

The supranational view: urban resilience & disaster risk

Interviewer: [Gareth Byatt](#) – Principal Consultant, [Risk Insight Consulting](#)
Interviewee: [Rajeev Issar](#) – Policy Specialist at [UNDP](#)

March 2024



The need for urban resilience has never been greater. Image credit: [UNDP Kenya/Kevin Ouma](#)

Rajeev,

Thank you for making the time to talk with me about the work of UNDP in urban resilience and disaster risk, and how people across multiple organisations can work together to make the world's cities and towns more resilient and sustainable. Could we begin this interview by summarising your background and experience, and the current areas of focus for you and your team at UNDP?

***Rajeev:** Thank you for this invitation to contribute towards your work on urban resilience and disaster risk – two vital and closely interlinked topics for how we develop and live in our modern world.*

I have been with UNDP since 2011, and I am currently based in [UNDP's Disaster Risk Reduction and Recovery](#) for Building Resilience Team, working from the UNDP Geneva office. Our team has regional offices and various country offices, and with our "entry point" being disaster and climate risks that urban environments face, we focus on disaster prevention, mitigation, risk reduction, and managing and recovering from disaster events that occur. During my recent years at UNDP, I have been particularly engaged on risk governance and local action, whilst linking with all other parts of our team's activities, which I will outline in just a moment.

Currently, I am focused on driving local action in urban areas – in cities and municipalities with a view to augment their disaster risk reduction and resilience building capabilities.

It may be useful for readers of this interview to know that UNDP adopts a multi-risk approach which looks at a broad range of risks that countries, cities and communities face – going beyond disaster and climate risks and looking at their inter-connected and mutually reinforcing characteristics.

Our team's work for disaster risk reduction and recovery is structured around five pillars, which link to [the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015-2030](#):

- The first pillar concerns the **provision of risk information for good decision-making**. For this, we undertake (with others) risk analysis and diagnostics to generate an evidence base that can be used by any groups of parties (countries, cities, communities, project teams and others) to support risk-informed decision-making. This work includes conducting risk assessments that may be specific or multi-hazard and developing Loss & Damage databases.
- The second pillar is focused on **risk governance**, in which we look at two areas. The first area is how national and sub-national administrative systems operate and what kinds of areas and support they need to be more effective with governance, be it for policies, strategies, legislation, frameworks, and associated governance requirements. The second area is how all these pieces come together for the “tuning” of decision-making effective risk governance.
- The third pillar connects to **early warning systems and preparedness**, including where and how we support pre-disaster preparedness and prevention and enabling communities to respond better to untoward events that occur.
- Fourth is our focus on **local action, which incorporates the urban risk and resilience work** that I currently lead. Importantly, this work includes community-based resilience building, which is a bottom-up approach to support national and sub-national resilience action. This includes valuable engagement with communities and other groups such as NGOs ([non-governmental organisations](#)) and CSOs ([civil society organisations](#)), and groups that are active at the local level.
- The fifth and last pillar of our work connects to the **recovery from a disaster event** – specifically, what needs to be done to support countries, communities and economic sectors to recover to a normal position and functionality as soon as possible in the aftermath of a disaster. Our work in this space includes post-disaster needs assessments, developing recovery frameworks and developing the capacities to be able to respond to such events before they happen, so that the readiness and capabilities are in place to respond quickly.

Whilst these five pillars can potentially each operate in a standalone way, we consciously make sure they are closely integrated with each other. For example, my work on urban risk is informed by the risk information generated by our teams that look at it.

Gareth: Thanks for this overview, Rajeev. As I was listening to your description of the five pillars, I can see how they all integrate with each other, and how the sum of all parts creates a “greater whole” to lead to “words into action”.

I know there are a wide range of initiatives and projects you have been and continue to be involved in at UNDP, which includes liaison with other UN agencies and other groups and organisations. Do the other UN agencies you liaise with have a similar approach and model to how they oversee their support of disaster risk?

