

Overcoming Disaster: From Principles to Practice

Version 1: 20 April 2004

This document was produced by Ilan Kelman (ilan_kelman@hotmail.com) but everyone whose work and ideas contributed is deserving of authorship. Comments are welcome and would be incorporated into later versions, although no material would be published without permission from the author.

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Introduction: Thinking and Doing Before it is Too Late

In a world of competing interests, short attention spans, and political games, risk issues are often sidelined. After all, the event has not happened, so why worry? Then, people die. Demands are made about why nothing was done before the disaster.

This attitude of thinking and doing only when it is too late must be reversed. Fundamentally, it is about education. In particular, children need to be convinced about thinking and acting before the event so that it becomes part of their normal thought patterns, values, decisions, and day-to-day actions throughout their lives and careers. Then, as these children enter the workforce, policies, behaviour, and actions related to thinking and acting before an event would hopefully follow.

For convincing society about the necessity of this approach, clear and simple messages are vital regarding what could be done, what should be done, and why it should be done. One challenge is selecting the name for the overall aim. The activities we seek have many aliases including disaster risk reduction, building resilience, vulnerability reduction, risk management, adaptation, mitigation, prevention, pre-disaster actions, safer communities, and variations of each phrase.

In the end, a good communicator—a simple, engaging, attention-grabbing idea—is still missing (see also Appendix 2). A short, accurate, understandable phrase communicating the wide range of ideas and activities encompassed might not exist. While suggestions are sought, this document uses flexible language despite resulting inconsistencies.

Irrespective of the dilemma of the overall name, the messages needed already exist in many forms. This document attempts to consolidate and summarise them in a three-level framework:

1. Overall Ethos: Disaster Tenets.

A starting point for discussion is provided. These statements must be accepted by everyone before doing what is needed.

2. Guiding Principles: Safe Communities.

Five short messages are provided followed by a sentence of explanation and then a lengthier description. These messages describe how to adhere to the ethos. They are guidance for determining how to achieve what is needed by providing general indications of the approach to use in practice.

3. What to Do: Travelling the Last Mile.

In 2003, Haresh Shah made a plea for “The Last Mile” (http://online.northumbria.ac.uk/geography_research/radix/resources/haresh-shah-lastmile.doc). He argues that despite the wealth of material available for building and maintaining safe communities and the extensive effort which many people give towards this task, a gap exists in reaching the right people with the right strategies for disasters, risk, and vulnerability. We must use our well-known and well-understood knowledge and techniques to make a direct difference for those who are threatened or who suffer (see also the Radix “knowing *versus* doing” page http://online.northumbria.ac.uk/geography_research/radix/knowningvsdoing.htm). This section lists operational actions which could be undertaken to effect the guiding principles.

In this document, not all suggestions would be appropriate all the time for every location. They are merely ideas to consider. Understanding particular circumstances would be essential before implementing, or even suggesting, any of the ideas in a specific instance.

Ethos: Disaster Tenets

(See also Question 1 in Appendix 1.)

1. Disasters are social, not environmental phenomena.

Disasters are about people and their or their organisations’ reactions to environmental phenomena or potential environmental phenomena. If an environmental event neither impacts nor worries people, it is just an environmental event, not a disaster.

2. Natural disasters do not exist.

An environmental event (often termed a “natural hazard”) is a necessary but not sufficient condition for a disaster. Environmental events happen, but the root cause of disaster is vulnerability which is created by society. Thus, disasters are created by humanity and are not “natural”. (Unless human beings and society could be considered to be natural processes...)

3. Disasters and risk cannot be understood without focusing on vulnerability.

Vulnerability dictates how society could be impacted by an event and the processes which developed and maintain the situation which permits those impacts. Vulnerability is about what humanity does to itself, including what some sectors do to other sectors. Focusing on this element is essential to understand root causes of disasters and risk.

4. All disasters are slow-onset.

Environmental events might be rapid-onset, but the disaster results from humanity’s decisions, attitudes, values, and activities over the long-term.

5. Exceptions exist.

Guiding Principles: Safe Communities

(See also Questions 2, 3, and 4 in Appendix 1.)

1. Safe communities are relevant.

- The actions for building and maintaining safe communities are for everyone, now and into the future.

Building and maintaining safe communities must positively and tangibly impact day-to-day living, such as through improved water, choices, shelter, food, education, and livelihoods. Safety (for example crossing the road, wearing seatbelts, and house fires) and health (for example safe sex, drunk driving, and smoking) are made relevant to people. Hence, other risks and vulnerabilities (for example poverty, volcanoes, injustice, floods, inequity, avalanches, and disease) could be made relevant too. Relevance does not always translate into action, but it is a needed beginning. Introducing risks and vulnerabilities into school curricula in the same way that health and safety issues are included would be a step forward. Safety Days, as outlined at <http://www.arct.cam.ac.uk/curbe/infosheets.html#ideasheet4> would be one approach.

2. Safe communities are cost-effective.

- The actions for building and maintaining safe communities save money, now and into the future.

For many people, particularly those with a subsistence lifestyle, a short payback period of weeks to months is too long. If people are asked to contribute—such as through resources, time, effort, or attention—to building and maintaining safe communities, they must receive prompt payback. Meanwhile, those who can afford to wait for longer payback periods which could be years, such as governments and donors, often request proof that building and maintaining safe communities is cost-effective. Some evidence is available at <http://www.arct.cam.ac.uk/curbe/infosheets.html#factsheet1>

Similarly, a payback period which must wait for an extreme event to occur is too long. Decision-makers often want a policy or action to save money regardless of extreme events. Thus, preventing extreme events from becoming disasters is part of cost-effective, long-term development and sustainability processes. Simultaneously, for long-term development and sustainability processes to succeed and to be cost-effective, preventing extreme events from becoming disasters must occur, since preventing extreme events from becoming disasters and sustainability mutually reinforce each other. Actions for preventing extreme events from becoming disasters need to have tangible development and sustainability benefits to ensure that this link is maintained.

