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WorldRiskReport 2015: Food insecurity increases the risk of disaster

Report addresses the consequences of possible extreme natural events in 171 countries

Berlin, 17 November 2015 – What is the connection between food security and disaster risk? This question is the central focus of the WorldRiskReport 2015 by the Alliance Development Works (Bündnis Entwicklung Hilft – Gemeinsam für Menschen in Not e.V.) and the Institute for Environment and Human Security of the United Nations University.

Crises and disasters cause hunger

"The catastrophic effects of natural hazards, such as earthquakes or cyclones, can be decreased by ensuring that people are fed. The hungry are more vulnerable in the event of disasters, wars, and conflicts," said Peter Mucke, Director of Bündnis Entwicklung Hilft and Managing Director of the WorldRiskReport. Whilst it would be necessary to feed about 1.2 billion more people by 2030 – as much as the current population of India – Mucke feels confident that there are good prospects for achieving the internationally agreed zero hunger objective by the year 2030: "In terms of food volume, there is enough food for everyone. But unequal distribution of agricultural products, food wasting, and losses incurred during harvesting or transportation are the main reasons of the current hunger situation."

During conflicts and wars food security is as much at risk as during disasters: "Hunger and migration are an outcome." Since a part of the current conflicts is hard to curtail, Peter Mucke emphasizes the high supply demand in neighbouring countries and refugee camps: "This requires also a better food supply to people in crisis areas and refugee camps."

WorldRiskIndex 2015

This year, the WorldRiskIndex once again forms an important part of the WorldRiskReport. The index evaluates the exposure to natural hazards faced by 171 countries and assesses the inherent vulnerability in the countries towards suffering from impacts when faced with these hazards. According to the index, the island state of Vanuatu once again faces the highest risk in 2015. It was only in March that the country was devastated by cyclone Pam. Ranked second and third are Tonga and the Philippines, which have merely swapped positions compared to the previous year. Germany is ranked in position 146.

"The vulnerability of a country largely determines whether a natural hazard will turn into a disaster," said Prof. Jörn Birkmann from the University of Stuttgart, who is responsible for the index. Typhoon Haiyan and Hurricane Sandy illustrate this point. With wind speeds of over 185 km/h (Sandy) and of over 300 km/h (Haiyan), both storms had high levels of destructive power. Yet, wind speeds alone did not account for the differences in terms of the destruction, said Birkmann. Whereas around 210 people died as a result of Sandy in the USA, there were approximately 6400 fatalities in the Philippines. In addition, although the total economic damage was greater in the USA, the share of the economic damage with respect to country's gross national product was five times less than in the Philippines. The insured damage in the USA was also six times higher than in the Philippines, explains Birkmann on the basis of the WorldRiskIndex.

Interplay between food security and disaster risk

"The report clearly shows that hunger and food insecurity have negative effects on disaster risks because they cause a significant increase in the vulnerability of the relevant population to natural hazards," said Dr Matthias Garschagen, Scientific Director of the WorldRiskReport and Head of Vulnerability Assessment, Risk Management and Adaptive Planning Section at the United Nations University Institute for Environment and Human Security. On the other hand disasters can significantly reduce food security.

Floods or cyclone events, for example, often do not only destroy harvests and graneries; they also destroy transportation-infrastructure and thereby hamper the provision of supplies to crisis regions. In the worst case, the combination of disasters and food insecurity lead to a fatal downward spiral in which the people affected move from one crisis to the next.

Especially in sub-Saharan Africa, there is overlap between the hotspot regions affected by hunger and those affected by high vulnerability to natural hazards. These areas are also expected to be heavily impacted by climate change, which presents further challenges for food security. "However comprehensive disaster protection strategies may be, they alone will not be sufficient if the international community fails to establish a bold climate policy that takes into consideration the situation of the groups and countries that are most affected by disaster risks," said Prof Katrin Radtke, Welthungerhilfe and representative of Bündnis Entwicklung Hilft.

"The goal of policy and practice must therefore be to make food security more resistant to crises and, at the same time, to include it as a central element of disaster prevention. The report identifies clear recommendations in this respect," said Dr Matthias Garschagen. Prof Katrin Radtke stressed the following point: "According to studies by the Food and Agriculture Organization, investments in agriculture are five times more efficient in reducing poverty and hunger than measures in any other sector."

Note to the editors:

- To download the full report, please visit www.WorldRiskReport.org;
- Printable images, infographics and maps can be provided upon request;
- Printed version of the WorldRiskReport 2015 and former issues can be requested via e-mail to: presse@entwicklung-hilft.de;
- Our authors are available for interviews either in person or on the phone.

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Bread for the World, the Christian Blind Mission International, Kindernothilfe, medico international, Misereor, terre des hommes, German Agro Action and the associated members German Leprosy and Tuberculosis Relief Association and German Doctors provide acute and long-term aid in the aftermath of major disasters and in crisis regions as part of the Bündnis Entwicklung Hilft.

The Institute for Environment and Human Security at the United Nations University (UNU-EHS) addresses the risk and vulnerability aspects of human security and the consequences of complex natural hazards and global change.