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Organización
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Natural Disaster Reduction



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Natural Disaster Reduction

While the forces of nature are impossible to master, it is possible to master ways to reduce natural disasters. UNESCO has followed such strategies since the 1960s.

The tsunami disaster that hit the shores of the Indian Ocean on 26 December 2004 caused at the same time distress and a huge wave of generosity. With it came the added awareness that nature, no matter how lovely, can quickly turn into a destructive force. But not all disasters can be blamed on nature.

NOT SO NATURAL DISASTERS

Natural hazards are naturally-occurring physical phenomena such as earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, landslides, tsunamis, flooding and drought. Disasters can result from these hazards but not all disasters are natural and some are clearly caused by human actions. Deforestation, for example, increases the risk and intensity of flooding; unsafe housing and poor land-use planning; construction in hazard-prone areas can all have catastrophic repercussions. Over the past twenty years, natural disasters have been more frequent and have had a greater impact on more extended areas: they caused the deaths of millions of people and caused enormous economic damage. Poor and developing countries suffer the greatest damage in loss of life as well as in social and economic terms because of their lack of resources, infrastructures and protective systems for disaster preparedness and prevention.



After the tsunami, December 26, 2004
(E. Schneider © UNESCO)

This is all the more serious because the scientific and technological know-how exists to improve parasismic prevention and wind resistance; to establish early warning systems; and to implement community-based responses. UNESCO has played an active role since the 1960s in adopting preventive strategies: anticipating risks; supporting on-going scientific programmes; and helping to set up disaster relief programmes. The strategy is based on scientific and technological advances, education and interdisciplinary training as well as on

awareness raising for decision-makers and the general public. The Organization has several goals in these fields:

- establish early warning systems
- define proper land-use and urban planning standards
- adopt appropriate construction standards
- protect school buildings and cultural monuments
- promote post-disaster research and reconstruction.

UNESCO's actions rely on the expertise of several international and intergovernmental scientific programmes including the International Hydrological Programme (IHP), the Man and the Biosphere (MAB)

Natural Disaster Reduction

Coast Home to 60% of the Population

The shock wave produced by the tsunami resulting in the death or displacement of thousands of people on the shores of Asia and East Africa in December 2004 still resounds in our collective memory. As UNESCO Director-General Koichiro Matsuura said of the disaster “in a few hours, nearly 300 000 lives were lost. In the most exposed areas, which were in some cases the poorest in the region, the tsunami not only killed, it also destroyed the development efforts and the future outlook of many communities” (1). Although an early warning system exists since 1968 for the Pacific, this is not the case for other parts of the globe, despite the fact that 60% of the world’s population (3.6 billion people) live in coastal areas. In an effort to spare this population from paying as heavy tribute to nature again, UNESCO’s Intergovernmental Oceanographic Commission (IOC) set up an Intergovernmental Co-ordinating Group (ICG) responsible for managing the Indian Ocean Tsunami Warning and Mitigation System (IOTWS). The system will be operational in July 2006. A global ocean monitoring system is scheduled for later development.

(1) Speech made during the “XXIst Century Talks” on tsunamis, May 10, 2005.

Programme, the International Geoscience Programme and the Intergovernmental Oceanographic Commission.

Through its Natural Disaster Reduction Sector (Basic and Engineering Sciences, Earth Sciences Division), UNESCO participates actively in the prevention field. Activities undertaken include: risk and disaster data exchange and analysis centres; seismic monitoring networks; identification and charting of hazard-prone areas; creation of a Pacific Ocean tsunami early-warning system (and in the Indian Ocean in July 2006), the launch of the International Flood Initiative, and providing assistance to prevention-based communications systems.

In the wake of the tsunami which struck the shores of the Indian Ocean on December 26, 2004, the World Conference on Disaster Reduction held in Kobe, Hyogo, Japan on January 18-22, 2005, adopted three texts concerning disaster reduction, including a ten-year action plan covering 2005-2015. The participants (4000 in all representing 168 States, 78 United Nations Agencies and other organizations, 161 NGOs and as many media professionals) adopted the Hyogo Declaration recommending that a “culture of disaster prevention” be fostered “at all levels”. It also recognized the links between disaster reduction, sustainable development and poverty eradication. The Conference voted to create a natural disaster global early warning system.

UNESCO was an active participant to the Conference. It organized, in partnership with other agencies, thematic sessions. Working with the University of Kyoto, it published a report entitled *Disaster Reduction and Human Security: Education for Sustainable Development*. The report focuses on case studies of best practice efforts in 41 countries in the disaster reduction field. It has also published a CD on disaster reduction issues, in co-operation with the Global Alliance for Disaster Reduction.

To Find Out More

www.unesco.org/disaster

ISDR - International Strategy for Disaster Reduction:
www.unisdr.org

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