

# The UN Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015–2030: Negotiation Process and Prospects for Science and Practice

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## 1. Introduction

On 18 March 2015, at the UN World Conference on Disaster Reduction, 187 members states signed the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015–2030 (SFDRR). This global agreement on national action for disaster risk reduction (DRR) replaced the Hyogo Framework for Action 2005–2015 (HFA). The SFDRR agreement was only the final stage of a long process that involved many consultations across government and with civil society at national, regional and global levels. The closing negotiations were fraught and required a final 36 h non-stop stretch of debate before the host nation, Japan and supporting UN agency, the International Strategy for Disaster Reduction (ISDR), could declare consensus.

As the first major agreement for the post-2015 development agenda, SFDRR is important in its own right but also as an indicator of the likely approach that may be taken by governments in negotiating across this period. SFDRR presents some important gains for the framing of international and national policy on DRR: its vision recognizes the context dependent quality of vulnerability alongside the advantages for policy making of transferable risk reduction approaches; risk and loss are presented as outcomes of development decision-making with DRR a concern for development as much as an outcome of development; urbanization is recognized as an emergent context and driver for risk. These are steps forward. In addition, the text reflects the strong views presented from the UN Major Groups

and others for SFDRR to go beyond the HFA to include response and reconstruction periods as opportunities for risk reduction and building back better.

Linkages between development and DRR are also reflected in the use of resilience in SFDRR to encourage development alongside or within risk management. In comparison to the HFA which had the overarching aim of supporting resilience, as expressed in its sub-title of “building the resilience of nations and communities to disaster”, SFDRR uses resilience sparingly to describe post-disaster development gains. This more technical and specific use of resilience is helpful in itself. From a strategic perspective, by invoking resilience in this way, SFDRR makes a potentially important contribution in the run up to the final negotiations of the UN’s Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Resilience offers the DRR community a connection point to the SDGs and an opportunity for leadership in interpreting resilience including at the level of indicators enhancing the relevance of DRR in the wider development agenda. Within the proposed SDGs, for example, resilience is a component of subsidiary targets aiming to achieve Goal 1: To end poverty in all its forms, everywhere. SFDRR now provides a potential bridge from the SDGs to DRR policy and practice and an integration point into the wider development agenda. Finally, SFDRR offers a concrete agenda for evidence-based policy and for international technology transfer.

Despite these advances, critics have described the SFDRR as falling short of being a major breakthrough, of failing to live-up to its own ambitions of being “action-oriented” and for presenting DRR with a “renewed sense of urgency” (Mysick 2015). In part, this is because SFDRR, is a non-legally binding framework with ambiguous targets. SFDRR process and final negotiations also revealed a lack of comprehensive political commitment and ambition from governments in advancing the disaster risk as part of the global development agenda. In this sense, SFDRR does not set a positive precedent for the other major international agreements to be finalized in 2015 — including the UN SDGs and UNFCCC Climate Change Agreement.

The content of the framework reflects the awkward politicization of intergovernmental negotiations that was less present in the HFA negotiation process. Several central ideas that already shape policy and research were negotiated to the side-lines of the SFDRR text. These omissions will now require additional effort and argument from donors and governments as well as civil society organizations who will want to continue with recognized priorities even if these are not clearly emphasized in the SFDRR. Four gaps stand out as generating such programming challenges for agencies wishing to conform with SFDRR:

- the need for national actors to build on local level capacities;
- conflict and violence as drivers of vulnerability;

- climate change as a key context for risk production, and climate change adaptation as an overlapping policy agenda for risk reduction;
- systemic risk (risk arising from the overlapping of multiple hazards and vulnerability) as an organizing principle and the associated inference that responsibility for risk may often be rooted in acts and processes of development distant to processes of hazard exposure, vulnerability, risk and loss.