In some cases, such projects might require funds which are independently managed and audited. Careful diplomacy would be needed to convince national governments that this approach is appropriate. As well, tainting of such projects must be avoided, such as accusations of Japan using their aid money to buy the votes of small island developing states on the International Whaling Commission.

Although this guiding principle can be convincingly proven, effecting it poses other challenges.

3. Safe communities are a continuous process.

- The actions for building and maintaining safe communities never stop, but are ongoing.

Building and maintaining safe communities is not about single or one-off actions. The task cannot be done once and then forgotten nor can it be separated into its own, isolated realm, activities, or deliverables. Building and maintaining safe communities is a process, an attitude, a paradigm, a value, and a culture. The past and future must be considered and examined in addition to the present. Questions to be answered include not only “What state are we in?” but also “How did we get here?”, “Where are we going?”, and “Where should we be going?”. To

work, building and maintaining safe communities must happen everywhere all the time by everyone as part of usual, day-to-day lives. The process is continuous.

4 Safe Communities must be visible.

- The actions for building and maintaining safe communities must always be seen prominently and prominently seen to work.

A Hercules landing in a disaster zone—fully loaded with relief supplies, politicians, and journalists—yields a good news feed. Building and maintaining safe communities must be made similarly visible. Following wildfires in California, the July 1998 issue of National Geographic printed a photograph of a house which had fire mitigation measures and which remained untouched surrounded by the smouldering ruins of houses without fire mitigation measures. We need more such examples, although such dramatic and communicable contrasts unfortunately require a disaster to have happened.

5. Safe communities are sexy.

- The actions for building and maintaining safe communities should be made exciting and interesting, so that people want to do them.

Everyone, including the media, must understand how inspiring, useful, enriching, fascinating, satisfying, rewarding, and fun building and maintaining safe communities is. People need to understand it, and be able to do it, on their own terms. One example is the Sasakawa Disaster Reduction Award, an impressive achievement and a great honour to earn. Searches on the BBC and CNN websites in February 2004 yielded no mention of this award. Communication of acts to build and maintain safe communities should improve so that they are on people's and the media's own terms. The consequence should be that people are proactively willing to build and maintain safe communities, encouraging their families, friends, peers, and colleagues to join in.

What to Do: Travelling the Last Mile

1. Travelling the Last Mile for Communities

(1a) Kofi Annan stated “Building a culture of prevention is not easy...the benefits are not tangible; they are the disasters that did not happen”. Let's overcome that barrier by ensuring that any disaster reduction measure tangibly contributes to communities. For example, not only retrofit a rural school but also add 5% to the budget to purchase learning materials (possibly books or computers, if appropriate). Thus, increased safety is seen as being exactly the same activity as a better education. Similarly, enlarge the school or build a new one, rather than just retrofitting a dilapidated building. Thus, rather than being specifically about the intangible disaster averted, the project is about tangible education, livelihoods, and sustainability outcomes which have disaster mitigation built in.

If the community would not want an enlarged or new school or if the extra 5% in budgetary demands would kill the project, then the best solution balancing all these issues should be discussed and the resultant sacrifices which the solution entails should be made clear. At times, “the best solution balancing all these issues” might be to do nothing, however much that appears to be callous.

(1b) Neither Peru nor Jamaica has seen a big earthquake for a few years and Vienna and Basel have not seen a big earthquake for a few centuries. Post-disaster missions require resources which are often found quickly. Are there resources for missions to Peru, Jamaica, Vienna, or Basel to check schools and hospitals for earthquake resistance, to retrofit where necessary, and to monitor progress? Are resources more effectively spent on international, interdisciplinary disaster response missions or on international, interdisciplinary disaster mitigation missions?

(1c) CERTs (Community Emergency Response Teams) appear to work well. CERTs need to be established worldwide. Even better, they should be CVRTs (Community Vulnerability Reduction Teams) or CSTs (Community Sustainability Teams). CVRTs and CSTs would have emergency preparedness and response as one task, but vulnerability reduction and sustainability processes would be ongoing. Rather than visibility and community involvement mainly during and after events, they would have continued visibility and would become a known and essential part of a community. These teams would also shift the responsibility and ownership of reducing and responding to disasters from outsiders and experts to the community. Building and maintaining safe communities would be everyone's responsibility rather than the experts' alone. Responding to events would be everyone's responsibility rather than looking towards the military or outside help.

(1d) Disaster mitigation documents need to be translated into street language, not only through using local dialects and colloquialisms, but also through using the appropriate medium. Some communities read publications and surf the web. Other communities have strong oral traditions, not by watching a laptop presentation in a meeting room, but by sitting in a circle, eating, gossiping, and listening to a lengthy and elaborate story or legend. Other communities use art, including music and dance, or engage in politics and community issues in only specific instances and venues. "Translation" means getting information and ideas to the people on their terms in their own way.

(1e) Elect or fairly select locals as intermediaries to bridge the gap in risk and sustainability communication between the "public" and the local authorities or administration. These intermediaries could be responsible for disseminating to the community the relevant information for specific issues and for initiatives related to building and maintaining safe communities. As an intermediary, this person should be integrated into local teams such as CERTs, CVRTs, and CSTs (see (1c)). If the intermediary has access to the relevant information and participates in the relevant meetings, they would become not only an interpreter or translator, but also a "multiplier" by multiplying the expanse of people which the knowledge reaches.