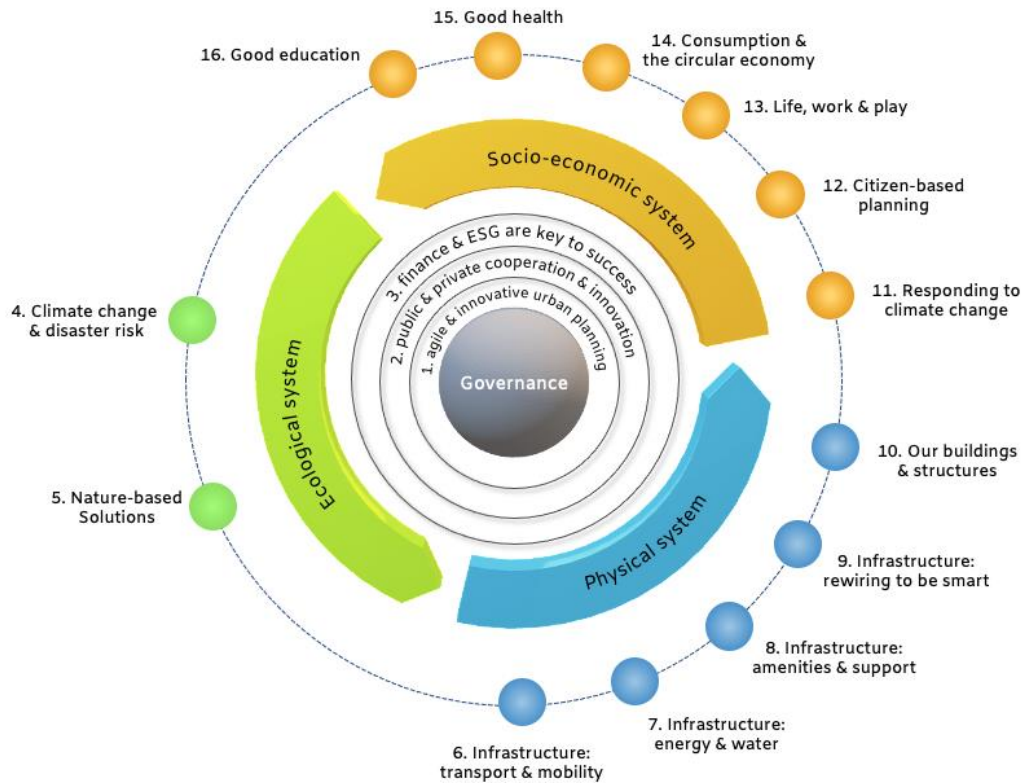
***Rajeev:** It's an interesting question, and it relates to how different UN agencies work. One of the features, by design, of UNDP is that it is not a linear or one-track thematic entity. By this, I mean that there are teams across UNDP that, together, look across multiple areas of development needs and actions. Our disaster risk and resilience team links into a range of needs and actions whereas many other UN agencies mainly have a mandate designed around a single thematic orientation in what they focus on, which is again by design.*

UNDPs work in disaster risk reduction (DRR) includes a focus on poverty eradication and on sustainable development issues, social protection, climate action and adaptation, and governance. We have the remit and structure to be able to touch upon many of the core developmental issues as one entity. The ability of UNDP and its cohorts to synthesise much of the action as one integrated approach that addresses multiple challenges helps us to avoid silos. If we were to solely address one particular challenge or deficit – focusing on eradicating poverty, for example – we could unwittingly allow the other risks and challenges to manifest, and our investments in addressing or minimising one particular risk might also be diluted over time, because of factors that could have been left unaddressed. Our ability to take a comprehensive analysis and an approach to implement it is the key. Other UN agencies rightly have specific focuses that they work on, and we work as an integrated overall team on our goals and objectives.

The overall guiding framework for all UN entities remains the 2030 Agenda – with all its strands connected. Through different interagency policy and programmatic initiatives, efforts to foster closer interface between different UN agencies are consciously advanced across all levels though more so at the national and sub-national level under the aegis of the RC (Resident Coordinator) mechanism. An example to illustrate this point is the UNDP – UN-Habitat ‘Enhanced Collaborative Agreement’ which seeks to bring the technical and thematic expertise of both organizations together to support implementation of the SDG 11 through greater synergies between risk reduction, resilience building and sustainable urban development and planning practices.

Gareth: I can see clear linkages to [the 17 Sustainable Development Goals](#) (SDGs), and how your work at UNDP spans across them, appreciating that some SDGs may be prioritised at certain points in time. It strikes me that this approach lends itself to systems thinking, to always think about and consider how aspects of a challenge connect together, knowing that different priorities can take precedence at different times and in different contexts.

In our discussion, I may refer sometimes to an urban system that I use and, also, some emerging factors I am seeing in how disasters can be avoided (per the attached two diagrams). I use systems thinking in my own urban resilience and sustainability work to consider the connections between everything.



