

**United
Nations
World
Conference
on
Natural
Disaster
Reduction**

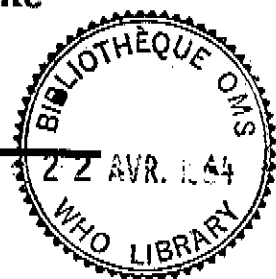
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**World Health Organization
Organisation mondiale de la Santé**

***Disaster Management:
An Opportunity for Change?***



No country is safe from the impact of disasters and complex emergencies, which are becoming more frequent and more severe. Today's most typical strategy to deal with disasters is fragmented and crisis-oriented: scores of national and international agencies, governments, companies, voluntary groups and journalists converge upon the scene of disaster to provide short-term relief and recovery in an uncoordinated manner.

This current approach to disasters is not sustainable. The scenario repeats itself endlessly, creating a culture of dependency and a vicious cycle of underdevelopment in poor, disaster-stricken areas. It drains money and manpower from external organizations which provide assistance, upsets fragile ecosystems, and triggers mass movements of people.

Hhealth professionals have every interest in changing today's inefficient approach to disasters. The health sector plays a key role during disasters, which unexpectedly cause large numbers of deaths, injuries, disabilities and illness. The health sector also plays an important role in development: public health status is a key indicator in determining the level of sustainable development.

Can the world adopt a more practical approach that integrates disaster management into activities which contribute to sustainable development? An upcoming United Nations conference plans to focus on the links between disaster management and sustainable development. The conference may provide the first opportunity to shift today's focus on short-term emergency relief towards new, more rational approaches. **WHO encourages health professionals to attend the UN World Conference on Natural Disaster Reduction so that the health sector has a voice in shaping new strategies to deal with disasters.**

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A WHO contribution to the International Decade for Natural Disaster Reduction

1990-2000

Major emergencies on the rise

Hardly a single day passes without news about a natural disaster, complex emergency or technological accident happening in some part of the world. From Mahārāshtra to Mississippi, disasters wreak havoc in developing and developed countries. Specialists say that no country is safe from disasters.

These emergencies are closely linked to many of the major issues of the 90s: population displacement, environmental degradation, economic survival, public health services, and cultural losses. And as we approach the 21st century, rapid population growth, ecological damage, rapid industrialization and socioeconomic imbalances make the chances of disasters around the world higher than ever -- in turn, fostering a cycle of more migration, economic dislocation, environmental destruction and needless loss of lives and property.

The impact of disasters is on the rise. The economic damages due to natural disasters alone have tripled in the last thirty years.

In 1992, global economic losses for disasters totalled \$60 billion. Early estimates of economic losses from the Los Angeles earthquake ranged from \$15-30 billion. Deaths associated with natural disasters have increased 50 per cent each decade since the 1950s, according to the World Bank, with 3 million deaths over the past two decades and 162 000 in 1991 alone.

In addition, the end of the Cold War has led to a rise in "complex" emergencies, in which humanitarian assistance is "bound by intense levels of political consideration."¹ The United Nations Department of Humanitarian Affairs has registered a 35% rise in the number of complex emergencies between 1991 and 1993.

¹ *UN Disaster Management Training Programme Manual, 1991.*

Changing today's piecemeal disaster management style

The rising number of tragic disasters and complex emergency situations has led to an outpouring of media attention, public sympathy and financial support. Since the 1980s, money and manpower for disaster relief has soared, yet we are no closer than before to bridging the humanitarian gap. Reliance on short-term relief policies cannot continue indefinitely. Money spent on relief seems to be at the expense of development; funding for development programmes has declined over the last decade.

Meanwhile, there is no end in sight to the number of demands for humanitarian assistance. As soon as one crisis abates, another one flares up. While four or five major emergencies manage to attract substantial amounts of assistance for some time, other equally tragic complex emergency situations are ignored, bypassed or forgotten. And with the recent rise in complex emergencies, some label natural disaster victims the "silent majority."

Donor countries are beginning to realize that, under the current circumstances, they will never be able to supply enough money and manpower to react to disasters around the world. At the same time, they are increasingly faced with economic constraints of their own. The result has been that countries are now showing signs of "donor fatigue."

Consequently, some changes in strategy are beginning to appear: there has been a great deal of discussion recently among donors and UN agencies dealing with humanitarian assistance about a "relief to development continuum." At the request of the UN Secretary General, UN agencies are now defining the relationship between relief and development, and developing new policies and procedures. In disaster-prone countries, a growing number of people are going even further, asking their own governments as well as UN agencies and donors to move from a strategy of crisis management, to a strategy that emphasizes prevention, mitigation and preparedness for disasters.²

In summary, then, while the predominant approach to disasters is still piecemeal, short-term and ad-hoc, there are those who are beginning to consider a proactive, risk reduction approach.

² See, for example, the summary of the Oxford Seminar on Disaster Management, October 1993, in which 25 officials from disaster-prone developing countries discussed how to communicate the acute needs for preparedness planning to policy level officials.

