

[INTERVIEW: Achieving global development goals ‘inconceivable’ without reducing disaster risk, stresses UN official](#)

23 May 2017 – Over the years, disasters – including earthquakes, floods, droughts and cyclones – have not only taken a heavy toll on human lives, but have had an immense impact on development efforts owing to the enormous economic losses resulting from them.

According to the United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction ([UNISDR](#)), disaster risk reduction is an integral part of social and economic development, and is essential if development is to be sustainable for the future. In 2015, for example, there were nearly 350 reported disasters, over 22,000 deaths, 98.6 million people affected, and \$66.5 billion in economic damage.

“It’s inconceivable that we’ll achieve the [SDGs](#) [Sustainable Development Goals] if we don’t get a handle on reducing disaster risk, including climate risk,” Robert Glasser, the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Disaster Risk Reduction, said in an interview with *UN News*.

It is for this very reason that more than 5,000 participants, including policymakers and disaster risk managers, are meeting at the 2017 Global Platform for Disaster Risk Reduction in Cancun, Mexico, this week to discuss how to curb economic losses from disasters.

Established in 2006, the Global Platform is now the world’s foremost gathering of stakeholders committed to reducing disaster risk and building the resilience of communities and nations.

UN News: Why is there a need for the Global Platform for Disaster Risk Reduction?

Robert Glasser: Well we’ve seen over the past decades a huge impact of disasters on economic and social development. Not only have millions and millions of people lost their lives in disasters, but the economic cost of disasters in terms of foregone development opportunities has been absolutely enormous.

Just to give you an example, for less developed countries, the average annual loss of disasters equates to something like over 20 per cent of their annual investment in social expenditure, in things like education and healthcare. So it’s a huge cost, conservatively estimated at something like \$300-400 billion a year. So this conference on reducing disaster risk is a huge priority if we’re going to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals.

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UN News: You just mentioned the huge economic costs. What are the key factors that increase economic losses from disasters and how can these be mitigated.

Robert Glasser: I think there are two main factors that increase the economic costs. The first is economic development that is poorly risk-informed... as an example, building hospitals in flood zones. As the economies around the world develop, as more and more infrastructure is built in areas that are susceptible to hazards, when these hazards strike, the damage goes up and increases. So economic development that is poorly risk-informed is clearly a cause of the escalating costs.

The second factor is climate change, because we've seen over time the frequency and severity of hydro-meteorological disasters or hazards has been increasing dramatically over the past decades – exactly what you'd expect from climate change. And of course, these disasters, whether they're extreme weather events, sea-level rise, drought, all of these factors are elements of disaster risk and of course are contributing to the escalating costs.

UN envoy Robert Glasser explains why prevention is key to enhancing disaster risk reduction, and what can be done collectively to mitigate risk associated with disasters.

UN News: What steps can countries take to reduce their disaster losses and what can the international community do?

Robert Glasser: Well one thing the international community could do is probably the most critical... reduce greenhouse gases as quickly as possible because if climate change continues unabated, then our efforts to reduce disaster risk in other ways will be overwhelmed. So number one, reduce greenhouse gases.

The second thing that countries need to do is to incorporate risk in core economic planning so that we don't end up building this estimated \$50 trillion of new investment in infrastructure over the decades ahead... we don't end up building this infrastructure in ways that are contributing to risk, the hospital-in-flood zone example. And that means looking at both particular investments to reduce risk but more generally risk-proofing as much as possible all of the investments to deal with multi-hazard risk, including climate risk. So those are steps that need to happen as a matter of priority if we're going to reduce the economic costs of disasters.

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UN News: Who will attend the forthcoming Platform?

Robert Glasser: We will see parliamentarians. We will see mayors. We will see civil society; people with disabilities; the private sector has a fundamentally important role to play in disaster risk reduction and they're extremely motivated to participate. I mentioned \$50 trillion of new investment in infrastructure. Well over 75 per cent of that will be private sector investment, not government investment. So if we're going to reduce economic costs, the private sector has an absolutely fundamental role to play. So we're expecting 5,000 people, maybe more, in Cancun, Mexico, for the Global Platform and each of these groups will have a really fundamental role to play, including leaders and heads of State.

UN News: Is it just a platform for exchanging ideas? If not, what is expected to be achieved?

