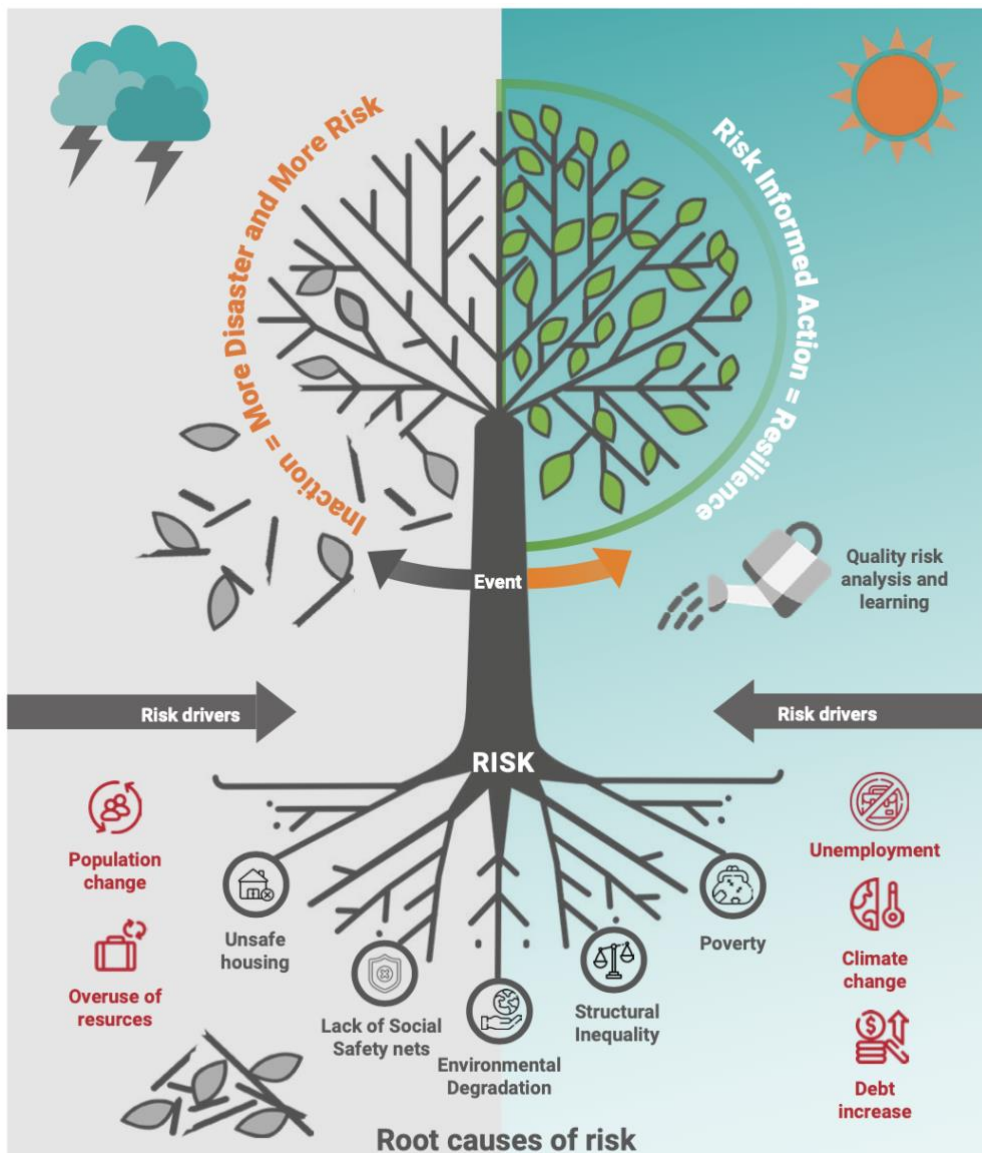# The supranational view: practical action to improve disaster resilience