Dangers exist that (a) the intermediary would become just another political position, (b) the intermediary would become, or be perceived to have become, a lackey for the official line, (c) no one would have the time or interest to do the job properly, or (d) the intermediary's strong involvement makes them an "expert" who cannot communicate with the "non-experts". Some of the dangers could be overcome by filling this position on an as-need basis for specific issues, e.g. a river management scheme or new street lighting, but then some of the guiding principles which led to this suggestion would be diluted or contradicted.

2. Travelling the Last Mile for People

(2a) Colleagues in Nepal use a simple shake table to demonstrate in public the difference between a normal scale-model house and an earthquake-resistant scale-model house. This powerful visual display captures interest for explaining the principles of earthquake-resistant houses and the low cost and relative simplicity of retrofitting. People then gossip to their neighbours and communities about their experience. We need to collect and evaluate examples of such simple, effective exercises—and then imitate them where appropriate. We also need to cost these actions in order to compare with the costs of a post-event foreign search-and-rescue team and post-event missions.

(2b) A large proportion of the world population attends regular religious or cultural services which include a spiritual leader giving a speech. Could we get these talks to regularly include advice and obligations related to disaster mitigation and community sustainability? Could international religious and cultural leaders agree on a declaration which they then interpret as a directive to their followers?

(2c) We need to organise media events of high-profile risk and vulnerability audits; for example, a team of experts conducting a risk or vulnerability audit of a mayor's, minister's, head of government's, or head of state's abode or home community. For the international press, how vulnerable is Buckingham Palace to flooding and what could Kofi Annan's home town do to reduce its vulnerability? For the local press, how would the house of the chief planning officer of a rural New Zealand or California council withstand a major earthquake? One message is that the only embarrassment in vulnerability is doing nothing about it.

(2d) In Fiji, the national stage show "Tadra Kahani" is developed by 6-19 year olds and their teachers by taking one U.N. Millennium Development Goal <http://www.developmentgoals.org> and dramatising or choreographing what it means to them. This approach should be emulated, because it reaches (in order) educators, youth, the youth's families, their wider community, the nation, and visitors.

(2e) Start Safety Days, as outlined at <http://www.arct.cam.ac.uk/curbe/infosheets.html#ideasheet4> Introducing all risks and vulnerabilities (for example poverty, volcanoes, injustice, floods, inequity, avalanches, and disease) into school curricula would be needed in the same way that health (for example safe sex, drunk driving, and smoking) and safety (for example crossing the road, wearing a seatbelt, and house fires) issues are included. Understanding these issues does not necessarily translate into action, but it is a needed beginning.

3. Travelling the Last Mile for Ourselves

(3a) A half-page resolution or convention should be agreed which requests that any donor contributing to a disaster relief operation must allocate 10% of their donation's value for disaster mitigation for schools and hospitals in another location. The money should be used for doing mitigation activities, not just for assessing what should be done—although assessment, monitoring, and evaluation are essential components of 'doing'.

(3b) As noted in (1a), Kofi Annan stated "Building a culture of prevention is not easy...the benefits are not tangible; they are the disasters that did not happen". Let's overcome that barrier by monitoring extreme events and publicising and promoting disasters which did not happen. For example:

- The lives and money saved in the Seattle 2001, Japan 2003, and California 2003 earthquakes should be calculated and compared to the cost of mitigation activities.
- The lives and money saved by draining the crater lake of Mt. Pinatubo in the Philippines and by degassing Lake Nyos in Cameroon, both in 2001 in order to avert a volcano-related disaster, should be calculated and compared to the cost of the projects.
- Munich Re produces an annual report on natural catastrophes including a top ten list. Could an Annual Non-Disasters Report be produced along with a top ten list of disaster costs averted?
- IFRC publishes an annual World Disasters Report. Could an annual World Disasters Prevented Report be published?
- USAID OFDA implemented a disaster mitigation project in Kinshasa which in its first year saved over \$45 for each \$1 invested. See <http://www.arct.cam.ac.uk/curbe/infosheets.html#factsheet1> for details. We need to imitate this project, and the economic analysis, and promote the results.

Regarding disasters, we know what happens and what does not happen in different circumstances. We need to make the latter as quantitative, tangible, and publicised as the former.

(3c) Members of post-disaster missions should be given training on, and practice with, communicating to non-experts. As a requirement to join the mission, they should undertake to disseminate what they learned to one hundred non-experts. Such dissemination could be in the form of articles in local newspapers or newsletters, a public demonstration, an email to personal not

professional contacts, or four visits to classrooms or university lectures with 25 students each. The members must be given extensive support in this endeavour, just as they receive extensive logistical and security support while in the field. Otherwise, this initiative could backfire.

(3d) Visiting scholar programmes need to be set up in operational agencies. The academics would learn about realities and how their work could and should be used on the ground. The agencies would learn the wealth of knowledge, experience, and ideas available in academia. Both would learn how to communicate with each other and engage each other in working towards the common goal. Care would be needed to avoid this initiative causing more problems than it would solve.

Conclusions: Will We Ever Learn?

Nothing in this document will change the world or will save us from ourselves. Each remark and idea hopefully indicates a change in attitude, a statement of commitment, a different approach to thinking and doing, and a tweaking of the path we have been following. Each has obvious dangers, could cause significant problems, and might have incorrect or inconsistent aspects, but we should work together to overcome the perils and objections.

Small steps taken by individuals might be the most unnoticed, but they can be the most enduring and endearing. As James Lewis writes:

(http://online.northumbria.ac.uk/geography_research/radix/knowningvsdoing3.htm):

It is myriad seemingly inconspicuous measures that are the most effective for normal self-reliance and quality of life, before, between, during, and in the aftermath of disasters. Though we read of national catastrophes, they are made up of myriad community and domestic small ones.

