BACKGROUND NOTE SESSION 3

The challenge of sustainable cities: Building inclusive urban infrastructure to withstand disaster risks

Cities in Asia are currently undergoing one of the fastest urbanisation processes in the world and this is forecasted to continue in the coming decades. While cities stand to benefit from the positive economic impacts of urbanisation, they also face unprecedented challenges, including the lack of urban infrastructure, social inequalities and environmental degradation.

One of the most serious challenges for Asian cities is the vulnerability to natural disasters that are further exacerbated by the unpredictable effects of climate change. Asia continues to be one of the most disaster-prone regions in the world. Natural disasters are a serious obstacle to realising poverty reduction and sustainable development, as they threaten lives and undermine long-standing development efforts. In 2015, disasters resulted in over 16,000 fatalities and generated over USD 41 billion in economic damages in the Asia-Pacific region. Immediate action is necessary to prevent damages and costs from escalating further. Climate change, higher concentrations of people and assets in risk-prone areas, and closer economic links between countries through global value chains imply that the impacts of such events have the potential to spread more quickly across borders and business sectors.

Governments, local authorities and civil society have become increasingly aware of the fragility of major urban centres when disasters occur. Asian cities are no exception, and are in fact among those most exposed to the impacts of climate change and other natural disasters. In particular, coastal cities are at a much higher risk. Disaster risk reduction is an indispensable element in realising sustainable cities.

Yet, disasters will occur no matter how hard we work to create cities resilient against them. That is why early warning, evacuation, preparation for rapid disaster response and smooth reconstruction efforts are all necessary to protect human lives. It also is necessary to raise public awareness about natural disasters and disaster risk reduction efforts. In this regard, November 5 was designated as the "World Tsunami Awareness Day" in December 2015.

Governments play a key role in ensuring that large metropolitan areas are resilient to major risks, guaranteeing the safety and welfare of the public, and maintaining public trust. The OECD Toolkit for Risk Governance (TRIG) aims at providing reference points and practical guidance for countries in areas such as risk assessment, strengthening the public/private interface for preparedness, investment in resilience, or strategic crisis management.

Policy issues

Growing role of cities in sustainable development and coordination across levels of government

The rapid urbanisation in Asia demonstrates the increasing potential for cities and regions in achieving sustainable development at the national and global scale. It also calls for effective coordination between national and subnational governments. A national urban policy (NUP) is expected to create an enabling, collaborative and cooperative institutional environment to realise sustainable and resilient cities, as demonstrated in the New Urban Agenda adopted at the Habitat III Conference.

Fostering urban resilience for critical infrastructure

The resilience and rapid recovery of infrastructure service systems after disasters is vital. Critical urban infrastructure such as energy, transportation and telecommunication networks are increasingly complex and interconnected. As the ownership and management of these networks are increasingly divided between public and private actors, the maintenance of appropriate standards of reliability for critical services poses challenges. Greater coordination is thus necessary to strengthen urban resilience.

Mainstreaming risk management

The mainstreaming of risk management policies across sectors and administrative levels is essential as outlined in the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015-2030. Countries need to systematically consider disaster risk reduction in sectoral public investment strategies and planning. The local level is particularly important, and requires the establishment of legal frameworks for local responsibilities, including risk sensitive regulation in land-use zoning and private real estate development.

Shifting the governance of risk

Risk governance includes the need to develop a long term disaster management strategy, and a long-term financial strategy, as well as educating and preparing citizens on the risks they are exposed to. There is a need to avoid the current over-reliance on governments in post-disaster risk financing. Instead, incentives for non-governmental risk management actors should be encouraged to increase the effectiveness of risk reduction investments.

Raising public awareness

A core element of reducing loss of life and damage from natural disasters is widespread public awareness and education. Policy makers face the challenge of designing appropriate risk communication techniques that reach the targeted audiences, that are specific and realistic for local conditions, and that induce the desired changes in behaviour and perception.

Localising Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

The important role of cities is increasingly recognised in global agendas such as the SDGs, particularly Goal 11 (make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable). Localising SDGs is not only critical for monitoring and supporting the implementation of national and global goals, but also a powerful tool for cities and regions to (re)think sustainability and well-being at the scale that matters the most.

Questions for discussion

- How to effectively incorporate the disaster risk reduction perspective into cities' policies and urban planning, and deepen people's awareness of natural disasters and disaster risk reduction?
- What are the challenges that national and municipal authorities face in developing quality infrastructure that also is resilient to disasters?
- What are the roles of national urban policies to guide sustainable and resilient urban development?
- How can cities translate and integrate the SDGs into their urban policy frameworks to achieve sustainability and resilience? How can national governments support localising SDGs?
- What makes a smart city "smart" and learning lessons from localised smart urban strategies?