

Asking for disaster

By Pascal Peduzzi *

A man jumps from a skyscraper and as he passes each floor says to himself: "So far so good!" This sums up our shortsighted way of thinking. Our daily lack of concern, let alone action, regarding depletion of natural resources, increasing poverty and poor spatial planning, is a recipe for disaster. We behave carelessly and then we are surprised when things go wrong. Most disasters are not random events without underlying causes. They are the sudden manifestation of slow but continuous degradation processes. Risks multiply through lack of concern or our failure to find alternatives. For example we cannot put all the blame for the death of 2,750 Haitians on Hurricane Jeanne. The long process of deforestation that preceded it was greeted by deafening media silence. Only after the disaster did USA Today write: "The torrents of water that raged down onto this city, killing hundreds of people, are testimony to a man-made ecological disaster. Poverty has transformed Haiti's once verdant hills into a moonscape of bedrock ravaged by ravines." Would any of the mainstream media have written about Haiti's 98% deforestation rate before Jeanne struck?

Why does slow degradation go unnoticed? Why are we blinded by footage of one disaster flickering across the screen until the next tragedy takes its place? Our relationship with the media resembles that of a scavenger. The higher the death toll the bigger the audience. Politicians travel to the scene of a disaster and express their concern for families, but once the tragedy is forgotten what happens to the measures needed to prevent the next disaster?

The explosion at the Chernobyl nuclear power station shocked the whole world. But with privatisation of the electrical sector we read more about

cutting costs than improving the safety of nuclear reactors. The media reported every detail of the wreck of the Kursk submarine with the loss of 118 sailors. But they say nothing of the dozens of Russian nuclear submarines slowly rusting in the Barents Sea. Much has been written about the crude oil escaping from the wrecks of Prestige and Erika. Yet every day petrol tankers are voluntarily degassing to cut down on cleaning costs, while media and politicians remain largely indifferent. Double-hulls are still not compulsory. Nor is tank cleaning. Overfishing affects 72% of our oceans but no regulations are being drafted for international waters, despite the fact that simple measures – the introduction of nets with a bigger mesh and a ban on bottom trawling – would help to prevent depletion of fish reserves. These are just a few examples of slow degradation of environmental and social systems by humans that may ultimately lead to disaster.

The world's environment ministers made a very clear statement with the UNEP Malmo Ministerial Declaration in May 2000. "Environmental threats resulting from the accelerating trends of urbanisation and the development of megacities, the tremendous risk of climate change, the freshwater crisis and its consequences for food security and the environment, the unsustainable exploitation and depletion of biological resources, drought and desertification, and uncontrolled deforestation, increasing environmental emergencies, the risk to human health and the environment from hazardous chemicals, and land-based sources of pollution, are all issues that need to be addressed."

Common sense dictates that we treat these issues as a top priority. But only sudden events

catch our attention. Our societies seem to be led by short-sighted visionaries. There are several reasons for this affliction.

We prefer to avoid trouble. Nobody can be accused of causing tropical cyclones, but it is relatively simple to identify the culprits behind continuous environmental destruction. Government leaders and the senior management of large companies are directly responsible for contamination of rivers by mining, erosion following unsustainable timber exploitation or soils pollution by industry. But to make such accusations against influential people is tricky. Putting the emphasis on natural hazards is a much safer attitude.

We are fascinated with speed, which makes it difficult to make the headlines with continuous degradation. Although the long term impact may be much worse, the media just will not make a week-long issue of the underlying causes of thousands of people dying of starvation. It is an uphill struggle keeping readers' and viewers' attention. The media need rapidly changing events to avoid boring their audience.

With our blinkered vision, security and the fight against terror have monopolised the global debate. Climate change threatens millions of people with more frequent heatwaves, rising sea levels, landslides and more severe storms, among others. But combating it will never attract the same amount of funds.

Our perspective is strictly short-term. To stand a chance of being re-elected politicians must focus on what can be achieved in a four to five-year mandate. Long term issues tend to be sidelined. Our political and economic reflexes prefer quick benefits, leaving the mess to be cleared up later.

We are obsessed with visibility. The media will focus on aid

following disasters and government rescue operations. But preventive measures are not attractive enough to make the headlines.

Lastly we imagine natural resources are infinite, so their price does not reflect the cost of producing such resources. For example there is no such thing as a petrol producer. Bacteria produce petrol. It takes them 200 million years to transform 24.5 tonnes of fern into one litre of crude oil! If we restricted oil consumption to the quantity produced the previous year its price would be stupendous. We can apply the same reasoning to many natural resources.

As long as our main concern is economic growth, we forget that our planet is a finite space in which continuous growth is impossible. We cannot catch more fish than the numbers that hatch each year. The same is true of the trees we cut down. Such unsustainable practices can soon lead to the collapse of entire systems on which a large proportion of the population depends.

We can no longer wait for the next disaster to happen. We urgently need to reduce the impact of our mismanagement on communities and the environment as a whole. It is a huge task but the goal can be achieved. We must stop ongoing degradation of society and the environment by helping all communities to live on sustainable resources. Priority must be given to renewable energy sources and resources, to supporting development, and promoting family planning and education. Only then we will see a significant reduction in risks. Our economy will certainly benefit from this. We cannot afford to postpone investments in our future. Otherwise the bill will just be too high.

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