The expert view: proactive action to avoid disasters, and coping with a disaster if one happens

Interviewers: Gareth Byatt – Principal Consultant, Risk Insight Consulting

Interviewee: Lucy Easthope – Expert and adviser on emergency planning and disaster recovery

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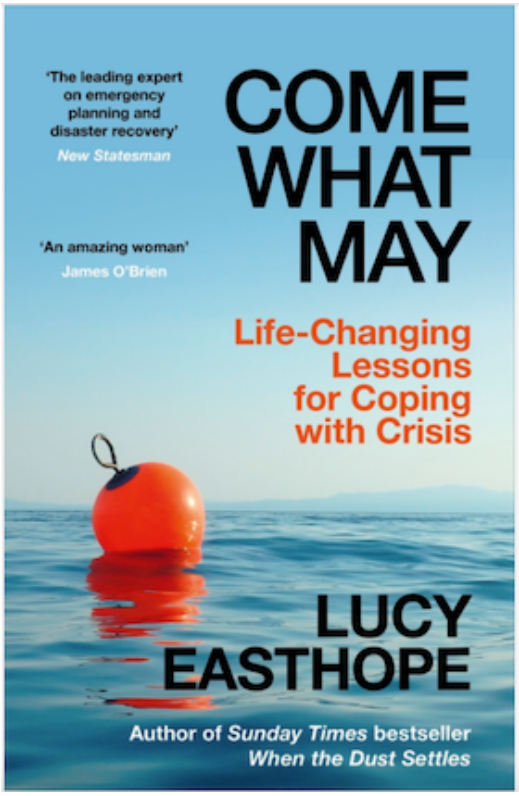


Images: front covers of books co-written by L Easthope (shown with permission by L Easthope)

Lucy,

Thank you for making the time to talk with me about your work and views on disaster risk and how people to cope with and recover from disasters when they happen. The published interviews you have given over the past few years about your experience working on disaster risk and responding to disasters, such as the one with LGIU in March 2025, are very insightful and I will draw upon some of them in our discussion if that's OK.

Your books, **When the Dust Settles** and **Come What May**, focus on how to deal with disasters and how to keep going, and I know you have received good reviews and feedback about them. **The Recovery Myth** is based on your PhD about the roles played by plans and planners in community 'recovery' and whether such a thing is even possible, and **When This Is Over** is about lives in an unequal pandemic.
Are you currently working on any particular aspects, ideas or projects on disaster risk and / or responding to and coping with disasters?

Lucy: *One of the things I am seeing through my research which has led to my books and other media is that key points to coping with and moving on from disasters and crises, which are traumatic and sometimes life-defining events for people, are common for people around the world. So, it feels like it travels well internationally. As I move forwards, I want to keep talking with and engaging people on practical ways to think about and apply risk management to ensure we build resilience for ourselves, our families and our communities, and to ensure we keep learning from examples of how people cope when things happen. Whilst we can prevent some disasters from happening, some will continue to occur and for those who are impacted by a disaster, the ability to bounce back and keep going afterwards is critical. I am currently doing more on citizen preparedness and there is a renewed interest from communities in my work on personal effects returned to families and also memorials and tributes at scenes.*

