2nd Asian Ministerial Conference on Disaster Risk Reduction

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Special Panel Discussion on

Development without Disasters

The nexus of disaster with development particularly in the developing countries has been appreciated only in the recent years. Earlier disasters were viewed largely as wraths of nature and public policy initiatives were limited to provide humanitarian and rehabilitation assistance to the victims. The much discussed paradigm shift in disaster management in the developing countries - from post disaster relief and reconstruction to pre disaster prevention and preparedness - is placing disaster- development debate in the centre stage of development discourse.

Disaster- development nexus has three dimensions.

A. Disasters impeding development

In the first dimension, which is rather clear and straight forward, disasters impede the process of development. Earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, landslides, tsunamis, tropical cyclones and other severe storms, tornadoes and high winds, river floods and coastal flooding, wildfires and associated haze, drought, sand/dust storms, and insect infestations cause widespread loss of human lives and livelihoods, destroy economic and social infrastructure and damage environment and ecology. Various studies have indicated that loss of lives and livelihoods due to natural disasters have been proportionately much higher in developing countries. In fact more than 90 percent of disaster deaths take place in developing countries and over seventy percent of them in Asia alone. Although economic loss in absolute terms have been higher in the developed world, GDP loss have been much higher in developing countries, which have threatened sustainable development and provided serious set backs to poverty-reduction initiatives in many countries.

The reasons why natural hazards have disastrous consequences in the developing countries lie in the layers of vulnerabilities created by unplanned settlements, unsafe building practices, poor economic conditions, inadequate risk transfer and social safety mechanisms, discriminations against women and other weaker sections of society etc. Often poor governance precipitates these vulnerabilities exposing people to increased risks of disasters.

Many developing countries have demonstrated that the risks of disasters can be reduced significantly by education, early warning and other preparedness measures placing local communities at the centre stage of risk assessment, mitigation and response, backed by a strong legal, institutional, technical and financial support from the national and local authorities. The Hyogo Framework of Action 2005-15 adopted by 168 countries at the World Conference on Disaster Reduction at Kobe, Japan has identified five Priorities of Action which would significantly reduce the risks of disasters and thereby protect the gains of development from the vagaries of natural hazards.

B. Development creating disasters

In the reverse dimension of disaster-development nexus, which is not always appreciated, development has sometimes created new risks of disasters. Rapid industrialization and urbanization have encouraged growth of informal settlements with unstable living conditions. Hazardous industries close to settlements have exposed people to threats of environmental pollution and chemical disasters. Economic growth has widened income disparities creating new layers of social vulnerabilities and tensions. Indiscriminate mining, quarrying and extraction of timber have resulted in degradation of forest and land resources with long term adverse consequences on environment and ecology. Large dams in fragile ecological zones have displaced communities and contributed to erosion of soil and silting that have reduced the holding capacities of reservoirs forcing discharge of water and creating man made floods in downstream locations. Inefficient governance and corruption have contributed to the poor enforcement of building regulations, sub-standard constructions and high rate of building failures even during moderate earthquakes. Last but not the least, global climate change due to high rate of emission of carbon in atmosphere have created new and unprecedented risks of disasters across sectors. The implications of climate change on hydro-meteorological disasters like glacial lake outbursts, flood, cyclone, sea level rise and their impacts on water, agriculture, livelihood, health etc have been started to be appreciated only recently.

C. Development without disasters

The third dimension of disaster -development nexus - *Development without Disasters* - is the overriding theme of the Second Asian Ministerial Conference on Disaster Risk Reduction. Most of the countries of Asia have very high risks of disasters and they are also on a high trajectory of economic growth. Therefore the challenge of the Asian countries in the coming years and decades would be to develop in a manner that would reduce the risks of disasters.

No doubt economic development provides the best opportunities to reduce the vulnerabilities of people by improving their economic conditions which has a spin of effect on housing, education, nutrition, health etc. But there is always the danger that unplanned growth of human settlements and unhindered exploitation of natural resources which generally take place in low-income-high-growth economies would create new risks that would have adverse impacts in the long run. Therefore mainstreaming disaster risk reduction in development would be one of the most challenging tasks of development planning in the coming years. Innovative tools and methodologies have to be developed to ensure that development does not create new disasters and that risks of disasters created by unplanned developments in the past are reduced in the future. These tools have to be tested, further adapted according to the local needs, capacities and resources and applied in a systematic and sustainable manner through a participatory process.

Climate change adaptation and coping with high density urban growth would be the two most challenging tasks of *development without disasters* in Asia. Innovative solutions have to be found to these challenges. Capacity development of various

stakeholders at national, regional and local levels, exchange of information and good practices and regional and sub-regional cooperation would be the key components in any innovative solutions. The Asian Conference on Disaster Risk Reduction would provide a platform and an opportunity to discuss these issues and to arrive at decisions on how best the countries and regions would cope with these challenging tasks of development.