Urban system image by G Byatt



Key aspects of avoiding disasters image by G Byatt, I Kelman and A Prados

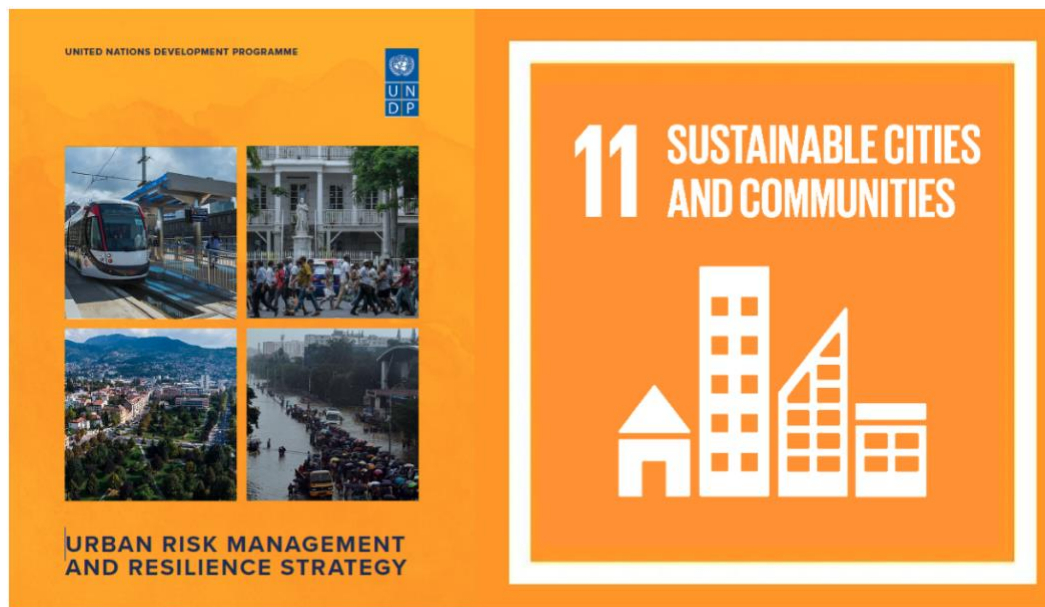
Rajeev: A systems approach is indeed how we approach our activities. From an urban resilience building lens, UNDP has been making consistent investments and efforts since the formulation of [the 2030 Agenda](#) and [the SDGs](#) in 2015.

UNDP's DRR practice specifically connects to [Goal 11 of the SDGs](#) and [the New Urban Agenda](#), the Paris Agreement on Climate Change while using [the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015-2030 as the entry point](#).

The imperative is clear for all development practitioners. We know that the world is already urbanised, with [half of the world's population living in them](#) (and that this percentage is set to increase), and it has been clear for a while that much of our development work needs to be in cities and urban areas. Many of the development deficits and challenges tend to converge at the city and municipality levels, and there are many benefits to adopting a systems approach and thinking to address the many needs and challenges. Systems thinking can help us be strategic for cities: this approach is driving us to look at our work in a holistic and strategic way, and our work is orientated in this manner. In 2016 UNDP developed a sustainable urbanisation strategy, where we looked at all the elements I have mentioned. We have since woven together many of these needs – existing needs and emerging priorities – to position ourselves to address and deliver upon these needs better through our 'Urban Risk Management and Resilience Strategy'.

A systems thinking and approach is almost, what we might call, a 'default' setting as urban spaces invariably operate as systems. Catalyzing action across resilience dimensions (viz. physical / built, environmental and socio-economic) requires the inclusion of all sectors, stakeholders and communities – which is possible only with the adoption and application of systems approach. For UNDP, this implies looking holistically at urban governance elements (institutions, laws, policies, frameworks) and decision-making processes along with urban services, capacities, resources as well as urban functionality as one whole.

Gareth: Thanks for explaining the strategic global UNDP perspective and the use of systems thinking in UNDP, Rajeev. I was delighted to support you with [the UNDP Urban Risk Management and Resilience strategy](#) that was published in December 2021 (noting [the overall UNDP Strategic Plan 2022-2025 also](#)). I know that it has five overall priorities: (1) supporting cities in geographies where there are capacity and resource gaps; (2) engagement to strengthen urban governance; (3) helping marginalised voices for city decision-making; (4) technical and financial capacities of less-resourced cities; (5) harnessing innovation and digital technologies. It was a pleasure to provide some support to you towards this strategy. How is the implementation of the Urban Risk Management and Resilience strategy progressing?