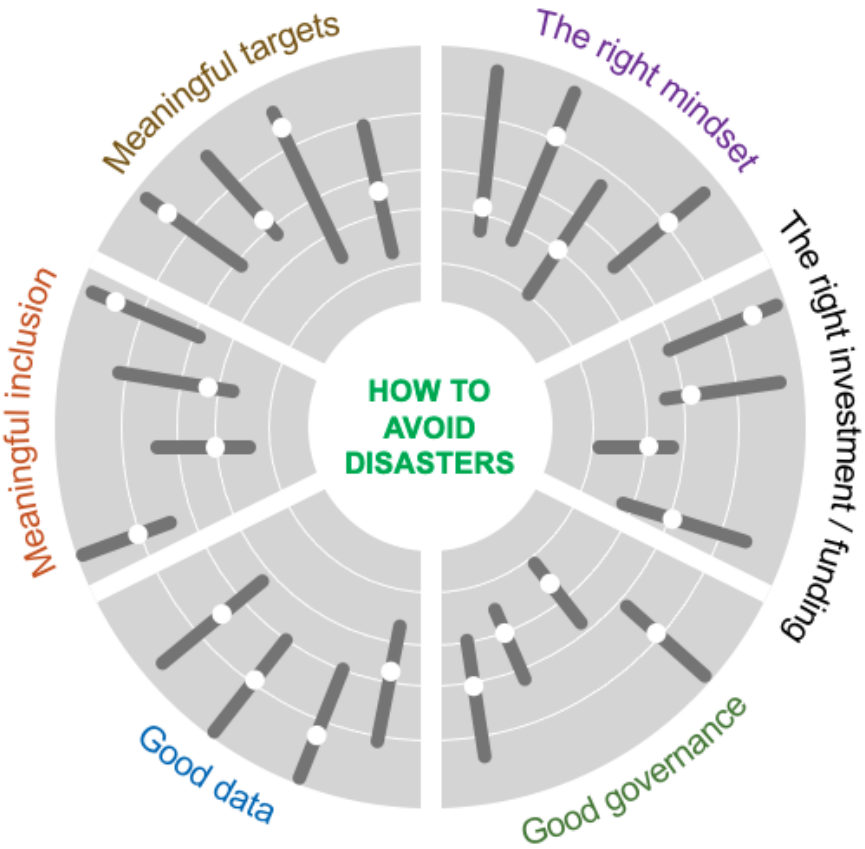
[Details of Lucy's books, articles and interviews are available at www.whatevernext.info]

Gareth: I look forward to seeing your new work in this space. I'd like to focus on some points about how to reduce disaster risk, and how to avoid disasters, before we then turn to how to cope with disasters when they happen.

I'd appreciate your thoughts on the Disasters Avoided model which has been developed by myself, Ilan and Ana. We call it an emerging model, because we see it as evolving and open to change. It's a result of reviewing many examples of proactive action taken to avoid a disaster from occurring after a severe event of some kind (extreme weather, earthquake, other), and situations where a disaster could have been avoided if good upfront planning had been in place, but it wasn't.

Our model has six factors. It starts with the right mindset – which we appreciate means different things to different people (context is key). Then the right investment (not always huge amounts of money), good governance, good data, meaningful inclusion of everyone, and then meaningful targets to aim for. Everything is interlinked.

The Disasters Avoided model: © G Byatt, I Kelman & A Prados



Lucy: *In my view, your focus on how we can, and how we should avoid disasters is so timely. I'll run through some points that come to mind which relate to the model.*

A key question that I see people rightly asking today is how we can test the hypothesis that proactive action to avoid disasters happening, or to minimise their impact, makes a tangible difference compared to what would or could have otherwise happened when an event without us spending time on upfront action. I think this demand links to the meaningful targets factor.

Having a mindset that we should avoid disasters is also key, and it's good that it is given prominence in this model. It can be tempting to tuck these types of words into detailed subtext – I support it being spelt out and made a priority. Having the right mindset sounds simple; in practice I find it requires deep commitment.

We must be able to show that a range of actions are required that benefit society. Genuine community engagement is key, and meaningful inclusion is a factor that I strongly support. Inequality continues to be a major issue to grapple with, and how we engage and support people of all backgrounds to solve a wide range of problems which, if not tackled, can manifest into disasters, is linked to having the right mindset.

I believe all countries are capable of avoiding some disasters or some of the consequences of disasters. Yet disasters keep happening for different reasons, and afterwards we ask ourselves why and carry out reviews into them.

The causes we find are often common and they are also often known problems in advance of the event happening. Different countries have different priorities to focus on, of course. When we look at the hazards that a country or a specific locality within a country face, we may apply a weighting to them based on a size of hazard – be it meteorological, seismic or socio-economic – and vulnerability, which can change over time. Through good governance, the planning and use of the right investment needs to show the worth of proactive action to avoid disasters.

Gareth: I appreciate your feedback on our model, Lucy. We try to focus on what we see as the core parts to focus on, including the definition of a disaster which we keep deliberately short and simple: A major situation requiring outside support for coping. We appreciate there are more detailed definitions of what a disaster is; we decided to focus on three core points: “major”, “outside support” and “coping”.

We are always looking to capture good examples of action taken to avoid a disaster, and to avoid an event turning into a major situation. On the inequality point that you mention, we aim to link to the targets of SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities) and other aspects of the SDGs in documenting how to avoid disasters.

