

Identifying vulnerability

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The UNDP report "Reducing Disaster Risk: a Challenge for Development", published in 2004 in collaboration with UNEP, highlighted the link between development and vulnerability. It measured for the first time global exposure to key natural hazards. Today 75% of the world's population lives in areas affected at least once by earthquakes, tropical cyclones, floods or drought between 1980 and 2000. Such events cause more than 180 deaths a day worldwide.

But these disasters are not "acts of God". While only 11% of the people exposed to natural hazards live in low human development countries, they account for more than 53% of recorded deaths. High human development countries, home to 15% of those exposed, account

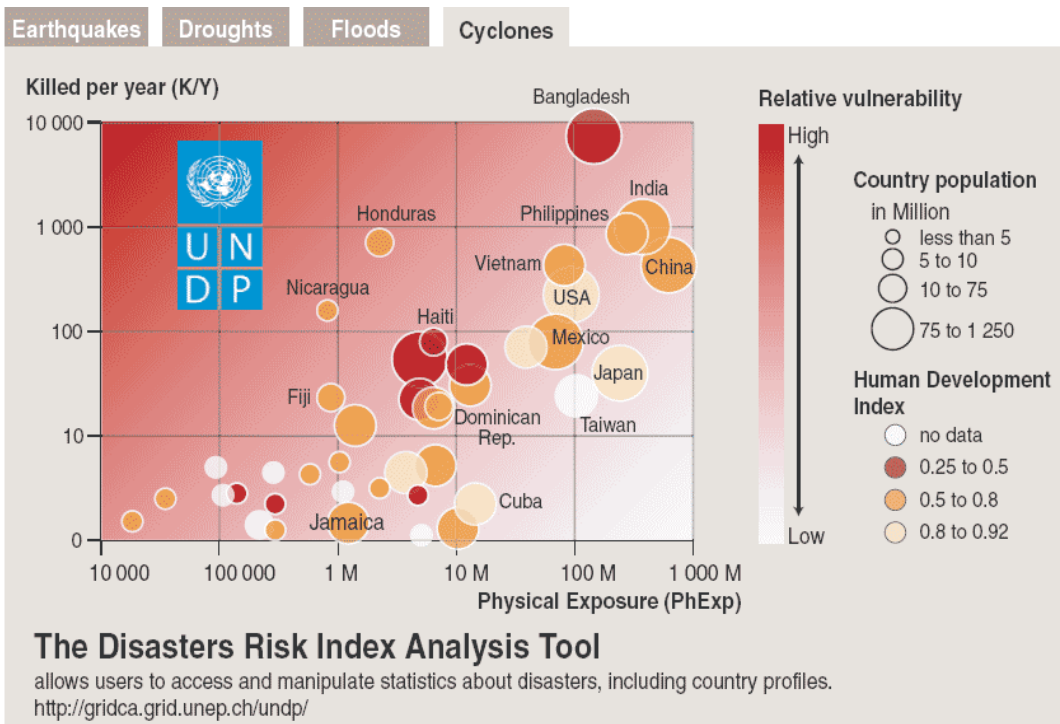
for less than 2% of deaths. So the level of human development matters and helps to explain why disasters are not so "natural". Some of the disaster impacts could perhaps be avoided.

So far the international community has mostly reacted to disasters, investing only limited budgets in prevention. This might be because disasters attract more media attention (see article above). Prevention programmes (e.g. sound urban planning, reforestation or capacity building for risk management) will never be as powerful as pictures of disasters. But even if there was a global will to invest in prevention, the next question would be where? A decision of this nature obviously must not be based on media coverage.

The floods that killed 2,000 people in India, Nepal and Bangladesh in August 2004, attracted very different media coverage compared with Hurricane Charley, which claimed 16 victims in Florida. So the Disaster Risk Index (DRI) is a vital first step towards providing decision-makers with more scientific, development-oriented tools drawing on independent sources, including at national level.

Since the project started new data (on deforestation, armed conflict, corruption) has become available, with the prospect of new applications for its findings. But some lessons have already been learnt. The DRI may not qualify as a proper early-warning tool, but it has anticipated some disasters. Iran,

for example, was the DRI's second most vulnerable country for earthquakes, even before the Bam disaster in 2003. Over and above Small Island Developing State vulnerability to tropical cyclones, the DRI showed that Haiti had "the highest relative vulnerability, perhaps linked to its small economy, degraded environment and weak institutions of governance". Recent floods in May and October (with more than 4,000 fatalities) dramatically confirmed this analysis. Early warning and action are still major challenges in most developing countries.



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