As a result of these distortions, SFDRR is some distance short of reflecting the cutting edge of science and practitioner consensus on best practice for DRR. It will be difficult to live-up to the comprehensiveness of ISDR's own Global Assessment Reports which have become an international benchmark for the ideas, evidence and practices behind DRR. The difficulty of intergovernmental political process to keep pace with scientific and practitioner progress was very clear in the World Conference on Disaster Risk Reduction, which placed intergovernmental negotiations alongside, but separate from, a science and business conference. This juxtaposition highlighted the two track nature of experience and research on one hand and the distortions of the intergovernmental political process on the other. Leadership in understanding and innovation for DRR is now firmly in the hands of practitioners and researchers, not the intergovernmental political community. This distinction is perhaps unavoidable in the current international arena but is clearly not desirable if development and DRR are to connect political will and professional expertise in facing the rising necessity and public demands for transformation towards a more sustainable future (Matyas and Pelling 2015).

So what does the SFDRR mean for different actors? This paper integrates accounts of the process and outcomes of the negotiations from the personal observations of members of the United Nations Major Groups for Non-Governmental Organizations and for Science and Technology. The authors had access to the preceding consultation and negotiation processes as well as the political negotiations and surrounding science and civil society conference at Sendai. Views expressed are not reflective of the Major Groups or of the authors' home institutions.

## **2. Describing the SFDRR in the Contexts of What HFA Did and Did Not Do**

The SFDRR replaced the 2005–2015 Hyogo Framework for Action (HFA). Formal reporting on the HFA was based on annual self-assessment submissions by national governments describing progress for five HFA priority areas:

- Ensure that disaster risk reduction is a national and local priority with a strong institutional basis for implementation.

- Identify, assess and monitor disaster risks and enhance early warning.
- Use knowledge, innovation and education to build a culture of safety and resilience at all levels.
- Reduce the underlying risk factors.
- Strengthen the disaster preparedness for effective response at all levels.

Most successful was Priority 2: Identify, assess and monitor disaster risks and enhance early warning. Most difficult to implement was Priority 4: Reduce the underlying risk factors, and also Priority 3: Use knowledge, innovation and education to build a culture of safety and resilience at all levels. Improvements in hazard monitoring and early warning have saved many thousands of lives and together are a global success story, indicating what can be achieved when science and policy are effectively integrated. But, even this success has met an impasse. Moving from incremental improvements in hazard-based early warning to the step change gain that can be achieved from improved emphasis on understanding human behavior has been slow. As indicated by the poor progress on Priority 3 and priority 4, efforts to tackle underlying gaps in understanding and root causes of risk have been far more difficult. UNISDR's own monitoring review is damning, describing progress on Priority areas 1, 2, 4 and 5 as "institutional commitment attained but achievements are neither comprehensive nor substantial" (UNISDR 2014).

Independent assessment confirms that structural barriers were not overcome during the term of the HFA. *Views from the Frontline*, a series of participatory assessments that gathered local perspectives of progress of the HFA, found that HFA produced national level policies but very little local level impact. In 2013, some 57% of respondents reported disaster losses were increasing (GNDR 2013).

In the context of limited success following the HFA, many hopes were pinned on the SFDRR making a difference where its predecessor could not: at the local level and with a systematic focus on root causes. These hopes were further extended by the development of other post-2015 frameworks also being agreed upon in 2015. These include the SDGs, the UNFCCC Climate Change Agreement, and the Finance for Development agenda. The timing of these new frameworks present an opportunity to create aligned objectives, actions, timelines and monitoring mechanisms toward enhanced resilience across all sectors. But, it seems unlikely that the SFDRR will fill the gaps of the HFA. A potentially significant advance on the HFA is the inclusion of seven global targets in the SFDRR. Whereas the HFA had no targets, the SFDRR presents seven global targets. The targets are not legally binding — there is no penalty for failure at the national or international levels, but

they do provide a starting point for measuring progress. These targets request signatory states to:

- (a) Substantially reduce global disaster mortality by 2030, aiming to lower average per 100,000 global mortality between 2020–2030 compared to 2005–2015.
- (b) Substantially reduce the number of affected people globally by 2030, aiming to lower the average global figure per 100,000 between 2020–2030 compared to 2005–2015.
- (c) Reduce direct disaster economic loss in relation to global gross domestic product (GDP) by 2030.
- (d) Substantially reduce disaster damage to critical infrastructure and disruption of basic services, among them health and educational facilities, including through developing their resilience by 2030.
- (e) Substantially increase the number of countries with national and local disaster risk reduction strategies by 2020.
- (f) Substantially enhance international cooperation to developing countries through adequate and sustainable support to complement their national actions for implementation of this framework by 2030.
- (g) Substantially increase the availability of and access to multi-hazard early warning systems and disaster risk information and assessments to the people by 2030.