A \$1 trillion cheque handed over at a conference of world leaders pledging to build and maintain safe communities would help. So would every individual considering what they could do to reduce their and their community's vulnerability—and realising the immediate and long-term gains which would result.

Too much has been lost to disasters when, as Terry Jeggle writes, we all know what needs to be done (http://online.northumbria.ac.uk/geography_research/radix/resources/jeggle1.doc). Will we ever learn to do it?

Appendix 1: Questions for the Reader

This document is a work in progress and suggestions are needed. In particular:

1. Is Point 3 of “Disaster Tenets” needed?
2. The phrases “Safe Communities” and “building and maintaining safe communities” have been criticised as being weak or vague. These phrases replaced “Stopping Disasters” which was criticised as contradictory because a disaster by definition has happened and cannot be stopped. Nonetheless, some of the power of the suggestions has been lost in switching from “Stopping Disasters” to “Safe Communities”. Any other suggestions? See also Appendix 2.
3. For Point 2 of “Safe Communities”, is there a better phrase than “cost-effective”? The initial word used was “cheap”, but that was criticised as having inappropriate connotations. “Cost-effective” might communicate to policy- and decision-makers but does it communicate to others? Is it political jargon?
4. Point 5 of “Safe Communities” has been criticised as too superficial. Should it still be included or is it simply a distraction and a dumbing-down of the complex reality of the issues?

Appendix 2: The Disaster Name Game

These messages are from an email list on natural hazards and disasters run by JISCMail. See <http://www.jiscmail.ac.uk/lists/natural-hazards-disasters.html> Messages are listed in the order in which they appeared posted to the list.

Date: Thu, 19 Feb 2004 21:10:03 +0000
From: Ilan Kelman <ilan_kelman@HOTMAIL.COM>
Subject: The Disaster Name Game

The activities of our field have many names including disaster risk reduction, building resilience, vulnerability reduction, risk management, adaptation, mitigation, prevention, pre-disaster actions, and variations of each phrase, often with other words used including emergency, preparedness, prevention, hazard management, and (dare I mention it?) the intriguing “homeland security”. Many of the phrases and the discussions of their meanings are appropriate in professional, scientific, and political venues.

I have yet to find a solid, meaningful phrase which can be used for publicity--to grab, engage, and maintain the interest of teachers, students, professionals in other fields, and people walking down the street. “Stopping disasters” might be reasonable, but seems contradictory because a disaster by definition has happened, so it is too late to stop it. What should be used instead? Suggestions include “Risk Reduction”, “Disaster Mitigation”, “Stopping Disaster Impacts”, and “Preventing Disasters”.

A simple yet powerful phrase, particularly one generally accepted by our community, would help the media to promote our messages while reaching out to the majority of the population. I seek neither definitions nor justifications of vocabularies; simply words that work.

Or perhaps this ideal is a waste of time to try to achieve because (a) it trivialises our work, (b) it does not exist, and (c) it would be too dependent on the whims of public opinion and public perception which cause many of the problems we face. Would it be better to retain the myriad of phrases, with selection each time based on the audience addressed and the specific interests of the speaker?

Although this debate is in English, suggestions and ideas from other languages (preferably with an English explanation--apologies!) would be highly relevant. Many thanks for any thoughts,
Ilan

Date: Thu, 19 Feb 2004 14:18:54 -1000
From: Robert E Alexander <bfootbob@HAWAII.EDU>
Subject: Re: The Disaster Name Game

if you want really “down to earth” lingo, i find that i get the most positive non-verbal cues (rather than glazed eyes or hints of the need to walk away) when i talk of the need to: “make decisions about unacceptable risks”.

this is not only great because people seem to latch onto it but because they seem to latch onto the whole “it”. rather than just saying “disaster risk assessment”, “disaster risk reduction”, or “disaster management” and leaving people with 1/3 of the puzzle, that one phrase seems to incorporate all three “prongs” of disaster risk management as appropriate for them:

* disaster risk assessment: the need to assess the interaction of hazard risks with other risks and determine (hopefully in a participatory manner) what types/levels of risk are acceptable/unacceptable

* disaster risk reduction: the need to decide which tools will best meet all locally relevant criteria for preventing/mitigating deemed unacceptable risks

* (and hopefully also) disaster management: the need for preparedness/coping and relief/recovery plans for those times when risks deemed acceptable result in disastrous events

personally, it seems a natural extension for people to make the small leap from personal risk management decisions of whether or not to apply sunscreen / shovel the sidewalk / wear a seatbelt

to thinking of disaster risk management on a slightly larger scale when they think of “making decisions about unacceptable risks”. i look forward to hearing suggestions of others - and hope we can find agree on something truly engaging.

hopefully,
bob alexander

Date: Fri, 20 Feb 2004 09:13:23 +0100
From: Brugnot Gérard <gerard.brugnot@CEMAGREF.FR>
Subject: Re: The Disaster Name Game

In French prévention/prevention applied to risks seems to be a good compromise. It generally includes preparedness and excludes crises management and recovery. It is used in the field of health “médecine préventive” vs “medicine curative”. The meaning might be slightly different in English.

Gérard Brugnot

Date: Fri, 20 Feb 2004 10:51:09 +0200
From: David Sanderson <Sanderson@CARESA.CO.ZA>
Subject: Re: The Disaster Name Game

It's been a good development to apply the phrase ‘disaster risk reduction’, as something that is more understandable than preparedness or mitigation, which, as technical terms, aren't.

The livelihoods and insurance worlds give shocks and stresses, which are useful for disaggregating sudden impact from slower but often no less ghastly events.

Vulnerability is a helpful and understandable word - being vulnerable is a pretty clear concept that implies both an external issue that causes vulnerability (the risk), and that you can perhaps do something about it to be less vulnerable.

