

International Disaster and Risk Conference IDRC Davos, August 25 – 29, 2008

Press Release – Thursday, 28 August 2008

Integral Risk Management

Large interest in the public open forum

Last night's public open forum gave the unique opportunity for locals and guests in the region to join in with the international group of participants for presentations and the discussion on the topic of climate change induced migration, internal displacement and food security. The forum was held to discuss solutions on how to reduce migration and displacement pressure and tried to find ways to improve food security. Global warming is likely to adversely impact the food production, mainly in regions in sub-Saharan Africa and Asia, aggravated by the increasing use of bio-fuel and by the use of water for the energy production, the latter further worsening the scarcity of water.

Migration in itself is of course not a new phenomenon – at all times people have moved on when they had to find food, safety or an income. What is new is the fact that this migration is induced by climate change. A complex chain of events sets in motion a process that can eventually lead to further degradation of water resources, the failure of agricultural land, the intensified spreading of malaria or to an increase in natural disasters; a vicious circle, forcing people to find a new place to make a living. These people, displaced by environmental factors, legally fall under the definition of refugees. But who is responsible for them? Under what convention are they protected? It becomes clear very quickly that this rather new type of migration needs to be globally managed. Countries that have to import food are the ones affected the worst, thus highlighting why bio-fuel is a controversial issue, as its production usually takes up land that could otherwise be used for the production of food. A factor pointed out time and again is that, even if migration and food security have to be seen from a global perspective, the measures suggested have to be planned on a local level.

About 130 people from outside the conference community attended the public forum and took part in a lively discussion.

Defining terms to speak a common language

The third day of the International Disaster and Risk Conference IDRC 2008 in Davos focused on the topic of an integral risk management as the key for successful risk reduction. The world's growing population, and expanding urbanization and globalization have resulted in a much larger risk potential. To tackle those issues, all aspects of disaster prevention, mitigation and relief have to be combined into a holistic approach of an integral risk management. In the discussion it became obvious that, even if by now the risk management community seems rather well connected, still, the terms are not defined clearly enough to allow a common language. And good concepts, strategies and policies only help if the communications linked to it are efficient – getting the message out is the key. The experts agreed on the importance of data. Observations and data need to be available and need to be shared, however, not just any data, but one with a certain standard that is reliable in its quality.

Regarding the ever-critical funding of disaster relief or prevention measures, it was pointed out that the funds should be handled with far greater flexibility, allowing fast reactions in case of events, but also enabling the shifting of funds to issues that emerge in another manner than formerly expected. For many countries corruption is a tremendous problem, wasting money that would be urgently needed. An interesting aspect was explained regarding the disaster relief after the Tsunami in Indonesia: the disaster struck a coastal area of about 6 km inland, and all help went to these areas. Quickly, it turned out that the regions in the hinterland which had been spared, were observing the efforts at the coast with jealousy, feeling left out from any support. This reminds us that it should not be forgotten that the complex integral risk management is not just a matter of the right technology, but needs to involve the society as a whole.

How to cover the last mile of early warning

In the course of this fourth conference day, a variety of parallel sessions highlighted the role of the media, of communication and education in disaster preparedness and risk avoidance, also especially looking at the problem of the "last mile" in early warning, meaning how to really reach the people concerned. Particular attention was given to risk reduction in agriculture, and it was discussed how microfinance could be used for disaster and risk reduction. The risks that are related to the particularly vulnerable energy sector were discussed in another session, while in yet another room, experts were exchanging experiences regarding risk perception and behavior.

Why should people engage in disaster prevention?

The second plenary session of the day was trying to determine how to proceed with an integral risk management. How can people actually be persuaded to shift from intervention to prevention? Smoothly operating information and communication tools, including all the new and widely used methods, such as web logs, chats or text messages, are of great importance. Yet, however advanced these instruments might be – in the end, the human factor, or simply the people themselves, decide if it will work or not. One could even go as far as to say that all the technology is there, but that it is not yet understood, how to make people change their behavior. If the incentives could be determined that would make people try and work their way out of vulnerability, a major step towards an

efficient disaster prevention would be achieved. And here, disaster prevention becomes a topic which will have to rely more on social sciences.

Award ceremony

An IDRC award was presented for best photography and for best poster. The Young Scientists in Contest Conference, held as a parallel event during the IDRC, gave out awards for best presentation and for best poster.

Have a look at tomorrow's program on www.idrc.info, and check our daily press release again – and for the last time - tomorrow night. If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact us by e-mail at anja.schilling@idrc.info or by phone on +41 79 564 87 56.