UNDP urban risk management and resilience strategy. Image credit: [UNDP](#)

Rajeev: Drawing inspiration from the 2030 Agenda and the principles underlying it – to be universal, integrated and to leave no one behind – we developed our strategy to look at where the biggest needs and existing gaps are now and what are likely to be the priorities in the coming years. We sometimes refer to a “theatre of action” to encapsulate the work we do now and intend to carry out in future, and we identified the five strategic pillars as you mentioned.

For the first pillar of supporting cities in geographies where there are glaring capacity and resource gaps, we are focusing on small and emerging cities, where we have identified a high demand and need, and we see an opportunity to make a difference with them.

The second pillar of governance is critical and a catalyst to make any change or action happen. Governance for us is more than elements of strategy, laws etc – it is about how a systems approach should be adopted and implemented, which goes beyond administrative entities and municipal functions. Urban spaces are driven by non-administrative actors and people, such as businesses and cultural teams. We therefore consciously engage with a broad and diverse range of people including the private sector, community organisations including women and youth groups, who must have a say in how things move forward.

The third pillar of socio-economic resilience is to make sure that we focus on the social side of dealing with challenges, as well as the resilience of the built environment. We must appreciate that city expansion in most cases today is being driven by migration of people, both a push (that is to say, people being forced out of somewhere else, for whatever reason) and a pull (where people are attracted to the city). Those that are pushed are the marginalised and weaker groups, and we want to ensure they have a say in urban improvements.

Fourth is the risk-informed development process. We know that risks are generated by the development choices that people, communities and authorities make. This means that we have to ensure people make choices being aware of their options; it's about down-scaling national assessments to the city.

Last but not least is our work to harness innovation and technology to inform all the work.

We are busy on several fronts to implement our strategy:

- 1. We are engaging at a policy level to get people together in global, regional and local platforms and inform policy in various ways, using our systems approach to inform urban resilience thinking and decision-making.*
- 2. We use our programmes to transmit our principles into action on the ground. This takes the shape of global programmes, and regional and national / specific city level, and within the implementation process we work along with other UN agencies and other organisations. For example, we have an understanding with UN-Habitat, for which urban resilience is one of the five action areas for joint action between both UN agencies. We have jointly developed an integrated urban resilience for Small Island Developing States (SIDS) and coastal cities programme, under which we have identified 10 cities with comparable risk and development aspects to support. We also work closely with UNDRR, and we work with them on a variety of things, including developing a programme with UNDRR to advance action in cities.*
- 3. Third, we have partnerships to expand the footprint through non-UN partners. These include donors and development partners, international organisations that work in this space such as UCLG, ICLEI and others. We have active engagement on a number of smaller city initiatives, especially for knowledge sharing.*
- 4. Fourth, advancing our broad technical support to cities is about helping them to build their internal capacities and skills.*

To give you an example of this work in action, UNDP has been identified as the implementation lead for an urban resilience initiative in Chad as part of a larger World Bank support to the Government of Chad to build resilience at city and community level. After the floods in 2022 in N'Djamena, the capital city of the country, a \$150 million project is being initiated by the World Bank to assist the Government of Chad on sustainable development issues, with a substantive focus on the capital city and some other cities in the country. UNDP has been identified among the lead agencies to implement it.

Another way in which we catalyse action is through conducting small city pilots, which allows us to work on smaller interventions that touch upon specific and niche areas, with smaller pilot investments that can have the potential to grow, scale-up and scale-out, if appropriate. We have a number of city pilots completed and underway to showcase how this action can work.

In parallel, we are also working on addressing some of the niche yet critical and emerging urban risks like that of the heatwaves, the heat island effects and water-induced risks in cities.

Gareth: This is great to hear, Rajeev. Can you explain a little more about the pilots you are undertaking – are there any examples you can provide?

Rajeev: *The most fascinating aspect of our city pilots is that they allow us to touch on, and get work done, across a broad spectrum of urban matters connected to the urban system and urban resilience. Through these pilots we can demonstrate practical and workable solutions with a potential for replication and scaling-up.*

For example, there's a small municipality called [Waling](#) in Nepal. It used to be three separate village councils until recently, when they merged together to create Waling municipality. It is a first-hand example of an emerging urban environment. We first helped with a resilience plan, then we started two key initiatives and small pilots with tremendous potential to catalyse action for years ahead. One was to conduct a risk-informed land use planning review, identifying which areas of this mountainous area are best suited to different development activities. The land in the area is susceptible to multiple hazards, so it's vital to agree what to build where to ensure people and assets are being protected and minimise potential. And the second was to ensure that built environment at public and private level is duly informed by risk considerations. This involved support to set-up an e-Building Permit System (e-BPS) and to train engineers, masons and construction artisans in risk-informed construction practices.

