

Experts Discuss How Prevention Pays: Saving Lives and Minimizing Destruction in Natural Disasters

Phnom Penh, March 31, 2011 AKP –Specialists convened here yesterday for the Cambodia launch of a joint World Bank-United Nations report showing how preventive measures can lower vulnerability to natural hazards such as earthquakes, storms, floods and droughts.

Natural Hazards, UnNatural Disasters: the Economics of Effective Prevention, globally released last November, estimates that the number of people exposed to storms and earthquakes in large cities could double to 1.5 billion by 2050, according to a news release of the World Bank.

Damages from disasters can be catastrophic, as the world is witnessing now in the tragic aftermath of Japan's earthquake and tsunami. However, prevention is critical, a lesson that surely save many lives in Japan.

According to the report, by 2100, even without climate change, damages from weather-related hazards may triple to US\$185 billion annually and factoring in climate change could push costs even higher. In the case of tropical cyclones it would add another US\$28-68 billion, says Natural Hazards. But the report argues that much can be done to reduce the toll from such hazards—even in the face of increased risk from climate change.

"A deeper questioning of what happened, and why, could prevent a repetition of disasters," says the report, a two-year collaboration of climate scientists, economists, geographers, political scientists and psychologists. The report has received praise from six Nobel Laureates, among others.

"Typhoon Ketsana inflicted huge losses on our country in term of social economic and development," said H.E. Ross Sovann, Deputy Secretary General, National Committee for Disaster and Management and Ketsana Project Manager. "Because Cambodia is prone to natural hazards and has limited coping capacity, we should all agree that doing a better job in preventing disasters will help us will try deal with tomorrow's challenges."

Cost-Effective Measures Possible

A key message of the report is that "prevention pays, but you don't always have to pay more for prevention," says report team leader Apurva Sanghi, a World Bank senior economist. Cost-effective preventive measures include greater access to hazard-related information and regulatory changes to remove distortions, such as abolishing rent and price controls and providing secure titles to encourage better repair and upkeep of buildings. The report also proposes cost-effective, hazard-specific infrastructure: for example, schools that double as cyclone shelters or roadways that double as drains. Sometimes increased spending is warranted—for example to develop and maintain early warning systems—and "even modest increases can have enormous benefits," says the report.

"This is an important and timely report," said Mr. Qimiao Fan, Cambodia Country Manager, World Bank. "The message that prevention pays if done right will certainly resonate in Cambodia."

The report was funded by the Global Facility for Disaster Reduction and Recovery, a partnership of 35 countries and six international organizations, including the World Bank, which helps developing countries reduce their vulnerability to natural hazards and adapt to climate change. –AKP