



The man who can

Emily Hough speaks to Salvano Briceño, Director of the United Nations' International Strategy for Disaster Reduction, who discusses June's Global Platform, harnessing political will, policy issues and the need to exploit the positive opportunities that a disaster can present

Salvano Briceño: "Politicians and economic leaders are always tempted to use disasters as a visible opportunity for their work"

photo: National Geographic / Natalie Biraben / Tom Wagner

IN 2005, 168 GOVERNMENTS FROM around the world adopted the United Nations' Hyogo Framework for Action (HFA) 2005-2015: Building the Resilience of Nations and Communities to Disasters. This seeks to reduce disaster losses, in terms of mortality, as well as in social, economic and environmental contexts.

The Global Platform for Disaster Risk Reduction, a mechanism to help meet the HFA's aims, was convened for the first time this June in Geneva, Switzerland (see *CRJ* 3:4). More than 1,150 high-level participants engaged in this platform, seeking to raise awareness on reducing disaster risk, share experience and to guide the UN's International Strategy for Disaster Reduction (ISDR). Representatives included governments, UN agencies, international financial institutions, regional bodies, civil society, the private sector and scientific and academic communities.

In the high-level dialogue during the platform, Robin Burgess of the London School of Economics identified a lack of political will as being a fundamental problem, prompting my first question to Mr Briceño: how best to achieve political and governmental 'buy-in' to the risk reduction and preparedness concepts that the ISDR is promoting?

"This is precisely the first priority of the HFA, our main policy guidance document at the international level," he replies, explaining that political will is vital as a first step. Most governments and institutions commit resources to disaster response, with the best of intentions, but: "The real issue is that accumulating those resources to be used only when a disaster strikes, does not help to avoid or reduce those disasters in the first place." This has prompted a proposal to devote ten per cent of those resources earmarked for response to risk reduction, on the premise that this is a better use of resources than when "people are already dead or affected".

The fact that the Hyogo conference took place just three weeks after the Indian Ocean tsunami certainly helped to focus the minds of those who took part, according to Mr Briceño, sparking participants' interest and generating initiatives to address risk reduction. But, despite intentions, will and behaviour being in place much more is needed, he emphasises.

"There are still too many embedded traditional approaches and concepts of understanding that are difficult to change," he explains,

with the most difficult hurdle being that of a serious misconception. "Because such events are termed 'natural' disasters, many people assume that they are inevitable, acts of God or nature, and that there is nothing they can do. We need to change this: it is not the earthquake that kills people, it is poorly built buildings."

The second challenge is that of harnessing the power and impact of an actual disaster in order to persuade the relevant authorities to integrate risk reduction approaches and to build back better, not just focussing on immediate disaster rescue or relief efforts.

OPPORTUNITY

Mr Briceño continues: "Politicians and economic leaders are always tempted to use disasters as a visible opportunity for their work. This is very human and everyone does it, so it is something that we must understand and work with. The disaster captures everybody's attention and these opportunities must be used politically."

When asked whether it is difficult to focus minds and efforts on reconstruction to make a damaged environment and community more resilient in the wake of a disaster, Mr Briceño agrees emphatically: "Absolutely, this is one of the challenges. But if you are aware at that moment that this is one of the approaches that you must build in, then you can do it gradually in an organised way and there is always an appropriate moment to do it." He uses the example of former US President Bill Clinton's work after the tsunami to illustrate this point: "Acting as the Special Envoy to the Secretary General of the UN for the tsunami recovery, he promoted risk reduction approaches in the recovery effort very strongly.

"Bill Clinton was convinced of this approach because in his previous experience as a Governor in the US, and then later as President, he was very well advised, especially by his top man on the subject, James Lee Witt (former head of FEMA)."

This logical approach must also be handled with sensitivity and naturally the first priority is to rescue people, deal with the immediate aftermath of a disaster and provide relief to survivors. "But as soon as things calm down slightly and the reconstruction phase begins, that is when you must explain to people that it is in their interest not to rebuild as before, but better." Pressures inevitably come to bear, as demonstrated by the recent floods in the UK, where householders are desperate to move back into their homes, preferably exactly as they were prior to the flooding. Anecdotal horror stories of botched jobs by cowboy builders abound, and it is debatable whether much

thought has been paid to making the buildings more capable of withstanding future floods. Mr Briceño comments: "In the UK there is more awareness and understanding of these issues, and yet still you will find pressure to build quicker and not care about reducing risk."

Moving on from governmental issues to those of policy, there has been a conceptual evolution in risk reduction policy in many countries and institutions, says Mr Briceño. This transition shifts the focus from preparing to respond to a disaster, to a risk-reduction approach. Disaster management organisations are those primarily affected by this progression. First responders have a more direct relationship with communities that could be affected by a disaster, so firefighters, civil protection and civil defence organisations, as well as the humanitarian response community, already know of the need to increase prevention awareness. Mr Briceño elaborates: "We have seen very good examples in Australia, Canada, Cuba, Japan, China, India, Vietnam and Bangladesh, where disaster management organisations are undertaking most of the educational awareness

raising activities in their communities."

He cites the example of how the role of firefighters has evolved in many countries. Instead of waiting around stations for a disaster or fire to occur, they are now engaged in the community, identifying vulnerabilities and performing risk mapping exercises, as well as training children and adults.