From a critical perspective, the language used in these targets is weak. Much pre-conference discussion on specific levels of risk and loss reduction was replaced by the cover-all term “substantially”. There is no quantitative guidance on how ‘substantial’ is to be interpreted. The challenge of stochastic variability in impact data has led to the first two targets comparing 2015–2020 with 2020–2030: this aims to limit the bias on impact data arising from extremes of high and low event activity. It is also argued that concerns over stochastic bias led to the object of assessment for these targets being global rather than national. Reducing both the number of people affected and economic losses can be achieved by relative increases in populations and assets with low risk exposure, which need not derive from DRR policy or action. The sixth target (f) changed considerably through the negotiation process. The SFDRR draft text referred to “technical assistance, technology transfer, capacity building and training programmes”; however, none of this language survived final negotiations.

The selection of targets could also be more ambitious, but they reflect the observational and monitoring capacity of governments; hence, the focus on direct economic loss and not indirect or systemic losses, even though we know direct

economic losses can account for less than half of economic losses. However, tracking even these targets will require substantial government investment in loss monitoring. Whilst this will be particularly challenging for low- and even middle-income countries, where states are often fragile, it will also be challenging across the board when it comes to tracking the losses from frequent but low-impact and cumulative everyday hazards (small landslides, diurnal tidal flooding, etc.). Connecting monitoring capacity to technology transfer will not be sufficient to meet this need — an overhaul of the organizational, administrative and human capacity for local monitoring is needed if the targets are to play a meaningful role in focusing investment and risk reduction strategies for the most vulnerable.

Providing direction for DRR policy in meeting the global targets, the SFDRR presents four priorities for action:

- (1) Understanding disaster risk.
- (2) Strengthening disaster risk governance to manage disaster risk.
- (3) Investing in DRR for resilience.
- (4) Enhancing disaster preparedness for effective response and to “Build Back Better” in recovery, rehabilitation and reconstruction.

Each priority identifies opportunities for local, national, regional and global actions. Priority 1 establishes a firm support for evidence based policy making, through calls for structured data collection (which should include a more serious engagement with vulnerability than is currently the case in many contexts); multi-hazard interactions; and for capacity building and technology transfer. The latter was somewhat weakened by the omission of explicit technology transfer goals from the SFDRR targets.

Priority 2 aspires to integrate governance issues across the disaster cycle from preparedness to response and recovery, though there is no explicit detailing of how governance issues might need support or articulation at specific phases, this is a particular concern in post-disaster period where existing mechanisms are least well developed and monitored. Global responsibilities are to include cooperation on transboundary risks and wider information exchange.

Priority 3 covers a wide agenda including support for risk sensitive land-use planning, health systems (going beyond protecting buildings to ensuring staff training and human resource), promoting insurance, employment safety and safety for people with disabilities and for financial systems. This particular focus on health systems is welcomed. However, whilst resilience is applied to health systems, social safety nets, livelihoods, and business, it falls short of asserting an integrated agenda.

Priority 4 focuses first on building capacity for preparedness but also calls for government to “integrate post-disaster reconstruction into the economic and social sustainable development of affected areas”<sup>1</sup> reasserting the opportunity disaster risk management offers for sustainable development gains.

These are laudable priorities, but there is little guidance on the pathways through which action on these priorities will help governments meet SFDRR global targets. An exception is mention of the ISDR Scientific and Technical Advisory Committee as a mechanism to support international science development and knowledge transfer. Indeed, the role of science, knowledge and evidence based policy has been much enhanced in the SFDRR. Beyond this, the individual sections of the framework are rather disconnected, reflecting the compartmentalized and somewhat awkward logic of international negotiations.

### 3. The SFDRR Negotiation Process

The SFDRR drew upon regional consultations and open meetings with the UN Major Group representatives for women, children and youth, trade unions, indigenous people, farmers, the private sector, local authorities, science and technology, and non-governmental organizations. While the initial text reflected the expertise and diverse knowledge of these communities, the governmental negotiation process saw many key areas being weakened to arrive at a common agreement. In the process, the negotiated political text has distanced itself from the underlying science and experience of risk and disaster management. This section highlights some of the more important areas where political interests intervened to create this disconnect.

