

Symposium 'Living with Risk: Towards a Disaster-Resilient Society'

(English and Japanese)

15:30 - 17:30 (Wednesday, 16 January 2003) Venue: International Conference Center

In recent years, the numbers of victims and the economic losses resulting from natural disasters have been increasing. Similarly, large scale disasters (such as the Great Hanshin-Awaji Earthquake, North-West Turkey Earthquake, West India Earthquake and floods in the Asia region) have been occurring frequently. In order to create a social structure that enables society to coexist with disasters, namely 'a disaster resilient society,' it is necessary to have an understanding of urban, social and economic structures, as well as the practical means to put policy into practice. This symposium aims to address the viewpoints, and to introduce the functions of the 'Disaster Reduction Alliance (DRA),' established around the Kobe New Eastern City to promote cooperative relationships between the wide-range of organizations.

Coordinators:

- Dr. Yoshiaki Kawata, Director, Disaster Reduction and Human Renovation Institution (DRI), Chairman, Disaster Reduction Alliance (DRA), Kobe
- Mr. Kenneth Topping, Visiting Professor, Kyoto University

Speakers:

- Ms. Sushma Iyengar, Secretary General, Kutch Nav Nirman Abhiyan, India
- Dr. David Mammen, President, Institute of Public Administration, NY
- Mr. Eiryō Sumida, Vice President, Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA), Tokyo
- Mr. Masatomo Umitsu, Professor, Nagoya University

Commentators:

- Mr. Sálvano Briceño, Director, UN Inter-Agency Secretariat of the International Strategy for Disaster Reduction (UN/ISDR)
- Mr. Hidenobu Sobashima, Director, Global Environment Division, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Japan

Session Summary

Dr. Yoshiaki Kawata cited the increasing prevalence of natural hazards and disaster risks, especially with the fast emergence of mega cities in developing countries. He also cited the detrimental impact of disasters, particularly in Asia, and the alarming increase in the frequency and intensity of disasters due to climate change. He also emphasized the link among disaster, poverty and the environment, among other issues.

Mr. Kenneth Topping focused on the issue of true collaboration and presented the various common challenges to collaboration in mitigation, recovery, administration in Japan. He highlighted the relevance of building a strategic alliance against disasters as a common threat. To combat this threat requires common realistic assessment, long-term planning, mutual learning through collaboration. He concluded that true collaboration is to accept other persons' perspectives and to agree on the next steps.

Ms. Sushma Iyengar introduced the impact of the earthquake in Abhiyan. She described the chaotic situation in the immediate aftermath of the earthquake which entailed coordination among NGOs, donors and governments. She stressed the necessity and importance of empowering communities and enabling people to help themselves in view of the long-term nature of recovery and rehabilitation efforts. She mentioned that coordination consists of collaboration, consensus, conflict and compromise, and creativity.

Dr. David Mammen remarked that the symposium is dedicated to exploring new disaster reduction paradigm. Citing the case of Lower Manhattan after 9/11, he described the organizational and political dynamics involved in the process of recovery and rehabilitation. He then emphasized the importance of collaboration and coordination and overcoming the constraints such as organizational and geographical boundaries and differences of concerns and priorities, among others.

Mr. Eiryō Sumida briefly introduced JICA and described its cooperation programs in disaster management. He mentioned that JICA adopted the holistic approach under the framework provided by IDNDR and ISDR, by having cooperation programs in the different phases of the disaster management cycle. He cited the disaster response of JICA in Turkey after the earthquake and disaster reduction projects in Nepal.

Dr. Masatomo Umitsu emphasized the human dimension of disasters, the importance of hazard and vulnerability mapping in different levels, from global to the personal level, and disaster counter-measures.

A few remarks from commentators were added to those presentations. Mr. Sobashima elaborated on the link among environmental protection, disaster reduction and sustainable development. He emphasized the importance of global sharing, human resource development and public awareness in disaster reduction. In concluding, he emphasized the importance of strengthening measures taken at the level of community bound by solidarity, recognizing the fact that disaster prevention is less costly than disaster recovery. Mr. Briceño elaborated on the important link of education and disaster reduction to ensure sustainable development and on the need to increase awareness of the value of protecting ecosystems in contributing to reduce risk of disasters.

Key points arising from the discussion were as follows. First, the importance of education and raising awareness for an empowerment of individuals is recognized. Although a community is a key player for disaster prevention and response in both developed and developing countries, as Ms. Iyengar said, ‘... people have become dependent because of the excess governmental support for them’. Mr. Briceño concluded the discussion that ‘a disaster resilient society can only be developed based on community self reliance, which in turn is only reliant on self-esteem and personal growth.’

Second, understanding a cultural, historical and social background of the region is also significant, in order for effective education and enlightenment of the individuals. Mr. Sumida introduced a lesson from JICA’s experience of project implementation that making visible a benefit the individual might receive from endeavors to prevent disasters is critical. Dr. Umitsu followed the argument saying that ‘an effective project must be field-oriented.’ These lessons lead the discussion to a conclusion that ‘we cannot avoid facing the socio-economic problem such as poverty and empowerment of women in order for effective disaster prevention,’ as Mr. Sumida emphasized.

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Finally, for all those purposes mentioned above, all discussants agreed that an ideal alliance among related organizations to disasters must be ‘... with clear communication, realistic assessments, true collaborative action and evaluation, and mutual learning and clear coordination,’ as Mr. Topping suggested. The nature of DRA is a loose alliance among disaster related and international organizations, but they clearly share the objective of enhancing collaboration among each other for future disaster reduction. In that sense, DRA is along with the conclusion of the discussion, as well as ISDR policy, the symposium was closed with a comment of Dr. Kawata who emphasized DRA’s potential to be an intellectual hub of international disaster reduction.