There is no way around the necessity of providing immediate aid for the victims of natural disasters to alleviate the suffering of thousands, if not millions of people. However, without sustainable projects for disaster risk management, this type of aid remains incomplete.

The hundred-year flood in Pakistan and the record heatwave that caused forest fires in Russia in the summer of 2010 have demonstrated how Mother Nature is increasingly reacting with weather extremes. Catastrophes of these dimensions keep us on tenterhooks for weeks on end, engulf the people afflicted in misery and can set the development of entire states back by years. However, the further away the country and the more “foreign” it seems, the lower the willingness to respond with aid and funding. The people of Pakistan felt the effects of this type of reaction in August 2010: the governments of other states were slow to react in sending funds, and even private donations were very hesitant at the beginning.

Widespread willingness to donate

Only when the people in this country became aware of the extent of the catastrophe did the readiness to provide help distinctly increase. By September 2010, donations amounting to €160m were received in Germany for Pakistan, a sum comparable with the donations (€195m) made for the Haiti earthquake in January 2010. German donors generally are very generous, contributing a sum of approximately €2.5bn annually, with many people donating on a regular basis. Taxation aspects, among other things, play a role in donation response and, furthermore, during Advent the poorer people of society also receive more attention. Very large sums of money can be raised in the event of major disasters. The German people, for example, gave some €670m after the tsunami in 2004 and donated a total of €350m during the flooding caused by the River Elbe in their own country in 2002.
The floods in Pakistan in the summer of 2010 took on Biblical dimensions; one-fifth of the country was covered by flood water. A family in Pannu Aqil in the Sindh province seeks refuge from the waters on a tiny hill.
The massive earthquake in Haiti traumatised many of the survivors. The people hit by this catastrophe cannot rebuild their country without help. Donations and international aid will be required to help young Haitians work towards a new future.
Victim statistics high despite improved risk management

The willingness to support people in need is praiseworthy in itself but, taken on the scale of things, it is not enough to tackle the problems at their roots. Help must commence at a much earlier stage. Natural catastrophes rarely occur out of the blue. Back in the 1980s, alarming signs of the coming extreme weather trends were already evident and gave rise to the foundation of the International Decade for the Natural Disaster Reduction (UN-IDNDR). Later, numerous national and international initiatives such as the German Committee for Disaster Reduction (DKKV, Bonn) and the International Strategy for Disaster Reduction (UN-ISDR, Geneva) were set up. These organisations still focus on optimising catastrophe prevention.

Many countries have since considerably improved their disaster risk management. Bangladesh, for example, where hundreds of thousands of people were hit by heavy cyclones and devastating storm floods in 1970 and 1991, has succeeded in setting up a protection programme. However, there is no reason to sound the all clear, whether in Bangladesh or in other regions at risk, as long as so many people remain exposed to natural disasters. Not only the Haiti disaster and the tsunami in Asia, each resulting in far more than 200,000 deaths, are a sad confirmation of this fact, but also the seismic shocks in China (2008) and Pakistan (2005), with a death toll of 80,000. And yet, these fatality rates are not necessarily inevitable; the risk zones of the earth and the probability of natural catastrophes are widely known.

Climate change exacerbating the situation

Even though the United Nations and numerous national institutions have met with some success, the global efforts are still far from sufficient. The world conferences, such as Yokohama 1995 or Kobe 2005, do not address the topic of disaster risk management often enough, and funding for effective preventative measures is too meagre.

In the long term, therefore, disaster management must shift the focus to the people at risk, even though political and cultural obstacles may stand in the way. Enduring and sustainable solutions will otherwise not be possible. This is particularly necessary against the background of the environmental and climate changes. As global warming becomes increasingly evident, weather extremes such as heatwaves, droughts, heavy rainfall and floods must be reckoned with more frequently in the future. This means that a recurrence of natural disasters like those experienced in the summer of 2010 is merely a matter of time.