

# Editorial

Risk prevention and reduction in general is not an invention of the last few decades as some authors would have us believe. Examples of what we would call disaster risk reduction practices today are present in many ancient cultures. In the last few decades, however, technological advances have allowed risk reduction activities to develop quickly, in both theory and practice.

How we would like to predict the future, especially when it comes to disasters relating to natural hazards! Many technical and scientific efforts are, in fact, aimed at building predictive capacity in order to do better planning and have a positive influence on the future. While it is impossible to predict many things in daily life or to deal with them in terms of equations or precise and quantifiable schemes, there are many issues in which the wise exercise of common sense and impartial observation of experience can provide appropriate guidelines.

**D**isaster risk reduction is truly a complex and multi-disciplinary area, but it is also a field in which it is possible to exercise common sense and use scientific and empirical knowledge at the same time —not exactly to predict the future, but to envision some very likely scenarios and how to have an influence on them.

Risk modeling is a very interesting tool that can help create spaces for debate and analysis, and to propose new approaches for prevention and mitigation plans. Modeling can also help us to present our decision makers with scenarios to support the public investment process and improve risk reduction strategies in a particular area. One good example of a new and promising initiative is the **Central America Probabilistic Risk Assessment (CAPRA)**. The initiative includes various consultation and study processes aimed at formulating a probabilistic model that can serve as a tool for helping governments make decisions about what their greatest risks are and how to develop comprehensive strategies to reduce them.

The **CAPRA** initiative can be seen as a mechanism for appropriate communication, understanding, and risk management. It makes use of the latest methodologies for assessing natural risks, and employs advanced computer and communications technologies to disseminate information about natural hazards and their potential effects.

It is essential to take more measures to reduce risks. There is no substitution for acting according to common sense and caution, and for engaging in long-term thinking. We cannot ignore the many messages that Mother Nature and experience have sent us in the last few years. We stand at a critical moment in history. We have the knowledge and the resources to make this world a better place and to make it more feasible to 'live with risk' in a way that is more harmonious with our social and physical environment. On the other hand, we also have the power to accelerate the process of social and ecological disintegration, creating more conflict and greater imbalance in ecosystems.

One of the basic factors of our society that has most undermined sustainable development (in the broad sense of the word) is humanity's tendency to seek power and domination. This tendency, expressed as

an inexorable type of social Darwinism, has wreaked havoc throughout history. But positive initiatives and social forces also exist and they are gaining momentum. In order to feed these positive forces, we need our politicians to move from words to action, literally and definitively. Most political actors in the free world are not making full use of the opportunity they have to achieve positive change. One cannot help but wonder, with so many intelligent and socially-aware politicians and the growing evidence that risks and vulnerability can be effectively reduced, why we don't "take the bull by the horns" and abandon the search for immediate political satisfaction in favor of more and better examples of caution and social vision, based on a strategic and ethical long-term vision.

We can make many changes if we are able, first of all, to raise awareness. Many (though not all) of the measures for reducing disasters—or for reducing risks—are not that expensive or difficult to implement. Often they are simply changes in attitudes—changes in the initial position taken when analyzing a problem or when designing a new land use plan, just to mention a few examples.

While it is true that advances in science and technology are providing us with valuable opportunities to improve early warning systems, or to improve the structural design of an earthquake-resistant building at a minimal cost—to mention just a few alternatives—most of the new initiatives we need are not high-tech efforts, and they do not require great mobilizations of capital or people.

Without a doubt, the next few years will present very special challenges for our world. Conflicts between countries and ethnic groups, the use of non-renewable resources, the environment, and poverty are all issues that will require creativity and a great deal of effort. But we must confront them if we want to have the capacity to transcend the current situation, which may be unsustainable in the long term and is already the source of much suffering. If we really want to move towards sustainable development and reduce the risk of disasters, we will need profound changes in the way we think about the relationship between human beings and their physical and social environment and their ecosystem.

All of this is feasible, though not easy, to accomplish with resources that are currently available, with political commitment, and with a little bit of common sense. If



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we do not change attitudes, an entire generation will soon be living in more difficult conditions, in a less harmonious world and with greater levels of conflict with their physical and social environment. Politicians at all levels have a pivotal role in all of this, but it poses a very special challenge at a time when current structures in many countries are being questioned by large sectors of the population, who simply no longer believe in the transparency or seriousness of many political processes. In this context, it is necessary to ask ourselves what factors are the most critical for institutions —whether national, regional, or international— to have credibility. It is likely that the most important factors for a (political) institution to have credibility are impartiality, transparency, and the absence of (an excess of) proselytism.

In any case, adaptation to climate change will be an increasingly important issue for countries, not only in Central America and the Caribbean, but also in many other places. One area of concern is the vulnerability of communities in many parts of the region (and the rest of the globe) —not only in the developing countries, but also in the wealthier nations. In many places in Latin America and the Caribbean, current conditions seem likely to lead to increased vulnerability. Deficient regulatory and urban management policies, poor management of environmental resources, and social inequality are all factors that cause a large part of society to live in conditions of poverty in places that are fragile and damaged ecologically. If the situation does not improve, the most likely outcome is that in coming years, disasters will occur cyclically,

affecting even larger numbers of people because of population growth and the unsustainable use of natural resources.

But we can still have hope. Fortunately, we now know a great deal about how to reduce vulnerability, and we can learn valuable lessons from the experiences we have gleaned. One priority is to increase access to technical, scientific, and other information about disaster reduction, and to develop innovative working models to create a more generalized culture of prevention. We must also develop new early warning systems based on local conditions and possibilities. And our early warning systems will only be sustainable in the long run, however, if we promote the development of more comprehensive and people-centered systems (as suggested in the Third International Conference on Early Warning in Bonn, in March 2006).

Otherwise, it will be difficult to keep sophisticated systems in good shape and to ensure the necessary level of coordination. Recent evidence has shown us how important it is to find an adequate balance between having early warning systems and taking preparedness actions. It is essential to have the local mechanisms necessary to ensure that information about hazards gets to the right channels, and that local capacity is strengthened for taking the corresponding actions.

In sum, there is much work to do. I hope you will enjoy this edition of the magazine which contains