

Overcoming our disaster myopia in Haiti

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It's no surprise how we behave before and after low-probability, high-consequence events like Haiti's earthquake: Our responses share certain common features. Before a catastrophe happens, for example, we give little thought to the possibility of such a devastating event -- after all, it's very unlikely to happen. But when we witness the destruction and chaos from a real disaster, there is an outpouring of sympathy and support. Several weeks later, however, another crisis inevitably takes center stage and much of the concern and support is dissipated.

There are ways to overcome this pattern of behavior but it requires concerted action, planning and financial innovation. In a somewhat perverse way, one thing Haiti has going for it is its abject poverty. This has led to an outpouring of money from all quarters since the earthquake occurred. The challenge is to funnel these funds to develop long-term plans for rebuilding the country rather than exhausting the money by reconstructing damaged or destroyed houses rapidly in a haphazard fashion.

The experience of the 1923 earthquake in Tokyo which destroyed the entire city is instructive here. The Japanese government used the disaster as an opportunity to reflect on how to deal with devastating catastrophes. As a result, they developed better standards of construction to avoid future disasters of this magnitude.

Port-au-Prince faces a similar but even more daunting challenge due to its poverty. How can one redesign the city and its surrounding area and construct safer homes so that the quality of life of the people is improved and the chance of another loss from a devastating earthquake or other disaster is greatly reduced?

To achieve these objectives, what is needed, in addition to massive contributions from the private and public sectors at a global level, is coordination of the rebuilding activities between international organizations such as the World Bank, the Agency for International Development and the United Nations and the Haitian government.

On a broader level, Haiti offers an opportunity for one to design strategies that have relevance not only for natural disasters in all parts of the world but for other low-probability, high-consequence events.

There is a tendency for all of us to be highly myopic in the sense that we are not willing to incur the upfront costs of protection or risk reduction now unless we believe that we'll get an adequate return in the next year or two. Coupled with this behavior is a tendency to perceive the likelihood of these catastrophes as very, very low -- too low to be of concern. However, recent remarks by the Obama administration and others following the Haitian earthquake point to the increasing recognition that we need to overcome our short-run focus and think long-term.

Here are some steps that are required to implement a long-term strategy in Haiti:

- Construct temporary housing, provide sufficient food, water and medical care for those in need.
- Utilize the scientific, engineering and building communities to design permanent structures that can withstand future disasters.
- Coordinate the redesign of Port-au-Prince through international organizations that work closely with the Haitian government to implement these concepts and fund the reconstruction.
- Develop long-term strategies that include well-enforced regulations and standards such as building codes coupled with financial protective mechanisms to provide the rationale for the building of these quake and other hazard-resistant structures from both an economic and human perspective.

If one views the Haitian earthquake as an opportunity to design long-term strategies for managing low-probability, high-consequence events, we will have taken a major step forward. But to do this we have to plan now, not tomorrow. That is both the challenge and the opportunity that Haiti provides the global community.