

Video Transcript: Mics & Sirens Season 2 – Episode 3

[Female Narrator] You're listening to Mics and Sirens, the official podcast of the Department of Fire and Emergency Services in Western Australia. DFES acknowledges the traditional owners on the land on which this podcast is created, the Whadjuk people.

[Sirens sound while news footage of fires play]

[Mami Mizutori] Countries with more comprehensive early warning systems have six to eight times lower disaster related mortality. The notion of preparedness, the notion of prevention, has to be what we do, so that we don't get wrecked totally by disasters. We're going to be constantly in this vicious cycle, which is disaster, response, recovery, and then disaster again. It's a cycle that we need to get out of. You don't forget the past disasters; you learn from them.

[Female Narrator] We've all seen the horror-filled images after a disaster hits: piles of rubble where homes and shops once stood; blackened landscapes that used to be vibrant with vegetation; and above all, stricken faces of the people now forever scarred, living with the ghosts of lives lost. A guest in this episode has what sounds like one simple question: can we, as a global community, do a better job to stay safe? Mami Mizutori, former head of the UN Office for Disaster Risk Reduction, has spent years advocating for a global shift from reacting after the event, to preventing disasters before they happen. Mami shares strategies for anticipating risks, reducing impacts, and building communities that are truly resilient.

[Di Darmody, Interviewer] Welcome to Mics & Sirens, Mami Mizutori.

[Mami] Thank you for having me.

[Di] To begin with, would you be able to explain the role of the UNDRR, please?

[Mami] Well, thank you very much. UNDRR supports all stakeholders of all UN member states. So, it's not only about governments, both central and local, but practitioners as the people who are gathering here today, the civil society, the business, and the goal, the collective goal is, as you said, to make the world more resilient. The targets are to reduce mortality, affected people, loss of economy, and destruction to infrastructure from disasters. And in order to do this, UNDRR convenes, advocates, researches; bringing everybody together around the table, so that we can find solutions for disaster risk reduction, which is about prevention and preparedness.

[Di] And we will talk about some of those targets and the framework that we're using to try and achieve those. But would you be able to give us a sense, Mami, how important it is that we transition from trying to manage disasters after they happen, to managing disaster risks ahead of time?

[Mami] I really cannot emphasise how important that transition is, because traditionally, we were trying to manage disasters, so responding to disasters and recovering after they hit us; after everything was wrecked. Now, we have climate changed induced disasters, which are hitting all of us, if I won't say on a daily basis, but monthly, certainly.

So, we need to be ahead of the risk curve. We have to do more prevention and preparedness, which means that we need to reduce disaster risk before they become

disasters, unless we're going to be constantly in this vicious cycle, which is disaster, response, recovery, and then disaster again. It's a cycle that we need to get out of, but we haven't been able to do it yet. And if we don't have this transition, I'm afraid that we can only talk about more gloom and doom.

[Di] How different are things in other countries than they are here in Australia in terms of the way that we can prepare for and prevent disasters?

[Mami] So, I don't want to make a very strict comparison between Australia and other countries, but I would say that the countries which have been hit for centuries by what is called geophysical disasters, so I'm talking about earthquakes, tsunamis, volcanic eruptions. And these are countries like my own: Japan, Indonesia, Chile, Mexico. These countries have been more focused on the need for prevention and preparedness for centuries. So, there is more advocacy around it. There is more education around it, because geophysical disasters, we can't really prevent them from happening. During this time, most of the Western countries, and I believe perhaps Australia too, because you were lucky enough not to be hit by these geophysical disasters. There was sense that yes, we need risk transfer, which means led by insurance. And in the unlikely event that there's a disaster, then the loss will be refunded. Now, the situation has totally changed. All countries, Australia, the European countries, and of course the countries which are also hit by geophysical disasters, we are facing this intensity, frequency, increasing of disasters. So, the notion of preparedness, the notion of prevention, has to be what we do so that we don't get wrecked totally by disasters.

[Di] And I think what you're talking about in terms of, say, somewhere like Japan, for instance, and the geophysical, you know, you're mentioning earthquakes. Maybe that's how we deal with bushfire here in Western Australia. You know, preparing for something that we know is going to happen. And that does make a big difference in how then they're handled. So, I feel like that might be something that we do differently say than other countries might.

[Mami] You are right because there has been a very tragic history of many bushfires happening in this country. And what is important, and what I think is happening in Australia is that you don't forget the past disasters; you learn from them. And then you implement those lessons in the preparedness and prevention for the new ones to come, because they will come. But the important question is how much can you reduce the impact of those bushfires? And exactly as you're saying for earthquakes in Japan, the people are trying to have more resilient housing. The people are trying to be better in responding to early warnings. And this is exactly the learning that we have to do.

