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

Press Release – Wednesday, 27 August 2008

Pandemics and Diseases

Expecting the unexpected

The third day of the International Disaster and Risk Conference IDRC 2008 in Davos focused on the topic of pandemics and diseases. Pandemics and diseases are a constant threat in a globalised world. Infectious diseases spread quickly, both in humans and in animals. And climate change might well aggravate the existing patterns and lead to a further spreading. How can prevention be improved for pandemics? And what is needed for the emergency phase? Clearly, there is the need to reduce the impact on human life, especially when seeing that about 70% of the new diseases have emerged from wildlife. A number of diseases that are so far not overly frequent, yet known to most people, as for example the Lyme disease, have a large pandemic potential. Experience shows that classic approaches to surveillance are ineffectual, and that completely new methods will have to be implemented. A first step to this goal could be the better use of all means of communication as well as the strengthening of local laboratories' abilities. Obviously, the movement of animals, potentially carrying an infectious disease, should not solely be controlled within the borders of one country – it is easily understood that the cooperation across national borders is crucial to fight the spreading of animal diseases.
The title of this first plenary session "Expecting the Unexpected" can also be looked at regarding influenza. Most experts seem to agree on the opinion that a new pandemic of influenza is on the door step – yet, when exactly it will break out, is completely unknown. But what is known is that the infrastructure, needed to deal with such an outbreak, has to be set up as soon as possible, so as not to have to react under pressure when the crisis is there. A very relevant point in the prevention of pandemics is proper communication. It has happened a lot in the past that governments did not inform their neighboring countries about a disease, hoping to keep it hidden as long as possible, so as to avoid negative impacts on food trade or tourism. A clear concept on how to communicate on these critical issues, and regulations that support compulsory information would be a start to avoid further spreading of existing diseases. Efficient pandemic prevention does not necessarily cost large amounts of money, small steps towards low-tech disease control methods, for example improved hygiene, can achieve a lot.

Security of health facilities as a central issue in disaster prevention

The parallel session through the day covered an impressive variety of topics, all of them looking at different aspects of pandemics and diseases. Participants of the IDRC discussed ways on how to make health facilities safe from disasters, and how to improve the public health security. A very important part of the disaster management regarding pandemics and diseases are the socio-economic and psychological aspects, thus reflecting some very human aspects of the topic. As with most disaster-related issues, the building of sustainable networks is crucial. The session on how livelihood can be protected and food security be obtained allowed a glimpse into the questions that were to be the main issue for the evening's public open forum.

Influenza pandemic could cause huge economic losses

The second plenary session of the day was looking into the consequences of pandemics and diseases regarding health, social welfare and economy. Diseases that used to be a local or maybe regional issue in earlier years, have suddenly become a global problem, threatening public health and welfare, economy and social stability. Huge numbers of people traveling all over the world are an ideal means to spread diseases with incredible speed. World Bank simulations of an influenza pandemic have revealed that not the actual mortality would cause the highest impact costs, but rather people's efforts to avoid infection. An influenza pandemic of moderate dimension, potentially causing a shocking 40 million fatalities globally, could result in almost 400 billion USD of economic losses for the United States alone, Switzerland having to deal with economic losses of around 11 billion USD. As already in the first plenary session of the day, the experts are certain that a new pandemic will come. One factor being crucial to the distribution of diseases is the transport of animals and tourists traveling. Every single day of the year, five to eight billion people travel internationally, not including domestic travels. The sources of the illnesses can in very many cases be found among animals rather than anywhere else. Scientists have found that each year two new organisms emerge that have the potential to bring on pandemics – and a stunning 98 % of those stem from the animal world. So if we want to prevent the uncontrollable spreading of fatal diseases, for instance the global transport of animals will have to be observed carefully. Veterinary and agricultural security is thus crucial to improve human security.

The public open forum, held in the evening, was dedicated to climate change induced migration, internal displacements and food security. Tomorrow's press release will provide more details on the issues discussed in the forum.

Have a look at tomorrow's program on www.idrc.info, and check our daily press release again 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.