Ilan, Ana and I liaise with some of the world’s multilateral agencies through our work, including connecting with the SDGs and the Sendai Framework. Do you have any thoughts on how these two global frameworks should evolve past 2030 (when they will be reset in some form) to ensure there is appropriate focus on disaster risk reduction and resilience? Is there scope for changing the tone and structure of them both? Some onlookers advocate for “less is more”, others want to tackle everything.

I am interested to see how much genuine feedback from and involvement of different parts of society goes towards what the new iterations these global frameworks are going to be (meaningful inclusion, per our model). How they practically link into the national level and then down to that ground level side of things.

Lucy: *These global frameworks are about making everything work, which is important and also very challenging, yet we have to be ambitious. We want to protect and save lives in an economically viable and positive way and to care for the planet and this requires many different activities to be coordinated.*

That said, there's some interesting research and discussions that looks at whether the current Sendai Framework and international law in disaster management are fit for purpose. They are examples of holding an open review into what’s good to keep focusing on and what isn’t working and needs to change [for example, the ODI piece published in May 2025, Ten years of Sendai: five big changes in disaster risk reduction and what comes next].

A range of factors come into play in updating global frameworks including, of course, the political climate internationally and in nations and also, importantly, the availability of people to spend enough time thinking through everything properly and working through reviews.

There should not be any fear in deciding how to update global frameworks that criticism may undo existing work and collaboration and make it harder to agree how to move forwards.

Updates / refreshes of the SDGs and the Sendai Framework require an inclusive approach to review all aspects, and engagement takes time. As we crystallise needs for moving forwards, I am keen to see if we achieve simple and clear language that resonates with everyone, because at the moment the language used in global frameworks does not always resonate well at the local level.

Gareth: We certainly see in our Disasters Avoided research that common and straightforward words that resonate in different languages with all parts of society is important, Lucy.

I'd like to draw on your point earlier, when we discussed the Disasters Avoided model, about the importance of good upfront planning to avoiding disasters. There are positive recent examples of events that have occurred where quick proactive action, due to proactive planning, has protected lives and minimised impacts. For example, as described in a piece in The Guardian newspaper which my co-lead in the Disasters Avoided initiative, Ilan Kelman, contributed towards, years of preparation and coordination ensured communities from Japan to Hawaii were alert and quick to respond when a major earthquake occurred in far east Russia in late July 2025. Unfortunately, there are also many examples, recently and further back in time, where risks were known but upfront action was either not taken or not undertaken well enough.

Are you encouraged by the current focus on upfront planning, globally and locally, to prevent disasters?

Lucy: *All countries need to continually engage in a review of disaster risk. Whilst some countries may be perceived as more vulnerable than others to certain hazards, we all need to play our part, and we all need to be open about the possibility of disasters happening in our country and our micro-area.*

There is work being done especially at a local level that doesn't get talked about enough. There is a lack of awareness about the amount of dedicated upfront action to manage disaster risk that continues to quietly take place around the world. I think the Guardian piece about the earthquake in eastern Russia in July 2025 and the resulting tsunami is ***AN EXCELLENT*** *example of highlighting to the public, through the channel of international media, why preparedness pays. Showing the value of preparedness and all that it involves with powerful examples is something I would like to see more of. We need to keep showing the value of people preparing for the potential for events to happen, not just focus on covering news about the aftermath of events.*

In my work looking at how people cope with disasters, I see that they need to be ready to face a wide range of things that could happen.

Governments and authorities can document and publish a range of risks on a national risk register and on risk registers of localities, and we should be prepared and ready to deal with them as societies – whether it's sensible measures to protect ourselves against and deal with earthquakes, floods, heatwaves, major power cuts or something else. We also need to monitor and measure how people are disrupted and impacted less because of preparedness and good upfront planning being in place, and people knowing how to act when something happened.

Gareth: Thanks for emphasising the importance of local level work, Lucy.

On your point about the media, we have been speaking with a range of people about this, and we are developing some thoughts about it.

Whilst there are examples of proactive action and upfront planning to avoid disasters (we document some of them through the Disasters Avoided initiative), there is always more to do.

There are good examples of preparedness and a "response ready" approach. In Bangladesh for example, despite known political and economic challenges, its citizens continue to show how practical resilience in preparing for the hazards they know exist. People prepared for possible impacts of Cyclone Mocha when it threatened to strike land in May 2023. Its impact was lower than it could have been, yet it was in any case vital that people were ready for it in case it did strike land and cause extensive damage. I also think about the coordinated action in Australia to avoid wildfire disasters, whilst always looking at economic benefits alongside benefits to people and nature. These are just two of many examples I can think of. We see many other examples around the world, which are worth documenting and sharing with people.

