

Interview with Robert Glasser
31 October 2016
Development Policy Centre, ANU

CAMILLA: Welcome to the Development Policy Centre podcast. My name's Camilla Burkot. I'm a Research Officer at the Development Policy Centre. And it's my pleasure today to be chatting with Robert Glasser, who is the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Disaster Risk Reduction – if I have got that correct.

ROBERT: You've got that correct.

CAMILLA: Excellent. In the UN Office for Disaster Risk Reduction, also known as UNISDR.

ROBERT: Right. That's one of the occupational hazards of the UN, too many acronyms.

CAMILLA: Yes. Yeah, you do sometimes trip over them! I thought to begin, perhaps could you just paint a sort of quick and dirty picture of global trends in disaster impacts. Are we seeing more climate related impacts? Are we seeing any overall improvements in resilience as a result of disaster risk reduction initiatives, such as the one that your office spearheads?

ROBERT: Yeah, sure, I'd be happy to. So we're seeing—basically if we look over the last decade or so, we're seeing a drop-off in the number of deaths, mortality, from disasters overall, although in less developed countries there is still—we're not seeing the same drop-off in loss of life.

At the same time, we're seeing a continuing increase in economic losses from disasters. So clearly investments that are not risk-informed, hospitals being built in flood zones where they're more vulnerable to storms, and the like. So we're seeing an increase in the economic costs, and it's actually going up quite rapidly, sort of \$300B a year, conservative estimate, now. And it's a wild underestimate, it could be twice that number, we just don't have the data actually on the costs.

So that's—those are the really broad trends. We're seeing huge progress in some countries, like Bangladesh is an example, Mexico, where various efforts to incorporate risk reduction in their core economic decision making has resulted in major improvements and big drop-offs in loss of life in disasters.

CAMILLA: So it's a quite mixed bag, really?

ROBERT: Yeah. It's a mixed bag. I think there's generally growing awareness of disaster risk in countries. You still—the main challenge is to get—move from managing disasters to

managing disaster *risk*. And that really means incorporating risk in the core economic planning that countries are undertaking in the budget process, for example.

Just as an example, globally the OECD predicts or estimates that there will be something like \$50 trillion in new investment in infrastructure over the coming decades. If those investments aren't informed by the disaster and climate risk, then we will see huge continuing increases in economic losses from disasters. You can build a hospital in a flood zone or you can build it somewhere where it's less exposed to hazards.

CAMILLA: Right, yeah. So we're particularly interested in the Pacific region at Devpolicy, and I understand last week you were at a meeting in Fiji, the Pacific Platform for Disaster Risk Management.

ROBERT: Yeah.

CAMILLA: Can you tell us about some of the key themes that came out of that meeting? Any outcomes or recommendations?

ROBERT: Yeah, sure. So the—some key themes. Well, the Pacific is one of those places where climate risk and climate adaptation and disaster risk are—where there's huge overlap between those issues. If you look at—there are a number of areas where disaster risk reduction and climate change adaptation don't overlap.

So from the disaster risk side, there are volcanoes, quakes, tsunamis, which aren't about climate change. On the climate change adaptation side, there are things like heat stress in buildings and how to adapt to that, which isn't about disasters.

But if you look back over the last couple of decades, 90% of the major disasters have been hydro-meteorological disasters, the ones that are basically those disasters that are increasing in frequency and severity, those hazards that are increasing in frequency and severity as a result of climate change. In the Pacific, disaster risk is fundamentally, for the most part, about these increased storms, sea level rise, where for some countries it's really a matter of their survival as entities.

So the main theme emerging from this meeting is the linkage between disaster risk and climate change adaptation. And the main outcome of the meeting was the launch of a framework, a Pacific regional Framework for Resilient Development, which fundamentally integrates disaster risk, the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction, and climate change, the Paris Climate Change Agreements, in an integrated framework.

CAMILLA: Right. So yeah, that sounds like it must incorporate quite a sort of cross-sectoral approach?

ROBERT: Yeah, because it gets—in a lot of countries, including in Australia if you look at the climate change adaptation strategy, it’s actually led by the environment ministry, or the equivalent.

CAMILLA: Right, yeah.

ROBERT: And in many countries it’s the same. And if you look at disaster risk, it’s usually led by the disaster management agency. And generally those are agencies that are relatively weak bureaucratically in the government, when what needs to happen is both of those need to come together and then brought into budget planning, led by finance ministries or treasury in Australia predominantly. So yeah, a lot of silos, and bridging the silos is the name of the game.

CAMILLA: I guess that’s the first step, getting people to understand—to see those silos and understand how to start to work across them.

