Role of leadership in managing disaster risk

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Climate variability and the extreme events (causing floods, droughts and storms) are one of the greatest global concerns. These global concerns have many implications at the local level. For instance, they affect local governments by changing conditions of various types of infrastructure including: built systems (roads, bridges, water and sewage, networks); natural systems (watersheds, forests); and human systems (health, education, human welfare). The local governments, all over the world, need systems (built, natural, human) that can withstand future extreme event/disasters.

I am of the view that initiating local level actions in relation to extreme weather events should not be visualised only through a technological lens (concerning new local urban infrastructure, transfer of technology, urban structural modifications). Whereas a technological approach may be essential to successful disaster management in urban local governments at a later stage, it will not be useful without first establishing the context through a visionary leadership for disaster risk reduction. Also, managing and/or reducing disasters at the local government level require close consultation between government, business, planners, scientists and local communities, as disaster risk reduction involves taking action to minimize the negative impacts of extreme events.

The new study (making cities resilient report 2012) also finds that “leadership is more important than a city’s wealth when it comes to protecting the lives and economic assets of cities and towns from disasters”. As a starting and practical point in urban local governments, local leaders can take immediate steps to seek the support of various stakeholders for initiating the local government-wide disaster risk reduction actions. Such actions should aim to augment the urban local governments’ capability to uphold their innate leadership in efficiently analysing, minimizing and managing climate-related risks, and in turn, grasping various local level opportunities.

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