

## **FEEDBACK FROM THE FIELD**

### **Pendulum Policies and the Need for Relief and Invulnerable Development**

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An interesting trend has occurred slowly but surely over the past 20 years. Disaster policies at the global level have shifted from a virtual reliance on relief to what may be regarded as the predominance of prevention. Ironically, this change has taken place—and continues to do so—with little circumspection. These preliminary remarks having been made, the following essay will explore the history and deficiency of past and present international disaster policies, and then offer suggestions as to how our endeavors to reduce calamities might be improved in the future.

The policies of governments, international governmental organizations, and private humanitarian agencies have traditionally over-emphasized the importance of relief. Since the beginning of our international state system, political leaders have felt morally obligated to provide aid to victims of disasters in foreign territories. Countries have frequently sent money, food, clothing, medicines, and other pertinent aid to counterparts that have been smitten by calamities. Many nations have even established branches within their governments to facilitate the implementation of relief at the cross-national level. Recognizing the imperative for coordinating individual operations, governments have also created international organizations with the purpose of managing responses to catastrophes. While the International Relief Union of the League of Nations never completely lived up to expectations, the Disaster Relief Organization and other relevant arms of the United Nations have cooperated in order to reduce the death and suffering associated with natural hazards. In addition to the emergence of international governmental relief organizations, numerous private voluntary agencies have concomitantly

become involved in humanitarian activities. Following the International Red Cross and the Salvation Army, a plethora of similar relief agencies burgeoned in the present century. There are now literally hundreds (if not thousands) of groups with various religious, professional, and ideological backgrounds which seek to alleviate the distress following calamities in other lands. Such attention and preference given to relief was especially evident up until the late 1970s; the pendulum has historically been in favor of policies emanating from a post-disaster response mentality alone.

For a variety of reasons the policies which exclusively relied upon relief were eventually doomed to fail. Practitioners saw a futility in their humanitarian labors as cataclysmic events recurred. Any level of comfort and reprieve given to disaster victims could be (and often was) undone in the blink of an eye. Governments, international governmental organizations, and voluntary humanitarian agencies also began to recognize that disasters seemed to have a selective bias. The accumulation of data revealed that the poor of the world, whether nations or individuals, were particularly vulnerable. Development therefore emerged as a potential solution to catastrophe. About the same time, science and technology had advanced to the point to where mitigation was becoming increasingly feasible. For example, new building techniques illustrated a greater ability to withstand hazardous events such as earthquakes, and early warning systems could provide at least some prior notification that volcanic eruptions, tornadoes, and hurricanes might occur. As an approach to disasters, then, relief was being discredited in the 1980s.

Conventional wisdom has currently called for and legitimated the triumph of policies that are based on a strategy of prevention. Everyone now extols the virtues of development. Not only is economic progress seen as the means to help the poor of the world overcome their vulnerability, but sustainability is correctly envisioned as the requisite for protecting the environment to thereby minimize the prospect of future disasters. The goals of the United Nations International Decade for Natural Disaster Reduction likewise reveal policies aimed at avoiding calamities altogether. Nations are encouraged to share information and technology which may facilitate mitigation through the application of structural engineering techniques and the use of early warning systems. The acceptance of prevention policies has been so widespread that the value of the United Nations Department of Humanitarian Affairs is now being questioned. Policies in the 1990s seem to indicate that the pendulum has swung far in the direction towards prevention.

While no one should doubt the importance of reducing the adverse effects of disasters, there are several problems with current policies which hinge on prevention alone. First is the fact that disasters will always occur. As recent

experience with earthquakes in the United States and Japan confirm, no nation is immune to calamity. Regardless of the stage of development and the resources devoted to mitigation, the tragic and destructive forces of nature cannot be stopped. Second, and closely related to the previous assertion, is the observation that a strategy of prevention can overshadow and preclude the preparation which is needed in case a calamity does strike. Japan is again illustrative of this issue. Although this nation spent an enormous amount of money on earthquake prevention, many victims were highly critical of the government's post-disaster response. These points endorse always having a plan and the means to react to disasters. Finally, a policy based on prevention through development and/or mitigation (which also requires social, economic, and political progress) is not without its drawbacks. Development does not have an encouraging track record; the lesser developed nations of yesterday are largely the lesser developed nations of today. Even if further development is conceivable, it is a lengthy process. Taking into account the many disadvantages that developing nations must overcome (e.g., debt, illiteracy, political instability, population growth), there is no reason to believe that the road to development can be shortened in the near future. This again indicates a continual need for international disaster response. But this is not all. We are only now becoming aware of the possibility that development may increase the likelihood of disasters in some situations. For instance, the pursuit of economic advancement may promote environmental degradation, demographic mis-management, and technological hazards. These, in turn, can be associated with further risk. Thus, what is originally seen as a way to overcome the disaster problem may turn out to be deceptive—at least in the short run.

The implication of this discussion should now be clear: the policy pendulum must be stopped. On the one hand, relief will always be required. Even the countries most capable of prevention may still need international assistance. This is to say nothing about the importance of relief for those who cannot afford mitigation measures. And, as the lesser developed nations progress socially, economically and politically, there may be further demand for effective humanitarian operations. Prevention, therefore, should not eclipse the imperative of relief. On the other hand, relief will persist in being an insufficient reaction to disaster. Steps must be taken to at least alleviate the adverse effects of nature. The sharing and transfer of information and technology to the poor nations of the world must continue. Abatement through the application of improved structural engineering techniques and the use of early warning systems will remain necessary. In conjunction with these actions, nations should further their resolve to become more developed as this may generate an ability to be more self-sufficient in reducing and responding to certain disasters.

Although this may also increase the probability of other catastrophes, some of these drawbacks can be overcome through policies that emphasize sustainability. Protecting the environment will undoubtedly reduce the potential hazards associated with desertification and deforestation. These efforts, however, are not enough. We now need to set in motion what can be termed "invulnerable development." A policy based on this concept would not only care for the earth and its natural resources, but could also ensure that buildings and societal infrastructure are constructed with the latest engineering techniques in locations that are less susceptible to natural hazards. This notion, if applied, would also encourage the utmost care with hazardous materials and newly acquired technology which may help to prevent chemical spills, industrial explosions and nuclear accidents. Furthermore, a rethinking of developmental priorities could help generate and direct resources to mitigate and respond to disaster, and might help to educate the public about hazards as well. Finally, the policy of invulnerable development would also find ways to integrate and combine relief and preventative activities in order to break out of the vicious cycle of disaster susceptibility. To recapitulate, then, invulnerability is development pursued in such a manner as to decrease the risks or probability of natural calamity as social, political, and economic progress takes place.

In conclusion, it can be argued that stopping the policy pendulum and seriously considering the merit of international relief and the possibility of improving our prevailing mitigation endeavors should be the future global focus as we near the conclusion of the International Decade for Natural Disaster Reduction. This essay has taken a first and necessary cut at what an alternative or supplementary preventative policy might look like. The invitation to academics and practitioners is hereby extended to refine the concept of "invulnerability" and to apply it.