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International Disaster Reduction Conference IDRC

From risk analysis to risk governance

Davos, Switzerland – *Global risk managers – nearly 1,000 of them – have flocked to this sprawling alpine resort for the week-long International Disaster Reduction Conference or IDRC.*

The last time a group of such experts met at the 2005 United Nations-backed Kobe Conference in Japan, its agenda focused only on natural disaster such as earthquakes and the Indian Ocean tsunami that shook much of Asia in 2004.

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).

Some wonder if the conference organizers have bitten off more than they can chew. Yet speakers at the IDRC's opening session defended the more ambitious approach.

Prof. Ortwin Renn, who heads a risk research unit at the University of Stuttgart, told a press briefing that experts need an integrated approach in his field, so that the public benefits from match-ups in technology and social issues. "These areas do have something in common," he said. "And it's important that we can see how they interact"

The IDRC's chief organizer, Dr. Walter Ammann of the Davos-based Swiss Federal Institute for Forest, Snow and Landscape Research (WSL), strongly agrees. "We need a chance to offer an exchange of all sorts of notes," he said. "We need to compare all our resources on the landscape and set priorities one step at a time."

An opening panel member, Sri Lanka's minister of disaster management and human rights, Mahinda Samarasinghe, told the conference of his task in preparing his country for a disaster like the 2004 tsunami in a country ravaged by a 25-year civil war. "We need to put a strategy in place," he said, "that addresses both natural and man-made disasters." This has resulted in Sri Lanka's ambitious "Recovery Plus" program. Samarasinghe called the response "a holistic approach between ministries, chambers of commerce, and energy planners. But he voiced strong support for local know-how in preference to mere "expert" opinion. "Sometimes local knowledge," he said, "is far better than so-called expert knowledge."

The executive director of the Washington, DC-based GDIN, Larry Winter Roeder, also urged the IDRC to work closely with indigenous people. His think-tank zeroes in on Native Americans like the Navahos, and said such a strategy is vital if risk strategies are to attain the "last mile" of effectiveness. "Let's focus on the poorest people in the world," he said, recalling the GDIN mission statement. Then his group attempts to link them technically with other poor regions to hammer out practical empowerment plans in common.

IDRC
Flüelastrasse 11
CH-7260 Davos Dorf
Switzerland

Phone +41 (0)81 417 02 25
Fax +41 (0)81 417 08 23
www.davos2006.ch
davos2006@slf.ch

Another panel member, Prof. Hilary Inyang of the University of North Carolina in Charlotte, also stresses the need for support to “increasingly vulnerably segments of society”. Seen globally, he said, this means aiding support systems in Third World countries of Africa, Asia, and South America. He also warned of a need to recognize what he called “the short-term needs of politicians” in many of these developing regions.

UNESCO’s chief of its Paris-based Section for Disaster Reduction, Rouhban Badaoui, said technology has advanced remarkably in disaster risk reduction, but it too has a “last mile” to travel. “We know how to analyse disasters, and we know how to design earthquake-resistant buildings,” he said. “But we could have largely averted the tsunami disaster if we could have done a better job of communicating warnings to the public.” In Indonesia, for instance, he noted that it took only 19 minutes for officials in Jakarta to learn that the tsunami had struck. Yet the lack of a communications system thwarted efforts to relay the warning.

The Geneva-based director of the UN-ISSR, Briceño Salvano, told conferees that roughly 600,000 lives had been lost to such disasters – an “intolerable toll” requiring our combined efforts. But he worried that resources are too focused on reaction once a disaster strikes instead of correcting its root causes. He too called for “community empowerment to crack the problem”.

Local musicians turned to works by Bach during intervals, and a fugue selection prompted Prof. Renn to quote a comment from the German composer that conferees may have found inspiring: “A fugue,” Bach wrote, “is an interplay of many independent themes that need to be composed so they form a perfect harmony.”

Lyn Shepard
Conference journalist

Information:
Ms. Birgit Ottmer, Media Relations Manager of IDRC Davos 2006, ottmer@slf.ch, office: +41 81 417 02 75, mobile: +41 79 763 91 88, www.davos2006.ch
Registration for the rest of the week is still possible!

IDRC
Flüelastrasse 11
CH-7260 Davos Dorf
Switzerland

Phone +41 (0)81 417 02 25
Fax +41 (0)81 417 08 23
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