different socio-economic and environmental variables explain - through statistical analysis - the recorded deaths. Some of these variables would include such things as GDP per capita, human development index, health indicators, government indicators as well as some environmental indicators like the quality of access to water."

Reducing vulnerability

Based on data for 1980-2000, the index shows that people in North Korea were most at risk from natural disasters (606 per million), followed by Mozambique (328) and Armenia (324),

In order to reduce the death toll, governments of poor countries are advised to take various measures. Urban areas, for instance, shouldn't be allowed to expand if they're located in earthquake-prone regions. But, says Marc Pelling, donor countries offering assistance after a disaster has struck also have a responsibility of their own:



The eruption of the **Philippines volcano Mt Pinatubo** in July 1991 claimed more than 800 lives

🔊 "Our criticism is that in responding to large-scale events it's very important that we don't simply reproduce the social conditions and architectural fabric or livelihoods that led to the social vulnerability that prefigured those events in the first place."

Links

- [UNDP report on disaster preparedness](#)
- [ReliefWeb- IRCS relief and rescue response to Bam earthquake](#)
 - [Bam, picking up the pieces](#) (RNW)

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