This leads on to one of the challenges that the ISDR has set itself, that of creating a worldwide culture of safety. For the past two years, its world campaign has focussed on education and school safety. "There have been so many disasters where it is mainly children who have died," says Mr Briceño. "In Italy a few years ago there was an earthquake in which the only building that fell in the community was the school. It was only children – and two teachers – who were killed."

He emphasises: "And Italy is a risk-aware country. It is just that this particular town had not been included in the list of areas most at risk from earthquakes, so building codes were of a different standard."

Next year, the ISDR campaign will start on hospitals and health, aiming to reduce the high number of people who die after an incident owing to lack of medical attention rather than because of the direct effects of the incident. Mr Briceño elaborates: "After the Pakistan earthquake, virtually the same amount of people died because of lack of medical attention as did people killed by falling houses. We need to make hospitals and schools a big priority, and it is easier to retrofit these than it is to retrofit all houses and buildings."

VULNERABILITY

Unfortunately, many schools and hospitals are rebuilt without taking into account their vulnerability to natural hazards.

Apart from governments, the public, the emergency and humanitarian response communities, there are two more stakeholders that have a major interest in disaster prevention. Regarding the former, the insurance industry is evidently already interested in promoting awareness on risk reduction. As Mr Briceño says, "We are working a lot with insurance companies – especially those from the reinsurance area."

But for the wider private sector – ie profit making companies – there are two elements to be developed. The first, which involves basic self interest, is that of business continuity, requiring risk reduction to ensure continued productivity and profitability of an enterprise should a natural hazard strike. The second element, corporate social responsibility, also contains an element of self interest and

PROFILE

Salvano Briceño is Director of the Inter-Agency Secretariat of the International Strategy for Disaster Reduction (ISDR). His career spans several decades and has focused on the management of environmental and sustainable development programmes at the United Nations, the World Conservation Union (IUCN) and the Venezuelan Government.

Prior to joining UN/ISDR, Mr Briceño was the Co-ordinator of the BIOTRADE and GHG Emissions Trading Initiatives of the UN Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), Geneva (1999-2001). Before that, he was Deputy Executive Secretary of the UN Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD) secretariat (1996-1999), following several years as the Co-ordinator of Intergovernmental and Institutional Support of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), where he was responsible for assisting the Executive Secretary with management, legal, information support, external relations and interagency relations of the organisation (1991-1996). Further UN experience includes five years with UNEP's Caribbean Environment Programme at Kingston, Jamaica, where he collaborated closely with the Pan-Caribbean Disaster Preparedness and Prevention Programme (1987-1991).

Earlier in his career, Mr Briceño joined the World Conservation Union (IUCN) as the Executive Officer of IUCN's Commission on Education, where he focused on environmental education programmes and co-ordinated a worldwide network of experts (1985-1987). During the 1980s he worked as Research Associate at Harvard University's Energy and Environment Policy Center in the USA, following an active career with the Ministry of Environment and Renewable Natural Resources in Venezuela where he was responsible for environmental education, professional development and international relations.

Mr Briceño received a Doctorate in Administrative Law from the University of Paris II (Panthéon-Sorbonne) in 1975 and a Master's in Public Administration from Harvard University in 1984.

involves investment in risk reduction.

Mr Briceño uses another example to illustrate this point, describing how when Hurricane Andrew struck a General Electric plant in the US, the company's preparedness plan kicked in and the plant was up and ready to function just two days later, one day of which was due to clearing flood debris from the car park. "But what happened? It couldn't open because there were no staff available, as they were all looking after their own houses and families," explains Mr Briceño. The company realised that it also had to invest in reducing the risk of natural hazards to its employees – and therefore the communities within which it operates.

AWARENESS

Mr Briceño adds: "We remind people that nine out of ten people around the world are in private sector employment. So this is clearly the most important sector to invest in reducing risk."

And the media is the sector that can contribute the most towards raising this awareness. "We insist that the media takes the opportunity of the disaster, which is what makes the news, to talk about what needs to be addressed and how this can be avoided next time," says Mr Briceño. The media must be encouraged not just to report on the victims, but also to report on the causes of a disaster, the risk factors, building codes, land use planning, environmental degradation, and all the other issues that can create the vulnerability and then the disaster.

One of the most worrying aspects is the rapid evolution of risk. "There is a lot of change happening too quickly," says Mr Briceño. Urbanisation is leading to ever-increasing numbers of people moving into cities, creating megacities, or even metacities, which are sprawling conurbations of more than 20 million people. Added to this trend are environmental degradation and climate change.

Mr Briceño determines that the starting point to confront these increased hazards lies in the United Nations' HFA, mentioned earlier. This is because the HFA is an instrument to build a stronger movement towards helping reduce the impacts of disasters, bringing about specific guidelines, setting standards and establishing benchmarks to measure progress.

It is a big challenge but it is not overwhelmingly daunting, according to Mr Briceño, who alludes to widespread campaigns on traffic accidents and AIDS, both of which have helped to reduce fatalities worldwide: "We just need to do a little bit more. AIDS and Road Traffic Accidents (RTA) campaigns have been very effective and we hope to do the same with natural hazards."

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The flags of the member nations fly in front of the UN headquarters

photo: UN Photo / Andrea Brizzi