

Progress made with public awareness-raising activities aimed at building both rural and urban disaster resilience

Professor John Handmer and Dr Briony Towers, RMIT, summarise the findings of research into informing populations about disaster risk.

Informing the general population about disaster risk is addressed in Priority 3, Indicator 4 of the *Hyogo Framework for Action* (HFA), which states: 'Countrywide public awareness strategy exists to stimulate a culture of disaster resilience, with outreach to urban and rural communities'. The Chapter examining this HFA indicator was drafted by an Australian team led by Dr Briony Towers, drawing on a number of input papers prepared by a wide range of people and organisations from many countries, and the global literature (Towers, Handmer & Ireland 2014).

As specified by the HFA monitoring and review process (UNISDR 2011) the key question for this indicator is: do public education campaigns for risk-prone communities and local authorities include disaster risk? There are also three means of verification by which this question is to be assessed, namely:

1. public education campaigns for enhanced awareness of risk
2. training of local government, and
3. availability of information on DRR practices at the community level.

The UNISDR (2011) defines public awareness as:

'The process of informing the general population, increasing levels of consciousness about risks and how people can act to reduce their exposure to hazards.'
UNISDR 2001

The aim of raising 'consciousness' (awareness and knowledge) is directed at the goal of reduced risk. While assessments generally focus on governments, and international organisations, given their responsibility for implementing the HFA, disaster risk is more often reduced through the actions of informed and empowered citizens (Wisner 2006).

There are four major ways the public learns about disaster risk. These are via:

- media campaigns
- participatory learning
- formal school-based interventions, and
- informal education (IFRC 2011).

Positive change worldwide

Worldwide there has been a surge in disaster risk reduction related awareness and knowledge education programs targeted to a diverse range of audiences, and there is evidence that disaster awareness has increased. Official programs are however only part of the picture and it important to keep this in mind as the formal assessment generally misses such informal efforts that could be highly effective.

This is an important achievement. However, has all this activity stimulated a 'culture of disaster resilience?' The answer to this question is not clear, but it appears that so far the effects have been limited. Any statement on progress needs qualification because the difficulty in measuring success characterises the field.

Examples of success include:

- Traditional media – the use of community radio for message dissemination, discussion and engagement, particularly in rural areas in Africa and Asia. While community radio has been emphasised, the medium can be used to engage people country-wide.
- New media – there is hugely enhanced communication between people and with crowdsourcing of information, this is generally seen as a game changer.
- Community-based DRR – has been shown to be an effective way of engaging people. The *Bangladesh National Plan for Disaster Management* pays special attention to community-based DRR including the provision of funding.
- Less formal programs – include the Californian initiated (and now global) 'Great Shakeout' campaign for earthquake preparedness aimed at increasing participation in drills, and TV DRR-themed soap operas that particularly engage women in Latin America (including the Caribbean) and Asia (IFRC 2011).
- Of the 100 reporting countries, 80 are training local governments in DRR, with communities of practice linking expertise and isolated officials to encourage good practice (FEMA 2014).

Challenges

Even though much progress has been made, a number of major challenges to achieving the HFA aims remain. Some are of long standing, while others such as that posed by social media, are emerging. A selection of five challenges is presented here.

1. The fundamental challenge has been highlighted: how to move from a relatively passive awareness and knowledge to being proactive in building resilience. This is likely to require a shift from current mainstream approaches to disaster awareness to incorporating resilience activity into mainstream development and day-to-day life. To achieve this, attention needs to go to informal and participatory learning as well as to the design of mass media programs. Even though there are many government-run hazard and disaster awareness programs, much important and relevant information needed by people and local organisations remains inaccessible. There is much rhetoric on information access, but limited action in some jurisdictions with concerns over legal liability, privacy, cost and maintenance.
2. Social inclusion in national DRR policies remains elusive with general agreement that policies are not engaging vulnerable and marginalised people in the development of disaster resilience (GNDR 2011 2015). For example, only six of 62 government statements to the Global Platform for DRR mention gender as an issue, and only 11 of 40 HFA 2013 National Progress reports discuss vulnerability and capacity by gender (Masson & Langdon 2014). Inclusion needs to extend to children and youth, in particular through child-centred DRR, to the elderly, to lower socio-economic groups, including the approximately one billion people living in informal settlements that are often located in high hazard areas, and to those with disabilities.
3. Participatory approaches are related to issues of inclusion and partnerships. Top-down approaches continue to dominate despite their limited success. Some of this effort needs shifting to partnerships between governments, communities, NGOs and faith organisations partnerships, and to harnessing existing and emerging networks. Worldwide over 80 per cent of people are religiously affiliated (Pew Research 2012).
4. The use of contemporary social media and the emergence of 'near universal connectivity between people and places, pose increasing challenges as people live, work and visit far from locations they are familiar with, and maintain strong and often day to day connections with those far away. However, the rise in global connectivity and the associated social media offer new and exciting opportunities for learning' (VINCK 2013). One challenge is that information can now flow in every direction, for example through crowdsourcing, and much can come from international sources. Even though most people are using internet and mobile technologies, many are not, and a complementary challenge is to ensure their inclusion.

5. Monitoring and evaluation are fundamental to improvement and evolution in the field. These need to deal both with the details of a program or campaign, as well as ask whether the whole approach needs fundamental change. At present there is considerable activity at the detailed level, but little looking more broadly. Closely related to the issue of evaluation and a weakness is the question of what success should look like.

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