Gareth: Is this initiative in Waling, Nepal, an example of where you support local authorities with guidance on governance matters such as appropriate building codes, to help them to set up practical standards (whilst appreciating and coordinating with national government teams on such matters)? The land use review sounds interesting – it makes me think about how we value land commercially, and how sometimes, in various parts of the world, the economic value of land is given precedence over being cautious about how we use it, which can lead to disaster hazards causing problems when hazards turn into events.

Rajeev: Yes, exactly. This land use planning review has helped the municipality to ensure it plans its use of land properly – from where to position community assets such as a local health centre and schools so that they are protected from hazards through to what parcels of land should be set aside for agriculture.

A second piece of work we undertook for Waling was to help them set up an e-building permit system, which links to the point you just made about building codes. With this new system, when local builders have projects, be they shops or new houses or extensions to existing houses or something else, they need to submit a plan to the authorities (which is standard practice around the world of course). Through the system they are guided through the process, and they can receive approval to construct once all steps are complete. This system helps to inform people of what risks and hazards they need to consider and plan for. As an example of linking up with the community, we conducted training for local masons so that they know what risk-informed construction means in their area. We have interest from other cities in Nepal to replicate this approach.

Another example I can share is from Serbia. There is a major river basin in Serbia called [the Drina river basin](#), in which there are over 30 municipalities. For understandable reasons, most of the flood management support in the basin is set up and concentrated on the major rivers, which have been set up with monitoring for early warning systems for flooding and the like. There are a number of second order water streams in the basin which are not rivers, but during a period of heavy rainfall upstream these channels become very active.

Many of the municipalities in the basin have been adversely impacted by heavy water discharges from these second order streams, including flash floods. They had no system to understand how such floods can occur and why, and when the risk of such flooding may be heightened.

We have been mapping the second order water streams, setting up early warning systems and sensors, digitising data from past events. The municipalities in the area now have a better understanding of the periodicity of flash flooding, the extent of the inflow they need to manage, which areas have been impacted in the past and what to learn from these events. Now the pilot is being extended into a phase 2, supported with mobilised funding from the Japanese government (who are a major overseas development aid donor). Our investment as UNDP was small, about \$50k, and since the early work we have been able to mobilise \$1 million to set things up.

Gareth: I can see through this example you have just provided of your work in Serbia how UNDP can and does act as a catalyst to implement projects and programmes based on initial pilot work outcomes.

Rajeev: *That's right. We are involved in many city pilots across various countries and regions.*

Another very interesting example is in [Roseau](#), the capital of the island of Dominica (part of [the SIDS network](#)). One of the key objectives of [the climate resilience and recovery plan \(CRRP\)](#) developed by [the Government of Dominica](#) that was developed a few years ago was to ensure the resilience of Roseau city. Ourselves at UNDP began a pilot to support this objective, and we have implemented two phases so far.

It is now being scaled up as part of our cooperation work with UN-Habitat that I described earlier. Our work includes holding city stakeholder forums, developing the city resilience plan, mapping all the buildings which are prone to fire hazards on a GIS platform so that the city can pre-position its resources to be ready to respond early to wildfire danger. An important and strong part of this work, linked to the climate resilience strategy, are inbuilt nature-based solutions for disaster resilience, which is a relatively recent focus in disaster risk reduction.

Gareth: Do you always aim to track a certain number of metrics and targets in your projects, to see how successful they have been, or does it depend on the type of programme / project?

Rajeev: *Primarily the latter – but of course each of the projects are informed or guided by a detailed results and indicator framework as well as baseline data which helps us to measure progress and potential impact. There have been examples of our work seeking to adopt and implement a benchmark-based approach to enable city stakeholders measure progress, monitor and take corrective action to realize the identified objectives.*

On the other hand, many times it depends on the type of the program / project, given the fact that each intervention addresses a particular context, and it might not be practical to apply a uniform set of metrics, although it might be pegged to certain benchmarks in principle.

Gareth: Regarding the use of appropriate nature-based solutions, I have appreciated talking with people recently about the importance of finding the right balance between nature-based “green and blue infrastructure” and the judicious use of “grey infrastructure” – i.e. the human-made structures that we build to protect, such as seawalls and dams, and how green/blue and grey infrastructure can work together when it is well-designed. Examples could be sponge city approaches working with appropriate city stormwater engineered infrastructure, or mangroves being linked to human-made coastal defences. And all the while, how to design resilience solutions in a low-carbon way. Again, it’s another example of systems thinking. It is interesting to hear about the \$50k funding by UNDP growing into a \$1 million project involving different funders and donors.