[Di] What do we know about the cost of disasters around the world in terms of loss of life, displacement and from an economic perspective, Mami?

[Mami] So, from the perspective of loss of life, reducing mortality, as I said, is one of the global targets of the Sendai Framework. We're doing quite a good job. The loss of life mortality has gone down quite a lot, thanks to better coverage of early warning system. It's not perfect, but it's better. And also the dedicated work of first responders who are using both innovation and traditional ways of combating disasters. But all the rest is not very good.

So, let's talk about economic loss. I can give you some figures. Between 1970 to the year 2000, so this is before Sendai Framework, the annual loss by disasters - the direct economic loss was around \$70-80 billion a year. Now, it is around \$180-200 billion a year. Now, when

we talk about billions, it's difficult to understand what this means. So, if I put it a bit into perspective, the GDP of Australia is \$1,750 billion, which means that every year globally, more than 10% of Australia's GDP is being lost. This is quite a staggering figure, I believe. Yeah.

And displacement. Well, it's a bit difficult to be honest to put a direct correlation between disaster and displacement, because displacement in many countries, they have multi-layered reasons. But definitely, in the countries like the least developed countries or the small island developing states, which are hit by many disasters, and sometimes simultaneously, like the time when COVID was happening, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines was hit by a volcanic eruption and also by a hurricane. These places are more vulnerable to disasters. And these are the places where displacement is happening. So, I think definitely there is a relationship between disasters and displacement happening.

[Di] Mami, you've mentioned the Sendai Framework a couple of times now. Would you be able to tell us about that and its aim, please?

[Mami] The Sendai Framework is the global blueprint for resilience. It is the global agreement that was agreed by all member states, all UN member states by consensus in the year 2015. It runs to 2030. It has four priority actions in it. The first is to understand risk. The second is to have good risk governance. The third is to invest in resilience. And the fourth is to build back better and recover better after a disaster happens. Now, based on these four priority actions that member states must take, there are seven global targets that need to be achieved. Four about reducing things, but to reduce first: mortality, second: affected people, third: loss of economy, and fourth: destruction to infrastructure, disruption to basic services. But then at the same time, you have to increase three things, which is first to increase the number of countries which have both national and local disaster risk reduction strategies. The second is to increase international cooperation for disaster risk reduction. And the third is to enhance access to risk information and coverage of early warning system. This is the Sendai framework.

The UNDRR is what is called the custodian of the Sendai Framework. So, member states submit data around these seven global targets on how they are doing: well or not, and UNDRR by analysing these data and also aggregating them, we know how good we are doing or not. And even UNDRR convenes, advocates and researches around disaster risk reduction, and brings the whole community of practice of disaster risk reduction together.

[Di] The framework, as you mentioned, started in 2015. It runs to 2030. So, what has been achieved in the last decade?

[Mami] So, as I mentioned, mortality is going down. And to give you a bit more concrete figures, during the decade before Sendai Framework, so we're talking about the years from 2004 to 2014. For every 100,000 people, the mortality from disasters was 1.61 person. Now, of course, you can't divide people, but this is the data. So, after that, between 2014 to 2023, this data has gone down to 0.79, which is actually half. And I think this is quite an achievement, also taking into consideration that the global population is still getting bigger.

The other thing that we have achieved is, and this may sound a bit abstract, but it's very important, the risk information that people receive is getting better. And as a result, people

are much more aware of what kind of risk surrounds them. And what they need to do is prevention and preparedness.

The number of countries which have those national and local strategies for disaster risk reduction, I think probably it's more close to 100 now. There are 193 UN member states, so it's not perfect, but it's getting better. And these are all the achievements that I think I can give you. And it's not bad, but really, if you remember the seven global targets and the fact that we're not doing well on most other targets, the overall picture is not great.

[Di] And with only five years left for that framework, you know, how do you think go up to 2030, with these targets and what you're hoping to achieve?

[Mami] Well, we're hoping - I shouldn't say we, because I'm not part of UNDRR anymore - but UNDRR is hoping, and everybody who are involved in this is hoping that there will be more investment in prevention and preparedness. If you don't actually invest financially into prevention, which means making your infrastructure more robust, which means more education in advocacy at all levels, community, city, country, globally, then prevention, preparedness will not happen.