One reason for the HFA not having a greater impact at the local level is that it failed to build on local level knowledge and capacities. The SFDRR does talk about the capacities of communities and about needing to blend scientific information with local knowledge.<sup>2</sup> However, the actions in the framework are overwhelmingly top-down with very little emphasis on governance mechanisms to place communities in the decision-making seat.

The implementation of the HFA often did not take into account the complex contexts within which disasters occur, leading to inappropriate initiatives. With 50% of those affected by disasters living in conflict settings (*Peters et al. 2013*), the inclusion of instability as a compounding factor in international DRR policy is essential. Some member states, in particular African nations including Mali and

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<sup>1</sup>SFDRR p.19 para 33j.

<sup>2</sup>SFDRR p.11 para 24i.

Zimbabwe, stressed the need for the Framework to cover conflict situations. Whilst many northern states including the European Union members and the United States also recognized the interlinkages between conflict and disasters and wanted conflict kept in, they appeared to feel more strongly about the *removal* of territorial occupation as an underlying driver of risk, something many Arab state countries fought strongly for. This disagreement led the US and EU to propose a deal “in the spirit of compromise” to lose conflict as an underlying driver, if territorial occupation was also deleted. With that omission went a paragraph reflecting considerable weight of scientific and experiential knowledge.

A global target on “enhanced international cooperation” has been set in the framework,<sup>3</sup> calling for sustained and long term funding from developed to developing countries. This recognition of the importance of the financial means of implementation is a step forward from the HFA. However, it is a small step forward rather than the large leap that is required. Developed countries refused to commit to “additional” and “predictable” funding to developing countries, resulting in the language being watered down and leaving developing countries clambering to be heard on how they could not achieve the framework’s targets without financial support from others. However, UNISDR did secure “additional” funding in the framework, to support its implementation. Whilst the decision to increase support to UNISDR and not developing countries directly is uncomfortable, one has to hope that this *additional* funding to UNISDR will help enable the political conditions for additional long-term and *additional* funding going to DRR in developing countries.

International cooperation was not alone in its weakening of language. Across the whole document, language became progressively more ambiguous as negotiations continued, with caveats such as “where appropriate” appearing in many action-orientated paragraphs. This is particularly apparent in regards to accountability. Whilst the inclusion of seven Global Targets<sup>4</sup> is an advance on the original HFA, these targets quickly became non-quantitative and baselines went from to be “implemented” to “encouraged”.<sup>5</sup> With this, the negotiating governments have reduced the SFDRR, though its strong symbolic value remains. The HFA suffered the same fate but succeeded in providing an accepted framework for international collaboration. While uneven, some government action was galvanized, arguably in part because of the HFA’s informality. But, the SFDRR has been agreed at a different historical moment, negotiations were informed by an additional decade of

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<sup>3</sup>SFDRR p.7 para 18f.

<sup>4</sup>SFDRR p.7 para 18.

<sup>5</sup>SFDRR p.10 para 24b.

scientific and experiential evidence on disaster risk and its relationship with development. The moment for informal and slow learning has passed.

Finally, whilst many governments made statements in support of linking disasters and development in the regional consultations and preparatory committees, behind the closed doors of the negotiation room they were less keen to put this policy coherence into practice. Most notably, a strong push back to aligning DRR and climate change came from the US, who argued for separate conversations between these agendas. And, it seems they got their way. The final hours of negotiations saw the removal of references to all other post-2015 Frameworks from the *Priorities for Action* section. This seems to have been driven by the desire of agencies to protect their siloed mandates and the fear that connecting climate change and disasters would lead to the contracting of developed countries to take more financial responsibility for disasters. There does remain language in the preamble of the framework that acknowledges the opportunity to enhance coherence across policies and sectors. However, this framework has failed to make that first meaningful connection.

The SFDRR negotiations did not yield results that were all bad. The SFDRR does include strong references to the critical opportunity presented by the recovery period to “build back better”,<sup>6</sup> a theme supported throughout the negotiations in particular by Japan and the Philippines. The framework also discusses the need for technological transfer,<sup>7</sup> which, in spite of successful calls by the US to refer to transfer only “on mutually agreed terms”, presents an exciting prospect for early warning systems in the future.