ROBERT: Yeah. Or actually, I would say—maybe I wouldn’t say it’s the first step, it’s an important step. For me, the first step, if I look at how you do this, is you have to speak the language that finance ministry or treasury understands, which means money. What does it mean? And that—so we sort of look at it in two steps.

One is to quantify the impacts disasters have had in the country, whether it’s Australia or a developing country, so you know what they’ve cost. And there are huge gaps in that data, but at least be able to quantify it. And then to do a risk projection for the future, to say “Okay, well with climate change we can’t really rely on the past as a reliable indicator of future risks, so what’s the projection of the risk? How will it change?”

With those two pieces, you basically know what the costs are. And then you can sit down with a treasury or the finance ministry and say “Okay, here’s the costs. Were you aware of this?” And if you incorporate that in planning, governments should be investing differently than they would if they weren’t aware of the risks.

CAMILLA: Right, yeah.

ROBERT: So that’s the objective as the first step. And bringing the money together in the budget I think helps break down silos.

CAMILLA: Yeah, that makes a lot of sense. Yeah. Money talks.

ROBERT: Money talks, exactly.

CAMILLA: So to date, UNISDR has been a fairly low profile agency, I think one of the relatively small agencies, in terms of staff members. Is that about to change, while the Paris Agreement is sort of really in effect?

ROBERT: You know, I would be very happy for UNISDR to be a very low-profile, or even invisible organization, if disaster risk is prominent as visible and is being addressed effectively and integrated with climate change adaptation. UNISDR, it is a small organization. It's about 120 people around the world, many in regional offices, including 1½ people—2 people—in the Pacific region, which is really key.

So I think—I don't think it will ever be like UNDP, or the World Food Program, which are very large organizations and have a higher profile. And I think our job, or at least my job as the UN Secretary-General's Special Representative for Disaster Risk Reduction, is to do what I can to raise the profile of risk, the costs, to congratulate countries when they're moving in the right directions, to be critical, a critical friend in discussions, usually informally or not publicly necessarily, and to try and move these discussions forward.

In each country, there's kind of a constituency for work on reducing disaster risk or climate change risk, and it might be a bit helpful if the UN, and if our organization, can raise the profile. It gives them a little more space, maybe, to push that agenda within the government and hopefully to make some progress, further progress, in reducing disaster risk.

CAMILLA: Yeah. So, it's really sort of a—well this is my next question. What would you actually define as the core business of your office? Is it more about that—I guess sounds like sort of facilitating and providing some specialized assistance to governments, but you're also working on a sort of more global level, trying to develop standards or that kind of thing?

ROBERT: Yeah. So let's see, our core work. So we've actually just been redefining our strategic framework. So if you'd asked this question a week ago, or maybe two months ago, it would have been—I would have been able to answer it, but maybe with less certainty about how it would look. So I guess there are really kind of—I'd say there are three main areas of work that we focus on.

One is, we have this international agreement, the Sendai Framework, and UNISDR is sort of the—I guess maybe it's not overstating it or understating it to describe it as the secretariat for that global agreement. And that means we are facilitating the process to develop the indicators for each of the goals that were agreed by countries, and then that will be rolled out in monitoring implementation. And we'll manage that process to monitor implementation, gather the data and analyse what progress is being made, where are the gaps, what are the themes that are emerging, all of that bit around monitoring implementation. It's also linked to the climate change agreement and the SDGs, because the same indicators we're developing

for Sendai are going to be used, at this point we're fairly confident of that, as the appropriate indicators for the SDG process. So there's a monitoring link to SDGs.

So that's one area. The second is the support to countries in helping them be able to implement the Sendai Agreement, what they've signed up to. And there are a couple of key steps in that process. There's technical support, there's sharing best practice and examples.

And it's basically helping them set up the pieces they need to develop their strategies and to begin implementing them; like, can they measure what disasters have cost, disaster loss database? Have they evaluated the risks in the future? Are they able to then take that and have a discussion with finance ministries to embed risks in planning?

And then with those processes, then you have—you can implement the strategy, which is actually the earliest deliverable or deadline in the Sendai framework: by 2020, countries should have national and local level DRR strategies. So if those things are in place, it's easier to have a real strategy, as opposed to a piece of paper that sits on a shelf. So that's the second bit, helping, providing technical assistance to help, with our partners at banks, the World Bank, GFDRR (Global Fund for Disaster Risk Reduction), one more acronym --

CAMILLA: Of course.

ROBERT: -- UNDP and others who we're working with, and donors, like the EU and Australia's also a key player in this, the Australian aid program, to help them implement those things.

And then the third area of work is really the advocacy, the work with stakeholders, civil society, the private sector.