Interviewers: The Disasters Avoided team:
Gareth Byatt – Principal Consultant, Risk Insight Consulting
Ilan Kelman – Professor of Disasters & Health at University College London and University of Agder
Ana Prados – Senior Scientist, University of Maryland, Baltimore County (UMBC)

Interviewee: Jenty Kirsch-Wood, Head, Global Risk Analysis and Reporting Section for the United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction (UNDRR)

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Source: Based on Oliver-Smith, A., Alcántara-Ayala, I., Burton, I. & Lavell, A., 2016, Forensic Investigations of Disasters (FORIN): A conceptual framework and guide to research (IRDR FORIN Publication No. 2), Integrated Research on Disaster Risk, Beijing. International Council of Scientific Unions, p. 56

Source: UNDRR (GAR Special Report 2024)

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Dear Jenty,

Thank you for making the time to discuss the UNDRR Global Assessment Report (GAR) Special Report 2024 – in particular, how the methodology it uses, and its recommendations, can be made "operational" by public and private sector and NGO teams around the world, and also, how it is envisaged to link to the next UNDRR Global Assessment Report (GAR) to be published in 2025.

The three of us as the Disasters Avoided team are delighted to have played a part in the creation of the GAR Special Report 2024, by reviewing the case studies it contains and by contributing our Disasters Avoided Model to complement the forensics methodology applied to the case studies it contains.

Gareth: To set the scene for our discussion about the GAR Special Report 2024, perhaps we should start by highlighting for our readers a key point of UNDRR's focus, which are the targets of the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015-2030.

Box 1. Targets of the Sendai Framework

(a) Substantially reduce global disaster mortality by 2030, aiming to lower the average per 100,000 global mortality rate in the decade 2020–2030 compared to the period 2005–2015.

(b) Substantially reduce the number of affected people globally by 2030, aiming to lower the average global figure per 100,000 in the decade 2020–2030 compared to the period 2005–2015.

(c) Reduce direct disaster economic loss in relation to global gross domestic product (GDP) by 2030.

(d) Substantially reduce disaster damage to critical infrastructure and disruption of basic services, among them health and educational facilities, including through developing their resilience by 2030.

(e) Substantially increase the number of countries with national and local disaster risk reduction strategies by 2020.

(f) Substantially enhance international cooperation to developing countries through adequate and sustainable support to complement their national actions for implementation of the present Framework by 2030.

(g) Substantially increase the availability of and access to multi-hazard early warning systems and disaster risk information and assessments to people by 2030.

Work Programme 2024-2025 (Source: UNDRR)

The Midterm Review of the implementation of the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015-2030, published in 2023, notes:
- There has been an increase in the number of people affected by disasters since 2015.
- Disasters are expensive to respond to.
- Funding for disaster risk reduction has stalled.

Given the global context of continued disaster threats and disasters that are occurring, how do you hope that the recommendations of the GAR Special Report 2024 can be used to help achieve the targets of the Sendai Framework? In our interview with the former Head of UNDRR, Ms Mami Mizutori in November 2023, we discussed the importance of thinking about systemic risk, and I am wondering if this is part of the report's ethos.

Jenty: Above all, I hope that the report can inspire action, that it can help show that whilst disaster risk globally is increasing, it is possible to take action. We should not accept disaster losses as inevitable, but instead see each disaster as a set-back we need urgently to learn from in a meaningful way. We need to unpack the key factors that contribute to a disaster's impact and learn from the past to inform future action. We know that risks are systemic and connected, and we know there are ways to reduce them. Some of these actions, for example, making sure drainage systems are well maintained ahead of a known typical flood season, are not overly complex or expensive, but they need to be seen as priorities. Disasters are not natural, and even systemic and complex risks can be mitigated. Linking existing social safety nets to humanitarian relief provision is key, as it can help reduce suffering, and this kind of anticipatory action needs to be prioritised. So, the GAR Special Report 2024 aims to provide tools and recommendations for policy makers on how to prevent and avoid disasters, how to adapt better to climate change, how to implement strong and robust early warning systems and solutions, and how to plan better for sustainable development for the long-term.

