

Opinion & Analysis

Drive for sustainability to start in Sendai

By Ban Ki Moon
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In the ruins of the mega-disaster that struck Japan four years ago this month, I found a lesson in global solidarity: countries of the world, so accustomed to accepting help from Japan, rushed to offer assistance in its hour of need. The Japanese people, in turn, kept their focus outward, seeking to ensure that their national tragedy could serve to help others avoid a similar fate.



The students I met in Fukushima in 2011 had lost homes, and they had every right to seek comfort and assistance. But instead of requests, I heard a common wish: that no country or community should suffer what they had been through. I left convinced that the land of the rising sun, despite being battered by the triple disaster of tsunami, earthquake and nuclear meltdown, remained a beacon of hope for the world.

This week in Sendai, Japan can do more than offer in-

spiration: it will host the Third U.N. Conference on Disaster Risk Reduction. This will mark the first important milestone in an important year as the international community aims to improve resilience, set an ambitious vision for sustainable development and achieve a new agreement on climate change.

Our drive for sustainability will start in Sendai. This meeting marks the first stop in a series of linked milestones. In July, the world will gather in Addis Ababa to discuss financing for development. Leaders will hold a summit in New York in September to adopt a new set of sustainable development goals to take us through 2030. And we aim to close out the year in Paris in December with a meaningful climate agreement.

The thread linking these events is human dignity. All of our efforts in what we aim to make a historic year center on leaving no one behind. Previous global campaigns, particularly the Millennium Development Goals, succeeded remarkably in improving living conditions and saving lives among the poorest countries and most vulnerable communities. Our aim now is even higher: to reach all people with universal targets for development and a universal climate change agreement. Helping those who are vulnerable to disasters is the ideal starting point in this journey.

In a world of extreme weather events, rising urbaniza-

tion, population growth and the decline of ecosystems, we urgently need clear targets to reduce mortality and economic losses from disasters. Negotiators in Sendai are expected to deliver with a clear and comprehensive outcome backed by a high-level political commitment to achieving results.

Strategies to manage disasters are critical. The world has already shown great progress in saving lives by improving weather forecasting, setting up early warning systems and organizing evacuations. But the Sendai conference is expected to also deliver strategies for disaster risk management, which lies at the heart of strengthening the international response.

The stakes are enormous. Over the past decade, more than a million people have been killed in disasters spanning the globe. While the human cost is immeasurable, the financial damage can be quantified, and it is staggering: \$1.5 trillion in investment has been lost through the destruction of roads, schools, hospitals, industrial plants and other infrastructure.

There is a clear path to reduce losses. Better understanding of hazard profiles, improvements in land use and respect for building codes would all foster much greater resilience.

This, in turn, would help address the grinding poverty

that is at the heart of our efforts to create a new agenda for sustainable development that is people-friendly and planet-sensitive. The poor are most vulnerable to disasters, and securing their future is essential to overall economic progress and social stability.

Health needs are paramount. The Ebola epidemic has served to raise awareness of the importance of disease surveillance. This is even more critical in areas vulnerable to disasters, as we see in Malawi, where floods have recently affected some 600,000 people, with devastating consequences, because treatment for communicable diseases has been interrupted by damage to health records and drug stocks.

Landlocked and small island developing countries face heightened risks. At the same time, Japan's experience showed how badly economic centers in developed countries can suffer in disasters, with repercussions far beyond their borders.

But people in Tohoku also showed how in our globalized world, countries can come together for the greater good. Our campaign for sustainability starts now in Sendai — opening the road to a future of dignity for all.

Ban is the U.N. secretary general.