Core Terminology of Disaster Reduction

by
Katharina Thywissen
United Nations University – Institute of Environment and Human Security

Introduction

The extent of disasters and their foreboding trend to increase imply that the problem of disasters will have to be addressed by the world community in the coming years. In the course of the IDNDR, the International Decade of Disaster Reduction (1990-1999), and of many other initiatives that have been spawned over the last years, disaster reduction has gained a lot of momentum and attention. The tolls that disasters are and will be taking have repercussions on countries' development, economies, and environment in all regions of the world. Human Security and livelihoods are severely compromised.

The Paradigm Shift

There has been a paradigm shift in some vital concepts evolving around the human livelihood. The human being is moving more and more into the centre of attention. The general understanding of Security has shifted from the nationalistic and militaristic perspective to a more individual, humanitarian one, Human Security. Another paradigm shift has taken place from income poverty (financial affluence) to human poverty (well-being). This shift has been paralleled in disaster management by a shift from seeing disasters as extreme events created by natural forces, to viewing them as manifestations of unresolved development problems [17].

Approaches in disaster reduction have become much more complex and emphasis is shifted from relief to mitigation. Consequently vulnerability, resilience, and coping capacities gain a more prominent role and more light is being shed on socio-economic, political, and cultural factors.

Integrated disaster reduction depends on the collaboration and exchange between experts from a multitude of disciplines and competencies. Those range from science, over policy building and civil society to disaster relief and rehabilitation. Approaches applied can be quantitative in nature as well as qualitative or descriptive and many fields have cultivated their own understanding and hence their own definitions of terms. As a consequence, communication within the disaster reduction community is often encumbered and misunderstandings are common.

"Babylonian Confusion"

A shared language and shared concepts are crucial stepping stones in the process of widening the understanding and effectiveness of disaster reduction. The definition of a term intends to explain its content and context in a logically consistent way while ensuring the widespread acceptance of peers. Definitions of terms have simultaneously and homogeneously grown in many disciplines. However, multi-disciplinarity often results in the same term being defined in different ways by the various disciplines involved. Most of these sometimes colliding definitions are valid in their respective contexts and cannot be discarded. But in order to enable collaboration and communication free of misunderstanding it is crucial to make the different definitions known across the disciplines and, in the long-term, to facilitate the emergence of a common vocabulary and preferably that of unique, well formulated definitions and concepts.

Terms and concepts are not just an academic exercise but have real importance in the practical world. The language used by workers in the disaster field frames, focuses, and limits the kinds of questions they ask [25].

Before working on disaster risk reduction differing perceptions, interests, and methodologies have to be recognized and a broad consensus on targets, strategies and methodologies has to be reached [17]. That shows that definitions and concepts are needed at every level of disaster reduction.

Common, coordinated, and consequent approaches to risk reduction can only be achieved if there is a common agreement as to the structure of the problem and as to the basic notions, concepts, and terms used in its definition [15].

The Moral Aspect of Disaster Reduction

To an unknown extent the exacerbation of the environmental deterioration and climate change has been brought about by today's developed countries and the developing countries are in the very act of repeating the same processes and harmful activities only exponentiated by the sheer size of their population. The resulting increase of disaster frequencies should alarm all countries alike but the developed countries are facing this situation with a heightened responsibility for the poor countries because it is the population of the developing countries that suffer most from disasters.

If the Millennium Development Goals carry any clout, the direct link between poverty and disaster impact implies a moral obligation for the international community to address both in a concerted way. Cannon (1994) points out that "it may be true that most of the suffering in disasters is experienced by poor people, it may not be the case that all poor suffer. Nor is it only the poor who suffer, but the impact of hazards may well be a factor in creating newly impoverished people." [106].

Risk usually involves a decision by the person at risk (to take the risk or not) always presuming the individual knows about the risk. According to Cardona (2003) [107] and Lavell (2003) [15], risk must be associated with decision if it is to have any relevance as a notion and concept. Thus, one objective of disaster reduction is to raise awareness and make sure that people understand their risk. Another objective inevitably is to see to it that people are in a situation to make choices and that directly leads to poverty reduction because poverty by definition reduces people's choices.

With risk also comes responsibility and the question of morality arises. However, there is no direct moral valuation of risk because the level of acceptable risk is highly subjective and highly variable. What complicates the matter further is the fact that the perception of probability connected with the risk varies from individual to individual, group to group etc. [26].

UNU-EHS' stance

UNU-EHS (United Nations University – Institute for Environment and Human Security) as a member institute of the UNU forms a bridge between the UN and the academic world, is a think tank for the UN, and provides a platform for dialogue and ideas. UNU-EHS aims to improve the in-depth understanding of the cause-effect relationships building up to disasters in order to find possible ways to increase human security. As an academic institution, UNU-EHS aims at strengthening the capabilities of individuals and institutions to address the potential impacts of hazards and their associated risks and vulnerabilities, turning research results into practical knowledge through training and other forms of human capacity building. Therefore common terminology and definitions are essential pre-requisites for a focussed scientific debate, interdisciplinary approaches and ultimately for improved disaster reduction. In front of this background UNU-EHS has started to compile a comparative glossary in a peer review process in co-operation with the UN ISDR.

The Comparative Glossary

In this first draft a list of core terms from the cause-and-effect chain of disasters has been selected and their definitions put up for discussion among peers. There are already a number of listings of terms published (e.g. ISDR, UNDP, UNEP, IPCC , DKKV, BBK). However, they generally lack the juxtaposition of the definitions of various disciplines because they want to spell out the definitions they are using and this way they probably attempt to put an end to a situation often perceived as a "Babylonian confusion". This comparative glossary in contrast aims at informing experts of different disciplines about the various, sometimes contradicting definitions currently used or referred to in the field of disaster mitigation. Even if some terms are defined differently by different disciplines, it is vital to make those differences in terminology known across the disaster reduction community to avoid misunderstandings and to enhance knowledge, mutual understanding and efficiency of disaster reduction.

The outcome will be a glossary of terms with definitions as concise as possible and as diverse and elaborate as necessary. It does not claim to be exhaustive; it rather focuses on a selection of terms that are typically used across multiple disciplines and that are central to the cause-and-effect chain of disaster reduction.

Terms and definitions are collected from the literature including several reports that already offer glossaries of disaster reduction terms.

Disciplines and sectors represented so far are:

Insurance Industry,
UN System
Natural Sciences
Social Sciences
Science (multidisciplinary)
Economics
Engineering
Governance/Policy
Civil Society
Disaster Relief

This collection of terms is the basis for peer review through an international, multidisciplinary group of experts to add to or make recommendations and suggestions for those definitions listed. Continued peer review and revisions will follow until the end of 2005.