

## Disasters Should Not Be the Protagonists of Disaster Risk Management

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Risk Management or Disaster Management: that is the question<sup>1</sup>. “Disaster Risk Management” (DRM) has been differentiated from “Financial Risk Management” (FRM). As we have been able to witness, economists and financial “experts”, in collusion with politicians are able to create disasters of enormous proportions, sometimes beyond nature’s power. Let’s then grant their creativity a supremacy in destructive capacity.

Risk Management (RM) as we know it, refers to the convolute relationship between hazards and vulnerability. As we can also observe, natural, socio-natural and anthropogenic hazards, when mixed with social, environmental, economic and governance vulnerabilities, have certainly not yet reached their peak in destructivity. There is far more to be seen in the future. This circumstance poses a certain number of questions, whose answers are far from being known.

Recent significant events in Latin America, the Caribbean and in other regions of the world have shown that considerable damage could have been avoided, or at least reduced (in terms of social, environmental and economic damage) if only a view on risk, rather than to disasters could have been applied. According to several sources, around two thirds of the total damage might have been spared by using space (land, territory) more wisely, taking better care of the environment and natural resources, and by offering more options to chronically impoverished populations. These three closely interlinked factors have two common keys that are often not well understood nor materialised: policy and strategy.

Disasters are socially built; they are the product of a misconception of development processes and a mismanagement of risk. Their evident social, economic and environmental consequences lead us to ask: Has DRM been effective? Where are we going with DRM? Is it true that “our” risk management should always have to be benchmarked to “disaster reduction”? Why should we continue to call it DRM instead of RM? A ready-made solution has been to propose an international framework of agreements and scopes, very much in line with the environmental issues of the 1970’s (e.g. Kyoto, Hyogo, Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, Global Earthquake Model). DRM came rather late to the international arena, but even if this trend has been effective in raising awareness, it should be asked whether success has been achieved, analyse if there is really a solid, robust sustainable drive, or if it is only ephemeral.

The most “à la mode” issue is of course climate change (CC): Why and how has it taken more attention than climate variability (CV), the latter being at least for the time being, far more damaging, and the cause of a higher jeopardy to the development and well-being of most nations in the world. As proposed by Working Group I of the Fourth Assessment Report (FAR) of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC): “...*the scientific consensus voiced that warming of the climate system is unequivocal...*” Further “...*most of the observed increase in globally averaged temperatures since the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century is very likely due to observed increases in anthropogenic greenhouse gas concentrations...*” Are these really so “unequivocal” truths? Or are there some misconceptions involved? Does CC really deserve that “unequivocal” priority?

What is then to be done about other hazards, natural, socio-natural (induced) and anthropogenic, not related to climate change: seismicity, volcanism, external geodynamics, hydro-meteorological, climate variability, technological? Haven’t they caused and won’t they continue to cause, at least for the time being, more damage than CC? Should we pay less attention to them just because some international organisations, lobbyist groups and influential politicians decreed it a supreme priority? Again, a renewed effort in settling down a clear and sound RM policy and strategy is required. The first step is to clarify that RM is not a part of Climate Change Adaptation (CCA), but the other way around.

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<sup>1</sup> *To be, or not to be: that is the question: Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer/ the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune/ or to take arms against a sea of troubles/ and by opposing end them? To die: to sleep/ No more; and by a sleep to say we end/ the heart-ache and the thousand natural shocks/ that flesh is heir to, 'tis a consummation/ devoutly to be wish'd. Hamlet, W. Shakespeare*

Engineering, scientific and technical communities, even by being able to read Nature's processes, and by having reached a considerable knowledge on hazards, vulnerability and risk, have not yet brought forward a politically effective risk assessment and management proposal. We simply do not have enough persuasive power. Risk mapping, space-time modelling and scenario modelling are not yet fully considered, perhaps because there is something wrong or weak in the way we address the topic, we stress our arguments, and we present our results. By way of an example: Early warning. Isn't this a pleonasm? Is there a warning if not made "early"? Early warning systems require further consideration and development if intended to become more than just mere promising marketed implements, simple surveillance devices and most of all, a doubtful DRM panacea.

It is therefore evident that RM requires new energy, vision and stamina to place it as an integral cross-cutting policy and to clear away its pervasive myths. Realities and challenges are already pressing under the present setup and will not give us any time-losing waiver. There is not a single order of priorities, because they have to be defined according to the mutating realities and circumstances of each nation and community. However, it seems promising to incorporate RM into national and sub-national development policies, as a transverse multi-sectoral axis in public and private investment and land use planning. Mitigation should be inspired on the definition of "accepted" as compared to "acceptable" risk thresholds and by metrics establishing sound Cost/Benefit ratios and future loss assessments. But the most important paradigmatic change would be to link RM with development planning, and separate it from "disaster management".