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Summary

The concentration of people and property in cities increases the risk of disasters, to the extent that many cities were established and have been expanded without necessarily taking into account the existing hazards in their territory and surroundings.

Furthermore, social exclusion processes resulting from settlements in unsafe areas, together with mostly inadequate informal constructions and insufficient regulation of private and public investment in the cities, make the situation more vulnerable. Governance and participation are key to risk management.

Context

Risk Knowledge. As a rule, technical studies have been conducted based on a hypothetical major disaster, with emphasis on exposure of housing and public services. It is necessary to include: an understanding of less catastrophic but more frequent risks; the history of disasters, the risk management strategies developed; the origins of hazards that do not always occur in the same territory (watersheds, pollution, etc.); the vulnerability of different people (including children, the disabled or the elderly); social processes and relations that create vulnerable conditions (e.g. gender relations, poverty, public policies); the vulnerable nature of markets and basic services; the vulnerability of companies (especially small enterprises); and an analysis of skills and existing or deficient resources.

The opinions of the population, the participation of vulnerable people and access to information that includes dissemination strategies must also be taken into consideration in Risk Knowledge. In the cities it is necessary to revise, update and certify the validity of risk estimates and studies. Risk Knowledge must also involve different local officials and should be accompanied by proposals to be incorporated into local development policies, plans and projects. Land use zoning is key to risk management in cities.

For risk reduction purposes, governance includes the capacity of local authorities and institutions to build and implement policy instruments to reduce urban risks. Governance for risk management involves the participation of different stakeholders and levels of society and the state; hence the need to create platforms that help strengthen risk management processes. Cities tend to congregate institutions that do not always interact or complement each other, so it is necessary to promote mechanisms to help coordinate their plans and policies. Governance may be restricted by a lack of coordination and complementarity between central governments, cities and communities. The functions of local governments cannot be differentiated without taking into account their capacity and resources. Central governments should take the diversity of cities into consideration and, therefore, there must be policies that address such diversity. It is necessary to have mechanisms to implement and enforce the rules, which implies political leadership. Governance implies ensuring that the city will continue functioning in the event of a disaster

and, above all, reduce disaster risks, mainly through prospective and corrective management. City expansion is an opportunity to reduce future risks.

Risk management in cities implies the use of innovative technologies and mechanisms. Information technologies are key to improving risk knowledge and emergency response (e.g. the Early Warning System, telephone warnings before an earthquake is felt on the surface and the use of text messages in cases of disaster). Market management can reduce the impact of disasters and mitigate damage in urban economies. Transferring risks by insuring some city properties requires a more precise risk analysis as well as institutional mechanisms that redistribute costs. Global information is a key aspect of risk management, especially as far as climate variability is concerned; however, mishandling of information can increase losses. Risk reduction technologies should be based on research and the implementation of appropriate technologies. Technologies to improve the resilience of buildings and infrastructure in general are often applied only to recent constructions; therefore, mechanisms and tools are required to improve the safety of old buildings.