

# Haiti earthquake a reminder that disasters are preventable, CU-Boulder expert says

February 1 2010

---

Amid all the commentary focused on the historic tragedy in Haiti, a tough but important fact has gone virtually unmentioned, according to a nationally recognized expert on disasters at the University of Colorado at Boulder.

"What is missing from the tragedy of disaster, and our response to it, is the recognition that disasters are preventable, that it is within the power of societies and communities to prevent or at least minimize the devastation disasters cause," said Kathleen Tierney, director of CU-Boulder's Natural Hazards Center. "We mourn the human toll of disasters, but collectively we do far too little to minimize their impacts."

The pervasive view of disasters is that they are inevitable, said Tierney, who also is a professor of sociology. They are viewed as acts of God, acts of nature or just random, tragic events.

But while earthquakes are inevitable in earthquake zones, and hurricanes and tornadoes are inevitable under certain [weather conditions](#) -- "there are no inevitable disasters," she said. "There is no such thing as a natural disaster."

The city of Port-au-Prince increased in size and population with virtually no attention given to the fact that it's in a seismic area, located on a boundary between two continental plates, she said. No effort was made to make buildings seismic-resistant. No restrictions were placed on where or how homes were built. Many homes were built on hillsides

susceptible to landslides.

All of these conditions are either tied to or made worse by the extreme poverty in Haiti, Tierney said. Eighty percent of the population lives in poverty and the country was still recovering from four hurricanes that hit the country in 2008 when this year's earthquake struck.

"The Haiti government can't provide for daily needs, much less a disaster," Tierney said.

But there are steps that can and should be taken now to make Haiti more disaster-resistant, she said, noting that the country faces continued risks from aftershocks, landslides and another hurricane season starting in June. She hopes that the international donor community will put preventive measures in place as a condition of providing disaster assistance.

For example, hillsides in Haiti should not be developed and the badly damaged port of Port-au-Prince should be rebuilt to standards that will enable it to withstand the next [earthquake](#) and the next hurricane, she said. Implementation of good emergency management practices and the engagement of Haitian communities in planning for future disasters also is essential.

"Societies create disasters of the future by decisions they make or don't make -- by how they live with nature," Tierney said.

Fields such as urban planning provide sound insights on land-use and urban development strategies that can keep people, buildings and infrastructure out of harm's way, she said. Architects and engineers understand how to employ hazard-resistant design and construction practices. Building codes can prevent structures from collapsing.

It also is known how to design emergency management systems that will perform effectively when disaster strikes and how to educate people in ways that will help protect them from natural and technological hazards, she said. Laws, ordinances and other measures also can save lives, protect property and speed the recovery process after disasters.

"We do not lack the knowledge to prevent disasters," Tierney said.

"What we lack is the foresight and political will to do so. The United States and other countries have not yet learned the lesson that disasters are preventable and that today's investments in prevention reduce tomorrow's suffering."

Provided by University of Colorado at Boulder

Citation: Haiti earthquake a reminder that disasters are preventable, CU-Boulder expert says (2010, February 1) retrieved 26 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2010-02-haiti-earthquake-disasters-cu-boulder-expert.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.