

Global Challenges in Disaster Reduction

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Gone are the days during which we reacted to disasters as they occurred, living from one catastrophe to another. Gone too are the days in which communities stand alone to cope with local hazards, receiving little (if any) acknowledgement or support from the outside world. Today we live in a globalised world, in every sense of the word: what impacts one community impacts us all.

“We can and must build a world of resilient communities and nations.”

Kofi Annan
UN Secretary-General

Together we must look to shift our emphasis from disaster response and relief to disaster reduction, incorporating preparedness, mitigation and prevention within the context of sustainable development towards reducing our collective risk and vulnerability to natural hazards. The World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD—Johannesburg, August 2002) reinforced awareness of the need for risk and vulnerability reduction in order to secure sustainable development. By reviewing past achievements (and failures) we can establish future priorities aimed at balancing the investment of resources between disaster response and disaster reduction.

We need to develop a common understanding on disaster reduction by means of ongoing communication and interaction among actors representing a wide variety of groups at all levels. This involves working together to ensure the efforts of the humanitarian, meteorological, developmental, environmental and agricultural sectors (among many others) are complementary, integrating disaster reduction within the respective agendas.

Climate change is a serious global concern that remains highly relevant to disasters and their reduction. Steps that enhance our ability to cope with the existing climate are needed, by identifying and reducing current and future climatic risks and promoting disaster reduction as a climate change adaptation strategy.

How can the ISDR offer ‘added value’ as we face these global challenges?

Following the International Decade of Natural Disaster Reduction (IDNDR 1990–2000), the United Nations General Assembly launched the International Strategy for Disaster Reduction (ISDR) to provide a global framework for action with the objective of reducing human, social, economic and environmental losses due to natural hazards and related technological and environmental phenomena. The ISDR aims at building disaster resilient communities by promoting increased awareness of the importance of disaster reduction as an integral component of sustainable development.

Under the umbrella of the ISDR, four primary objectives are identified: 1. Increase public awareness to understand risk, vulnerability and disaster reduction; 2. Promote the commitment of public authorities to disaster reduction; 3. Stimulate multidisciplinary and inter-sectoral partnerships, including the expansion of risk reduction networks; and 4. Improve scientific knowledge about hazards, vulnerability and risk to disasters.

All four objectives are interdependent and interrelated. For instance, awareness-raising is possible by translating scientific knowledge and research into user-friendly information, disseminated throughout networks and partnerships across a variety of sectors, and encouraging decision-makers to incorporate this information into public policy and awareness campaigns to reach the general public.



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Following are some examples of how the ISDR is being implemented to address the above-mentioned challenges.

Learning from the past to balance the scales of disaster response and disaster reduction

Currently in progress is a review of the *Yokohama Strategy for a Safer World: Guidelines for Natural Disaster Prevention, Preparedness and Mitigation and Plan of Action*, examining the achievements in the implementation of disaster reduction worldwide, identifying gaps and preparing recommendations for future priorities to guide action in longer-term development plans by UN Member States. The ten-year review – which commenced in the mid-1990s following the Yokohama World Conference on Natural Disaster Reduction – takes into account several relevant processes, such as the Johannesburg Plan of Implementation of the WSSD, and will culminate in the World Conference on Disaster Reduction (WCDR) planned for Kobe, Japan, 18–22 January 2005.

It is anticipated that the WCDR will adopt a programme of action 2005–2015 based upon an agreed set of principles and framework for disaster risk reduction, including benchmarks and criteria for indicators, to serve as a tool for guiding and monitoring progress at all levels¹. The Conference will draw upon various regional and thematic consultations including regional consultations in Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean, the South Pacific, Europe, the Second International Conference on Early Warning, Review of Small Island Developing States and Barbados Plan of Action, the International Conference of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies as well as the 2003 Australian Disaster Conference.

A common vision to raise awareness and build understanding of disaster reduction

The annual World Disaster Reduction Campaign is one way for communities to participate in the global interactive movement in which different parties are engaged, to create social pressure and change people's perceptions towards reducing risks and vulnerabilities. The dissemination of clear and motivating messages is crucial for the implementation of disaster reduction at the global, regional, national and local levels, with international agencies, non-governmental organizations, government representatives, local decision-makers, scientists, educators and communities all having the opportunity to participate in the Campaign. Each brings their complementary roles and responsibilities towards generating more widespread commitment and understanding to disaster reduction, contributing to the promotion of a 'culture of prevention'.

The ISDR is an opportunity for practitioners and institutions from all regions of the world to share experiences and exchange information on lessons learned and best practices in disaster reduction. The publication *Living with Risk: A global review of disaster reduction initiatives* (UN/ISDR, 2004) comprises a compilation of activities and case studies aimed at reducing the impacts of natural hazards, involving actors at all levels. By way of an open dialogue, we can identify trends, draw up policy and institutional guidelines, establish links that previously may have been overlooked, share success stories with a view to apply them elsewhere, and build a common understanding of disaster reduction across communities, nations and regions of the world.

Living with risk in a changing climate

Weather-related disasters – such as droughts, floods, landslides, storms, fires and sometimes epidemics and pest outbreaks – far outstrip other types of disasters, and are impacting more communities than ever. Average economic losses in the 1990s were six times greater than in the 1960s (2003 Geo Risks Research Department of Munich Reinsurance, January 2003).

The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) has consistently projected the likelihood of increased frequency and intensity of hazards in the future as a consequence of changes occurring in the earth's climate, such as increases in concentrations of atmospheric greenhouse gases caused by human activity.

It is widely recognized that many countries are rapidly accumulating large latent risk burdens through the concentration of growing populations in hazardous

1. From 25 August to 26 September a preliminary consultation was carried out on-line to discuss the proposed framework for guiding and monitoring disaster risk reduction with experts around the world. More information can be obtained at www.unisdr.org/dialogue or by emailing framework_consultation@un.org



Inspecting one of the conference displays, Mr David Templeman and Dr Sálvano Briceño

situations, the stripping of environmental capacities to withstand hazards, and the creation of new social and economic vulnerabilities from migration, urban development and economic growth. When a hazard occurs, it exposes a large accumulation of risk, unleashing unexpected levels of impacts. Disaster reduction provides a solid, meaningful, no-regrets set of activities in support of climate change adaptation plans.

A wide consensus is emerging on the need to move towards the goals of the International Strategy for Disaster Reduction. We need to harmonise our efforts towards sustainable development plans and poverty reduction initiatives to include disaster risk assessment as an integral component, increasing investment in reducing risks and vulnerabilities towards the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals and the Johannesburg Plan of Implementation for Sustainable Development. Disaster reduction is both a humanitarian and development concern that must be considered as a one of the core responsibilities of the international community at large.

As a result of extensive experience in facing a range of natural hazards, Australia has developed an integrated community approach to disaster management. This approach demonstrates its clear commitment to community education in risk reduction, through the promotion of a culture of 'spontaneous volunteers' and encouraging involvement at all levels, potentially serving as a model for other countries to adapt and follow. As a key member of the international community, Australia has much to contribute to the global movement towards building safer sustainable communities.