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Michael Gordy

Disaster Risk Reduction and the Global System

Ruminations on a
Way Forward



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ISSN 2213-784X ISSN 2213-7858 (electronic)
SpringerBriefs in Climate Studies
ISBN 978-3-319-41666-3 ISBN 978-3-319-41667-0 (eBook)
DOI 10.1007/978-3-319-41667-0

Library of Congress Control Number: 2016944352

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Printed on acid-free paper

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Disasters focus the mind, whether they are natural, man-made, or some combination of the two. With the burgeoning of disasters of all kinds, it is no surprise that reducing the risk of their occurrence and preparing responses to them has moved to the forefront of human concerns. Nowhere is this effort more apparent than in United Nations organizations whose mandates include disaster risk reduction (DRR), and whose work has brought together the most substantive and far-reaching information on the subject.

Over the past few years I have worked with several of these organizations. One of them, the United Nations International Strategy for Disaster Risk Reduction (UNISDR), publishes a biennial report, the Global Assessment Report (GAR), which aggregates and analyzes data on DRR efforts throughout the world.

These reports, which can be accessed through links found in the reference section of this essay, have appeared four times so far—in 2009, 2011, 2013, and 2015. The most recent edition was presented at the Third UN World Congress on Disaster Risk at Sendai, Japan, in March 2015 and contributed significantly to formulating the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015–2030.

I have made an extensive study of the first three editions of the GAR, which cover almost 700 pages. In this essay I present what I believe to be their most important points. Based on my study I believe that these points, taken together, issue in a more fundamental insight, one that needs to be understood and integrated into all aspects of DRR work. In short, I have taken what I believe to be the conclusions implicit in these three reports and have made them explicit.

The purpose of this essay is to present that distillation of important points organized around this insight. In addition I present a few principles that I believe can make genuinely effective action possible. This essay will, I hope, help anyone who is interested in DRR, either professionally or non-professionally, to work his or