I am curious to hear your thoughts about private sector funding, and opportunities. I often think about the amount of resources – finance, skills, built environment and others – in the private sector, and how businesses, financiers and insurers can benefit from considering disaster hazards and threats in their own business strategies, which is something I have written about for a few publications (an example [being available online here](#)), and also interviewed people about.

Rajeev: *The private sector is a critical part of achieving urban resilience and sustainable development in cities, including the management of disaster risk, everywhere around the world. The proactive engagement of the private sector is essential – we know that much of the investments in urban environments are made by the private sector, and we need to ensure they are engaged in our resilience efforts.*

At UNDP we have multi-organisational initiatives to support private sector engagement. One of the flagship initiatives we have in this area (in association with other organisations) is the [Connected Business Initiative](#), or CBI. Through this initiative we engage with private sector organisations, often as consortiums, to discuss existing needs and demands and agree ways forward. Specifically on disaster risk and reduction, we have some successful examples of work taking place with the private sector.

For example, we have close engagement with [the Mitsubishi Research Institute](#), which is a consortium of Japanese businesses that come together to work on risk and resilience issues. There is also a platform called the Japan Bonsai Forum through which they encourage businesses to talk with each other and other external stakeholders, especially on matters connected to the Sendai Framework for DRR. Another good example is in the Philippines, where [the Philippines Disaster Resilience Foundation](#) (PDRF) is a consortium of businesses that are actively working with UNDP and the government of Philippines to support management of disaster events, supporting local communities and other matters.

Whilst there are good examples of private sector engagement, I want to emphasise that we need to do more, especially in the implementation of our urban R&R strategy. We are looking at greater engagement for urban diagnostics, for example, which requires a deep level of analysis and review (linked to the pillars I described earlier). We can benefit from working with the private sector and researchers to better understand all needs, and to conduct analysis for the short and long-term.

A second area of focus with the private sector is on specific sectors. For example, support on water, energy and food systems is important (which link to our focus across the SDGs). There is tremendous potential, I think, for active engagement with private sector consortiums and entities in these sectors. We have started engagement, which includes linking to existing forums and initiatives, for example, with [the Coalition for Disaster Resilient Infrastructure](#) (CDRI).

A third area of focus with the private sector is on the application of digital technologies for urban resilience and disaster risk (our fifth pillar). For example, we have developed an initiative to look at heatwaves and the urban heat island effect, and how digital technologies can support the effort to avoid heat-related disasters in various ways. We can see great potential in working with the private sector and our interactions with a cross-section of private sector entities indicate a strong interest in and desire to foster collaborative action. I mean at the end of the day, all of us have a shared stake in ensuring urban resilience action given the systemic nature of risks and their cascading impacts.

Gareth: Thanks for these examples of how the private sector can support urban resilience and disaster risk work. I can see an example of how businesses can benefit in economic and financial terms from supporting this work, for example on the heat resilience that you mention. When a city is better prepared to deal with heat, and can minimise it, the urban system can continue to function (as long as it is safe to do so) rather than being shut down, which helps businesses. There is also the One Billion Resilient platform and [their extreme heat resilience resources](#).

Your example of working with the private sector on water made me think about [the Alliance for Water Stewardship](#) (AWS). Some businesses I work with are experts in managing water, and I have seen how some cities engage with businesses to help them with city-wide water management, including businesses that operate as water utilities. Thanks for mentioning the example of the network in the Philippines, too. I hear good things about various types of work taking place in the Philippines.

You mention the value of urban diagnostics assessments. Are you undertaking diagnostics assessments on city pilots to establish a “baseline”, and if so, is there a particular diagnostic assessment approach that is being used (perhaps linked to global goals like the SDGs, and a systems approach)? I know there is [the UN cross-agency Diagnostic Planning Tool](#), and other diagnostics tools exist such as the UN-Habitat [City Resilience Profiling Tool](#) and [the City Resilience Index](#). I have created an urban diagnostic tool that is based on the urban system I described earlier and incorporates disaster risk aspects as part of the assessment.

Rajeev: Yes, we establish a “baseline” for each of our interventions. The diagnostic tools applied depend on the context being addressed. Purely from a disaster risk reduction perspective, UNDP has been supporting countries to set-up their disaster databases, loss and damage analytics etc. which provide actionable risk information to help design and implement the projects. UNDP also led the development of the UN Common Guidance on Resilience which provides an approach to analyze a multi-risk context and the kind of capacities required to advance resilience action.

