

# Aide-Memoire

## Asian Conference on Disaster Reduction 2003

—Contribution to the Review of the Yokohama Strategy and Plan of Action—

15-17 January 2003

### 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. Since then, 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, has served as the international blueprint for disaster reduction. Since 1994 the human and economic losses due to natural disasters have continued to increase despite efforts by local, national, regional and international actors undertaken during the last decade. The IDNDR promoted the subject and raised the awareness for action.

The current challenge, envisioned in the International Strategy for Disaster Reduction (ISDR), the United Nations programme established in 2000 to follow on the IDNDR achievements, aim at promoting further implementation of disaster reduction as part of sustainable development. This is envisioned through increased awareness and public commitment to risk and vulnerability reduction, expanded partnerships and networking, as well as increased knowledge development in these areas. The goal is to build resilient communities to withstand and live with the risk to natural hazards, and related environmental and technological disasters.

While the world has witnessed an exponential increase in human and material losses due to natural disasters, there is 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 loss 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, climate change 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.

The review of the Yokohama Strategy was endorsed by the General Assembly in December 2001 (resolution 56/195). The 2002 report of the Secretary-General on the implementation of the ISDR (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”.

The publication “Living with Risk – a global review of disaster reduction initiatives”, released by the ISDR Secretariat in July 2002, is a study of the lessons learned by experts and communities to reduce vulnerability and risks to hazards presented by natural forces as well as technological accidents and environmental degradation, focusing on how risk reduction, as part of sustainable development, is put into practice in different parts of the world. As such “Living with Risk” is both a tool for orientating the substantive process of reviewing the implementation of the Yokohama Strategy and related activities to disaster reduction, and to develop a monitoring framework and specific policy advice for disaster and risk reduction to guide national, regional and international organizations. The exercise is expected to involve all relevant institutions, organizations and experts involved in the area.

In addition, the World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD) included several commitments regarding disaster risk management in its plan of implementation. The outcome of the Summit recognizes the critical link between sustainable development and disaster reduction, thus providing renewed thrust to disaster reduction as a fundamental component of international cooperation for the future years.

## **2. Disaster Reduction Activities in Asia after the “Yokohama Conference”**

Since the UN World Conference on Natural Disaster Reduction, which took place in Yokohama in 1994, the international community has undertaken efforts to implement disaster reduction measures based on the following assumptions:

- 1) There is a need to improve disaster reduction strategies as a key element to achieve sustainable development. In Asia, a single disaster could wipe out the GDP of a country such as in the case of the forest fires in Mongolia in 1996, the earthquake in Armenia in 1988, and the floods in Tajikistan in 1992.
  - New trends, such as frequent floods, are emerging, which are largely a consequence of unsustainable human activities and faulty development practices;
  - Protecting human and socio-economic resources to reduce loss is becoming essential to achieve sound regional development.
- 2) 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 vulnerability and risk reduction

programmes.

- One concrete example from the region is the experience of Bangladesh with the establishment of early warning systems for floods that have greatly reduced the consequences of torrential rains and flooding.
- 3) 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.
- 4) Cooperation in disaster reduction activities 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 expanding.
  - At the Great Hanshin-Awaji Earthquake in 1995, 85% of victims were rescued by citizens and the post-disaster activities by volunteers were significant.

### **3. Challenges for disaster reduction in Asia in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century**

Thanks to growing efforts being made by the international community, significant accomplishments have been achieved in disaster reduction. However, poorly planned economic and development activities are still resulting in a steady increase of the negative impact of natural hazards. In Asia the increased vulnerability in urban areas has become a central problem. Recent severe floods due to torrential rains in Asia and other regions of the world 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.

When it comes to natural hazards and their impact on society, several countries in Asia share similar geographical, geological, and meteorological factors which all have an effect of the negative consequences of disasters. In addition, similar economic, social and cultural aspects link several sub-regional groups of countries. Therefore, there is 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. Extreme climate events and urban vulnerability are two focus areas of particular relevance to Asia as a region that would benefit from the mobilization of governments and civil society alike.

As the situation evolves, it is becoming urgent to respond to the increasing vulnerability in Asia and the need to promote multi-disciplinary and inter-sectoral partnerships. It is essential to bring about general consensus on the need for international cooperation for disaster reduction. In this perspective, the Asian Conference on Disaster Reduction 2003 will examine vulnerability in Asia and discuss the state of disaster reduction activities in the region. The Conference will bring together participants from the region as well as from other parts of the world and will focus on the following issues:

1) Urban vulnerability and disasters

Currently, half of the population in Asia lives in urban areas and it is expected that urbanization will progress rapidly in future. Unplanned or poorly planned urban growth results in a generalized increase in damage in case of earthquakes, floods and similar disasters. It is recognized that sustainable development in developing countries has to rely also on measures to counter urban vulnerability to natural disasters. As the Great Hanshin-Awaji (Kobe) Earthquake demonstrated, cities are highly vulnerable to some hazards. Once a disaster occurs, its direct and secondary impacts can become enormous. It is therefore a pressing requirement to be prepared for urban disasters, both in developing and industrialized countries.

It is indispensable to undertake risk assessments based on vulnerability indicators, to build cities with reduced vulnerability, as well as to build capacity to recover from disasters and to reconstruct the city quickly.

2) Response to climate change and water related risk

It is a common concern in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century that, due to global climate change, the number and intensity of cyclones and typhoons, or El Nino related disasters such as droughts and floods are anticipated to increase. Rise in sea level and temperature will increase the risk of storm surge in island and low-lying coastal countries and extend the liquefaction of alluvial lands in time of earthquakes. Therefore, it is necessary to respond to the effect of potential extreme climate fluctuations.

There are intrinsic links between disasters risk reduction and the broader water agenda, both nationally and internationally. In this regard, it is suggested to carry out a research on the correlation between climate change and disasters with a long-term view as well as strengthen international cooperation 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 some whose primary mandate may not explicitly include disaster reduction. Social aspects of vulnerability such as poverty and environmental degradation need to be better understood and confronted hand in hand with local communities exposed to them. In addition, to reduce vulnerability and risk to disasters it is crucial to involve various sectors, such as education, the media, environment, and development planning. Furthermore, cooperation with academic and scientific sectors should focus on the correlation between climate change and disasters and on the development of improved early-warning systems.

## 4. Outcome of the Asian Conference on Disaster Reduction 2003

The Asian Conference on Disaster Reduction 2003 is expected to examine and discuss, among others, the issues mentioned above, identify remaining problems and gaps and recommend means of implementation of effective disaster reduction measures in Asia for the forthcoming decade.

The outcome of the Conference will be reflected in a number of events planned in 2003 and 2004 also in relation to the ten-year review of the Yokohama Strategy and Plan of Action. This process would be concluded by a final event in 2004-2005 expected to indicate the guidelines for a long-term programme of action. The process is tentatively expected to include:

- Regional Event in Asia (Kobe, January 2003)
- Regional Event in the Pacific (Fiji, May 2003)
- Thematic Event of the ENSO and Climate, (end of 2003)
- International Early Warning Conference II (Germany, 15-19 October 2003)
- Regional Event of the Euro-Mediterranean region (Spain, October 2003)
- Thematic Event - Forum (Geneva, first semester 2004)
- Regional Event of the Americas (Mid 2004)
- Regional Event in Africa (May/June 2004)
- Consolidating Event (September 2004-January 2005)

The above events will be complemented by other international, regional and thematic events to be convened with ISDR partner organizations. The views stemming from these various lead-up events and other related developments will be incorporated into the consolidating event to be held in 2004/2005.

\*\*\*\*\*