Lucy: *We need to keep documenting and sharing good examples of resilience and work to avoid disasters. Another point to think about is "What if?" – that is, what if a situation could have been even worse? It can be challenging for people to look back and think about how a situation they have faced could have been even worse. For example, one of the things that was difficult to do during and after the COVID-19 pandemic, was to ask people to think about how much worse it could have been. Despite many challenges, humanity managed to avoid the pandemic being worse than it could have been (whilst knowing that we have a lot of lessons on how to improve). There's a lot of good hidden work out there and we need to make it visible and accessible.*

Gareth: Your point about "What if?" makes me think of the value of counterfactuals. I have liaised with Gordon Woo about this way of thinking for several years. Looking at how events could have been worse using a "downward counterfactual" is a valuable learning exercise. I see it as part of having a mindset that includes having "chronic unease" that something could happen. I know chronic unease is something you have written about also.

Gordon co-authored a report published by Lloyds in 2017 titled Counterfactual Disaster Risk Analysis: Reimagining history which describes how this lateral thinking.

When it comes to reviewing events that happen, what caused them and how to move forward, we liaised with UNDRR in 2024 to support their Global Assessment Report (GAR) Special Report for 2024, using the Disasters Avoided model to link into a forensics analysis approach. We appreciated being involved in this review which included the research of many experts around the world.

Lucy: *It can be valuable to integrate "What if?" / counterfactual thinking into the details of each aspect of how we prepare for and respond to a potential or actual disaster event, and how to capture metrics to measure what we are doing. The Guardian piece about the earthquake in eastern Russia concluded with a point about how linking together a range of actions provides a greater whole of benefit for disaster avoidance. If you do "all these things" you have a better outcome all round. What if thinking on this could be: what if something hadn't worked, or the event occurred in a more built-up area?*

The example of this earthquake was an example of how we are never going to be able to prevent certain big events from natural hazards from occurring – in this case, a big seismic event – so let's make sure the data we monitor (which links to the "good data" part of the Disasters Avoided model) and the governance of immediate response mechanisms are rehearsed so that they work when they need to. Thinking about how things could be worse isn't always something people want to do, because we like to be optimistic, but it's important to ensure we keep learning, and we keep challenging ourselves on how to improve.

Gareth: Perhaps your point about capturing metrics to measure what we are doing can link to the next iterations of the Sendai Framework and the SDGs, which we discussed earlier.

Part of your writing includes ensuring people are ready to face the realities of the risks that are present in their lives, and what could happen over time. In some parts of the world, society lives with and respects the hazards around them (Japan and New Zealand always spring to my mind on this point). In others, it seems not to be discussed or thought about as much. Do you have any thoughts on this?

Lucy: *It's important to accept that things can happen and we need to be ready for them if they do. In my work, I see that Emergency Planners are constantly having to justify what they do, so making a good case for sensible upfront practical action and showing the benefits of doing so goes hand in hand with carrying out this type of action, much of it hinging on good (meaningful) engagement with people and communities.*

We are at an interesting point in time where many organisations who operate in disaster risk are seeing their role being closely scrutinised by governments, as belts tighten. Development budgets are being challenged and often reduced, inside countries and in the provision of aid from donor countries to recipients.

One thing that's cropping up quite a lot in my disaster response work is the persisting perspective that some nations that find themselves asking for help feel there is still a certain amount of imperialism and colonialism to DRR attitudes from some donor countries. Governments in all countries need to be open about their use the word "disaster", and to help their citizens to prepare for possible disaster scenarios.

Gareth: This point about preparing citizens brings me to a point about dealing with the development of cities and towns, which is done to varying degrees of effectiveness around the world. The importance of practical resilience for long-term development is something that I talk with urbanists and urban planners about, which is an area I focus on through my Urban 2.0 activities.

I know you have direct experience at a city level, having held a risk management role at Cambridge City Council in the UK in the past and advising on this point in your work. Are local authorities around the world, which we know are resource-constrained, focusing their resources on the right things with the available support they have from national / federal / state / regional governments? Are there good examples of efficient and effective local authority action that you see in some parts of the world that could be valuable for others elsewhere to learn from? For example, I wonder about learnings to be gained from how local authorities in Japan approach disaster risk reduction and community preparation. I also appreciate the way local authorities coordinate activities in Australia and New Zealand.

