

Asian Conference on Disaster Reduction 2004 Background Paper

The outcome of the 2004 Asian Conference will be reflected in the regional and thematic preparations for the World Conference on Disaster Reduction in 2005, which is expected to produce guidelines for a long-term program of action.

1. Introduction

On the occasion of the 1994 mid-term review of the IDNDR (International Decade for Natural Disaster Reduction 1990-99), the World Conference on Natural Disaster Reduction was held in Yokohama. The scope of IDNDR work was to promote the subject and raise awareness of an impending issue: that of the increasing threat posed by natural hazards. Since 1994 the *Yokohama Strategy for a Safer World: Guidelines for Natural Disaster Prevention, Preparedness and Mitigation and its Plan of Action*, unanimously adopted by the participants of the Conference, have served as the international blueprint for disaster reduction. Since 1994 the affected people and economic losses due to natural disasters have continued to increase despite efforts by local, national, regional and international actors.

Almost ten years later, in 2001, the UN General Assembly endorsed the review of the Yokohama Strategy with a resolution recognizing the importance and the size of the problems caused by vulnerability to natural and other related hazards

(A/RES/56/195). The 2002 report of the Secretary-General on the implementation of the ISDR (A/57/190) recommends in its paragraph 61 that: "The Secretariat for the Strategy should begin, in collaboration with Governments, agencies and other entities concerned, a full review of the Yokohama Strategy and Plan of Action. This review process will help identify gaps and means of implementation in a way that will chart the course of action for the forthcoming decade, while taking into account the outcome of the World Summit on Sustainable Development."



Image 1 - The Yokohama landscape with the conference centre that hosted the 1994 World Conference on Natural Disaster Reduction

In December 2003 the General Assembly adopted resolution A/RES/58/214 announcing the convening of a World Conference on Disaster Reduction to be organized by UN/ISDR and hosted by the Government of Japan at Kobe, Hyogo from 18 to 22 January 2005. The Conference will mark the conclusion of the review of the Yokohama Strategy and its Plan of Action; identify specific activities aimed at ensuring implementation of the Plan of Implementation of the World Summit on Sustainable Development on vulnerability, risk assessment and disaster management; share best practices and lessons learned to further mitigate disaster impact and identify gaps and challenges; increase awareness of the importance of disaster reduction policies; and increase the reliability and availability of appropriate disaster-related information to the public and disaster management agencies. The Conference will

also discuss the elements of a programme of action to implement disaster reduction in the future.

The challenge embodied in the International Strategy for Disaster Reduction (ISDR), the United Nations programme established in 2000 to follow on the IDNDR achievements, is to promote actual implementation of disaster reduction as part of an overall approach to reducing risk and vulnerability, which has also a direct connection to sustainable development. This is envisioned through increased awareness and public commitment, expanded partnerships and networking, as well as increased knowledge development. The ultimate goal is to help build resilient communities able to live with the risk posed by natural hazards and related environmental and technological disasters.

2. Disaster Reduction Activities in Asia since the 1994 “Yokohama Conference”

Since the first UN World Conference on Natural Disaster Reduction held in Yokohama in 1994, the international community has undertaken increasing efforts to implement disaster reduction. The Yokohama conference had also a stimulating effect on the development of additional international cooperation in this area and the Plan of Action adopted by participants did include some benchmarks and reachable objectives. In this context,

countries in all regions have been working towards understanding the importance of risk and vulnerability reduction and creating means and measures to counter the impact of natural and other hazards.

The world is witnessing a steady increase in the number of affected people and material losses due to natural disasters. Nonetheless there is still debate over the causes of the increase in frequency and

intensity of extreme events. Apart from considerations linked to climate change and variability, one sure reason for the increase is the generalised rise of people's vulnerability provoked by human action and its influence on the built environment. The effects of rapid urbanization and the risks posed by the increasing degradation of the environment, epitomised by deforestation, reduced water quality and supply, and desertification, are only a few examples of how vulnerability is growing world wide. In recent years, the number of people at risk has shown an increase of some 70 million a year.



Image 2 - Devastation at Kobe after the massive earthquake of January 1995

In Asia the need was evident to improve disaster reduction strategies as a key element to achieve sustainable development. In this region, a single disaster could wipe out the GDP of an entire country such as in the case of the earthquake in Armenia in 1988. New trends, such as frequent floods, are emerging, which are largely a consequence of unsustainable human activities and faulty development practices. Furthermore protecting human and socio-economic resources to reduce loss is

becoming essential to achieve sound regional development.

