

# Catastrophes afflict poor the most

By *David D. Caron*

Amid the scramble to provide aid following the tsunami in the Indian Ocean, international conferences will be convened to consider how humanity may be more ready the next time. This is the pattern: The international order for reducing the harm from disasters has grown case by case. It is fragmented and inadequate, leaving many holes in the collective effort and often rendering emergency assistance as much a matter of luck as of planning.

Historically, catastrophes have not been a successful lens for international organization because the notion can embrace too many issues to be manageable. It is as though one finds that the microscope one chooses to approach a problem only can be held upside down, and that instead of focusing one's attention, it demands that one consider more and more.

To succeed, the conference conveners must divide early into two major working groups with quite different, yet complementary, missions. Because delegates will arrive with two very different images of the problem, they will disagree about what even constitutes a catastrophe. Unless two major working groups are established at outset, it can be expected that the conference will become mired in a discussion of the scope of the problem.

The key factor that will divide the conference is poverty. A primary determinant of both the risk of a catastrophe and the extent of the harm following one is the poverty of the affected community. Catastrophes are regressive. For example, a community on the edge of starvation overuses its soil and clear cuts its timber, thereby increasing the likelihood that a natural fluctuation in rainfall will cascade into a catastrophic event. Similarly, it is most likely the community without resources that will not adequately plan for catastrophe — i.e., by building health-care facilities.

People everywhere are vulnerable to natural disasters. But while industrialized countries suffer greater economic damages in absolute terms, poor countries are

impacted more severely in relative terms: GNP lost due to natural disasters is estimated to be 20 times greater in developing countries than in developed ones. Also, deaths from natural disasters are more frequent in poor countries. Japan, for example, averages 63 deaths per year from natural disasters. Peru, with similar natural hazards and only one sixth the population, averages 2,900 deaths per year, according to U.N. data.

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are also the boundaries of their fate. It is these communities, unable to marshal resources to protect themselves, that are most at risk. Poverty's influence can be seen in the recent tragedy, where some of the victims were unnecessarily exposed to danger. It is the same poverty that has hampered rescue and assistance efforts, and it threatens the spread of disease that ultimately may compete in scope with original catastrophe.

Once the importance of poverty is recognized, then the mission of addressing catastrophes begins to grow in scope very quickly. If the international community seeks to prevent crippling catastrophes, a logical policy is to increase directed development assistance to poor areas. And that recommendation historically is difficult because it is simultaneously an attempt to respond to the large disparities in global wealth distribution. Thus the need for two working groups mentioned at the start: One to address the international provision of assistance following a catastrophe (the acute policy challenge) and one to ad-

dress the reduction of risk in vulnerable areas through the provision of assistance (the chronic policy challenge).

Both problems must be addressed. But if the division is not made, the discussion of the chronic poverty endured in much of the world will threaten to overwhelm and block progress on the suffering following a catastrophe. A two-pronged approach allows work on the chronic challenge to move forward while ensuring that significant progress is made on rapid and effective humanitarian assistance to ease the acute suffering that follows a catastrophe.

The truth is that the poverty that bears down on much of the world is itself a catastrophe beyond measure, yet humanity has numbed itself to the daily suffering of the world's poor. But a catastrophe such as the recent tsunami in the Indian Ocean surprises the heart. A catastrophe, like lightning, illuminates the world unexpectedly. And in that clear vision of so much pain, there is a feeling of solidarity with our fellow beings. For a time, this feeling will drive international events. It will lead to both responses for this catastrophe and to negotiations on how to mitigate the harm felt in the next.

Catastrophes are not rare events at the margin, nor are they addressed by such policy tools as tariffs. Catastrophes are a part of human history and endeavor. They pervade our lives and are a certain part of our future. Catastrophes humble the human effort to bring order to the world. Catastrophes will continue because the world is violent and people only rarely cautious. This tragedy is built into the fabric of existence.

But as in all sobering recognition of limits, there is simultaneously an empowering insight into what is possible. In accepting their inevitability, many actions can be taken to prevent certain catastrophes, and many more steps may be taken to mitigate the suffering to come.

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