



Some definitions and concepts

Difference between a *hazard* and a *disaster*

Strictly speaking, there are no such things as natural *disasters*, but there are natural *hazards*. A disaster is the result of a hazard's impact on the society. So the effects of a disaster are determined by the extent of a community's vulnerability to the hazard (or conversely, its ability, or capacity to cope with it). This vulnerability is *not* natural, but the result of an entire range of constantly changing physical, social, economic, cultural, political, and even psychological factors that shape people's lives and create the environments in which they live. 'Natural' disasters are nature's judgement on what humans have wrought.

What is a natural hazard?

Natural hazards include phenomena such as: earthquakes; volcanic activity; landslides; tsunamis, tropical cyclones and other severe storms; tornadoes and high winds; river floods and coastal flooding; wildfires and associated haze; drought; sand/dust storms; insect infestations and biological ones. Other types of hazards include human-induced stemming from technological hazards and environmental degradation.

What is a disaster?

A serious disruption of the functioning of a community or a society causing widespread human, material, economic or environmental losses which exceed the ability of the affected community/society to cope using its own resources.

What is vulnerability to disasters?

Vulnerability to disasters is a process resulting from human action or inaction or from an inherent situation such as poverty. It describes the degree to which a society is threatened by the impact of natural hazards in social, economic, physical and environmental spheres. The degree of vulnerability depends, amongst other factors, on the condition of human settlements and their infrastructure, the way in which disaster management is addressed by public policy, and the level of information and education available about hazards and how to deal with them.

Why target society's vulnerability to disasters?

Although societies have always experienced major natural disasters, they have, in recent years, been increasingly affected by their adverse impact. In early 2001 alone, three consecutive earthquakes in El Salvador and one in India, together with recurring floods in Mozambique caused significant loss of life and damage to economic and social infrastructures in these countries. This global development is directly linked to a number of trends such as increasing wealth and poverty, population growth and density particularly in the context of rapid urbanization, environmental degradation and climate change.

What is disaster (risk) reduction?

Solutions to counter the increasing impact of natural hazards exist. The knowledge and technology necessary to apply these solutions is widely available. Disaster reduction – or rather disaster risk reduction – is the sum of all the measures, which can be undertaken to reduce the vulnerability of a socio-economic system to natural hazards. The measures cover a wide spectrum of activities ranging from avoiding disasters altogether (disaster prevention) to measures aimed at limiting the severity of a disaster when it strikes. Sound information and political commitment are the basis of successful disaster reduction measures.

This is an ongoing process, which is not limited to a single disaster. It seeks to motivate societies at risk to become engaged in conscious disaster management, beyond the traditional response to disasters. Disaster reduction is multi-sectoral and interdisciplinary in nature and involves a wide variety of interrelated activities at the local, national, regional and international level.

(See diagram of the Disaster Reduction Framework)



FRAMEWORK FOR DISASTER RISK REDUCTION

