

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

Press Release – Tuesday, 26 August 2008

Critical Infrastructure and Protection Resilience

Standardized regulations or rather small-scale, regional measures?

The second day of the International Disaster and Risk Conference IDRC 2008 in Davos focused on critical infrastructure and protection resilience. The morning's plenary session was looking into ways of how to cope with emerging threats in an international context. One of the experts discussing stated that the dependency aspect is extremely relevant. That means that external supply chains of countries are very vulnerable in any critical situation. The private sector is dependent on the critical infrastructure, be that power lines or transportation on road or railway. Thus, the impact of malfunctioning infrastructures on cash flows and stakeholders should be assessed in more detail. It is also important to understand that countries far away from any disasters, yet depending on the energy supply from more disaster prone areas of the world, have an equally threatened infrastructure. A European program for the protection of critical infrastructure is also putting an emphasis on preventing criminal activities that target infrastructure. A lot of examples were given, showing just how much we really depend on functioning structures – an instance was reported where a hacker manipulated the sewage system in Australia, making clear that IT systems are an essential link in the chain of protection. Even if the problems resemble each other in most countries of the world, it has to be remembered that developing countries do not and cannot operate on the same level as any western country, making it difficult to set worldwide standards for the protection of critical infrastructure. Statements from the audience highlighted the fact that regulations, standards and programs to protect infrastructure and enhance resilience need to be adapted to the financial means of the country concerned, and cannot be arranged according to a pre-arranged set of regulations. Country-specific, strongly localized measures are the key.

Psychology and cultural heritage strongly influence risk reduction

A large number of sessions discussed a variety of issues, presented by experts and practitioners alike. Topics ranged from the experiences made with risks in the context of cultural heritage, to the role of psychology in disaster risk reduction and to ethical and social aspects in disaster management. Further, it was explained in what way civilian structures could be designed to withstand terrorist attacks, or what is different regarding urban risks and how difficult it is to mitigate risks in mega-cities. Specialists from hospitals and catastrophe prevention centers looked into the risk assessment of health infrastructures, while another session tried to define necessary tools to make society more resilient towards multi-hazards.

Developing policies that allow better protection

The second plenary session of the day was dedicated to the question if new institutional frameworks would be needed to better protect critical infrastructure. In following-up on what had been said in the first plenary session of this morning, it was highlighted that "tailor-made" solutions have to be found and that in general it should be attempted to improve existing infrastructure instead of building it newly. Trying to protect critical infrastructures puts a focus on the human face of disasters. If frameworks and policies neglect cultural differences in human society, they will not be applied successfully. A representative from the energy sector, which is naturally high up on the list of vulnerable infrastructures, explained that they are very well prepared for potential disasters, being well aware of the threat that a failure would mean to the supply chain of a whole region or country. Yet, he specified that there is a lack of performance indicators, so that it is rather difficult to measure, how well they cope. Switzerland is having a very high level of preparedness, however, the communication seems to be the main issue – only information or warnings that reach the right person at the right time are of use. From the audience it was pointed out that countries, repeatedly struck by disasters, often do not learn from the experiences made to improve disaster preparedness, which could be explained by a lack of protection baselines.

The last plenary session of the day brought highly interesting news from the Kyrgyz Republic. Representatives of the government and specialists for nuclear safety presented the facts on the nuclear waste that was left in the Central Asian Republic by earlier mining operations. In an area highly prone to natural disasters this toxic waste is at risk to reach rivers or the groundwater, thus also polluting neighboring countries. The Minister of Emergency Situations of the Kyrgyz Republic showed a movie which impressively demonstrated the imminent threats, these uncontrolled dumps pose. Further, two experts reported on water-related disaster reduction, based on results obtained in a conference earlier this year. With an Asian culture program and refreshments, this second day of the IDRC 2008 ended.

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.