Something like, I mentioned that \$50 trillion of investment in new infrastructure. Well over 70 percent of that will be implemented by the private sector, not by government. So if the private sector isn't brought in fundamentally to address disaster risk, we're not going to get there. So the key roles are both civil society and the private sector. And actually, they're not really a stakeholder because they're part of us, the UN system itself, integrating risk reduction and climate risk across UN agencies, is part of that work as well.

CAMILLA: Right. Sort of that mainstreaming of DRR. Interesting. On the topic of technical assistance, I guess is where it would fall, do you think that—so there's specialized agencies in developed countries, like Geoscience Australia, for example. Do they have something to offer developing countries? Do they kind of fit into this overall framework? Or are they sort of too different, the problems and capabilities too divergent?

ROBERT: They are totally relevant. In fact, just before coming here I had a meeting—I'd come from a meeting at Geoscience Australia, the head of Geoscience Australia and CSIRO, climate change

focal point – I'm not quite sure what his title is, but really, really smart guy – and the Bureau of Meteorology as well, to talk about science and technology in support of disaster risk reduction.

So I would say we spent three-quarters of our conversation on Australia, what Australia's doing and how you translate all the knowledge, enormous knowledge Australia has about climate risk and disaster risk, and geographic information systems, where they've plotted flood risk in cities, and how that is translated into implementation in budgets and planning. That's a big gap still in Australia, and in most countries, actually.

So that was a big chunk, but probably at least 1/3 of the discussion was about how Australia can support countries around the world, particularly in Australia's immediate region in the Pacific, in Southeast Asia and places like that, to incorporate Australian science for early warning systems, for technologies on how to build back better, on flood management, on just a broad range of issues, on earthquake modelling, volcanoes and tsunami warning.

There's a huge agenda of work for the science and technology community, and for Australia as a leader certainly in geosciences and climate modelling and the like.

CAMILLA: So certainly space there, just finding how to really make those linkages across, I guess would be the challenge.

ROBERT: That's a challenge also. If we focus on the Pacific, our colleagues at Geoscience Australia were saying—or maybe it was the Bureau of Meteorology – mentioned that they had this big project working in the Pacific on early warning systems, but what they'd discovered was as soon as they left, the capacity just sort of, their context, moved out of the region.

And I know that this is—certainly in the aid program, I remember from my days at AusAID, the capacity, the institutional capacity, the weakness of institutions sometimes there's one person you're working with, is a huge challenge to embed the science and technology, or to—we have all these tools, but there's the absorptive capacity, is a huge challenge.

CAMILLA: Yes. That's certainly I think the case in all of the—in across a lot of the aid program. What's your view of disaster risk insurance schemes? There's regional schemes, more specific schemes. As I understand DFID has been quite interested in these, and has pushing for these, but they don't really seem to be taking off. There's quite a lot of critique of them as well.

ROBERT: Right, yeah. So maybe the starting point is ideally, countries should identify the risk, they should not create more risk. They should try and decrease the exposure and vulnerability that exists already. But there will always be risks that cannot be reduced that exist, and insurance plays an important role in transferring that risk to others, basically, or sharing it more widely as a way of making countries less vulnerable, I guess.

So there's a key role. It doesn't solve all the problems, but it clearly has an important niche, and there's certainly areas where there is inadequate coverage and where more coverage would arguably objectively be good as a public policy approach in the country. So I think that's the big picture.

Another part of the big picture is that this is a very hot area of work right now. There's an initiative that we're involved with that includes the CEOs of the largest insurance industries, mutuals and reinsurers in the world, that is looking at how to share disaster risk data, which has generally been proprietary, but now they're thinking "We need to do this more," because of climate change and other factors, that is looking at how to support reaching the bottom billion, having greater coverage through micro-insurance products and finding opportunities to do that. That's looking at working with UN, through the World Bank and others on the insurance regulatory environment, because some of the regulations are not—that do not reflect the facts and the knowledge we have about risk.

And so it's preventing the availability of insurance products that objectively – again, it's always a judgement call, but I think pretty convincingly made – with some changes in the regulation would be really sensible from a public policy perspective. That would also create business for the insurance industry but simultaneously transfer risk. And then also these sovereign risk funds and insurance pooling in places like the Pacific or the Caribbean, where there is controversy. I mean, there are huge challenges in—particularly in the Pacific, which is spread over a huge area, small populations, and the risks, the hazards are huge and increasing dramatically.