David Sanderson

Date: Mon, 23 Feb 2004 17:04:05 +0530
From: anshu sharma <anshu@SEEDSINDIA.ORG>
Subject: Better safe than....

Aren't terms like prevention, mitigation, risk or vulnerability reduction suitable for processes? And those too as viewed by practitioners and academicians? A little too clinical for the public? If the aim, as put by Ilan, is ‘..to grab, engage, and maintain the interest of teachers, students, professionals in other fields, and people walking down the street’, why not use positive terms like ‘to be safe....’ ?!

Anshu Sharma

Date: Mon, 23 Feb 2004 15:31:28 -0000
From: “Musson, Roger MW” <rmwm@BGS.AC.UK>
Subject: Re: Better safe than....

It's a shame that “mitigation” is considered too difficult a word, because it is so accurate. It is “making things less bad”. While I tend to be reticent when using this word to journalists, I have found recently that they are generally happy with it. Perhaps the phrase “mitigating circumstances” is so well known that the concept of mitigation is deemed to be widely understood despite the number of syllables. I have to say I don't think “vulnerability” is in any way an easier word.

The trouble with some attempts to formulate a phrase in a positive way is that one loses the gist. “Community safety” has the right sense, but is too general (it suggests an anti-crime programme), and attempts to make it more specific end up being unwieldy: “Community safety from disasters”.

I think one really has a choice between “disaster mitigation” which is punchy and unambiguous, or phrases that are necessarily rather longer, like “making communities safer from disasters”.

Roger Musson
BGS

Date: Mon, 23 Feb 2004 11:23:28 -0600
From: “Pena, Ray” <Pena@CO.DANE.WI.US>
Subject: Re: Better safe than....

I’m always amazed by this topic. Emergencies and disasters are inherently interesting. We work awfully hard to make it boring.

I use “emergency management,” which I define this way:

Emergency management is the continuous process by which all individuals, all groups and all communities manage hazards and the effects of disaster. The process involves mitigation and preparedness (pre-event/event) and response and recovery (event/post-event). Actions taken depend in part on perceptions of risk and event-generated need(s); effectiveness depends in part on how well activities are integrated. Activities at each level (individual, group, community) affect the other levels.

Individuals, groups and communities define hazard and disaster for themselves. They may not know the word “mitigation” (including prevention) but they know what it means.

It works well enough.
Ray Peña

Date: Mon, 23 Feb 2004 12:24:58 -0500
From: Nicole Rencoret <rencoret@UN.ORG>
Subject: Re: Better safe than....

I agree that when we start throwing around the words such as “mitigation”, “risk” and “vulnerability”, it becomes irresistible to introduce the less-than-understood jargon that those outside the circle have difficulty getting their heads around.

I personally like the idea of “safer communities”, for two reasons:

1. Being safe is the hot topic of the moment - safer sex, safer streets, safer spending. If we jump on the bandwagon we have a greater chance of our cause being recognised and understood.
2. The world is feeling more and more like one large community made up of numerous smaller communities. We are all living on this planet together, therefore we should cooperate to make it the best and safest place possible.

There was a conference not so long ago whose theme was “Safer Sustainable Communities”, which brings a third concept into the picture - sustainable development. Any thoughts on this?

Nicole Rencoret
UN/ISDR

Date: Mon, 23 Feb 2004 19:42:33 +0000
From: Ilan Kelman <ilan_kelman@HOTMAIL.COM>
Subject: Re: The Disaster Name Game

The message below is from Scott Miles who has given me permission to post it. Thank you for all the responses so far which have generated a fascinating discussion. I am learning plenty.

Ilan

From : Scott Miles <smyles@u.washington.edu>

A worthy exercise!

I think it’s important to accentuate the fields positive intent and actions, while making linkages to concerns of everyday life.

Ilan suggested “building resilience”, but this seems to evoke construction of a fortress... really not what our collective actions are about, except perhaps if you’re concerned about “homeland security.”

So perhaps, then from Kates and others “building sustainability / sustainable communities” But William McDonough points out that “sustainable” isn’t very sexy. Think about if you asked your friend how their marriage was and they reply: “It’s sustainable.”

McDonough suggests, for lack of anything better, “quality of life” instead of “sustainability” So then perhaps “building/bettering/enhancing quality of life”

But as Bob Alexander pointed out, we need to complete the picture about how we do this...

I might then suggest: “building quality of life through decisions about policy and technology”

...or has this taken us too far away from a hazards perspective?

Peace,
Scott

Date: Tue, 24 Feb 2004 10:21:38 +0800
From: Riki Marten <ricardamarten@HOTMAIL.COM>
Subject: Re: The Disaster Name Game

Ilan,

in your original request you asked for a phrase that could be used....i have been working with ‘safe lives, safe world’ or just Safeworld....this covers a multiple number of cultural and individual definitions..and i can just tell people that i’m working for a Safeworld...it’s been a great week’s reading, thanks to all

Cheers,
Riki Marten

Date: Tue, 24 Feb 2004 10:55:30 +0530
From: anshu sharma <anshu@SEEDSINDIA.ORG>
Subject: Re: Better safe than....

It is true that “mitigation” is a very accurate term for what we are trying to convey. However, we also need to consider the target audience. Terms like mitigation and vulnerability may work well with english speaking communities in developed countries, but they create problems when dished out to local people in the developing world. We have faced problems of a very basic nature, when we tried to look for equivalent terms in local languages and couldn’t find any!

Anshu Sharma
SEEDS, India.

