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Presentation of the WorldRiskIndex with a special focus on Urban Areas in New York

Urbanization: Driver of Risk - or Opportunities for Resilience?

As Governments and UN bodies prepare for the World-Conference for Disaster Risk Reduction (March 2015), for the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG in summer 2015) and the Climate Change Conference in Paris (December 2015) a new report – the WorldRiskReport - on global risk patterns and risks of urban areas is presented today in New York co-hosted by the Permanent Mission of Germany and the Permanent Mission of Indonesia to the United Nations.

“The World Risk Report 2014 and the World Risk Index provide very valuable scientific input into the preparations of several major UN conferences taking place in the course of 2015 and 2016. They highlight the crucial role risk reduction plays in preventing disasters and in mitigating their consequences. Their findings and recommendations will directly benefit the World Conference on Disaster Risk Reduction, the Summit on the Post 2015 Agenda for Sustainable Development, the Conference of the Parties of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change as well as the Conference on Housing and Sustainable Urban Development (HABITAT III). We are grateful to the researchers and authors of the World Risk Report and proud to present their findings today at the German Mission to the United Nations in New York “ - says the Ambassador Harald Braun, Permanent Representative of Germany to the United Nations, on the occasion of the presentation of the World Risk Report 2014

The report features the WorldRiskIndex which assess and compares the disaster risk of countries. The results show that people are particularly at risk in countries that are prone to be hit by hydrological, meteorological, geological or climatic hazards such as floods, droughts, storms, earthquakes and sea level rise while also having a high inherent vulnerability and low response capacity to these events.
Following a modular approach, the WorldRiskIndex therefore differentiates disaster risk into the four components of hazard exposure, susceptibility, lack of short-term coping capacity and lack of long-term adaptive capacity.
“Whether extreme events and natural hazards trigger a disaster and crises, is not solely a question of the intensity and frequency of extreme events, but also significantly depends on the vulnerability and preparedness of countries and cities at risk” – says Prof. Joern Birkmann from the University of Stuttgart who is the scientific coordinator of the WorldRiskIndex.

This year’s edition the WorldRiskReport examines for the first time also levels and dynamics of risk in urban areas. The results show that urbanization is not a driver of risk per se. Rather urbanization also opens up opportunities for risk reduction in cities and beyond. “The high density of cities, for example, allows for high efficiencies with regards to protective infrastructure and disaster response mechanisms”, says Dr. Matthias Garschagen from the United Nations University – Institute of the Environment and Human Security who is a co-author of the report.
Whether these opportunities of urbanization can be tapped or whether urban growth predominantly drives up risk levels depends strongly on the quality of risk governance in the respective countries and cities. The index results underscore that countries in which rapid urban growth exceeds the capacity of state and non-state actors to effectively build-up adaptive capacity and reduce vulnerabilities are amongst the countries with the highest risk levels. Niger, for instance,

has a comparatively low level of urbanization at present - but ranks amongst the countries with the highest levels of urban population growth and urban vulnerability. In contrast, in Sweden the major part of the population is living in urban areas (high urbanization level), while featuring a lower level of urban growth and a very low level of urban vulnerability.

Comparing the national risk index results with the urban risk index results per country show, that urban risk hotspots are not solely located in developing countries, but also developed nations, such as the United States and Australia rank high on urban risk. This is due to the fact that various cities are located in exposed areas that can be hit by extreme events, natural hazards and climate change, as just seen in terms of the snow storm in New York two days ago. The comparison of countries with the highest national risk levels and the highest urban risk levels show that the Philippines, Bangladesh and Guatemala are both high at the national risk and the urban risk levels.

The report that has been edited by the United Nations University- Institute for Environment and Human Security and the Alliance Development Works also provides concrete recommendations for risk reduction. “The WorldRiskIndex is an important vehicle for us to communicate scientific findings to policy makers and to derive important recommendations for international negotiations”, highlights Prof. Jakob Rhyner – Vice Rector of the United Nations University. Furthermore, Peter Mucke, the CEO of the Alliance Development Works (Bündnis Entwicklung Hilft) underscores that: “NGOs on the ground can use the report as an important tool to lobby for linking disaster risk reduction and emergency response with long-term development strategies, particularly in the global South.”

Recommendations for up-coming World Conferences in Sendai, New York and Paris:
The findings of the report suggest action for Disaster Risk Reduction and Sustainable Development should be prioritized in risk hotspot countries identified in the study. In addition, the findings underscore the potential for synergies and co-benefits between the action taken for Disaster Risk Reduction, Sustainable Development and Climate Change Response. The results of the RiskIndex at national scale and for urban areas call for more comprehensive funding strategies. Mechanisms to improve hazard monitoring tools are important, but equally important are codified quality criteria for risk governance and inclusive policies that help the most vulnerable groups. The report highlights that one-size-fits-all funding mechanisms for risk reduction and adaptation will not be sufficient. Policy solutions rather have to be custom tailored towards specific urbanization dynamics, the overall socio-economic development context and the risk composition in the respective country or city.

The report can be downloaded under the following link:
www.worldriskreport.org

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