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Published in:
Climate and Development

DOI:
[10.1080/17565529.2013.825203](https://doi.org/10.1080/17565529.2013.825203)

2013

[Link to publication](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Wamsler, C. (2013). Managing risk: from the United Nations to local-level realities: or vice versa. *Climate and Development*, 5(3), 253-255. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17565529.2013.825203>

Total number of authors:

1

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Climate and Development

This paper has been peer-reviewed but does not include the
final publisher proof-corrections or journal pagination.

Citation for the published paper:

Wamsler, Christine
"Managing risk: from the United Nations to local-level realities – or vice versa"
Climate and Development
2013, vol. 5:3, pp. 253-255
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/17565529.2013.825203>

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Taylor & Francis

MEETING REPORT

Managing risk: from the United Nations to local-level realities – or vice versa

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The outcomes of the Fourth Session of the Global Platform for Disaster Risk Reduction show that making cities and rural areas safe from disasters and climate change impacts and enhancing citizens' resilience is everybody's business and part of the larger sustainability challenge. Under the theme 'Resilient People, Resilient Planet', the session took place on 19–23 May 2013 in Geneva, Switzerland. This paper underlines the significance of some of its outcomes, including the role of civil society and science in risk reduction and adaptation planning, and questions the common understanding that adaptation needs and benefits are local while mitigation needs and benefits are global.

Although initially criticized for excluding civil society perspectives, the Fourth Session of the Global Platform was ultimately successful in recognizing the importance of including all communities and the significance of personal responsibility and behavioural change in order to achieve a more integrated risk governance system. This is also a significant step towards the realization that wealth in high-income countries can drive risk in low-income countries, and that adaptation is likely to have global feedback links, which have not yet been explored. It is hoped that the further regional consultation processes associated with the post-2015 development of the Hyogo Framework for Action (HFA 2) will build on these outcomes to create concrete action plans, which are based on local-level realities and science that is appropriately linked to them. In this context, systems thinking, inter-disciplinary research and trans-disciplinary collaborations are crucial for narrowing the persistent gap between local-level realities, science and policy.

Keywords: adaptation; climate change; disaster risk; resilience; risk reduction; sustainable development; sustainability science

1. Background

The Fourth Session of the Global Platform for Disaster Risk Reduction, established in 2007 as a biennial forum, was held on 19–23 May 2013 in Geneva. The Global Platform is organized by the UNISDR, which is the United Nations office for disaster risk reduction (and adaptation) and the secretariat of the International Strategy for Disaster Reduction.

2. Consultation process at the fourth Global Platform harshly criticized

The overall theme of the fourth Global Platform was 'Resilient People, Resilient Planet'. It provided an opportunity to progress and consult on the Hyogo Framework for Action (HFA) and prepare for its post-2015 framework (HFA 2). The HFA is a 10-year plan to make the world safer from natural hazards, which include climatic extremes and variability. Its aim is a 'substantial reduction of disaster losses, in lives and the social, economic and environmental assets of communities and countries' (UNISDR, 2007, p. 3; UNISDR, n.d.). It was adopted by 168 Member States of the United Nations in 2005 at the World Disaster Reduction Conference. The current HFA expires in 2015.

The fourth Global Platform attracted civil society in greater numbers than ever before and with greater unity of purpose. Over 40 members of the Global Network of Civil Society Organisations for Disaster Reduction (GNDR) joined 3500 delegates from 171 countries, including heads of state and United Nations organizations, representatives from national and local government, the private sector, non-governmental organizations, scientists and practitioners. The GNDR was initiated with the firm support of the United Nations-International Strategy for Disaster Reduction (UN-ISDR) Secretariat in collaboration with the Special Unit for South-South Cooperation, under the United Nations Development Programme (see www.globalnetwork-dr.org). The network was officially launched in Geneva during the first session of the Global Platform for Disaster Risk Reduction in June 2007. It is committed to working together to improve disaster risk reduction policy and practice at every level of decision-making.

During the fourth Global Platform, the UNISDR's consultation process for HFA 2 received harsh criticism from many civil society representatives. There were two main reasons for this. First, many disapproved of the fact that the summary report of the Fourth Session was not drafted by a committee that included civil society (as was the case in 2011). Second,

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the ‘forced’ withdrawal of a 3-minute video produced by the GNDR created even more disappointment. The UNISDR ‘explained that it wasn’t an option to show the video’ since it portrayed an overly negative picture (Oxley, 2013).

3. Reducing (the increase in) disaster losses

The video in question starts with the words: ‘disaster losses are increasing’. It is based on the GNDR’s ‘Views from the Frontline’ project, which was designed to establish a global architecture to independently measure progress towards implementation of disaster risk reduction measures at the local level. It is the third bottom-up report of its kind. It draws together different sources of information including surveys in 57 low- and medium-income countries that involved 21,455 informants (GNDR, 2013).