Date: Tue, 24 Feb 2004 02:16:10 -1000
From: Robert E Alexander <bfootbob@HAWAII.EDU>
Subject: Re: Better safe than....

another potential problem with “mitigation” is the confusion among many people regarding whether mitigation is only post-event (mitigating the losses) or pre-event and continuous (mitigating unacceptable risks).

perhaps those of us who are in this line of work may be getting closer to consistency in terminology (e.g., the recent glossary at the ADRC website [among others]), but getting such common understanding among local stakeholders should prove to be much more difficult (especially given the difficulty with language noted by anshu sharma) unless less ambiguous words are used.

hopefully,
bob alexander

Date: Tue, 24 Feb 2004 13:39:44 -0000
From: David Crichton <david@CRICHTON.SOL.CO.UK>
Subject: Re: Better safe than....

Dear all,

I can't resist adding some comments. In the climate change community, "mitigation" is taken to mean reduction in greenhouse gases, in order to reduce the long term increase in hazard, while "Adaptation" is used for such matters as reducing exposure and vulnerability. Apparently this was due to mix up in the White House some years ago, but it is a useful distinction, even if it causes all sorts of confusion on the rare occasions that disaster mitigation and climate change experts happen to talk to each other. (I know, I've chaired such a meeting!)

Another term I still can't get to grips with is "disaster reduction" - which seems to me to imply to people that you can reduce the number of disasters, but how can you reduce the number of disasters without tackling the exposure issue?

I like "adaptation". We know that hazards will grow due to climate change, so all we can really do in the short term is to adapt, until the world comes to its senses and accepts something like Aubrey Meyer's contraction and convergence principles. A relatively new one from the UN FCCC is "maladaptation" which is all about what society is doing wrong, for example building flood defences which encourage more people to live in floodplains. (see: <http://unfccc.int/sessions/workshop/120503/present.html>)

Regards,
David

Date: Tue, 24 Feb 2004 17:06:24 +0300
From: Esteban Leon <Esteban.Leon@UNHABITAT.ORG>
Subject: Re: Better safe than....

What about "reducing the risk of disasters"?

Is it not what all of us are trying to do? It also sounds very well in Spanish. Don't know French.

It's true, I don't really like "mitigation", I never know if its before or after the event.
Cheers,
Esteban

Date: Tue, 24 Feb 2004 17:26:40 +0200
From: James Lewis <datum@GN.APC.ORG>
Subject: Better safe than

Once upon a time and for many years, probably commencing in times and places of colonial governments, there was "disaster relief", to which, because disaster relief didn't seem to be changing things in the longer term, came to be added "disaster prevention" - but this was a tad too presumptuous. So then there was "mitigation" which was more realistic and, being in place of prevention, meant measures taken before to limit disaster impacts. This was when things were simple.

In all of this, I believe there is a difference to be respected between participants - ie: potential and actual victims, and practitioners, on the ground - and academics. I feel confident in suggesting this having been, from time to time, all three ! This distinction I think can take account of Anshu Sharma's important point re language. What has always concerned me most of all is another category - the policy makers who, if we fail to reach them, can either destroy or remake the world.

Can we return to the simple - I doubt there is a need to coin more phraseology, don't we have enough ? "Better safe than sorry" is good in English and has been well tested (what is it like for others ? "mieux sauf que regretter" ??? etc). English also has "a stitch in time saves nine" but that's getting specialist, and "an ounce of prevention is better than a pound of cure" has outdated terminology and is too long.

Sorting the verbiage is long overdue; Ilan has again struck an important cord - may the comments flow.

James

Date: Tue, 24 Feb 2004 18:02:39 -0000
From: 'komal.aryal' <komal.aryal@UNN.AC.UK>
Subject: Re: Better safe than....

anshu,

I have same problem. Recently i was in nepal. My grand uncle asked me simple meaning of vulnerability. It took me nearly an hour to explain its meaning in the nepalese context.

regards,
komal

Date: Wed, 25 Feb 2004 10:33:15 +0200
From: David Sanderson <Sanderson@CARESA.CO.ZA>
Subject: Re: Better safe than....

Risk reduction remains pretty clear. If risk is the threat of a future disaster, then it may be possible to reduce the scale of that event.

The concept of risk is also probably understandable by most, as being part of everyday life.

Appendix 3: Remarks from Valerie Bode (18 February 2004)

Introduction

I think you have a fascinating approach here which without doubt deserves further attention.

Question 1

Definitely. I have encountered many people outside the disaster community who are not aware of vulnerability at all. I believe it is the key!

Question 2

I suggest "Preventing Disasters" because it best describes the fact that action can be taken to eliminate the disastrous element hazards might have on society if not anticipated. You actually prevent the disaster from taking place—this is what we are talking about here.

Question 3

Maybe something like "Stopping disasters pays off" or "Stopping disasters economises", "Stopping disasters is affordable and profitable", "Stopping Disasters is not a luxury", "Stopping disasters is low-cost/high effectiveness"... Maybe "low-cost/high benefit"?

Question 4

It should still be included but toned down. Maybe adventurous, captivating, thrilling?

Other Comments

- Maybe you should mention that an agreement on disaster terms is highly needed first within those organisations working in this field!

- For The Last Mile's (2b), I think this is a nice idea but I seriously doubt this to be possible, for the simple reason that especially religious beliefs have disseminated the picture of disasters being God-given actions of wrath or punishment etc. They therefore have substantially contributed to the populations' often passive stance. I do not see how we can change the philosophies of religious beliefs.
- For The Last Mile's (2c), great idea, I am pretty positive that this could work. But we must get the media to write about it.

Appendix 4: Remarks from Tina Plapp (26 March 2004)

Introduction

Your wonderful text is a personal challenge for me, because it is so systematically positive thinking. In general, I am trained to think critically why things in societies go wrong and to look sceptically at recommendations on what should be done (and how they could backfire...). I tried to keep these criticisms and scepticism short when reading the text and I tried to break through my typical thought pattern and think positively. That's also what I have to learn when I speak about disasters.