The only way to achieve a significant reduction of human and socio-economic losses in the medium to long term is the implementation of integrated programmes for prevention and emergency management focusing on vulnerability and risk. One concrete example is the experience of Bangladesh in the establishment of early warning systems for floods that have greatly reduced the consequences of torrential rains and flooding.

Activities at community level are increasingly important. The example of Papua New Guinea has shown the positive effects of targeted awareness raising campaigns. After the 1998 tsunami event that took the lives of about 2000 people, information on how to cope with tsunamis was provided to local communities in a simple language complemented by illustrations. As a result, there were no deaths when another large-scale tsunami affected a large coastal area in the year 2000, destroying thousands of houses.

Cooperation among governments (national and local), and civil society (academia, research, NGOs, private sector, citizens associations, etc) is essential. In Asia a network of NGOs dealing with disaster reduction has been created and is growing. In one significant example, in the Great Hanshin-Awaji Earthquake in 1995, citizens rescued 98% of victims and the post-disaster activities carried out by

volunteers were significant.

3. The perspective of a new disaster reduction strategy in Asia

Thanks to growing efforts being made within the international community, significant accomplishments have been achieved in disaster reduction over the past decade. However, poorly planned economic and development activities are still resulting in a steady increase of the negative impact of natural hazards. Extreme climate events and urban vulnerability are two focus areas of particular relevance to the Asian context. These would benefit from the mobilization of governments and civil society alike.

In Asia increased vulnerability in urban areas has become a central problem. Recent severe floods due to torrential rains have highlighted the need for comprehensive development plans to include disaster reduction components adapted to the prevailing situation in each country and capable of taking into account the incidence of current climatic and geological patterns.



Image 3 – Rapid urbanization exposes

societies to increased risks from natural hazards such as landslides and mudflows.

When it comes to natural hazards and their impact on society, several countries in Asia share similar geographical, geological, and meteorological aspects, which all have a bearing on the negative consequences of disasters. In addition, similar economic, social and cultural aspects link several sub-regional groups of countries. Therefore, there is enough room in Asia for strengthening intra-regional cooperation and various forms of collaboration that could be based on both geographical vicinity and socio-economic commonalities. The widespread presence throughout Asia of active segments of civil society could be a distinctive advantage for involving local communities in effective disaster reduction.

As the situation evolves, it is becoming urgent to promote multi-disciplinary and inter-sectoral partnerships. It is also essential to create consensus on the need for international cooperation for disaster reduction and determine the relative positioning of this cooperation within the general schemes of current international cooperation and development policies. In this perspective, the UN/ISDR, the Cabinet Office of Japan, the Hyogo Prefectural Government, the Asian Disaster Reduction Center (ADRC), and the Disaster Reduction Alliance (DRA) organized the

2003 Asian Conference on Disaster Reduction (held on 15-17 January 2003 at Kobe, Hyogo). The aims of the Conference were: 1) to understand the achievements and challenges in disaster reduction in Asia, 2) to develop the paradigm of

regional and international cooperation, and 3) to build disaster reduction capacity and propose guidelines to improve it for the Asian region, as a contribution to the review of the Yokohama Strategy and Plan of Action for a Safer World.

4. Challenges for disaster reduction in Asia in the 21st Century

During the Asian Conference on Disaster Reduction 2003, some key areas of focus emerged clearly from discussions among participants. It was also stressed that Asia as a region needs to reflect on the following challenges:

1) Urban vulnerability and disasters -

Rapid urban growth, as a result of the sharp economic development, is one of the main factors contributing to increased vulnerability to natural hazards in Asia. Unplanned urban growth results in a generalized increase in damage in case of earthquakes, floods and similar disasters. As the Great Hanshin-Awaji (Kobe) Earthquake in 1995 as well as other similar disasters in Asia demonstrated, cities are highly vulnerable to natural hazards. Once a disaster occurs, its direct and secondary impacts can become enormous. It is recognized that sustainable development has to rely also on measures to counter urban vulnerability to natural disasters and that urban contexts should be built and maintained according to more stringent prevention guidelines.

