



# Organization of American States

## EDITORIAL

### Perhaps we need to change the point of reference

By Pablo González<sup>1</sup>

For the past twenty years we have been preaching the gospel of mainstreaming Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR) into development policy and planning. We all understand that risk is inherent to development, and consequently is within development processes where risk is built. Yet, there seems to be a disconnect between what we preach and what we do to achieve this integration. Perhaps the disconnect lies precisely in that our point of reference is the 'Disaster', the last stage of a crisis when we cannot cope any longer. Instead, we might consider moving that reference back in time, when we can still do something to preserve our ways of living, our well-being and opportunities for complete self-realization.

For over a decade, during what is known as the *International Decade for Natural Disaster Reduction* (IDNDR) that took place in the 1990s, the United Nations led a discussion to reach an international consensus on how to reduce loss of life, property and socio-economic infrastructure damage, economic losses, and business and government disruptions caused by natural disasters. This discussion resulted in the endorsement of the *Hyogo Framework for Action* (HFA), in Kobe, Japan, in January 2005, during the *World Conference on Disaster Reduction*. Endorsed by 168 sovereign States, the HFA establishes a dogmatic framework defining general objectives and priorities for action that should lead to *'the substantial reduction of disaster losses, in lives and in the social, economic and environmental assets of communities and countries'* by the year 2015.

The first strategic objective of the HFA is an explicit recognition of the relationship between development and risk, as it calls for *'the more effective integration of disaster risk considerations into sustainable development policies, planning and programming at all levels, with a special emphasis on disaster prevention, mitigation, preparedness and vulnerability reduction'*. Another unequivocal sign of this understanding is the fact that

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the international community decided not to refer to 'natural disasters' any longer, and instead simply to 'disasters'.

But eight years later, and almost after two decades of preaching the gospel of mainstreaming Disaster Risk Reduction into development policy and planning, and increasing investments in vulnerability reduction, disaster prevention and mitigation, we are still struggling with how to integrate DRR within the development agenda. Earlier this year, government representatives, representatives from international organizations, non-governmental organizations, UN agencies, regional inter-governmental organizations, and private sector, held consultations on what the future of the HFA should be after 2015. It was then, at the Fourth Session of the Global Platform for Disaster Risk Reduction, in Geneva, where some supported the idea of a post-2015 HFA and even a legally binding international agreement on Disaster Risk Reduction.

But, are we not doing more harm than good by continuing to promote a framework that is conceived around the event, the 'Disaster'? Should we not instead move to the integration of DRR considerations into the post-2015 Development Agenda? Should we not lower the alert threshold from 'Disaster' to development objectives? I think we are, and I think we should.

Those of us, who have been confronted with the challenges of mainstreaming issues like DRR, Integrated Water Resources Management (IWRM), Gender-equity approaches, and other alike, may not have a formula to achieve such a task, but surely are very much aware of the level of difficulty it represents. We want to stress these issues and raise their relevance, but in doing so, often we create the so-called 'communities' around these matters which in the end exacerbate the problem by creating islands of efforts and initiatives. So, we strive to integrate them to the point that they are an integral part of sector policies and plans, programs and projects, running then into the risk of making these issues invisible and in the end irrelevant again. Ultimately, we must find a balance between higher visibility and integration of these issues into others' agendas. And that is the dilemma that I believe we face past 2015.

We have a dogmatic framework given by the HFA, and a significant number of hemispheric and regional mechanisms and instruments such as Inter-American Conventions and Plans, regional policies and strategies, as well as specialized organizations to support its implementation. So, why would we need another framework, another plan? Those mechanisms and instruments already provide for the needed advocacy and guidance to integrate DRR into development policy and planning. What we need now is to work within the development agenda, based on development objectives and goals that are tangible, measurable and quantifiable. In this way, we will be moving away from the 'Disaster' and closer to development.



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The small-business owner in a small or large town in our Americas doesn't need a declaration of 'disaster' to have his or her business and life affected when water finds its way into his or her store, or garage, where he or she runs an Internet-based business. An elder or a parent in need of medical assistance does not need for the water to flood the entire city to find themselves stranded and unable to get to a hospital or have an ambulance pick them up. And a farmer cannot wait for the government to provide assistance for an extensive drought before he or she must move the cattle to areas where they can find water or lose their whole harvest due to lack of water. Those thresholds are reached way before the impact raise to the level of 'disaster' and can be better defined in terms of development objectives, protection of livelihoods, well-being and prosperity. If we then think in those terms, even if we were to stop talking about disasters, we would be addressing the underlying causes of disasters and tackling the problems much earlier, increasing the chance for preventing and/or mitigating their adverse effects.

And then again, I wonder why we continue to push for a framework that will only ensure the existence of a 'community', the community of DRR, which for being a community will continue to preach to the converted and has little or no impact on the decisions that development 'operators' make every day. And I wonder if those who build and operate risk to disaster are not already managing the risk and reducing it to the levels that make sense to them, to their sectors and business. We have argued for quite a while that for each dollar we invest in prevention, we save many more in response and reconstruction, and more in business interruption and development setbacks. But, we also know that reconstruction provides for employment and business opportunities as well, and perhaps those dollars that are not invested in prevention and mitigation are also being invested in stock markets and new businesses, which in turn boost economies, increasing employment opportunities and sources of income and access to education and health, which ultimately make people more resilient.

In the end, I believe the answer lies in the development model that a society chooses and whatever model we choose, whatever risk we are willing to take, we must change the point of reference. The 'disaster' cannot be our point of reference any more if we truly want to build more resilient societies and move towards sustainable development.

Educated and equitable societies are more resilient. Natural phenomena will continue to impact our lives, people will perish, and personal property and socio-economic infrastructure will be lost and damaged, business and government functions will be disrupted. And we will continue to manage risk based on our priorities and goals. Yet, our risk will shrink as we become more resilient. And we will become more resilient when we can provide education and health services for all, and equal opportunities for prosperity for all.