In particular, I like the idea of "annual reports of disasters avoided" and I think it is important to find/develop/establish methods how "prevented disasters" could be counted and how the "avoided impacts" could be measured. Imagine what a press release "IFRC publishes World Disaster Prevented Report" or "Munich Re Releases Annual Non-Disasters Report" could do: a completely different framing of information that "mitigation saves"; prevention as issue in the media!

As you have stated at the end of the text, there are enough pitfalls in "overcoming disasters". In some points I could not resist thinking critically and I pointed out some issues that I think should be taken into account. Most notably, "safe communities" provoked me.

Question 1

When I read the text first I thought that point 3 and 4 could be summarized in one point: Stopping disasters is continuous and visible, or is visible and thus continuous.

Question 2

Even if "safe communities" is only a working title, I have problems with "safe". On the one hand, I think it is a great slogan because it is positive and creates a "sexy", attractive, friendly vision of the future. And survivors of disasters need positive visions. Therefore I like it very much. Besides, it is quite a fashionable and popular word these times. "Safety" and the right to safety apparently have become an issue or a psychological basic need in a world that is challenged with bad news of disasters and terrorist attacks.

On the other hand, I have doubts if the message "safe communities" is suitable to evoke changes in attitudes, risk awareness, and corresponding behaviour as intended, e.g. for a Safety Day. Is the usage of "safe" in the field of disaster reduction/prevention (or however we name it) a false promise for security that—in the end (= in a disaster)—no one could ever keep or guarantee? Does "safe communities" create a false sense of security? Of course, "safe communities" is the aim, but I doubt that the use of "safe" is the appropriate vehicle language offers to reach this aim.

One of the most important achievements in risk communication in the field of technological hazards is that risk has to be communicated to the public. That means that although risk management measures are in place, there is no 100% safety; there is always uncertainty and people should be

aware of these uncertainties. Simplified, this lesson was learned from incidents in nuclear power plants (Three Mile Island, Chernobyl), and other “accidents” with hazardous materials. Before these events, the message conveyed in risk communication (a mainly top-down-approach) was rather calming: “you are safe”. I think we should keep that in mind when we look for a good general name of the aim.

Do the aims of “safe communities” and the message of risk communication “there are uncertainties and there are risks that need to be managed and handled” interfere with each other or even conflict? On a theoretical or political level that links disaster policies and risk communication, there are no contradictions, because the two messages have basically a common purpose. Despite common purposes on a theoretical or political level, I think that the message “safe communities” could be misinterpreted too easily when communicated to “the public”. I try to avoid following interpretation or equation in “the public”: safe communities means that we live in safe communities that means we have nothing to do to change it because we are already “safe”.

The point is that a short and crisp formulation should convey the message that building safer communities is a process. This process or development needs actions by all actors and groups of society, be it local or regional, be it administrative bodies, NGOS, other organisations/groups—and every person as an active part of a civil society and as part of “the public”. Thus, instead of “safe communities are for you”, I prefer “we need you for safe communities” or “safe communities need you”.

I have used unknowingly the words “building safer communities” in the paragraph above. Maybe the usage of the comparative degree “safer” could solve my problem a little. The aim is “safer communities”, because we would like to improve safety for everyone. “Safer” instead of “safe” might indicate that “safer” is a stage we aim at, but a stage we have not yet reached.

My personal preference for a word is “prevention”, and I especially like “culture of prevention” when talking to people outside the “disaster camp”. I agree with Gérard Brugnot who suggested “prevention” and explained it by preventive and curative medicine. Keeping the analogy to medicine, I would also add “aftercare”. The important message is that steps to avoid disasters must be done in advance, that is “thinking and doing before it is too late”. Thus, I would suggest “preventing disasters” or the wonderful phrase “building a culture of prevention”.

Interestingly, when I try to translate “disaster mitigation” in German, I intuitively use the German translation “disaster prevention” (“Katastrophenvorsorge”) to translate the message enclosed in “mitigation”. The DKKV has “Katastrophenvorsorge” in its German name (Deutsches Komitee für Katastrophenvorsorge), in the English translation it is: German Committee for Disaster Reduction.

Question 3

My idea for a better word than “cheap” is to point out the huge effect of small steps using antonyms such as “little”, “small”, and “great” to add an impulse through language. I am sure that better alternatives do exist than “little investments for a great future”, but I have no better idea at the moment.

Question 4

I do not think this point is too superficial. Nevertheless, I am not sure if this point can be easily applied to disasters—but it can be applied in other, less complex fields of risk-taking behaviour, e.g. environmental education, health education, and driving. Since the effects of better, more attractive

environmental or health education could help build resilience or reduce vulnerability in some aspects, it could lead to an indirect effect for disaster mitigation.

Making prevention exciting and fun works well in the myriads of daily and recreational activities which are “small-scale” compared to a disaster. Especially when activities are already associated with fun, prevention can be sold as fun, too. One example is promoting alpine safety in mountaineering, especially for the increasing popular activity skiing or snowboarding off-piste.

Or big signposts along highways that remind you to behave such that risk is minimised in a provoking but funny, smart, and “inviting” manner (issues include wearing seatbelts, reducing speed, taking a break when tired, keeping your distance, and others. One example from German highways: four vultures sitting on a dead branch and the slogan “speeder, we wait for you”).

But I think that there is another difference, apart from “small-scale” individual behaviour:

- If I take the risk to die in an avalanche because I want to have fun on slopes covered with wonderful, fresh, powder snow or in risk-taking driving, smoking (voluntary risk taking), or
- If I live in a hut on a slope in a shantytown in a developing country and have no chance to live in a safer place—because the safer places are used for business districts, industrial areas, or agriculture—and I do not have the means or opportunities to move to another place.