Robert Glasser: I think if this is just a platform for exchanging ideas, it's not worth it to have a meeting like this. One of the wonderful things about disaster risk reduction is that it is an extremely practical agenda and actually it has achieved a lot, even over the last ten years in terms of reducing loss of life from disasters, from the Hyogo Framework and now to the Sendai Framework. But this meeting is not about just exchanging ideas, although that's important.

This meeting will identify, will launch the monitoring framework for this global agreement and the seven targets member States have agreed to. There's a whole process to monitor implementation, the global accountability for continuing to improve or reduce disaster risk. It will also include major commitments through the leaders' forum, heads of State, heads of industry, private sector and others. It will include some major initiatives, including a major initiative on multi-hazard early warning that UNISDR is working on with the WMO [World Meteorological Organization] and our colleagues at the World Bank to launch.

And it will involve the science and technology community initiatives, and I mentioned the private sector a moment ago, and there's a very fundamental role for the private sector where they are quite enthusiastically and dramatically looking at some major initiatives, including in the insurance sector, but in the other areas as well to reduce disaster risk. So this is very practical, it's extremely important... and it will deliver some really significant economic outcomes that will continue the progress in reducing disaster risk.

This video features Global Platform host Mexico and shows how the country is meeting target G of the Sendai Framework, which promotes greater access to multi-hazard early warning systems.

UN News: Are there some examples of best practices that countries around the world might want to learn from?

Robert Glasser: There are so many wonderful examples and you know this is one

area where it's not necessarily the wealthy countries that have the best examples. Many of the examples are in less developed countries. You know people talk about the limitations of least developed countries and developing countries to move agendas forward but if we take Bangladesh for example, they have made such huge progress in reducing disaster risk through early warning, evacuation, storm shelters. There were some major cyclones that struck Bangladesh decades ago that resulted in hundreds of thousands of people being killed. There was a recent, relatively recent storm track and people were killed and the headline was, "hundreds of people killed."



A family along with their cattle and possessions stranded atop small islands formed due to massive floods, Sindh province, Pakistan. Photo: IFAD/EPA/NADEEM KHAWER



A pastoralist in northern Somalia, a region hit hard by drought. He lost almost half of his sheep flock that originally numbered 70. Photo: UNICEF/Sebastian Rich



Rescuers at work in Sankhu, a particularly badly affected town in northwestern Nepal. Photo: Laxmi Prasad Ngakhusi/UNDP Nepal



Low income households along riverbanks prone to floods in Jakarta, Indonesia. Photo: World Bank/Farhana Asnap

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But the actual headline should have been, "hundreds and thousands of people weren't killed" because that was the progress that has been made. So there are wonderful examples in Bangladesh. In India they've dramatically improved the early warning for disasters; in Mexico, during Hurricane Patricia, they evacuated millions of people. We've seen that in other countries as well.

There are wonderful examples in the Pacific. This is maybe another example of best case – we have the Pacific Island countries agreeing to integrate disaster risk, climate risk and development into one framework which is world class, not surprising given that small and developing States are particularly exposed to hazards and climate change. So it depends what you look at but there are many examples of best practice, and not just in the wealthy countries. Actually, developing and less developed countries have made wonderful progress and have much to share with even developed countries.

UN News: In the broader context of the Sustainable Development Goals, what is the relevance of disaster risk reduction for achieving the SDGs?

Robert Glasser: Well, I think for me it's very hard to imagine achieving the SDGs without reducing disaster risk, and climate risk as a fundamental part of disaster risk, because as I've mentioned, these costs of disasters, the economic costs – you know \$3,4,5 billion, we actually don't know the annual costs because we just don't have the data comprehensively, particularly for lower level disasters that are not as visible in the media and so on – but those costs are going up dramatically.

So it's inconceivable that we'll achieve the SDGs if we don't get a handle on reducing disaster risk, including climate risk. And similarly, another way of looking at this is to say, if we look at our humanitarian emergencies that are increasingly destructive and costly and you see that the international community is struggling to allocate funding to deal with these, if all we do is react, we will never be able to meet the need. I think this is why [Secretary-General](#) António Guterres focuses on prevention, prevention of conflict and prevention of disaster risk. The only way we will ever get ahead of this curve is by focusing on prevention. And disaster risk reduction has huge returns on investment and ultimately will reduce the need for humanitarian response.