Ana: We appreciate these insights into the GAR Special Report 2024, Jenty. Regarding the case studies that were selected for the report, what were the criteria for choosing the ones that it features? We know they are from various regions and they cover different hazard types.

Jenty: When we began working with colleagues like Irasema Alcantra at the University of Mexico, and Roger Pulwarty at NOAA and the UCL team, it quickly became clear early on that we wanted to show that disasters are every country's business. This applies to the context of climate change, and also other global trends like urbanisation, and how different countries around the world, rich and poor, are having to upgrade and adapt their approaches to make sure disasters do not derail essential current and future sustainable development.

We wanted to provide a good geographic mix of countries, and a range of hazards, from intensive rapid onset events like earthquakes to longer term extensive events like drought (for example, in the Horn of Africa). Perhaps most importantly, we wanted to work with government teams in developing the report, and so it was important to find the right national stakeholders who could co-create the report with us and share their valuable insights and experience directly. I am glad to say that we were able to assemble a great team of experts and practitioners, and we learned a lot in the process. I hope this approach to pulling together a range of case studies that we can all learn from inspires others to try a similar approach in their contexts.

Ilan: Thanks for this explanation. We know that the GAR Special Report 2024 uses the FORIN (Forensic Investigations of Disasters) methodology to review the case studies. How did you arrive at deciding to use the FORIN methodology, what have you learned from using it and does it have scope to evolve in future?

Jenty: Clearly, we rest on the shoulders of giants on this one. The FORIN methodology was developed by scholars including Anthony Oliver-Smith, Irasema Alcántara-Ayala, Ian Burton and Allan Lavell more than 20 years ago and has been refined over time. At its core, it aims to provide a way to better understand the root causes and drivers of disasters - what we call in the report "the disaster DNA."

In this GAR Special Report, we set out to distil the key elements into a short, actionable set of questions and to bring the approach to a wide and global audience. We felt it was the right time to do this, as it is clear that disaster risk globally is increasing, and tools that focus on helping communities properly analyse where they are effective, and where more needs to be done to prevent future disasters, are essential. FORIN is a great tool for this. We truly hope it can inspire governments and communities to spend time to meaningfully bring people together after an event has occurred to learn from it, not point fingers, and to upgrade their defences ahead of the next hazard event.

Ana: In applying this methodology, are there common factors across the case studies that stand out in your view, which could be shared with the stakeholders that you mention and applied to any disaster hazard around the world? We appreciated being able to analyse the case studies in the report using the Disasters Avoided Model.

Jenty: Absolutely, the Disasters Avoided approach was essential to report. First, it helps to highlight where positive action has been taken and has been effective. Every one of the case study events covered in the report is not a 'one-off' – hurricanes impact the Caribbean every year, forest fires keep occurring around the world, as does drought. Globally, disaster-related deaths are going down, and in all the cases in the report some impacts were avoided through proactive action. Every death is a tragedy and we always need to do more, but the Disasters Avoided model helps point to key elements of effectiveness which can be scaled up, and it pinpoints the importance of factors such as having the right mindset and of a learning culture that otherwise might be missed but which can really be helpful in accelerating risk reduction.

Ilan: We appreciate your words about the Disasters Avoided model, Jenty. Following the launch of the GAR Special Report on September 18, 2024, what are your plans for sharing it with people and encouraging discussions to drive action (bearing in mind the people you want to reach)? We are wondering, for example, how the report will be seen by people including elected officials and administrators of local authorities and those who distribute budgets and funds.

Jenty: We are very happy that the report seems to be resonating with a number of readers, particularly within governments around the world. The report is being discussed at UNDRR's regional platforms.

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For example, since its launch our regional office for the Americas and Caribbean has brought stakeholders together to see how we can further enhance the work and scaled-up adoption.

There is work in the pipeline on additional guidance to help apply the model in the context of early warning, which is a key focus for the UN Secretary General through the Early Warning for All Initiative.

We are also hoping to pull together a suite of online training tools and resources to help those interested to learn more, and to support those undertaken FORIN exercises. Funding is always a challenge, but we want to maintain our momentum following the release of the report. There is no time to waste.

