

World Bosai Forum

Sendai, Japan, 9-12 November 2019

Summary

The World Bosai Forum brings together a broad range of people working to reduce disaster risk, including practitioners, experts, officials, business people, and citizens, with the aim to share experience and knowledge and to stimulate more effective approaches to reducing disaster risk worldwide.

First held in Sendai, November 2017, the Forum was initiated partly in appreciation of the support received by the region during the response and recovery phases of the Great East Japan Earthquake and Tsunami and partly to promote the implementation of the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction, the international blueprint for action that was agreed at the United Nations World Conference on Disaster Risk Reduction, also held here in Sendai, in 2015.

This 2019 Forum has attracted nearly 900 participants from about 40 countries. There were 50 individual sessions of 90 minutes, three keynote addresses, 47 poster presentations, 33 short “flash” talks, and 14 exhibition booths contributed by the private and NGO sectors. It was preceded by the Pre-WBF Festival, which celebrated the human, cultural experience of disaster, through memories, archives, heritage, music, and dance, ranging from the moment of devastation and loss to the process of recovery many years later. Two other related events were the 10th Earthquake Technology Expo Tohoku, 10-11 November, and the Sendai Symposium for Disaster Risk Reduction and the Future, 10 November.

This summary does not attempt to describe the numerous contributions and advances reported; instead it aims to identify a selection of main themes and trends that the Forum’s International Steering Committee feels have emerged during the event.

National and local disaster risk reduction plans. The development of these plans, as called for in Target E of the Sendai Framework, was a key topic for the 2019 World Bosai Forum. Good progress was reported, with 91 countries having reported their plans to the UNDRR

secretariat by May 2019. However, some plans remain to be more fully developed beyond the basic descriptions of the Sendai Framework language, and some still reflect a view of disasters as exogenous events rather than recognising them as the result of socially constructed risk.

Disaster risk reduction “coming of age.” Though still a relatively new field, disaster risk reduction has reached a solid level of maturity, with a growing pool of graduates and field-experienced practitioners and professionals, many networks and communities of practice, and an accepted place in public policy in many countries. Language, methods, tools and data resources are increasingly standardised, while the importance of social context, particularly gender, inclusive participatory process and institutional strengthening are now widely normalised. At the same time, there remains a strong demand for concrete examples and specific tools that can be readily transferred and implemented, especially in developing countries, and for international cooperation and comparative information from different countries and disaster settings. Inadequate coordination across different sectors and disciplines is an ongoing major problem.

Change and uncertainty. Weather and climate hazards are changing, bringing increases and uncertainty in the nature of the risks that we face. Intensification of development, or maldevelopment, as sometimes occurs, may exacerbate risk or bring new types of risk. There is potential for slow change to accumulate or reach tipping points that lead to bigger or new types of problems. A hazard event may precipitate a cascade of other events such as fires, toxic emissions, industrial accidents, and environmental destruction. Will our risk reduction approaches need to be modified to accommodate such change and complexity?

Role of the private sector. The private sector plays a variety of relevant roles, including as a service provider, but most importantly is a primary actor in development and investment and therefore in decisions that can increase or reduce risk. Industry and business also have processes and skills to manage their own risks that are relevant to public disaster risk reduction. For these reasons their participation in the Forum and in disaster risk reduction should be more actively sought. Better standards and evaluation frameworks would encourage private sector adoption of disaster risk reduction.

Technology and technique. Many presentations demonstrated or used new technologies and technique, such as mobile apps, the use of drones, artificial intelligence methods and atmospheric observations for earthquake prediction. Once again this shows the power of science and engineering to constantly produce better ways to achieve disaster risk reduction. At the same time we know that there are often significant challenges in integrating such advances into socially feasible practices. Innovation can also result from applying existing technology to basic problems, for example, in the development of disaster loss databases, an ISO standard for disaster risk reduction, and general economic modelling of the value of disaster risk reduction.

Youth and young professionals. The Forum saw many younger people bringing new perspectives and enthusiasm to the Forum. The “flash talk” sessions provided a good opportunity for them to propose and discuss novel new ideas, such as new technologies and a proposal for entrepreneurship in disaster risk reduction. In some countries young professionals are being systematically inducted into formal decision-making processes concerning disaster risk reduction. Several young people with direct experience of disasters and loss of family or friends presented as highly effective communicators and advocates for disaster risk reduction. The involvement of younger people in disaster risk reduction should be encouraged.

Memories and generational change. Disaster risk reduction is most strongly driven by direct experience of disaster and loss, but memories fade and generations change. Spiritual care and emotional awareness assist people to make sense of their experience and ongoing difficulties. To keep awareness alive, we need to elaborate and record the experiences and perspectives of different generations, including testimony of people affected as children and youths, and to develop means to pass these on, through memorials, museums, film, story telling and celebrations and the active involvement of the media. Formal education and leadership by teachers can promote these activities and link them to knowledge and practice on disaster risk reduction, thus expanding the reach of direct experience well beyond the time and place of any one disaster. It can be added that teachers’ themselves desirably should undertake fieldwork-based training in disaster risk reduction.

Dreams can come true; recovery happens. It takes some years, but it is clear that organised recovery which seeks to integrate action across sectors such as planning, housing,

transportation and livelihood development, and to “build back better”, can return a post-event wasteland to a well functioning community with high levels of citizen satisfaction. The transformation of east Japan’s coastal areas in the eight years since March 3, 2011 is remarkable. The great resilience and positive spirit of the people of region has permeated the 2019 World Bosai Forum.

Thoughts for the next Forum. A number of suggestions have been made on improvements or changes for the next Forum, the two main ones being to more actively engage the private sector and younger people. Others included the adoption of a few selected themes with more coordinated sessions on each theme, particularly sessions that demonstrate integrated and transdisciplinary approaches, and that encourage more participation and interaction.

Reid Basher

Chair, International Steering Committee

World Bosai Forum, 2019