Despite the wide-ranging frustrations of civil society organizations, they continued to carry out a variety of advocacy activities during the Global Platform, seeking to share local challenges, successes and reality with influential parties at a national and international level. They considered whether to withdraw their participation in protest, or to maintain the spirit of partnership and try to ensure that the reality of life at the local level for members was communicated in other ways. GNDR Executive Director, Marcus Oxley took the decision to take the diplomatic option – with success! The GNDR managed to get virtually all their recommendations reflected in the Chair’s Summary.

Central role of communities

Unexpectedly, the report summarizing the fourth Global Platform states that for sustainably reducing risk, ‘systematic and meaningful inclusion of communities in planning, decision-making and policy implementation is a must’ (UNISDR, 2013, p. 3). Civil society representatives congratulated the UNISDR for this statement during the Final Plenary session. The statement is linked to the summary report’s call for more integrated risk governance and planning which must ‘be rooted in a strong acceptance of personal responsibility and commitment to behavioural change’ (UNISDR, 2013, p. 3).

However, what the summary does not make very explicit is the importance of community inclusion and behavioural change for improving risk governance in all nations, and especially the wealthier parts of society. This is an essential precondition to target the root causes of risk. Although not included in the summary, but courageously mentioned during the Final Plenary session by Margareta Wahlström, the Special Representative of the Secretary-General (SRSG) for Disaster Risk Reduction:

Affluence drives risk, and not including all communities in the vision for the future will be a missed opportunity to ensure a resilience perspective (Wahlström, 2013).

Affluence in high-income nations can drive risk within and, importantly, outside national borders. These nations first need to ‘sweep’ their own doorsteps and take localized initiatives – instead of sending ‘brooms’ from in-country production to other countries (to boost their own economy), buying cheap, imported products (which may create hazards and vulnerable conditions for others), and investing only in hierarchical risk governance structures. As with climate change mitigation, disaster risk reduction and climate change adaptation have to become recognized as global issues, which require local action from all nations and their citizens – even in countries that themselves do not have strong adaptation needs. The understanding that adaptation needs and benefits are local, while mitigation needs and benefits are global (cf. IPCC, 2007), advertises an incomprehensive understanding of risk and risk reduction and is dreadfully misleading.

Central role of science

Another important outcome of the fourth Global Platform was the explicitly recognized ‘unmet demand for data, tools, methods and guidance on implementing risk reduction’ and the call to the scientific community to fill this demand, educate specialists for this task and assist in narrowing the science-policy gap (UNISDR, 2013, p. 4). How to effectively govern the multiple foci of disaster risk reduction and adaptation is still an area where there are few practical examples of what is effective, and should thus become a growing research field (Wamsler, 2013). Research into *local* action for *global* adaptation is even more unexplored, and relates to the summary report’s statement that ‘urban risk needs to be more fully understood’ (UNISDR, 2013, p. 2), together with related, urban–rural linkages.

This is an urgent call for sustainability science and Mode 2 knowledge production, which address the interface between science and practice (at global, regional, national and local levels), as well as the task of how to ‘operationalize’ sustainability. Such approaches demand systems thinking, inter-disciplinary research and trans-disciplinary collaborations (Clark, 2007; Kates et al., 2001; Lang et al., 2012). However, they are often still seen as inferior to basic science (where the test of practical utility does not apply) (Gibbons et al., 1994; Ziman, 1996).

4. Conclusions

Under the theme ‘Resilient People, Resilient Planet’, the Fourth Session of the Global Platform took place on 19–23 May 2013 in Geneva. Although initially criticized for excluding civil society perspectives, the session was ultimately successful in recognizing the importance of (all) communities’ inclusion and of personal responsibility and behavioural change for the achievement of a more integrated risk governance system. This is a significant step

towards the realization that wealth in high-income countries can drive risk in low-income countries, and that adaptation is likely to have global feedback links, which have not yet been explored. In this context, systems thinking, inter-disciplinary research and trans-disciplinary collaborations are crucial for narrowing the gap between local-level realities, science and policy.

Next steps: alleviation of global adaptation needs through localized risk reduction

The outcomes of the Fourth Session are a testimony to the increasing but always-challenged consensus that making cities and rural areas safe from disasters and climate change impacts and enhancing citizens' resilience is everybody's business and part of the larger sustainability challenge. It is hoped that the further regional consultation processes associated with HFA 2 will build on these outcomes to create concrete action plans, which are based on local-level realities and science that is appropriately linked to them.

Finally, if a resilient planet with resilient people is the aim, HFA 2 requires enforceable targets and increased accountability on the part of governments in low-, middle- and high-income nations to ensure an environment that enables citizens' involvement and participation in localized risk reduction *and* in the alleviation of global adaptation needs.

Acknowledgements

Thanks to Ebba Brink for her support in finalizing this paper. The author declares that she has no financial or personal relationship(s) which may have inappropriately influenced her in writing this paper.

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