

6. Risk, Cities, and Asia: The Path Forward

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The future world will be an urban world: 2010 was the first year that more people lived in urban than rural areas, and nearly two thirds of the population is expected to reside in cities by 2030.

Asia is extreme in this instance: it alone has over 2.1 billion people living in urban areas, and numbers are expected to rise dramatically over the coming years. In many countries, governments cannot provide essential services to match the scale of urbanization, exacerbating vulnerability and risk.

These risks are inequitably distributed, with the extreme poor often exposed to more risks and able to access fewer services than their better off counterparts. The worst off often reside on the streets, in slums, or in other informal settlements, which can be labeled as illegal and deprived of amenities.

In my research on urban risk reduction in four different cities (Dhaka, Bangladesh; Port au Prince, Haiti; Freetown, Sierra Leone; and Nairobi, Kenya) I saw how challenging it is to address urban risk. The immediate cause of urban flooding, for example, is often heavy rainfall, but lack of physical mitigation structures and poorly designed buildings, limited ability to access essential services, environmental degradation, poverty, and inadequate preparedness and response all contribute to risk.

These cities, like all urban environments, are a complex amalgamation of people, institutions, and technologies, making it difficult to comprehend risks and to develop appropriate risk reduction strategies.

In all contexts, risk reduction resources were limited, as were abilities to prevent new risks from emerging, both because of weaknesses in ability to enforce regulations such as those that limit pollution, environmental degradation, and construction of unsafe buildings and in the ability to develop regulations for risks that transcend jurisdictional boundaries. As a result, risks were understandably high and disasters common. There are, however, a number of ways that

risk can be reduced. Understanding the system dynamics of urban risk is critical.

Thus, risk reduction requires a variety of activities including the provision of basic services such as schools, safe housing, healthcare, and sanitation, natural resource management, physical mitigation, and emergency response.

This is a large task, requiring the commitment of all members of society, including governments, the private sector, civil society, and local communities. This also necessitates coordination, both between sectors, to ensure that activities undertaken by one actor complement those of another. It is also important that stakeholders are not creating further risks.

Private sector actors, for example, are critical for providing jobs and supporting economic capital, but should not do so in ways that increase pollution or environmental degradation. Governments need to provide strong regulations to prevent the factors that lead to risk, and all actors need to work with governments to ensure that these rules are enforced.

Special care needs to be taken to ensure that the most vulnerable and marginalized in society receive the support that they deserve. The extreme poor often play little role in creating the risks they face. Providing support to shoulder this risk burden is not an act of charity, it is a right: everyone has a right to essential services, and everyone deserves to be protected from the risks that they did not create. Living in an 'illegal' settlement is not a valid excuse to deprive people of their rights.

If risks are managed, the new urban world can be one of safety and prosperity. Limiting risk through strong regulations and systems of accountability and the coordinated efforts to provide the basic services in an equitable manner are key steps to building this world.

Further reading: Clark-Ginsberg, A. (2015). Concern's approach to disaster risk reduction - urban contexts, Concern Worldwide. available at: <https://www.concern.net/insights/concern-disaster-risk-reduction-urban-contexts>