

Press Release, August 30 (Morning Plenary of August 30)
International Disaster Reduction Conference (IDRC)

Environment and Disaster Management

Davos, Switzerland – *A gathering of world experts on coping with natural hazards and man-made disasters is puzzling over a new catastrophe: What do you do when decision-making politicians don't read your climate change warning reports? The issue surfaced at the weeklong International Disaster Reduction Conference (IDRC) in this scenic alpine resort hosting nearly 1,000 risk trouble-shooters from government, research, and the private sector.*

A member of the European Parliament, Anders Wijkman, posed the problem in keynote comments detailed in a later press briefing with other panelists. According to Wijkman, busy politicians lack the time to reach expert reports on issues such as climate change, so technocratic authors need to plot new strategies to relay their message. The official suggested that science experts on topics like climate change involve lawmakers by "inviting them into the field." This, he asserted, is "the only way to deal with this, because they don't read our reports."

The goal, as described by a second keynote speaker, Reid Basher of the UN International Strategy on Disaster Reduction (UN-ISDR) secretariat, should make those alerted think "My God, that's *my* baby!"

Wijkman said he can understand the time and energy pressures on politicians and the news media: "You're bombarded by news from all sectors at the same time," he told reporters. So scientists need to cultivate the press within their fields as well as politicians."

Jeffery McNeely of the World Conservation Union (IUCN) said he finds that "a lot of politicians get nothing directly but learn through their minders". So he suggested adapting to this situation by approaching decision-makers' aides.

But, in light of the "current mismatch" between scientists and decision-makers, Prof. Janos J. Bogardi, who directs the United Nations University's Institute for Environment and Human Security in Bonn, Germany, favors another approach. "Politicians need to sense a mandate from the public," he said. "Too often we write papers to impress our colleagues but not to reach the public. That has to change."

The chief of the Geneva-based World Meteorological Organization (WMO) water resources division, Wolfgang Grabs, insists that agencies like his need to seek dialogs with serious journalists writing for reputable newspapers to make their case effectively. He admitted that this approach takes time and energy, but the WMO is pursuing it on the climate change issue in Geneva.

Unfortunately, warns the chief of the United Nations Environment Programme / Disaster Management Branch (UNEP/DMB), Pasi Rinne, "the news media is moving in the other direction." Thus the UNEP prefers to contact politicians directly. Cultivating lawmakers may be frustrating at time, but he says they're the key figures and "They have to get this issue under their skin."

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The IDRC follows up the 2005 United Nations-sponsored conference held in Kobe, Japan – a gathering on combating natural disasters largely restricted to government officials. The Davos meetings also address man-made catastrophes such as war and terrorism. Those attending include nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and the private sector. Four organizing partners are cosponsoring the IDRC: the United Nations Education, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), the United Nations International Strategy for Disaster Reduction (UN/ISDR), the Global Alliance for Disaster Reduction (GADR) and the Global Disaster Information Network (GDIN). IDRC organizers say a follow-up conference modeled after the Davos framework will meet in Harbin, China, in 2007.

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