

WHO's Role in the International Decade for Natural Disaster Reduction

"Africa's vulnerability to various forms of natural disasters has been proven in recent years. Its lack of preparedness to respond adequately to such disasters has been clearly demonstrated. WHO's Panafrican Centre for Emergency Preparedness and Response is a most welcome project and answers to Africa's crying need".

Dr M.T. Mapuranga, Assistant Secretary-General of the Organizations of African Unity, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia

The World Health Organization is the leading technical agency in the United Nations system. Its mandate is to direct and coordinate international health work, with the aim of "attainment by all peoples of the highest possible level of health".

WHO's role at the Country Level

In its ongoing work with national ministries of health, WHO provides technical cooperation on subjects as diverse as health information systems and community water supply. Under the International Decade for Natural Disaster Reduction, WHO proposes to incorporate disaster reduction strategies into established country programmes. By employing systems that are already in place and working, WHO hopes to make disaster awareness as central a concern as primary health care.

WHO country representatives will work closely with United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) resident coordinators to promote

disaster reduction strategies that are appropriate to the special needs of each country.

WHO will also provide technical cooperation in planning and developing country-level preparedness programmes. This will include a wide range of activities, such as technical assessments of current preparedness capacity and identification of gaps in planning. WHO will cooperate with ministries of health in the development of preparedness programmes that complement and strengthen health activities at national and community levels.

At the Regional Level

Because natural hazards vary by region, a clear priority for WHO is the development of human resources at the country level. WHO's focus, therefore, is to channel relevant information and training materials from the regional level to the country level.

WHO's regional offices will not only back up the emergency preparedness programmes in individual countries, but will also play an important role in regional disaster awareness. So that countries can share the "lessons learned" from disasters that may have struck them separately, intercountry workshops are arranged. These regional offices also produce the training manuals needed by country programmes.

WHO also creates networks of experts so that when disaster strikes, they can be quickly employed to deal with the emergency at hand.

At the Centre for Research of the Epidemiology of Disaster, a WHO collaborating centre at Louvain University, Brussels, staff members are creating an "institutional memory"—a database on disasters and relief efforts that will aid in reducing the effects of disasters as well as in the management of relief operations.





Visit to a refugee camp in the Islamic Republic of Iran

At the Global Level

Reducing the effects of disasters on health workers and hospitals is a formidable challenge. WHO is preparing a wide range of measures to improve awareness and preparedness.

The measures can be classified in four categories: training, technical cooperation, distribution of health information, and research in health preparedness and response.

Training

Training is one of WHO's primary goals. Health workers are, naturally enough, the focal point for health issues. Insofar as health and disaster reduction are interrelated, health workers should also be the focal points for disaster reduction.

Technical Cooperation

Gaps currently exist in the availability of technical guidelines which incorporate basic emergency preparedness and response principles and procedures in

health programmes at country level. From environmental sanitation to immunizations, there is an urgent need to incorporate – within existing guidelines – the information relevant to disaster reduction.

By assembling a global network of experts, WHO can match needs to specific expertise in emergencies at all levels.

Distribution and Dissemination of Health Information

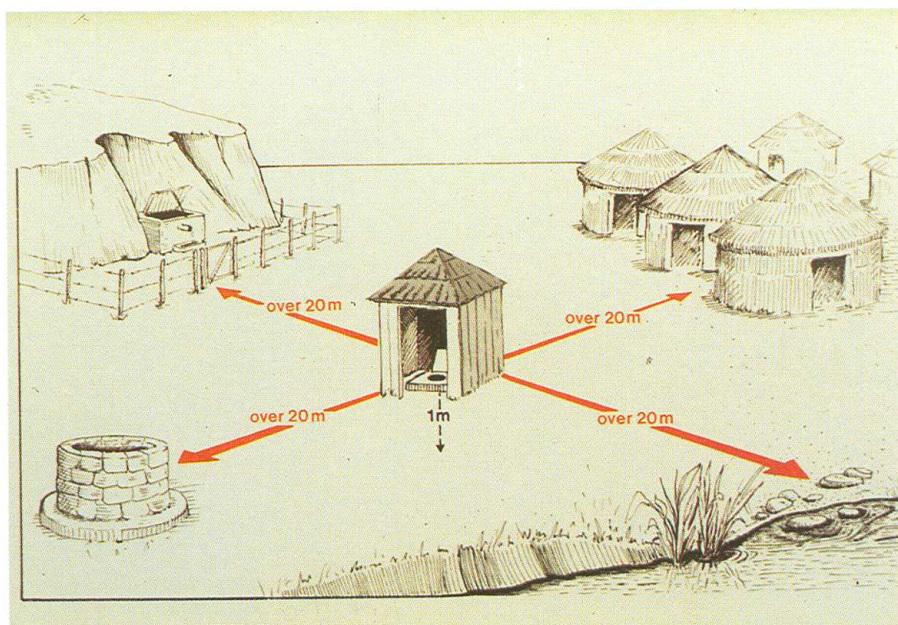
Reaching a broader public with information about disasters and their effects on health is also a priority. Wider dissemination of such materials is intended to create grass-root awareness and support for disaster reduction measures. It is widely acknowledged that awareness at the local level is the critical component of overall disaster preparedness.

Research

There is still much research to be done on issues such as early warning systems for epidemics and famine, the reduction of vulnerability of individuals as well as health facilities, and on what constitutes affordable mitigation measures in poor countries. Effective identification of malaria-prone areas is a specific problem. The capacity to prepare adequately for disaster is predicated on the ability, to some degree, to forecast disasters. The more we know about disasters, the better we can prepare for them.

Resource Mobilization

Although it is not a funding organization, WHO can act as a facilitator in mobilizing funds for disaster relief. It can also advise donors as to the appropriate donation of goods or material.



In temporary settlements following a disaster, it is important to prevent contamination of the water supplies.