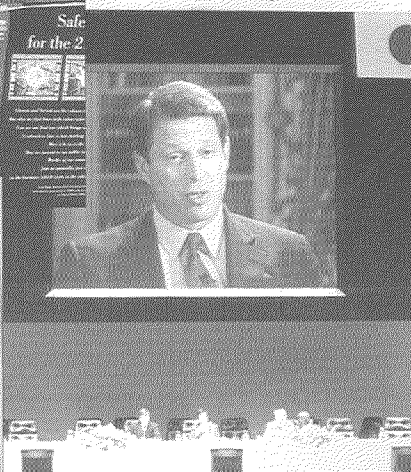




...on Natural Disaster R
...kohama, 23-27 May 1994



Photos: UN Dept. of Public Information

From top: Panellists from the WHO Main Committee session listen to a question from the audience; Mr. Peter Hansen, Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs, presents conference posters; US Vice-President Albert Gore addresses the audience by video; selections from the exhibition of children's drawings.

Summary

The session examined how governments, NGOs and private companies can establish effective policies and strategies for disaster management that are integrated within a process for sustainable development

No country is safe from the impact of major and complex emergencies, which are becoming more frequent and more severe. Since the 1980s, money and manpower for disaster relief has soared, yet we are no closer than before to bridging the humanitarian gap. Today's predominant crisis-oriented approach to disasters is not sustainable. It creates cultures of dependency and triggers vicious cycles of underdevelopment. It upsets fragile ecosystems and leads to mass movements of people. It often drains scarce resources from local, national and international organizations which provide humanitarian assistance, without ensuring that disaster relief serves as a springboard for future sustainable development.

In fact, sustainable development is not possible without addressing the damage to development wrought by disasters. Sustainable development has been defined as "improving the quality of human life while living within the carrying capacity of

supporting ecosystems."¹ Because public health status is a key indicator in determining the level of sustainable development, because disasters cause large numbers of deaths, illness, injuries and disabilities, and because disasters destroy public health infrastructure and strain health personnel resources, the World Health Organization is seeking new ways to address the rising toll of disasters on society.

No one sector or organization, however, can do it alone. Disasters are by definition beyond the coping capacity of the stricken community. All parts of society are affected by disasters, and all have a role to play.

This session featured leaders in business, government and voluntary organizations who outlined their experiences related to disasters and development. They offered views on how to build a cost-effective, new paradigm for emergency management that is integrated into a cycle of sustainable development.²

The new paradigm is based on formal partnerships between all parts of society that build a "preventive culture" towards disasters. The emphasis is on disaster prevention, mitigation and emergency preparedness activities as part of ongoing development. Where emergencies occur, such partnerships provide an efficient means to reduce the impact of disasters, and ensure that recovery and rehabilitation activities lead to long-term sustainable development.

The speakers outlined the elements needed to make this approach succeed: political will, public awareness, development of local and national resources, and strong cooperation between public, private and voluntary sectors. This cooperation must be based on clear division of responsibilities between the public, private and voluntary sectors: each has a role to play and the roles have to be complementary and well-coordinated.

The speakers outlined comparative advantages of their sectors in a disaster management partnership that fits within the framework of sustainable development. They discussed the constraints in achieving such a partnership, and offered constructive solutions that countries can adapt to their needs. ■

1 "Caring for the Earth": WWF, UNEP, IUCN, 1991.

2 The incorporation of emergency management within the sustainable development cycle reflects WHO's position on international discussions of the relief-development continuum.

Introduction

Disasters are becoming more frequent, more costly and more disruptive than ever before. Complex emergencies (which have political, social and economic origins), as well as natural disasters are on the rise. Indeed, while we gathered for one week in Yokohama, natural disasters will affect 7 million men, women and children and will cost the international community over US\$ 1 billion.

The increase of the global population, the deterioration of the environment, the widening of social and economic gaps, and regional and ethnic conflicts indicate that the problem will worsen by the year 2000. Moreover, each disaster will bring more shattered lives, more separated families and more shaken communities — a downward spiral away from sustainable social and economic development.

Thanks to the telecommunications network around the globe, especially television, we are becoming more and more sensitized to the tragedy of disasters. More official aid is being earmarked for humanitarian assistance today than ever before.

Nevertheless, these efforts are insufficient for the tasks needed. All the financial and human resources we pour into disaster relief are short-term measures. They do little to solve long-term problems that require structural solutions.

We believe that this conference — the mid-term review of the International Decade for Natural Disaster Reduction — has been a good forum to look for answers.

■ Bridging relief and development

In looking at disaster management today, two things stand out. One is the overwhelming focus on emergency relief. The other is the dichotomy existing between those working in emergency and humanitarian relief with those involved in development areas. The dominant policy approach to disasters has been "crisis-oriented," and not approached as an integral part of development.

The general public tends to perceive disaster management in terms of the delivery of relief supplies and medical care. While these activities are important, they are not enough. Disaster management and development activities need to be streamlined and efficiently coordinated, particularly in a world of shrinking resources and rising demand.

The money we spend on emergency relief today is, to some extent, being "diverted" from development programmes.

It is estimated that the proportion of aid spent on disaster relief increased from 2% in 1989 to around 7% in 1994. If this trend continues, by the year 2000 we will be spending at least 12% of development aid on emergency relief.

In the 1980s, the scientific community realized that the answer to disaster management was not exclusively in relief. The answer lies in building up national capacities to deal with emergencies, starting with prevention, mitigation and preparedness, and going to relief, rehabilitation and recovery.

The same scientific community designated the 1990s as the International Decade for Natural Disaster Reduction.

Scientific and technical tools are available and affordable. The problem is our approach to disaster management. Some changes are beginning to appear in national and international strategies to deal with disasters.

WHO has been part of a process in which United Nations agencies, nongovernmental organizations, and several donor governments are now defining the relationship between relief and the continuum to development

■ Opportunities for change

The Yokohama conference represents a chance to change practices in disaster management. By bringing together many different people from the public and private sectors, including nongovernmental organizations and multilateral agencies,

Yokohama can represent a first step in forging new, more comprehensive, and more sustainable policies. This session — "From Disaster Management to Sustainable Development: How the Public Sector, Private Sector and Voluntary Organizations Can Work Together" — is WHO's contribution to this process.

WHO was pleased to see national government officials, scientists, journalists, international agency officials, business leaders, and representatives of voluntary organizations who attended the conference. The process of coordination for sound disaster management is a long one. Forging consensus on priorities, defining complementary roles for all partners and raising public and government awareness that we can no longer afford "quick fix" solutions, are all necessary steps in building a safer world for the 21st century. The discussions which ensued from this session will, we hope, point us in the right direction. ■

***The answers to disaster
management do not lie
exclusively in disaster relief,
but in building up national
capacities to deal
with emergencies***

Fabrizio Bassani
Director
Division of Emergency and Humanitarian Action
World Health Organization
Switzerland