It's not happening at the pace that we hope. Many countries, and if I'm very honest with you, I think politicians feel that yes, once a disaster happens, they need to get to that place and say, "well, very sorry for the loss and we will do whatever to try to help you," because it's visible, right? But avoiding disasters by investing in prevention, is not visible. You have avoided a tragedy, which is great, but it's not something that makes a headline. And many times, politicians of all countries, think about their rather short-term cycle of the elections. And so, you need a very bold and inspired politician to do this. I think that what we really need to do is to demand to our politicians to invest, to put financial resources, to put budget into resilience. And we have to do it now because, as you said, we only have five more years.

[Di] I wonder too about the role of us as global citizens within that Mami, because our politicians will often make decisions that they think we will approve of. And, when we see on our televisions terrible things happening elsewhere, and we know that aid is going to them from our tax money, I think people generally are OK with that. But to have this idea of maybe helping somewhere else with something we're not sure is gonna happen, maybe it's a shift that we all need to make as global citizens. I'm not sure.

[Mami] No, you are spot on. We have to make that shift, a) because a lot of governments give very generous international cooperation for these least developed countries, in other countries to develop sustainably. But once a big disaster hits, sustainable development is eroded. And even the case of peace and stability, can be eroded by disasters. So, if you don't invest in prevention, in preparedness for disaster for these countries, whatever else you do might be useless at the end.

Another thing I would say is that we learned a lot during COVID time that something that happens far away can impact us because the world is connected, right? Supply chains, travel, et cetera, et cetera. So, of course, we need to support these least developed countries from a humanitarian concern view. But I would also say that making other countries resilient, will also impact on us positively.

[Male Narrator] Are you looking to go a little out of your comfort zone and expand your world? Become an emergency services volunteer in Western Australia, and gain some incredible skills. Be there on the frontline to help your local community when an emergency strikes, or join the important teams who work behind the scenes to make a difference. DFES volunteering; give a little, gain a lot. Visit dfes.vol.org.au to find out how you can join.

[Di] One of the targets of the Sendai framework that you mentioned was around early warning systems. And before we start talking about them, I just wanted to mention Emergency WA, because it's our State's official source for fast and accurate information during emergencies, and it pushes out critical information in near real time through the website and app and information line and socials as well. And the team behind it is award-winning. So, we are very proud of it, but we're also very lucky that we have that, because there was information from 2022 that said that less than half of the world's countries have a multi-hazard warning system. What impact does that have for people who live in those areas, Mami?

[Mami] Well, first, congratulations to Australia for having that system, which is very important. Now, the countries which are not covered by effective, comprehensive, early warning, early action - I would add the two words – system, the mortality rate is really impacted. If you do not have what is called a comprehensive early warning system, which is from end to end, so it reaches the last mile, you know, people who live in remote areas, people who are vulnerable, and if these people are not educated enough to be alert about this and take early action when an early warning system is issued, and if the early warning system is not good enough, which means that if it's only about one hazard, say, we have multiple hazards surrounding us now. It can't be only about, let's say hurricane. It has to be about all the risks that surround us. If it's not like that, and if the way that is communicated is not effective enough, then the number of mortality will be far greater. To be very accurate, countries with more comprehensive early warning systems have six to eight times lower disaster related mortality. That is a big figure. And the countries which do not have it suffer this.

[Di] And I've heard you say that it's unacceptable that in less developed countries and small island developing states, that the number of people who have access to early warning systems or early action systems is the lowest. What can be done to change that?

[Mami] So, there is a very important initiative that is going on right now. It is called Early Warning for All. It's the United Nations Secretary General, Mr António Guterres' initiative. And the goal is to, by the year 2027, that every person is covered by a comprehensive early warning, early action system.

There are four elements of a comprehensive early warning system. The first is have good disaster-risk knowledge. Second is observation and monitoring. Dissemination and communication is the third element. And early action is the fourth.

There's one UN or UN related organisation which leads each of these areas. For risk knowledge, it's UNDRR. For observation and monitoring, it's the World Meteorological Organisation, WMO. And for dissemination communication, it's International Telecommunication Union. And early action is the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent.

Countries can give funding to these four organisations, which are really trying to move the needle until 2027 to cover the whole world. They need funding to do the work that has been started by the Secretary General. I think right now, at this moment, the best way to expand the coverage of early warning system, is to be part of this initiative.

[Di] Mami, for people who might be listening to us or watching us today who work here in Western Australia in emergency services, why is it important that they understand this global picture?

[Mami] So, it is important, and I do feel that the people who are gathered here today at this conference already understand the importance of this picture. Because I have heard during even this course of this morning, from the practitioners and the volunteers, that if we don't prevent and prepare better for disasters, then we can never get out of this response, response, response mode.

