



UNITED NATIONS
UNIVERSITY
UNU-WIDER

WIDER Development Conference

Responding to crises

23-24 September 2016, Helsinki, Finland

For the world's poorest people, each day is a crisis: of finding work, enough to eat, and safety. There is a **continuing** crisis. The UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) embody international efforts to end the continuing crises of poverty, hunger and the diseases of poverty. Environmental loss is also a longstanding crisis, and the world is more aware of the accelerating crisis of climate change—the impact of which is becoming ever clearer. The international community is starting to respond to climate change, though late in the day. Numerous fragile states live through a continuing and longstanding crisis of weak governance and disrespect for human rights.

Wars, natural disasters, pandemics, and economic shocks can sometimes be predicted, but with no certainty. Their timing is often a surprise. They are often **unexpected**, or on a scale exceeding any forecast. The size and spread of the humanitarian crisis arising out of war and conflict in the Middle-East and North Africa, and the flows of refugees in 2015, took most governments and international agencies by surprise. Medical science has known about Ebola and the Zika virus for years. But the scale of the Ebola crisis in West Africa was not predicted, and for a while its movement across the world was uncertain. Few economists predicted the severity of the 2008-09 financial crisis. The collapse in the world prices of oil and metals has come as an unpleasant shock to exporting countries—booms are turning to busts, and may well prove politically destabilizing.

The crises of the **future** can come in many shapes. Some catalysts may already be identified, and the outline of their impact discerned, even if their timing and final shape remain hazy. One catalyst is demographic change, especially the rising share of young people in the populations of Africa, the Middle-East and South Asia, together with the ageing of most of the rich world and, eventually, China. The 'demographic dividend' of the poor world can be put to good use—in productive employment that raises living standards. Or it could become a 'demographic burden' leading to continuous and rising flows of economic migrants. Technological innovation, economic transformation, advance and retreat in the control of disease, climate change, and tensions within and between nations will all shape the crises of the future.

While the world has made considerable progress over 30 years in reducing the incidence of poverty, together with maternal and child mortality, and while the number of wars has fallen, no progress is irreversible. Unexpected crises demand responses but can draw attention and resources away from continuing crises—slowing or stalling international action on poverty, hunger and disease—and leave little if no space to prepare for future events. Those responding to crises, including governments, international agencies, NGOs, civil society and private citizens, can take action in ways that are good or bad.

Some in the rich world believe that they can turn their backs on the world's poorest people and the world's poorest countries. This is evident in their attacks on international aid, international trade, and international cooperation in all its forms. Humanitarian responses and peacekeeping are underfunded, and development aid is under threat, while national interests threaten to undermine global governance.

But the impact of economic failure, poverty, war, disease, terrorism, and climate change do not stop at national borders. Crises will grow worse without international action, and will mutate to take even more dangerous forms in the future. The crises of the poorer world will still arrive at the doors of rich nations, even as some of their citizens seek to lock those doors and close their eyes to the world around them.

UNU-WIDER's 'Responding to crises' conference in Helsinki on 23-24 September 2016 aims to improve our knowledge about current, unexpected, and future crises, and to discuss the options available for responses by governments, international agencies, NGOs, civil society and private citizens. It will aim to get the facts right about the nature of crisis in our world, and the actions, resources, and attention now underpinning those responses. It will pay close attention to the economic and social impact of crisis, the tensions that arise in responding to continuing crises while dealing with the unexpected, the resourcing of responses (including development aid, humanitarian aid, the financing of global public goods such as health, environment, and peace) and what the future might bring—for good or bad.