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Headline: Climate change, disaster risk: Asian action critical

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THE JURY may still be out on the link between climate change and natural disasters. But one thing is clear: Weather-related disasters are increasing in both frequency and intensity. Witness the string of severe recent floods across Asia—from Pakistan, to Thailand, to the Philippines—and Hurricane “Sandy” in the United States, which have vividly shown us how extreme weather events can bring entire countries to a virtual standstill. Volatile weather extremes are hitting Asia and the Pacific more often than any other region of the world.

This gives the Asia-Pacific region a huge stake in mitigating global temperature rise while adapting to already rising climate change impacts. Sixty percent of the region’s people rely on highly climate-sensitive farms, forests and fisheries for their livelihoods. Seven out of the 10 countries most vulnerable to climate change and disasters caused by natural hazards are in Asia and the Pacific. A decrease in fresh water availability can affect more than one billion Asian people by 2050.

The region has borne the brunt of the physical and economic damage of increased disasters. It accounted for 38 percent of global disaster-related economic losses between 1980 and 2009. People in the Asia-Pacific region are four times more likely to be affected by disasters than those in Africa, and 25 times more likely than those in Europe or North America.

A recent report of the Asian Development Bank (ADB) noted that storms and floods, in particular, are becoming endemic to the region, and their increasing frequency and severity can slash economic growth and development. And as we have seen time and again, it is the poorest and most vulnerable citizens who suffer the most. We cannot hope to bring an end to poverty without building resilience to climate change and these associated events.

The challenge is to tackle both at the same time. We need to mobilize massive funds for climate change adaptation—around \$40 billion a year for the Asia-Pacific region is a very conservative estimate. Investing in disaster risk reduction as part of adaptation only makes sense; it has been estimated that every dollar spent to reduce risk saves at least \$4 in future relief and rehabilitation costs.

Clearly, there is a need to more closely integrate climate change and disaster-related activities. Doing so will present its own challenges, given the different—sometimes competing—interests involved: Disaster risk reduction is a well-established area of work handled mainly by engineers, whereas climate change adaptation is relatively new and falls more within the purview of environmental specialists. Nonetheless, we should make every effort possible to do what is most prudent and effective.

The Climate Investment Funds (CIF) has endorsed \$1.5 billion to ADB for mitigation and adaptation cofinancing within the Asia-Pacific region. The CIF’s pilot program for climate resilience has thus far allocated \$278 million to ADB for projects in Bangladesh, Cambodia, Nepal, Papua New Guinea, Tajikistan, Tonga, and the Pacific regionally.

Much can be done to supplement these efforts. The region needs, for example, an Asia-Pacific disaster risk insurance scheme, and it will benefit from the wider introduction of catastrophe bonds.

Such innovative forms of insurance can increase resilience by forcing communities to model, price and manage the risks of climate change. A climate-induced disaster fund for the region that will channel critically needed post-disaster assistance into building resilience against future catastrophic events should also be considered.

So far, few developing Asian countries have focused on disaster risks in their economic development plans. As a region, we no longer have a choice. We must invest in disaster prevention—not only in infrastructure, but also in the region's social development. Neglecting the looming threats of increased weather-related disasters will put millions of Asia's most vulnerable people at increased risk of poverty, ill health and premature death.

This issue must be brought to the forefront at the 18th Conference of Parties of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, which runs until Dec. 7 in Doha, Qatar, through enhanced discussion, consideration of innovative solutions, and commitments to act.

The Asia-Pacific region has a critical role to play in reaching a solution to the climate crisis. Its population and economies face ever increasing risks from the consequences of climate change, and future economic growth must be decoupled from the rapid expansion of greenhouse gas emissions. The impacts are felt at a very personal and local level, and it is critical that we create, invest in, and act upon solutions to improve the resilience of communities across the region. However, this is a global problem, which will require a global solution involving the full participation of all countries.

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