2) **Adaptation to climate change** – In addition, it is necessary to respond to

the effects of extreme climate fluctuations. For example, due to rise in average temperatures caused by global warming, the number and intensity of cyclones and typhoons, or El Niño related disasters are likely to become worse. Furthermore, it is anticipated that sea level rise and temperature increase will augment the risk of storm surge in islands and low-lying coastal regions and extend the liquefaction of alluvial lands in time of earthquakes. Experts should investigate the correlation between climate change and disasters with a long-term view. In parallel international cooperation should support efforts to establish and improve early warning systems at national, regional, and international levels.

3) Multi-disciplinary and inter-sectoral cooperation to address emerging challenges -

In order to confront the problems mentioned above, it is vital to strengthen cooperation among various sectors, including those whose primary mandate may not explicitly include disaster reduction. Considering that aspects such as poverty and environmental degradation are main driving forces of vulnerability, it is crucial to involve in disaster reduction actors

from various fields, such as education, the media, environment, science and technology, and development planning. Cooperation with academic and scientific sectors is relevant to the study of the correlation between climate and disasters and the development of improved early-warning systems. Furthermore, to strengthen comprehensive disaster reduction capacity at the community level, it is essential to enhance partnership among various sectors including national and local governments, and various public and private sectors of the society.

- 4) **Enhancement of Information Management Capacity** - It is necessary to improve the collection, organization and dissemination of data (statistics and other relevant data) on the human, social, economic and environmental impact of disasters in order to

demonstrate to policy and decision makers that disaster reduction is cost effective and conducive to sustainable development. Sharing of information and networking among relevant actors in the information field is essential to ensure wider involvement and a greater impact in policy and decision making.



Image 4 - The safety of all human beings must be at the center of disaster reduction policies

5. Recommendations of the Asian Conference on Disaster Reduction 2003

In order to respond to the challenges mentioned above and to promote multi-disciplinary and inter-sectoral cooperation to address emerging issues, the Asian Conference on Disaster Reduction 2003 recommended to build a framework of international cooperation, among others, in the following areas:

Urban vulnerability and disasters

- Promotion of disaster reduction strategies at the community level, in particular, to reduce vulnerability in urban areas and to promote activities to ensure safety through the development of culture of prevention.

- Promotion of risk assessment based on vulnerability indicators, to build cities with reduced vulnerability, as well as to build capacity to recover from disasters and to reconstruct the affected areas rapidly.

Response to climate change

- Promotion of research on the correlation between climate change and disasters with a long-term view.
- Establishment of improved early warning systems to reduce disasters caused by extreme events, such as floods and droughts.

Cooperation to address emerging

challenges

- Establishment and strengthening of cooperation between various sectors of the community, such as education, the media, environment, development planning, science and technology in order to reduce the negative impacts of disasters.
- Participation of all sectors at the

community level, such as the local governments, the private sector, NGOs, and other driving actors.

Enhancement of information management capacity

- Improvement of data collection and dissemination.
- Strengthening of information sharing and networking.

6. Asian Conference on Disaster Reduction 2004

While the Asian Conference on Disaster Reduction 2003 identified that the above four areas require strengthening, the question remains of how to achieve these objectives. In order to do so, it is necessary to identify concrete measures and actions responding to general objectives that are compatible with current international strategies and programmes. This latter aspect is important to ensure that local and national undertakings are in phase with internationally shared goals.

The Asian Conference on Disaster Reduction 2004, to be held on 4-6 February 2004 in Siem Reap, Cambodia, should therefore aim at building a framework for disaster reduction within which short-term and longer-term measures to reduce risk and vulnerability can be proposed, including concrete solutions that can be incorporated into national and local policies. In addition this conference is part of a series of international, regional and thematic events serving as preparatory consultations in view of the World Conference on Disaster Reduction in 2005. In this sense, the Asian Conference on Disaster Reduction 2004 is a

unique platform to discuss and assess achievements, and identify challenges and concrete future action to mitigate the negative impact of natural disasters.

The ultimate goals of the Asian disaster reduction community are:

- 1) To assist Asian societies to become disaster-resilient while focusing on people and community needs and on all policy levels with a view to promoting a culture of prevention as an essential component of sustainable development,
- 2) To encourage and enhance partnerships for disaster reduction among various sectors including national and local governments as well as the public and private sectors,
- 3) To support and expand networks in order to enhance cooperation and information sharing as well as increase information management capacity for disaster reduction,
- 4) To identify and propose effective and efficient risk and vulnerability reduction measures based on information exchange and taking account of best practices existing in Asia.

