



## Conference Report: Global Platform on Disaster Risk Reduction 2013, Geneva, 19-23 May

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The Indian Ocean tsunami resulted in the United Nations' reaching agreement in 2005 on the Hyogo Framework for Action (HFA) to achieve "the substantial reduction of disaster losses, in lives as well as the social, economic and environmental assets of communities and countries" by 2015. Every two years, 133 nations report on progress towards disaster risk reduction (DRR) to the HFA's Secretariat, the United Nations' Strategy Implementing Disaster Reduction (UNISDR). UNISDR also produces a Global Assessment Report (GAR) which is launched at the biennial Global Platform on Disaster Risk Reduction (GPDRR), at which the nations committed to the HFA also officially meet, report, share experiences and make decisions on the programme for the coming years.

The decisions and information shared at such conferences affect the future direction of public investment decisions, and therefore of associated businesses. The conference therefore has a large number of delegates who are officially representing their country (officials) and usually Minister's of the countries concerned make an appearance at some stage, and representatives of related United Nations organs (e.g., UNDP) are also present. As with most United Nations meetings of this type, there is considerable interest by non-government organisations (NGOs) of all types (business to environmental).

It is not a typical academic conference, instead comprising an official core or formal session at which only nations have a right to speak, but 'significant others' (e.g., the World

Meteorological Society or the World health Organisation) may be invited to make comments. Such sessions are translated simultaneously into the languages of the United Nations and comprise plenary sessions. At other times formal programme, concurrent 'featured events' occur and questions are often taken from the floor in an attempt to stimulate discussion, although usually these questions comprise lengthy statements from representatives of groups or local governments that have not had a seat on that particular podium, but wish to push their particular interests to the fore. In addition there are also a large number of concurrent 'side events', that are not part of the formal programme, and exhibitions. The side events tend to be where many of the more significant, often academic, discussions occur in a more relaxed manner but positioning also frequently occurs. There are ongoing exhibitions featuring demonstrations of materials and technologies proudly and often energetically promoted to passers-by and some of these are genuinely breath-taking – the Tangible Earth project is especially so. A stage provided opportunities for those not on any particular event to give brief informal pitches about their work and these were also often well attended. Then there are the cocktail parties hosted by various organisations, usually governments, pre-'formal session' meetings of relevant technical and scientific committees and the behind-the-scenes meetings where key decisions are taken of various levels of importance. It is effectively a market opportunity and a gathering at which contacts can be made, networks established and strengthened that typically occurs at conferences.

The 2013 GPDRR was the last before the World Platform in Japan in 2015 at which nations will have to make decisions on whether to recommit to the HFA for a further 10 years or to take a different path. The 2013 conference therefore had a greater significance than usual as various interests sought to focus attention on their issues and achievements. Not surprisingly it was the most well-attended of the Platforms to date with 4060 delegates registered before the conference started, the majority of them from Europe and the Asia-Pacific regions. This was larger than the World Health Organisation's concurrent conference and consequently accommodation in Geneva was at a premium.

Lincoln University had been commissioned by UNISDR to prepare one of several Background Reports for the Global Assessment Report and the team, with Roche Mahon as Principal Investigator and with Prof Susanne Becken and myself as Investigators had produced a report of over 100 pages (Mahon et al. 2013), and as a result were given a three minute slot to present the key findings in what turned out to be a packed formal featured event at the launch of the Global Assessment Report. We had also been part of the review process for the GAR itself. As a result of these activities the Lincoln University logo was prominently displayed in the featured event and our involvement was fully acknowledged in the GAR itself. Roche did not attend the Platform as she needed to make up time on her PhD which had suffered somewhat from her efforts in researching the Background Report (while we were in Geneva she was actually winning the Lincoln University Thre3sis competition and a trip to Australia!). Susanne gave a very effective presentation and was the first of the expert presenters to stick to her three minutes, a feat that was noted positively by UNISDR.

Lincoln University was also represented by Dr Simon Lambert who was an invited presenter at a side event on indigenous peoples' issues and DRR. The Lincoln presence at the Platform was consequently relatively high, as was New Zealand's generally with a large official party that included the Minister of Civil defence (Nicky Kaye), the CEO of CERA (Roger Sutton), John

Hamilton of the Ministry of Civil Defence who headed the immediate Canterbury earthquake response before the creation of CERA, and a large number of other prominent New Zealand-based disaster specialists and others who were working for other organisations (e.g. the International Red Cross). The Minister and Roger were panellists in various sessions due to the high level of interest in the Canterbury earthquakes and the recovery process.

In the build-up to the Conference, GNS/Massey University Professor David Johnston had ensured that those New Zealanders attending the conference were linked with the Official delegation (of which he was part). This led to invitations to attend a welcoming function at the New Zealand Embassy at which the Minister briefed us on New Zealand's official objectives and interests at the Platform. This created a sense of awareness and cooperation between the New Zealanders present that was retained throughout the Platform and has continued subsequently.

I have been a member of New Zealand's official delegations to United Nations Conferences of Parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity in the past, but this was my first experience of a UN conference as a non-official, and as someone not presenting a paper I had sufficient non-importance and anonymity to have considerable freedom. As a non-presenter my goal was to strengthen existing networks that had developed during our research and build new connections. I also aimed to ensure that Lincoln's presence was noted positively and that our research findings were shared widely, as well as learning as much as possible from the various sessions and supporting other New Zealanders where possible. Despite the size of the conference it was relatively easy to meet all the people I wanted to and I found the featured event on "Building resilience in urban planning and investments" of most interest.

The overall impression that left, was that politicians tend to address disaster planning after the disaster has already occurred, and do not give priority to funding the preparation period when a disaster is only a statistical probability. We have not found a means to combat this yet. A second,

heartening impression was the amount of effort being put in by some in the private sector to reduce the risk of disaster for sound business, but also social reasons. The one day post conference fieldtrip to look at the ways in which Switzerland was attempting to avoid disasters on its main roads through the mountains was also a memorable learning experience.

In summary, the GPDRR was an impressive event and it was notable that the GAR played a central part in shaping many of the discussions. As a direct consequence of our involvement, Lincoln University was subsequently included as one of only two places where UNISDR's Dr Andrew Maskrey, lead author of the GAR, gave seminars when he visited New Zealand in August. The focus is now on developing Lincoln's input to the future work of UNISDR in the build-up to the 2015 World Platform.

#### **REFERENCES**

*Mahon R., Becken S., Rennie H. (2013) Evaluating the Business Case for Investment in the Resilience of the Tourism Sector of Small Island Developing States: A Background Paper Contributing to the Global Assessment Report on Disaster Risk Reduction (GAR) 2013. Leap Research Report No. 32 Christchurch: Lincoln University P.142.*