Both cases have different conditions of risk exposure and vulnerability and thus different methods are necessary to overcome the situations. In the case of the skier or risk-taking driving, an educational campaign using “interesting, fun, exciting, and hip” is suitable for the targeted audience. In the case of the inhabitant of a shantytown, I would apply the message “stopping disasters is interesting” only if this message would be the last addition (with lowest priority) in a large bundle of strategies to reduce vulnerability: access to drinking water and enough food, access to electricity supply, access to education, access to health care, the right to vote and freedom of expression, a change of the land use system, political reforms, etc.

The idea that stopping disasters is attractive, exciting, and interesting is fine and perhaps the message “stopping disasters is sexy” can be applied as a guiding principle when the world has changed for the better in x (?) decades. For the moment, I would not recommend it as a guiding principle in disaster prevention, but as an idea in certain activities that can be easily associated with fun, hoping that the many small steps taken would end in fewer deaths and injuries. These areas could be a test field for “stopping disasters is interesting”. In these areas, good examples that are told by friends or neighbours could cause others to take preventive steps.

Concerning that prevention should be in the media, media do have their own rules on what is worth being news and what is not worth being broadcasted/printed. Sadly, a disaster is 100 times more “mediagenic” than mitigation / prevention measures and examples of (local) mitigation strategies. How to get out of this? We cannot change that system and these “rules” in one day, but whenever we speak to the media, we can speak of prevention, prevention, and prevention.

Reaction to the use of “brainwash” instead of “educate and “convince” in earlier drafts

“Educated” or “brainwashed”? Surely education is one important key to changes, and it is one of the highest challenges, but it is so complex that “brainwashing” sounds too simple. “Brainwashing” was sometimes used in risk communication, e.g. concerning nuclear energy. In top-down approaches, the public should be “educated” (=brainwashed) to judge risks similar to the experts’ view. Ignoring the fact that non-experts or “lay-people” use different concepts to assess and to judge risks, the concept of “objective risk”, represented by numbers yielded from calculation of probabilities, was used to calm the public that they should not worry about the risk. Lay-people’s risk perception was sometimes even regarded as “irrational” or “insubstantial”.

Brainwashing, or the attempts to do so, did not succeed. It sometimes even evoked the opposite: more “irrational”, “distorted” risk perceptions than before “brainwashing”. Dialogue, participation, and mutual respect are better vehicles for risk communication and risk education from a bottom-up-approach. But these approaches take a long time to yield visible results.

It is very good that risk communication and risk education are prominent issues in disaster mitigation / prevention. But there are further matters that have an influence on behaviour which cause “inappropriate” actions of people although they are well-educated and have appropriate risk awareness: there are situational and structural factors of life that have an influence on spontaneous priority setting and choosing what could and should be done. These factors should also be taken into account, although they are difficult to tackle. Education is not all, even though it is a beginning. Consciousness determines social existence, and social existence determines consciousness at the same time.

Other comments

- We need more examples such as the National Geographic one and we need them in the mass media. How many people read National Geographic compared to people watching TV, reading daily newspapers printed or via the web, and listening to the radio? We need “prevention” as an issue in the mass media.
- CVRTs and CSTs = Safer communities need you.
- For The Last Mile’s (1d), could the internet be used? Personally I am not convinced of this idea, because I think that many people in industrialised societies using / depending on information technology, especially younger people, have to learn again that nature and conditions of vulnerability are no “virtual reality” that can be changed to the default settings with a mouse click. But I think it should be discussed if and how information technology could be used for awareness and knowledge that otherwise could not be achieved.
- For The Last Mile’s (2b), before religion can be used in that manner, the idea that humans themselves can influence their future (= the idea of prevention and risk reduction that follow the ideals of The Enlightenment) has to be a concept accepted and supported by the canons of the respective religions—and in the services of local spiritual leaders. If life is karma or fate, thus predestined according to the laws of the religion or the spiritual group, how could that match with the idea of disaster prevention? Influencing the future as a human or individual right and not as blasphemy might not be accepted everywhere.

Besides, if religious or faith-based organisations educate people, they might include their own explanations or interpretations of disasters and might promote their own principles in a prevention strategy. Religious explanations, and prevention inspired by religious rules or world views, are not necessarily those we have in mind with our western, liberal perspective (committed to the ideals of The Enlightenment).

Of course, it is necessary to reach people at all levels and religious services are important and influencing for many people’s lives. It would be nice if religion could be a way to reach people to promote disaster prevention. But religion provides powerful “lenses” to look at the world and its problems and should thus be treated or “used” carefully.

Perhaps I break a taboo when I pose the question “does everyone in the world want prevention, development, or disaster mitigation?”. Of course, everyone wants to have a safe life and the right to safety should be protected, but what does “safe” mean in different socio-cultural, religious, and individual contexts? And what is every person willing to invest/contribute to “be safe”? These questions are posed relating to discussions in the field of development work and are driven by caveats and “lessons learned” in personal experience in development work: the aims of those promoting development are not always or necessarily the aims of those “being developed”.

My point is that there are competing or conflicting views on disasters as a problem in different cultures and subcultures. We have our views and we should be aware and respect that others have other understandings and other needs and priorities, although we agree that everyone wants to live “safely”.

- For The Last Mile’s (3d), that requires openness in academia and agencies plus mutual respect and understanding. In some countries, you can forget your academic career if you have been outside a university for too long. As well, academics and practitioners work on completely different time scales. In academia, projects run for two, sometimes three years. In agencies, a project has to be finished and a practical solution has to be provided, usually within weeks.