Gareth: This is very encouraging to hear, Jenty. Just to add to this question from Ilan, the Australian Institute for Disaster Resilience (AIDR) informed me in mid-October that they are looking at the possibility of using the FORIN model to enhance how they produce their annual Major Incidents Report, plus I have had positive feedback from presenting the report to a group of people as part of the "Resilience Month of activities and engagement" of the Municipality of Bordeaux in October 2024.

Jenty: That's great news, and just the kind of action we hope to see. It will be great to hear how these types of initiatives develop and to learn from them. We hope to see more uptake around the world.

We'd love to see the report translated and applied in a range of contexts. I hear that Gareth recently presented the report to an audience in French; I hope we can see more of this moving forward.

We are encouraging disaster managers to think about how they can use the approaches in the report to help engage with communities. The distilled list of ten questions that guided the case studies could we hope can be useful in focus group discussions and in evaluation or lessons learned exercises. We know some governments are thinking about how this could be done, and we encourage these kinds of participatory approaches.

Gareth: Making the right funds and financing available for the right activities (which you touched upon earlier) is critical to implementing successful disaster risk reduction and resilience. Can the GAR Special Report 2024 help to orientate funding in the right way, including investment from the private sector?

As some context to this question, target c of the Sendai Framework is to reduce the economic losses from disasters. As described on the UNDRR website page on Financing Prevention and De-risking Investment: "in certain countries, domestic public finances earmarked for risk prevention as primary objective are on average less then 1% of national budgets, suggesting a chronic underinvestment in disaster risk reduction."

Jenty: Making sure the right resources are available is critical for risk reduction – and it is key that they are effectively deployed in the right way. One of the strengths of the FORIN approach is that it encourages more investment in prevention, and it encourages thinking about how to maximise learning about how vulnerability and exposure impacted a particular disaster, and then shows us how to apply these learnings to target investment to where it will be most useful and it can have most impact.

The skills we need to learn, to scale up what works, and to hone in on areas where there are challenges is essential, and they are only going to become more important for disaster risk reduction as we see hazards become more intense and volatile in the context of drivers like global climate change.

Ilan: We greatly appreciate the incorporation of [the Disasters Avoided Model](#) into the GAR Special Report 2024, which you kindly mentioned earlier. Do you have any suggestions for us on how we can improve this model to help support action?

Jenty: We need to work together to help make the case for resilient investment, and that it is a long-term asset, not an additional cost. I think the Disasters Avoided Model does this well, and it is important that we listen to feedback from communities, from local authorities, from governments about what resonates with them, and where more information can help make it more actionable.

Ana: There is clearly a lot to do, but there is also a lot that has been achieved and is still being worked on, which deserves recognition. We are looking forward to seeing the next Global Assessment Report (GAR), which we understand is scheduled for publication in 2025.

What are your plans for the GAR 2025 and how it may link to the GAR Special Report 2024, if we may ask?

Jenty: All of the GAR's focus on elements of how to scale up effective disaster risk reduction action. A number of our recent reports have homed into how to upgrade actions in a world of more systemic and challenging risks.

Thanks for asking about the upcoming Global Assessment Report that will be launched ahead of our next Global Platform in June 2025. The intention for this report is for it to focus on Sendai priority action three: investing for resilience.

There is a key link to the learning from the GAR Special Report 2024 and our intended GAR 2025 work. Whilst the upcoming GAR 2025 will focus in particular on investment strategies, the approach we used in the GAR Special Report 2024 definitely helps us refer to the importance of understanding risk and how hazards, vulnerability and exposure combine to produce disasters and how we can do more to prevent them with the right kind of intelligent investment.

We hope the GAR 2025 will truly help make the case that building resilience is fundamental for all sustainable development, and that it can inspire actors including the financial sector and ministries of planning and finance to make risk reduction fundamental to their planning and daily work.

Ana, Gareth and Ilan: Thank you very much for your time, Jenty.