Another major step forward is the enhanced recognition of the vital role that civil society and science can play in achieving the framework’s outcomes. The role of civil society and the diverse range of actors that this encompasses is discussed in a sizeable paragraph<sup>8</sup> that saw little argument from the floor (apart from Cuba who questioned the role of local actors appearing in the framework). The inclusion is a testament to the demonstration over the last decade of what civil society can contribute in reducing disaster risk for the most vulnerable. The role of science is formalized in the first of SFDRR’s four priority areas: Understanding disaster risk. Paragraph 23 states “Policies and practices for disaster risk management should be based on an understanding of disaster risk in all its dimensions of vulnerability, capacity, exposure of persons and assets, hazard characteristics and the environment” — preparing the way for science and technology to move beyond hazard dominated research.

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<sup>6</sup>SFDRR paras 6 and 32.

<sup>7</sup>SFDRR paras 8, 19 m, 40, 46 and 47.

<sup>8</sup>SFDRR para 36a.

#### 4. Where Might the SFDRR Lead?

So where do we go from here? The World Conference for Disaster Risk Reduction may have come and gone, but there is still a long way to go to make sure the modest agreement is translated into improved practice and outcomes. The political context of negotiations has blunted the ambition of this international agreement. It is now the responsibility of governments to move beyond this basic statement and set ambitious national targets and strong local indicators that measure real resilience at the frontline of disasters. They must partner with different actors to implement what simply cannot be done alone. Whilst the global ambition of the SFDRR was hampered by national interests, the framework and perhaps the difficulty of its agreement indicates the seriousness with which governments are taking DRR and its relationship to development. The negotiations of the HFA 10 years ago saw national delegations being influenced by technical experts and DRR practitioners. In contrast the SFDRR was influenced much more by national political strategy. The fact that 186 governments cared so much about the wording of this agreement is perhaps a step forward.

Civil society and science communities must now work to fill the gaps left in the SFDRR as well as supporting governments to meet the stated (if rather incomplete, unspecific, and non-binding) targets. They can do this by originating new knowledge but also by acting as knowledge brokers, sharing local perspectives on risk and resilience with governments and international partners. They can also fulfil the function of independent monitors, undertaking rigorous and participatory monitoring from the local level up to complement national and international accountability mechanisms. As advocates, they can also help turn attention to influencing related UN agreements to ensure that these frameworks incorporate language to support meeting the targets of the SFDRR. Specifically, there is still the opportunity for science and civil society to make the evidence based case for a DRR target to be included in the Finance for Development agreement and for UNISDR and the Adaptation Committee under the UNFCCC to come together and link implementation and financing vehicles, such as the Green Climate Fund, with the Sendai framework.

The urgency of this task and its independence from international agreements was demonstrated only weeks after the signing of the SFDRR. Devastation following the 7.8 earthquake in Nepal, April 2015, was not a surprise. Scientists had warned of a “big one” for decades with some even predicting the exact epicenter location (Bollinger *et al.* 2014). It was never a case of *if*, but *when*. But what was even more certain was that when it came, buildings would fall, people would die, and livelihoods would be lost. It was well acknowledged that a large enough

geological event would not simply impact Kathmandu but would demolish it. While brought on by the earthquake itself, losses are the result of years of bad development choices, inappropriate human actions, and poor policy implementation and enforcement. In short, the systematic and cumulative failure of governance systems to institutionalize provision of safe housing for a burgeoning population and the widespread poverty that restricted the ability of households to invest to protect themselves.

Faced with such engrained development challenges that are inadequately addressed in the framework, the SFDRR can be a starting point only. The SFDRR agreement process resulted in the separation of much of science and experiential knowledge from the final outcomes. If SFDRR is to be a catalyst for DRR, this must be done by providing a challenge to governments to show how far they can go beyond its minimal agreements. SFDRR is clear that science, civil society and others have key roles to play in working with government to reduce disaster risk. Reconnecting civil society and science with policy making is the first task in implementing the SFDRR and in establishing common agendas at the national and local levels that can reach beyond the agreement's limited ambition. This would be a legacy of leadership that the Sendai process could be proud of.

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