

Xiulan Zhang, Dean and Professor
School of Social Development and Public Policy, Beijing Normal University, China
Lessons from Wenchuan Mega Earthquake: A Social Development Perspective

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1. China's Disaster Risk Reduction Lessons from Wenchuan Experience, with regard to protecting critical public facilities like schools and hospitals

- Enforcement of existing regulations, eg. Building code: evidences indicated that the enforcement of building code is a major problem, for that if all is designed for VII, then the building structure would have at least sustained for a few minutes which are critical for saving lives. A concrete example would be the Liuhan Hope School, it did not lose a single student. However, the Wenchuan earthquake has claimed thousands of lives of children and teachers, and also caused injuries of over 10 thousands. The same situation for the hospitals, not only the casualty and injuries of the health workers, over 50% of the health facilities got damaged in the hardest hit counties and cities. Not only the damages of the health facilities, health care workers, and the equipments will affect the health service provisions and capacities after the quake in the region, thinking about the over 370,000 injuries, they have to be moved out of the region for treatment. The crucial time for treatment will save many lives, reduce the rate of disabilities, if they could be treated locally and timely.
- Lack of considerations for critical public facilities in disaster mitigation. Example of Japan, which has policy to make school building a higher standard against earthquake hazard, which not only protect student but also serve as local evacuation centers when disaster happen. Hospital should be in the same category.
- In general, the biggest lesson of all probably is the lack of adequate awareness and attention for disaster risk reduction (prevention and mitigation) during rapid development. There are also many institutional as well as risk coping capacity lessons, for example, lack of capacity for quick appraisal of emergency situations; inadequate preparedness (equipments for rescue operation and materials for emergency response), coordination mechanism for the involvement of NGOs and civil society in general (volunteers). There is also the issue of how to cope with catastrophic risks, including the needs for disaster insurance and other financial mechanisms.
- Lessons can also be learned on the involvement of local residents. We could see the situation that the outside rescue teams were moving in and the residents were moving out. In those remote areas, the local residents have the knowledge of where the people live, and how to get there. When saving lives relied on hours, it would be crucial to establish timely contact with the local residents and use the information to guide the rescue effort. We saw gaps in this area. Same things happened for the volunteers, with so many of them flooding in the quake areas, without mechanisms

of linking them to the local needs, it would result not only waster of resources, but also would cause confusions.

2. The importance to social development priorities of protecting public facilities, in the context of the Wenchuan experience

- In addition to the points 1 and 2 above, perhaps, at a more fundamental level the importance lies in how to measure the quality of development. Where to invest and how to invest as we develop and accumulate wealth is and should be a measure of "sound" development - speed is nice, but it should be "Good and Fast", the component of disaster risk coping capacity will have to be an integral part of a good development. An example is the education. In the 1990s, the goal was to expand the 9 years compulsory education. While it was good to offer the educational opportunities to all children, but the building safety was largely ignored.
- Public spending needs to priorities toward building safe public facilities, especially the schools and hospitals. And the participation of communities and monitoring mechanisms need to be established to make sure that the public facility safety is included into the development policies.

3. Top 3 pieces of advice as learned from the Chinese experience, in mainstreaming disaster risk reduction into social development

- As we have discussed, perhaps the most important one is the clear delineation of roles, responsibilities, as well as coordination among key actors, including governments (central and local), private sector, and public. This is even more so in the Chinese context with rapid transition from a centralized planning economy to an increasingly market based one, from rural to urban, from a very egalitarian to a society in which disparities among social groups and regions is a major concern (rural urban, rich and poor, west and east, etc). The space of "social" in the development process is quite limited and the government needs to involve all stakeholders.
- The second will have to be the awareness of disaster risk and development for both government and public. While China has the right strategic orientation for disaster risk reduction (i.e., prevention and mitigation as foundation, combined with relief and assistance), mainstreaming such a strategy into development planning still has a long way to go.
- The third one, perhaps, is a question rather than a clear lesson. That is, while China is capable of powerful and massive mobilization in disaster emergency response, how such approach would feature scientifically remain to be a question, i.e. the cost and effectiveness, the often misleading effect on the responsibilities of disaster risk reduction, etc. Of course, this is not particularly Chinese lesson. So, alternatively, a third point may also be on the openness and transparent communication that has demonstrated in the Wenchuan case, which is normally a major weakness in the past, eg., Tangshan, SARS, etc.