What I think is actually lacking is for these people to do their job, because the reality is that practitioners, first responders, volunteers - they are overwhelmed with responding to the daily, monthly, yearly disasters. They know that prevention and preparedness is important, but they don't have the resources, the time, the training to do this as much as they want to. So, what I really want to ask the politicians - call of action to the politicians, is do invest in these people and their work, so that they don't have to be overwhelmed and prevention and preparedness becomes an essential part of their work.

That is what is actually lacking right now because unfortunately, politicians, once a disaster happens, they will go to this height and they will say that we will help the people as much as possible, but they are not bold enough to invest into prevention and preparedness because if you avoid a disaster by investing in prevention, you don't make the headlines. And for a lot of politicians who basically work around their short election cycle of two to four years, they feel that talking about and investing in prevention is not good enough. They need to change their mindset. And once they change their mindset, they will be able to be with the practitioners and support their work.

[Di] In this series, Mics & Sirens, we speak to fire and emergency services experts from around the world. They all bring their vast depth of knowledge and a wide range of experiences. But all our guests are like you, Mami, and they're connected by a personal drive to improve how we respond to and manage emergencies. Is there an incident or disaster that stands out in your mind even today that you would be able to share with us?

[Mami] So, for me, I would say the 2011 March 11, Great East Japan earthquake and tsunami, which hit the northern part of Japan and which claimed so many lives. It was a real shock to even Japanese who are, let's say, used to being struck by earthquakes. But what also impressed me was the level of solidarity that countries, including Australia showed at that time. I want to see more solidarity for prevention and preparedness as well, and I'm sure it's coming.

[Di] Is there something about the work that you have done in emergency services and disaster risk reduction that used to keep you up at night? Or was it the forefront of your mind when you were working at the UNDRR?

[Mami] So, I keep on remembering the cases of exclusion that I saw. And I went to a lot of missions in this region, in many other regions. One example was a woman in a certain Pacific Island country, who raised her concern to me, saying that at times of disasters, women's voices are not heard in my village. And I thought she was a very brave woman to say it, but I was very shocked. Maybe I was naive to be shocked.

Another case is that I keep on remembering, it was in Bangladesh. I went to a certain village which is constantly flooded. And now they have better evacuation centres. But then I did also visit this corner of this village, which was kind of like gated. And this was where a transgender community was living. And their leader told me that we're not allowed in the evacuation centre when the village is flooded. And I really keep on remembering that. And so, when we say leave no one behind, these are the cases that we definitely have to eliminate. And this keeps me awake at night.

[Di] What technological development do you think would have the, will have the greatest impact on the future of disaster management?

[Mami] I do think that if artificial intelligence can be used in a way to devise more affordable, accessible solutions to disaster risk reduction, whether it's for early warning and early action, or whether it's for - to decrease disaster risk in any way, I think it can be very impactful.

But I also think that we need to be mindful that when we talk a lot about innovation and innovative solutions, we have to understand what is so innovative about it. Does it really have an impact? Is it going to be cheaper? And is it going to be accessible? And I do believe that, yes, we need to look at innovation, but we also need to remember the traditional ways of the indigenous, the First Nation people dealt with disasters and have a good mix of these solutions.

[Di] What's been the most rewarding part of the work that you've done?

[Mami] Well, I do feel a sense of satisfaction when, after a panel discussion, after a speech, after going to a village, whatever, people come up to me and say, "I really felt that your message was important," because the message of prevention and preparedness, I am repeating like a broken tape recorder. [Laughs] And sometimes I do feel like, OK, how many times do I have to say this? But when people come and say, "I get it, it's important. I'll do it." Then it's really rewarding.

[Di] It's been such a delight to speak to you today. Thank you so much, Mami Mizutori, for being part of Mics & Sirens.

[Mami] Thank you for having me.

[Male Narrator] Are you looking for fast, accurate, and official information that helps you to make informed decisions to stay safe during an emergency? The Department of Fire and Emergency Services Emergency WA app lets you set up watch zones for places important to you. So, if an emergency happens in your watch zone, you'll receive alerts and warnings. The best part, it's sent direct to your mobile device. Download DFES' Emergency WA app from the App Store or Google Play today.

[Female Narrator] That was Mami Mizutori on why preparedness and prevention must become the foundation of disaster management. This is Mics & Sirens, the official podcast of

the Department of Fire and Emergency Services in Western Australia. Don't forget to follow, rate and share the series to help us spread these global insights.

Next week, we look to the skies with Karen O'Connor from the Earth Fire Alliance, on the way satellites are changing the way we detect and fight fires.