Urban areas of all sizes – from the smallest townships to the world's mega cities – face a range of hazards. Noting that local context is always key for the hazards that exist and their vulnerability to them, are there particular common areas of focus for people who oversee cities and towns around the world to focus on to reduce disaster risk and support societal resilience?

Lucy: *Managing the disaster risks present in urban areas and risk-informed urban development is a broad area. Cambridge City Council in the UK is an example of how things work in the British multi-layered governance system, where you have a county (Cambridgeshire in this case) then the city level below it. As a city we coordinated a lot with the county.*

As of today, I continue to liaise a lot with different local government teams. I am a strong advocate and supporter of local government being empowered and responsible to support communities in local preparedness to the threats and hazards they face in their local area – of all types, including humanmade ones. It is an example of the point we just discussed just now of making risks visible to the public and having a discussion about the disaster preparedness and resilience work that goes on, which is too often unseen, and what more is required. Sometimes we see examples in the media of, for example, respite centres being "in place" when an event (for example, a flood) occurs, in which sometimes there is surprise expressed in the news coverage that these respite centres were set up quickly. More often than not, the speed of action was down to detailed preparedness planning by one or more local government teams, and this needs to be shown as a positive example of the value of upfront proactive action.

This is true wherever the situation is in the world. One of the things I have found interesting with my research and writing is how providing examples of action taken in one local area of a country provides people with parallels that they see and can apply elsewhere, which spans across different countries. There can sometimes be rhetoric that can make us think that different things are required in different countries, but at the local government level, whilst you will have different levels of resources and cultural differences and different hazards and exposure to them, there are common approaches that we can all use. Allowing local people to govern and manage themselves is pretty much a principle of every community anywhere in the world, and we can and should learn from each other.

Many cities and municipal authorities face tough times with their budgets at the moment, and this makes it hard to do as much work as they would like on preparedness for threats and hazards. We know that a strong preparedness culture means that citizens and businesses are engaged in preparedness and future planning. When the resourcing of local government is reduced it is very challenging to maintain the level of upfront action in resilience. Taking the UK as an example, almost every local authority that I work with is today forced to be reactive in a ring-fenced way. When events do happen, there may then be barriers to introducing different ways of resilience to "build back". Sometimes, for example, insurers may request that structures are built back the way they were, rather than use more resilient new approaches. Upfront discussions should be held to try to make the recovery better in all ways.

Gareth: I have seen some good examples of how municipal authorities in Japan carry out good upfront planning, involving their citizens and businesses to support urban continuity planning. I have seen examples elsewhere of city-wide engagement in "resilience month" programmes, such as one that is held annually in the French city of Bordeaux in October (to coincide with UN-Habitat's "Urban October").

Do you have any thoughts on how local and municipal authorities should govern land development to reduce disaster risk? In April 2025 I discussed with Terry Gibson what governments can do to ensure risk-informed land development takes place. However, it often seems that risk reduction is not properly embedded in development, that too land is developed to achieve commercial gains and risk is only reviewed after something bad happens. I have also spoken with Wendy Saunders of the Natural Hazards Commission in New Zealand about how they are using risk tolerance to manage land development.

Ben Wisner, Piers Blaikie, Terry Cannon and Ian Davis in their book At Risk talk about the structural problems that prevent us working towards a safer environment, with action focusing on vulnerability being insufficient. That book was first published in 1994 (the second edition came out in 2004).

Lucy: *I think we need to capture the money flows in and out, and how much the cost of resilience to support land development would be, whilst appreciating that we need to take a risk-based approach. Insurers have some good data about this.*

To return to the Disasters Avoided model, what meaningful targets should we be using, and can they be common across different geographies? Can we track and measure, when events happen, the scale and size of what a disaster could have been if preparedness action had not been taken?

I really enjoyed contributing to Gaia Vince's series of podcasts on these issues, which you can listen to here: www.whatevernext.info and BBC Inside Science on BBC Sounds: https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/m001q0yr and https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/m001lrjz.

Gareth: Thanks for the podcast links, Lucy, and for your point about thinking carefully on the metrics and targets to focus on, which I am an advocate of.

