

The Role of Academic Institutions in Disaster Preparedness

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National disaster preparedness and related risk management measures will often take different forms of implementation. This implementation can especially differ between countries in different states of economic and social development. The approach will depend on what resources the country can mobilize, using to the maximum extent indigenous skills, and what resources will have to be newly created some with likely assistance from the outside. The role of regional or global development banks and their willingness to address these natural hazard and risk management issues as part of an overall development and risk management strategy can be critical.

In most instances academic institutions may not be the best suited to play the role of "contractor" to produce a viable disaster preparedness and risk management plan. That may be better done by government agencies or private contractors. However, academia tends to play a major role in the planning and some implementation efforts for several reasons:

1. All these efforts require a major scientific base in which the proper information and the uncertainties associated with it need to be fully understood before they can be translated into policy and regulatory measures. Academic institutions are often, but not always, the source of pertinent information, and the developers of analytical and critical methods and tools.

2. The educational basis for the various professions that are needed to make the plans and implement them is critical. Academic institutions can be important for basic and continuing advanced education, and for developing scenarios and training programs.

3. Academic institutions are often in the position to bypass political hurdles which government or private (commercial) institutions are often subjected to, due to historical or other circumstances.

4. Academic institutions can provide a continuity of program support beyond the immediate assessment phases which private sector consultants with given profit motives cannot afford to invest in.

5. Out of the box thinking can sometimes provide ingenious solutions, where traditional approaches may fail otherwise. The academic environment can be conducive to this unburdened modus operandi, although some private and public sector institutions do so occasionally as well.

6. The "university" in its better incarnations provides a universe of knowledge and expertise that can be readily mobilized when needed. It is often in the interdisciplinary overlap of professional domains where the solutions lie. Universities can readily provide the combination of breadth and depth of skills that are conducive to find the optimum solutions. If these potential assets are combined with a strong management skill typically found in the private sector, then academia can make major and lasting contributions.