Yet, the diagnostics work is not confined to application of tools and methodologies developed by us but brings to bear the key tools like the City Resilience Profiling Tool, the Disaster Resilience Scorecard by UNDRR among a host of other such approaches developed and applied by UN sister entities.

Gareth: I’d like to return to the first and fifth pillars of your team’s work, with the risk analysis and diagnostics that can be used by countries, cities, communities, project teams and others to support risk-informed decision-making, and innovation + technology solutions. As part of your data collation, do you use Earth observations to look at what is happening in various areas, including monitoring the effectiveness of agreed actions such as how to govern land use? In our Disasters Avoided initiative we see a lot of examples of how Earth observations by satellites, and also lower-level observations by unmanned aerial vehicles including drones.

Rajeev: Sure enough, technological and scientific advancements definitely have a huge potential to support risk reduction and resilience building action. Through our initiatives, a conscious effort is invested in harnessing the potential offered by such existing and emerging technologies. These have so far been primarily centered around data collection, analysis, diagnostic, mapping and dissemination.

But this is being expanded through collaborative action with technical, specialized and private sector entities as also through global initiatives like the Group of Earth Observations (GEO) set up by WMO to help map and provide empirical data on heatwaves.

So, the tremendous potential offered by earth observation technology is immense and it will be great to have such efforts coordinated to inform the action across sectors and scales.

It will be great to learn and benefit from the work being done through the Disasters Avoided initiative in this regard.

Gareth: Can we talk about finance for urban resilience and disaster risk reduction now, to link to your work programmes and those of others. UNDRR talks about the need for more upfront action to avoid disasters, as noted for example in their flagship [Global Assessment Report \(GAR\) of 2022](#), in which they call for more upfront investment. Yet finding funding and resources for everything we would *like* to have in place is tough.

Many national and local governments say they do not have funds available to implement improvements that they would like to see in place.

I can understand that it is particularly challenging for developing countries and smaller public sector entities to raise capital and debt funding for urban improvement projects, and that raising capital through multi-partnership funds is valuable but can be challenging to achieve.

I therefore wonder about the private sector (a key part of my urban system wheel, section 2). Is there scope for a fresh approach for solutions with the private sector to make funding and resources available? Some urban projects are created as a Public Private Partnership (PPP), others use taxpayers' money, and they can work when they are set up and governed well. Moreover, I'm thinking of setting up a different approach to cover the many gaps that exist. I'm thinking of some of the principles of [Mariana Mazzucato](#) and changing capitalism (and ideas in her books such as [Mission Economy](#)).

My starting point is that there are trillions of dollars of capital and assets in the private sector and on the world's markets. Credit Suisse estimated [global wealth in 2022 to be US\\$454 trillion](#). [Private market deals are still huge](#), according to McKinsey. [The World Bank is trying to do its part for developing countries](#) (linking to climate adaptation).

Can private sector wealth be deployed more widely than it is today for societal and nature improvement, in a way that provides an appropriate financial return for funders and helps a thriving economy? I wonder about the potential for markets to invest in city and urban improvement and disaster reduction projects – as part of a mindset of changing the concept of value. Markets can keep investing in businesses of various types, but what about the physical environment that we live in as a sustainable investment (and not just real estate investment trusts)?

Is there enough engagement with people who run investment funds – including pension / super / 401(k) funds – to show the investment value of urban resilience and disaster risk reduction projects? Are changes to the corporate accounting system required to define this type of value?

I'm conscious this is a multi-headed question – I would appreciate your views on private sector funding potential and ways to unlock even a small part of [the world's global wealth](#) for disaster risk reduction.

Rajeev: Cities and municipalities have identified access to disaster / climate risk finance as a major impediment hampering risk-informed development efforts. This resource crunch assumes critical dimensions in small and medium cities where much of their budgetary allocations are barely sufficient to maintain ongoing administrative functions and day-to-day services. This leaves insignificant resources for investments in risk-informed and resilient local infrastructure development and socio-economic assets.

An MCR2030 survey of local governments (2021) revealed a consistent concern in terms of understanding and accessing risk financing options (and having the capacity to develop bankable projects). The escalation of climate and disaster risk in urban settings is increasing the need for innovative approaches.

This entails enhancing the capabilities and capacities of municipalities for finance as well as for developing / attracting investible projects – duly informed by risk-informed urban development considerations.