So rather than—I know those are fundamental challenges, and that's why there is a role both for governments and also for donors, the World Bank, the Australian aid program, to try and see if it's possible to develop a model that is—if the risks are—if the costs aren't right, then the scheme goes out of business. So it has to be sustaining somehow – of course with a subsidy; that could be an aid subsidy, or the concessional element. And we've seen many examples in projects in insurance schemes, and initially are not sustainable. But that's the challenge. So that's really the challenge, to make sure that the elements are right. And also being very clear about what's appropriate from a public policy perspective and what is basically subsidizing the industry unfairly.

CAMILLA: Yeah, it's a quite challenging public policy—

ROBERT: Very challenging, yeah.

CAMILLA: —field to navigate. Yeah, interesting. Lastly, I wanted to ask you, in the course of your career you've had quite a varied career. You've worked for AusAID, you mentioned. I understand you've worked for CARE Australia and then CARE International. So you've seen quite a few

different sides of the aid and development world. And now, of course, you've entered the UN at quite a high level.

Now of course you have to be diplomatic answering this question, but I'm wondering if you could comment on the strengths or the weaknesses of the UN system—

ROBERT: Wow.

CAMILLA: -- relative to your past experience.

ROBERT: Well, so okay, I can give you my cliché, this is my view of the UN from the outside, from the Australian government and from CARE. It was bureaucracy, slow, skimming the money off the top, you know, 'if you gave it to CARE directly, we can implement much faster.' These were the cliché images that I had of the UN.

So I guess I was very pleasantly surprised to see how lean the new organization I came into was, UNISDR. It was really the—in fact, it was too lean. For example, before I arrived they organized this Sendai – really organized and arranged the meeting in Sendai, this world conference. It was really done on a shoestring budget, and it was basically because every single staff member was working 18-hour days for three months.

So you could argue that's admirable. On the other hand, it's very bad management, because people are burned out. They're exhausted afterwards. So I think what I saw didn't really jive with my expectations. I have of course seen inefficiency in even things like the HR systems, the human resource systems in the UN, particularly in the UN secretariat, are just so complicated. And we're actually implementing a change process in our organization, and I'm really hoping to work hard to try and implement within the rigidity of the system.

And I don't—I actually don't blame the UN for that rigidity. It's really, I think, at least 70 percent of that is a reflection of the intervention of the states, member states in the system, and I think over time it has just created this complexity that makes it really difficult to untangle.

So I think—so that's one comment. The other comment is I feel really strongly that this—the piece the UN provides is basically the multilateral space. There are a lot of flaws in the UN system, and they reflect the flaws in the international system, but there is this little precious thing called multilateral space, where things can happen that would not be able to happen outside of it.

And I feel, as a senior person in the UN, part of my job is to try—and there are pressures to close that space in every direction, as we see in the world, which I'd be happy to talk about. But I feel that my job, one of my jobs is to try and do what I can to push it open some more.

And DRR is one of those areas where you can get people around the table, you can demonstrate progress, you can demonstrate what the multi-level action can deliver.

And so I always, in my work, in my advocacy, try and keep that. It's not just about DRR and climate change. It's also about the importance of multilateral space in the world we're entering into, which is more complex, multipolar, huge challenges that can only—I think only will be addressed effectively with that multilateral space.

CAMILLA: Yeah, that's interesting, because it is very easy to find the faults with the UN system, and we don't often have a chance to talk to someone who's actually in it and at that level, to have that perspective. So it's really valuable.

ROBERT: I can—thank you for saying that. I can say that I've—when I was with CARE, I sat on the IASC [Inter-Agency Standing Committee], which is this UN agency, the heads of agencies that were involved in humanitarian response. And I was representing sort of the NGO community at the time on that committee, when I was with CARE.

And Antonio Guterres, the head of UNHCR, was also at that table. And he was—I think of all the people around the room, he had the most completely developed worldview. And almost every one of his comments fit consistently within his world view. So he is really a wonderful choice.

I mean it would have been nice if it could have been a woman Secretary-General. Actually, the candidate who I think was sort of next—second on the list would have been fantastic, but Antonio Guterres, intellectually and as a communicator, and as a humanitarian, someone who is committed, really obviously committed to doing the right thing, he is a fantastic choice.

CAMILLA: Well, that's good to hear, yeah. Well, on that positive note, I think we'll wrap up. Thank you again, very much, for taking time to come have a chat. It's been a pleasure. And I was not very familiar with UNISDR when I sat down to do this interview, so I've learned a lot.

ROBERT: A little more! Well thank you very much for inviting me to be here. I really appreciate it. I appreciate the great work that your organization's doing. I have colleagues who are working here as well, who are really wonderful. So you're lucky to have them, I'm sure.

CAMILLA: Thank you very much.

ROBERT: Sure, thanks.

[End of transcript]