7. Expected Outcome of the Asian Conference on Disaster Reduction 2004

The overall goals listed above are fully consistent with the international agendas on disaster reduction and do proceed from the Yokohama Strategy and Plan of Action. Similarly to other regional contexts, in Asia governments, experts and practitioners are sufficiently aware of the importance of disaster reduction. There is also a great deal of knowledge regarding the actions necessary to implement effective risk and vulnerability reduction. Yet, implementation of these actions is lagging behind. The work of the UN International Strategy for Disaster Reduction is largely dedicated to solving this blockage. In general terms, referring to any regional context, the situation is impeded by three main factors: (a) a general misapprehension of disaster reduction within the context of internationally accepted priorities; (b) a relative lack of political commitment at the national level; (c) low level of priority among national policies, which causes poor allocation of resources.

Today the international community is seriously looking into how to bring the strategic planning embodied in the Yokohama Strategy (and still very much valid today) at least one step closer to the implementation level possibly by crafting programmes of action able to indicate the practical ways towards building resilient societies.

In this context, participants in the Asian Conference on Disaster Reduction 2004

should be invited to reflect on both the areas in which efforts must concentrate in future to realise successful implementation of disaster reduction, and concrete measures that can be recommended in the context of a programme of action for the future. Some key areas are: financing disaster reduction (as a challenge for the international community and for each nation); educating new generations to be conscious of risk and vulnerability; establishing conducive national legal frameworks (laws, regulations and sanctions); activating a participatory dynamic between government and civil society on risk; generating a true partnership between public and private sector on vulnerability matters; enhancing information management capacity.



Image 5 - There is no perspective of sustainable development without taking into account risk and vulnerability factors

8. Expected additional impact of the Asian Conference on Disaster Reduction 2004

- 1) Participants will become aware of the importance of enhancing partnerships among various sectors to build capacity for disaster reduction at all levels with a view to achieving sustainable development objectives.
 - A comprehensive approach in disaster management such as the Total Disaster Risk Management (TDRM) approach developed and promoted by ADRC and OCHA-Kobe, CHARM by SOPAC, and CDM by CDERA, should be promoted and implemented.
 - TDRM encourages enhancing cooperation through developing partnerships among governments, international and regional organizations, non-governmental organizations, and other critical sectors, including the private sector, academia, and media to develop capacity in disaster reduction at all levels.
- 2) Participants will also become aware of the importance of information sharing and networking, which are essential to ensure wider involvement of and greater impact on policy and decision making.
 - ReliefWeb was launched in 1996 as an Internet-based information service of the UN OCHA, providing humanitarian and disaster relief information, thus strengthening information exchange partnerships.
 - In order to improve the collection, dissemination, and sharing of data, GLIDE (GLobal unique disaster Identifier number) has been developed as an enabling standard.
- 3) Participants are expected to discuss and recognize the need to adopt a comprehensive strategy to reduce the negative impact of disasters and should realize the positive impact of the best practices proposed during the meeting, if necessary adapted to local conditions and needs.
 - TDRM, as an integrated disaster risk management, is expected to become an important strategy for effective disaster reduction and response in Asia.
 - In order to ensure effective application of the TDRM approach, it is essential to learn lessons from the best practices in the region as well as in other regions.
 - Emphasizing such practices is vital for decision making of prime decision makers, including politicians, financial administrators, and planners in the national coordinating body in each country to create a "culture of prevention" in the pursuit of sustainable development.
 - Effective disaster risk communication is vital in raising awareness and mitigating disasters. Community based hazard mapping is an example of effective risk communication among policy makers and communities, thus ensuring effective early warning. Policy makers should be encouraged to use hazard maps as a tool for effective risk communication with the community and

to strengthen its disaster reduction capacity.

4) Participants are also expected to propose specific and long-term activities to reduce risk and vulnerability to disasters in Asia.

- In an integrated disaster risk reduction approach, activities from structural interventions to community based disaster management (CBDM) must be coordinated in order to reduce

hazard and vulnerability.

- It is important to orient development agencies of the need to integrate disaster risk management into the national and local planning process, thus mainstreaming disaster reduction into development.

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