Emergency and Humanitarian Relief Operations

"Recalling resolutions... on emergency relief operations, on the International Decade for Natural Disaster Reduction on drought, floods and famine in certain countries;

... Deeply concerned at the alarming increase in disasters... and the effect such disasters have on the health and well-being of the population and health services of Member States;

... Recognizing that it is a constitutional function of WHO to provide health services and facilities to special groups affected by disasters at the request of Member States or of the United Nations;...

REQUESTS the Director-General: to support and guide Member States in strengthening capabilities to prepare for emergencies and to provide humanitarian assistance in the health sector;

... to ensure that WHO fulfils its responsibility for coordinating the health aspects of disaster preparedness and response within the UN system...; ... to strengthen WHO's capacity for early warning of disasters...."

Integrating Disaster Management into Sustainable Development

Despite the major impact that major emergencies have on our world today, no comprehensive policy and strategy is in place to guide the world's approach to disasters. Such a strategy should be based on prevention, mitigation, preparedness, relief and recovery that is fully integrated in sustainable development.

WHO is working to ensure that any new approaches to disaster management are firmly integrated into sustainable development. Disasters do not exist in a vacuum; most frequently, they interrupt a normal process of development. For this reason, WHO prefers to think beyond a relief to development continuum. WHO sees disaster management as a cycle of activities in which emergency prevention, mitigation and preparedness are integrated into sustainable development programmes. Many prevention, mitigation and preparedness measures can be integrated into existing development plans at little or no extra cost, and they go a long way towards building self-reliance in the face of disasters. In addition, these programmes -- if

carefully planned and implemented -- should lead to quick, efficient humanitarian action during disasters, in the event that outside assistance is needed.

Similarly, relief, recovery and rehabilitation efforts should be designed to complement and strengthen the coping capacity of the stricken community, enabling it to move rapidly back to the development phase, building a stronger and safer society than before.

In fact, sustainable development is not possible without paying attention to the global problem of disasters. Sustainable development has been defined as "improving the quality of human life while living within the carrying capacity of supporting ecosystems."³ Disasters can heavily damage ecosystems, wipe away homes, offices, lives and change the fate of a community for decades. How can we improve the quality of human life without taking into account the human and economic suffering caused by disasters?

³ From "Caring for the Earth", 1991, WWF, UNEP, IUCN.

Health Sector Has an Important Role

Emergency management and sustainable development are intersectoral by nature. To varying degrees, many parts of society influence development and are influenced by it. Similarly, when a disaster strikes a community, it is the entire community that feels the impact and that has a role in response and recovery.

The role of the health sector in disasters is particularly important. The impact of major emergencies expresses itself most often in terms of morbidity, mortality and, in some cases, long-term degradation of the health status of vulnerable groups stricken by disasters. Disasters frequently trigger

unexpectedly high numbers of deaths, disabilities, injuries and disease; an increase in psychological and social behavioural disorders; food shortages and nutritional deficiencies; large population displacements; destruction of local health infrastructure; and disruption of routine health services.

Health professionals, therefore, have every interest in taking a prominent role in designing new approaches that link disaster management to sustainable development, and integrating these new approaches in the on-going work of the health sector.

An Opportunity to Adjust Global Strategies to Disasters

A good vehicle to begin shifting in global policies on emergency management could be the **UN World Conference on Natural Disaster Reduction (Yokohama, Japan from 23 to 27 May 1994)**. Many of those involved in the conference preparations strongly advocate an integrated approach to disaster management, focused on sustainable development, with better cooperation between the public sector, the private sector, voluntary groups and the public at large.

The conference provides a forum for policy-makers, managers and experts to share the latest examples of

integrated, cost-efficient disaster reduction programmes. The conference will also provide a forum for decision-makers to shape new policies about how they deal with natural hazards and disasters.

If national governments and international organizations subsequently enlarge the scope of new natural disaster policies to encompass man-made disasters as well, it could lead to a real shift in the way the world considers and handles disasters.

The Health Sector and the World Conference on Natural Disaster Reduction

To help shape a new strategic approach to disaster management, WHO, through its Division of Emergency and Humanitarian Action, has organized and sponsored one of the *main committee sessions* of the conference. The session is entitled, "From Disaster Management to Sustainable Development: How the public sector, private sector and voluntary organizations can work together."

WHO's Regional Office for the Americas is contributing to the conference by organizing a main committee session on regional approaches to disasters. In Africa, WHO's Pan-African Centre for Emergency Preparedness and Response has contributed greatly to the creation of a common African position on disaster management issues.

WHO strongly encourages health professionals in countries around the world to attend the World Conference. In addition to the sessions and issues outlined above, health professionals may wish to participate in the *poster session on health* (organized by UNESCO). There are seven poster sessions on different topics. The poster session on health will take place on Wednesday 25 May 1994.

Ministry of Health officials and leaders of national nongovernmental or private sector groups with an interest in health issues are encouraged to join **official national delegations** to the conference, which speak during plenary sessions throughout the week. ■

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