

A BIG STEP IN REDUCING THE RISK OF DISASTERS

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An aerial view of a flooded area in Sanchore, Rajasthan. Cyclone Biparjoy caused heavy rainfall in the region in June. | Photo Credit: PTI

Disasters around the world are claiming more and more lives. The consequences of climate change are already on our doorstep. Ten days ago, three continents were gripped by heat waves. Massive forest fires have ravaged parts of Greece and Canada. Two weeks ago, the river Yamuna breached the highest flood level, recorded 45 years ago, and inundated parts of Delhi.

The cost of these disasters is yet to be determined. However, it is clear that the world needs to do more to prevent the risk of losses from all disasters, whether they are weather-related, earthquakes, or biological like COVID-19. For too long, countries have spent billions responding to disasters rather than paying a little upfront to prevent or reduce their impact.

We are at the midpoint of the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015-2030, which is the global road map for reducing disaster risks and losses. While progress has been made, we are not where we need to be. However, with a renewed sense of urgency and a people-centred approach, we can significantly reduce disaster losses by 2030.

One good news is that countries are finally coming around to the value of disaster risk reduction, which India has elevated as a priority for G20 through its presidency of the group. Specifically, India has established the first G20 Disaster Risk Reduction Working Group.

Countries that make up the G20 hold around 85% of the global GDP and about two-thirds of the world population. And as human vulnerability to disasters is strongly linked to economic decisions, the G20 is in a unique position to chart a new path of disaster risk-informed decision-making. This means not only considering the potential impact of economic decisions on disaster risks, but also leveraging economic tools to reduce existing risks and prevent new ones. This type of foresight is critical if countries wish to protect their people and grow their economies in the face of increasing and inter-connected risks.

That is why we welcome the priorities identified by the G20 Disaster Risk Reduction Working Group, which form the basis for the Communiqué being negotiated in Chennai. These are in direct support of the calls to action of the May 2023 Political Declaration of the UN General Assembly on the midterm review of the Sendai Framework. Of particular note are those around enhancing early warning systems, resilient infrastructure, and financing for disaster risk

reduction.

Expanding disaster early warning and early action systems is a top priority. Inclusive and multi-hazard early warning systems are among the most effective means of reducing disaster deaths and economic losses. During Cyclone Biparjoy, effective systems for end-to-end early warning and action helped achieve zero deaths from the event in India. Preparedness of the power sector helped reduce the disruption time in power supply in the aftermath of the cyclone.

The promise of disruptive technologies can help many countries leapfrog into a regime where they can use global capacity for forecasting to meet local needs. To that end, we are working to realise the goal of the UN Secretary General's Early Warnings for All Initiative, which seeks to create universal coverage for everyone by the end of 2027.

Enhancing the resilience of infrastructure to withstand climate and disaster risks is another global priority. From New Zealand, which saw the flooding of Auckland airport, to the U.S., where a pharmaceutical plant was destroyed by a tornado, every country can benefit from assessing and enhancing the resilience of its critical infrastructure.

Infrastructure has a long life cycle, and if built well, can lock-in resilience as opposed to risk. That same infrastructure also becomes the lifeline of recovery during a crisis. Hence, infrastructure, whether economic or social, is ultimately about people and it must lead to sustainable development outcomes for them.

That is why India launched with the UN in 2019 the Coalition for Disaster Resilient Infrastructure, to spur policy development and capacity support for disaster resilient infrastructure, especially in developing countries. We are currently collaborating to create a global methodology for conducting infrastructure resilience reviews and stress testing, based on the Principles for Resilient Infrastructure.

Failure to adopt an integrated perspective to understand risks to infrastructure, and its impact on development, has the potential to multiply losses, which disproportionately impact the poor, who subsequently take the longest time to recover.

Finally, developing a new approach to financing disaster risk reduction is needed to transform risk reduction plans into concrete actions. This effort must be led by finance and economy ministries in collaboration with the private sector because the current funding deficit for disaster risk reduction is too large for governments to manage alone, and many of the risks generated are by the private sector.

G20 nations like Indonesia and India have used risk metrics to allocate resources at the sub-national and local levels for disaster risk reduction. These need to be studied and scaled.

Building on these areas of work, scaling up ecosystem-based approaches and enhancing national and local response capacities will be the responsibility of the next G20 presidents. To that end, we are delighted to hear that Brazil, which will assume the Presidency of the G20 in December, has committed to continuing the working group and building on what India has started.

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