Recognizing this technical capacity constraint and critical resource gap, the potential areas for focus for us on currently are oriented to:

- i. Identify innovative approaches to augment local/domestic revenue streams and identify additional revenue streams.*
- ii. Foster closer interface/connect between national policies, development plans, and funding mechanisms to enable cities tap into budgetary resource allocations.*
- iii. Build capacities to develop investible projects to tap into international financial streams and mechanisms including private sector funding.*
- iv. Enhance absorption, allocation and effective utilization capacities.*

As part of UNDP efforts to support cities with policy, programmatic and technical support to augment municipal finances to advance resilience and sustainability action, the focus is not only on how municipalities can tap into diverse sources of funding (access to domestic, international and other instruments) from different streams, but also on understanding the issues and challenges that cities and city stakeholders typically experience to implement those funds (absorption capacity).

Gareth: Can we touch upon good knowledge sharing around the world now (a core part of making the urban system effective) – which is certainly important for organising good financial instruments, and of course for many other things. What is the key to making it succeed, so that people who oversee and are involved with urban environments can use learnings from others to actually improve their local areas? Can and should we quantify good knowledge sharing?

To give a few examples:

- I find [MCR2030 webinars](#) a great way to learn and to connect with people afterwards to continue a conversation (it was a pleasure to be a speaker in [a UNDP / UNDRR \(MCR2030\) webinar in July 2023](#) that you chaired, in which discussed the topic “*Can disasters be avoided?*”).
- I have experience of using good private sector connection services. Is there value in a new “urban connect” service for people to log queries to a specialist team that can connect them with others around the world?
 - o For example, what if an urban planner in a mid-sized city in Ecuador wants to know how other cities have looked at and tried using reflective paint technologies to reduce the urban heat island effect, knowing that it’s not simply a case of buying white paint and painting buildings once with it.

Rajeev: *Thanks for bringing up this point about the significant role an outward facing information sharing can play to foster learning and replication across cities. As part of our engagement with a range of cities and stakeholders across regions, it is encouraging to note the innovative ideas and approaches being advanced – which are already spawning remarkable success stories, showcasing good practices and providing avenues for replication.*

Despite contextual peculiarities, many cities face a shared set of challenges. The shared risk, vulnerability and development context calls for fostering shared approaches to address them too. It is in this context that the importance of creating easily accessible platforms for knowledge networking and information sharing assume importance.

Of course, it is good to recognize salutary efforts being made in this direction especially at the global level. You have already referred to the MCR2030 platform which enables stakeholders from diverse domains to come together and engage with cities on issues of common interest.

Interestingly, it also includes service providers who can work with cities to identify and deliver solutions for the challenges being faced by them.

Similarly, UNDP also has a publicly accessible page on its platform Sparkblue to help engage with different sectors and stakeholders.

But surely more needs to be done – and done at scale, with accelerated engagement not only from the cities but also from a whole range of sectors and stakeholders including the private sector which is, and will be, playing a major role in urban development. And hence will be the key to realizing the urban resilience and sustainability objectives. Or even research and technical institutions which have the potential to develop solutions to some of the complex challenges being faced by cities especially the small, medium and the transitioning ones.

So, the need is clearly felt and well underscored. It will surely be great to see a network of knowledge networks emerging with a sound repository of knowledge resources for the cities and their stakeholders to refer to for their requirements.

Gareth: One last question: what's the most important thing that you would like to see city and town authorities around the world focusing on to keep improving their urban resilience and efforts to avoid disasters in the coming years?

Rajeev: *UNDP's approach to urban resilience is characterised by what we call a "3+1" approach. The "3" refers to the three dimensions of resilience viz. the physical or the built, the environmental and the socio-economic. Yet it is the "1" which can be the catalyst i.e. governance.*

It seems that a well capacitated and forward-looking governance is the key to advancing resilience action. Our work on strengthening urban governance focuses on the elements or components viz. laws, byelaws, policies, frameworks etc. as well as on the processes which ensure that these work in synergy to foster effective decision making characterized by systems thinking and the involvement of different sectors, stakeholders and communities. Of course, this needs to be supported by effective capacities, information, technical knowledge, and resources to make it actionable.

Gareth: Thank you very much for your thoughts and perspectives, Rajeev. I look forward to continuing to see the work and outputs of UNDP around the world. I have been fortunate to liaise with several UNDP country teams about their work to support cities and towns with urban resilience and disaster risk. For example, I have held some very informative discussions with UNDP Armenia about [their work in disaster risk reduction](#), and with a team in UNDP Viet Nam about [their joint project with GCF](#) to create some 4,000 homes in a flood-prone coastal central area of the country. These are just two of the many UNDP efforts around the world that are making a difference.