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## Responsible Leadership in Disaster Reduction : A Global Perspective

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Item Type	Book chapter
Authors	Wisner, Ben;Walker, Peter
Publisher	Globethics.net / WCC Publications
Rights	With permission of the license/copyright holder
Download date	2026-07-06 08:10:26
Link to Item	<a href="http://hdl.handle.net/20.500.12424/173459">http://hdl.handle.net/20.500.12424/173459</a>

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### RESPONSIBLE LEADERSHIP IN DISASTER REDUCTION. A GLOBAL PERSPECTIVE

*Peter Walker / Ben Wisner, USA*

We would like to propose the following twelve 'big questions' as a filter and run the events, statements and outcomes of the World Conference on Disaster Reduction (Kobe, Japan, 18-22 January 2005) through them. As far as we can see the formal output from Kobe will do precious little to address good governance, the collateral damage of globalisations, violence, climate change or urbanisation.<sup>1</sup> It will also not materially affect the obstacles that face innovative civil society groups and local governments. The draft Program of Action also does not link the Kobe outcomes to poverty eradication as laid out in the Millennium Development Goals,<sup>2</sup> to date the only truly global consensus framework humanity has for sustainable development. The approach of the Kobe meeting with respect to knowledge and communication is likely to be one-sided, privileging the hard ware and top down transmission of warnings without providing resources for increased public hazard awareness 'from the bottom up'.<sup>3</sup> Certainly it seems there will be no targets set for UN member nations to reach. There will be lots of rhetoric but not much to be held accountable to. That was indefensible before Christmas, but now coming directly after the tsunami, it is nearly immoral.

We know that over the last two decades, disaster deaths/year have gone down by around 30%, whereas the number of people affected by disaster has gone up by 59%. It is largely the technical fix of warning systems better communication and cyclone shelters that has reduced the death toll, taken the extreme worst off disasters, but it is the lack of human rights, political, global process fixes that is allowing the numbers affected to raise so. Fewer are killed but many more living their lives in abject poverty and on the brink of survival. They are vulnerable to the extreme events to follow as the 21st Century rolls along.

The call for a tsunami warning system in the Indian ocean is all very well, it has been made before, but as the successful Bangladesh cyclone warning system shows, the technology is not effective if it cannot connect with the people and both get the warning to those who are vulnerable (on mud flats, in small villages, in shanty towns, in the rebel held areas) and, give them a viable option as to what to

do (get to the cyclone shelters in Bangladesh's case). Once again technical fix is not enough. It is a human rights and governance issue. Therefore we encourage participants in, and observers of the Kobe conference to ask what light is shed and what concrete resources are provided by each public and scientific session and each pronouncement as regards these twelve critical clusters of questions.

1. *Governance and respect for people's rights.* Good governance leads to concern for the right to life with dignity. Is it not the basis of all disaster mitigation? Just look at Haiti for an example of what appalling governance can do to disaster vulnerability. With no government in place, Somalis are highly vulnerable to drought and, in fact, many thousands of coastal Somalis were affected by the tsunami. In neighboring Kenya and Tanzania the government was able to warn most coastal dwellers.
2. *Globalisation & disasters.* Economic globalisation, at least with the corporate model, seeks to externalise risk (external from the corporation that is). It is not that corporations act immorally, they act amorally, but in the process people are attracted into low wage jobs and crowded in shanty towns and in coastal cities. Can economic globalisation be re-thought and 'tamed' so that people do not suffer increased disaster risk in the process? (See the report of the World Commission on Social Dimension of Globalization, chaired by the Presidents of Tanzania and Finland: <http://www.ilo.org/public/english/fairglobalization>).
3. *War & disasters.* Where there is war there is little chance of building against disaster using our normal models. In Aceh, Indonesia and Sri Lanka and other places, war or at least violence and unrest has been the norm for many people today. Internally displaced people fleeing war in Colombia, Congo, Sudan, and elsewhere live in conditions that make them vulnerable to disaster. You cannot wait for it to end before mitigating against disaster, so where are the models and approaches to deal with this? Does a 'window of opportunity' open up after a disaster that might allow conflict such as those in Aceh and Sri Lanka to be finally resolved? (See Disaster Diplomacy <http://www.arct.cam.ac.uk/disaster-diplomacy>).
4. *Climate change.* Rising sea levels and more extreme events such as cyclones and other storms mean more disasters: no way round it. The Netherlands is going flat out to adapt to this reality, but where else is adaptation to climate change taking place fast enough?<sup>5</sup>