It would be good to talk about the "response" part of disaster management now. I know that how people respond to and cope with disasters that occur is a core part of your work. Your book published in May 2025, Come What May, distils what you have learned about how people can keep going and carry on during and after they experience terrible events.

I know you have been on the ground shortly after many disaster events have occurred. What are some of the key points you have seen to how people can cope with disaster events? For example, I believe you talk about "secondary disasters" that can occur if a response to a disaster event has not been thought through and planned carefully. This seems to be a case of the importance of good systems thinking to think through all aspects including potential unintended consequences.

Lucy: *In the early stages of any kind of major event happening, whether it's an earthquake or a warehouse fire or a societal problem, we do things like vulnerability assessments and impact assessments. When we do this, we need to be careful that we do not rush to solve an immediate problem yet, in doing so, leave ourselves exposed to hidden consequences afterwards.*

One of the challenges I see at the moment at the local level is the quality of an initial community impact assessment and initial vulnerability assessment, which is often lacking in thoroughness.

To give you an example of thinking through many different points, and understanding what's critical, in the new Hurricane Katrina documentary on Disney / Hulu, there's a moment when people are reflecting that the hurricane is about to strike at the end of the month. That is the day before payday for people. So, this means that people have run out of money and may not have any money to evacuate or get ready.

It's this sort of thing you'll find me asking about in a meeting to review possible consequences. But people think that's far too "operational" rather than "strategic". People who are leading response teams need to know what counts, and the answer is that it will consist of many things so prioritising what to do first really is important.

Gareth: I am an advocate in holding scenario exercises to work through practical details, and of ensuring we have good checklists to refer to. Every situation is different, of course. In my work advising how teams form and how they manage disaster and crisis events, I find that the skills required to manage a disaster or a crisis situation are not linked to a person's role or title.

Lucy: *I agree on this point. One thing that you see me talk about on my podcasts and other media is that we tend to wrongly believe that the skills to manage a disaster event or a crisis come with pre-existing senior leadership roles. They do not. Some people can be very good at Disaster Risk Reduction planning; others may be good at responding to an event. When we look at the whole cycle, we might want to have different group chairs between a strategic planning stage and response and recovery which needs a different skill set and maybe a different person to lead it.*

I have really enjoyed participating in the Sky / Tortoise Wargame podcast as it is another insight into trying to place humanitarian and community issues into very strategic rooms.
You can access the Wargame podcast here: https://news.sky.com/story/the-wargame-new-sky-news-and-tortoise-media-podcast-series-simulates-a-russian-attack-on-uk-13371462

Gareth: Thanks for this Wargame podcast link, Lucy. You mentioned some other podcasts a little earlier. You have hosted some very interesting radio programmes with the BBC, including in 2025 At Your Own Peril, in which you explore the history of risk from the origin of probability to the existential threat of nuclear war, artificial intelligence and climate change. I also enjoyed listening to your interview in June 2025 on BBC Desert Island Discs (a BBC radio programme that has been going since 1942).

Do you have plans for taking part / leading any more radio programmes / podcasts?

Lucy: *I loved creating At Your Own Peril. On paper it looked quite a dry series, yet people have been interested in it, which I am delighted about. Broadcasters are telling me that people want to hear realism and good science. The pandemic has left them wanting to understand science communication better. Perhaps the pendulum is swinging back to appreciating expertise and deep knowledge.*

We can draw connections for people sometimes, to help join the dots. For example, if we shine a light on the scarcity of resource in defence and security, it may be appropriate to expand this point to a scarcity of resource in disaster management.

Gareth: A final question for you, Lucy. Are there one or two key points you would like to see politicians and policy makers around the world focusing on to reduce disaster risk and ensure local communities are prepared for events that could and do occur?

Lucy: *One of the things I would say is that the Disasters Avoided theme is one that needs continued focus, including with broadcasters and communications people. People need high quality and accessible material and guidance.*

I'll also return to our earlier point about reviewing how things are articulated and done, and whether we need to reset some approaches. I have a colleague who is looking at international law on disaster risk and management because it needs to be changed. But make sure you tell people about it. I would also like to see a strong focus on citizen preparedness and resilience. This can take many forms and go through many communications channels, from official documents to lifestyle magazines that can advise people about preparing for times ahead.

Gareth: Thank you very much for your time, Lucy.