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5. *Urbanisation.* Most population growth today is in urban areas, mostly in shanty towns, and most large cities are on coasts where sea level rise effects them, and where they are exposed to storms and possibly tsunamis. How can urbanisation be guided so that vulnerability to such hazards is minimised? Mega city urbanisation also puts a very large number of people at risk to earthquakes. How can the risk be reduced rapidly in Tehran, Istanbul, Mexico City, Addis Ababa, Manila, and other large cities facing earthquake hazard?

Concerning possible ways forward, we think it is necessary to ask:

6. *Local initiatives and innovations.* What are the obstacles that face civil society and local government in expanding important successes in 'bottom up' disaster risk management? Where can the necessary financial and other resources needed come from? How can initiatives 'from below' negotiate sub-national and national bureaucracies?
7. *Meaningful and effective local participation.* How can local initiatives and citizen participation in planning escape capture and control by dominant political elites that have been quick to appropriate the language of 'participation' and 'people centred' planning while giving up no control or resources to civil society?
8. *Knowledge and communication.* What is the role of knowledge, early warning and communication in risk reduction? What are the obstacles to implementing what science already tells us? Jeanne Johnson, director of the Tsunami Museum in Hilo, Hawaii, did a Master of Arts thesis in risk communication at the University of Hawaii. She found that without communications in place 96 people died in Hilo's 1946 tsunami. 61 still died in 1960, in another large tsunami, despite the existence by then of warnings via radio, television, sirens, and the police. Clearly public awareness and other social issues are also important – not just the information and communication technologies (ICT).
9. *Merging risk reduction and development.* How can the Millennium Development Goals (formulated in 2000, reaffirmed in 2002 at the WCSD in Johannesburg and monitored in September 2005 at the UN M + 5) be implemented in a way that simultaneously addresses risk reduction? In fact, is it possible to achieve the MDGs without attention to risk reduction? What are the *precise* links between opportunities for risk reduction and the manner in which the MDGs are currently being implemented? (One example: some 100 million children of school age are to be absorbed

into the school system. However, who is looking at the hazardousness of the school locations and schools themselves where these new students will find themselves?).

10. *Global alliances of disaster concerned and disaster affected peoples.* There is great power in the sharing of suffering and outrage. For example, tsunami victims from 10 countries or earthquake victims in Turkey, Japan and California coming together to lobby for better and more people-focused governance. Can the World Social Forum and other new people-focused institutions be made to see this as a priority?
11. *Women's crucial role in disaster reduction.* How can the potential of women as proactive agents of disaster reduction be acknowledged and fully utilised? Women and children may suffer more in disasters, but women should not be stereotyped as 'victims'. Women have a large contribution to bring to disaster risk reduction and local resilience. They have knowledge, skills, and relevant capacities and experiences. This has been very well documented, but women's contribution is often ignored.
12. *Full national accountability and transparency.* Given that the final documents produced by the WCDR did not include targets, timetable, or indicators of success in implementing the 'framework' for disaster risk reduction, what steps can be taken to ensure that nations actually take the Hyogo Programme of Action seriously and move concretely to implement it?

#### NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> In fact, in the end, the Hyogo Declaration as well as the Hyogo Programme of Action did mention climate change several times – a small step in the right direction.
- <sup>2</sup> The MDGs, were, in fact, mentioned explicitly in the final documents issued from the World Conference on Disaster Reduction (WCDR). However, none of the specific eight MDGs were linked to the framework for disaster risks reduction developed and agreed by international consensus. At the moment considerable effort is going into programmes worldwide to reduce poverty, increase child survival, expand access to clean water, etc. Without identifying specific links between disaster risks reduction and the manner in which these MDGs are being pursued, a key opportunity for concrete implementation is going to be missed.
- <sup>3</sup> In announcing an International Early Warning System at the WCDR, Jan Eglund called it 'people centred.' A major challenge for civil society is to take up this challenge and give content to this phrase.
- <sup>4</sup> The Small Island Developing States (SIDS) were very active at the WCDR, and a paragraph on their particular vulnerability to the hazards of climate change was included in the Hyogo Programme of Action.