



International Strategy
I S D R
for Disaster Reduction

Focus Paper No. 3

**Capacity Building for Disaster Reduction
in Developing Countries**

INTER-AGENCY TASK FORCE ON DISASTER REDUCTION

**SECOND MEETING
GENEVA, 10-11 OCTOBER 2000**

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I. Background:

1. At its First meeting in April 2000, the IATF identified “capacity-building in developing countries” for disaster reduction as one of the priority areas of common concern that should be discussed and supported by the Task Force. The ISDR Secretariat was therefore requested to carry out preliminary research and consultations on ways to address the issue and to submit suitable proposals to the Task Force.

2. The present focus paper provides a brief overview of the concept of capacity building in the context of disaster reduction in developing countries and makes some proposals to be discussed at the Task Force meeting. This paper is not exhaustive. Its aim is to facilitate discussion in the Task Force rather than to provide definitive policies on the issue.

II. Rationale:

i. General

3. Natural and other related hazards have devastating effects both on developed and developing countries. However, developing countries are often worst hit, both in terms of economic and social impact. According to the estimates of the World Bank, economic losses caused by disasters in developing countries, in terms of GNP, are 20 times higher than in developed countries. As the Secretary General of the United Nations has stated:

“It is no accident that 90 percent of disaster victims worldwide are in developing countries. Poverty and population pressures are forcing growing numbers of poor people to live in harm’s way – flood plains, earthquake-prone zones and unstable hills. Their extraordinary vulnerability is perhaps the single most important cause of disaster casualties.”

Kofi Annan, IDNDR Programme Forum, 5 July 1999

4. Many factors contribute to the vulnerability of developing countries to natural and other hazards. For example, poverty, lack of appropriate technology and inadequate communication links as well as lack of awareness of the root causes of disasters contribute to the increased vulnerability of communities living in hazard prone areas. However, weak institutional capacities represent a major problem in many developing countries.

ii. The concept of capacity building in the context of disaster reduction

5. The concept of capacity building is currently widely used, in many different domains, especially in the United Nations and other international development organizations. In general, capacity building efforts aim to provide a defined target group or an organization with skills, resources, both human and financial, or technology needed to enable it to perform to its full potential.

6. Current conceptual approaches conceive capacity building at three different levels. At the individual level, capacity building refers to the process of changing attitudes and developing skills while maximizing the benefits of participation and knowledge exchange. At the institutional level, capacity building concentrates on organizational performance and functioning capabilities. In recent years, increased emphasis has also been placed on the systemic dimension of capacity development with emphasis on the overall policy framework in which individuals and organizations interact with the external environment.

7. In general, the steps to be taken in any capacity building effort include: (1) need assessment and definition of target groups (2) definition of the desired change in performance (3) means to achieve such change, and (4) impact assessment.

8. Capacity building can be achieved through different means, such as training and education, public information, transfer or provision of access to technology and other forms of assistance designed to improve institutional efficiency and formulate an appropriate policy framework. In the field of disaster reduction, depending on the context, “capacity building” can include issues such as training of disaster managers, transfer of technology, application of traditional knowledge and know-how as well as strengthening of institutional capacities at the community, national and regional levels.

9. Reference to capacity building in the context of disaster reduction has been made in number of resolutions and programmes of actions adopted at the international level. The following list is not exhaustive as different organizations will have similar statements related to the subject.

10. The UN General Assembly resolution 54/219 on the successor arrangements to IDNDR called for the implementation and further development of a: *“comprehensive strategy to maximize international cooperation in the field of natural disasters, based upon an effective division of labour, from prevention to early warning, response, mitigation, rehabilitation and reconstruction, including through capacity building at all levels, and the development and strengthening of global and regional approaches that take into account regional, sub-regional, national and local circumstances and needs, as well as the need to strengthen coordination of national emergency response agencies in natural disasters”*

11. The same resolution recalled the strategy document “A Safer World in the 21st century: Disaster and Risk Reduction”, which makes implicit reference to capacity building. The concept of capacity building is, in fact, embodied in the main vision of the ISDR, which is “to enable all communities to become resilient to the effects of natural, technological and environmental hazards”, as well as in one of its main goals, which is “to engage public participation at all levels of implementation to create disaster-resistant communities through increased partnership and expanded risk reduction networks at all levels”.

12. Agenda 21 (Chapter 7), which was adopted in 1992, incorporates several specific recommendations related to capacity building in disaster-prone urban areas, including the following:

- *“Developing countries should conduct training programmes on disaster-resistant construction methods for contractors and builders, who build the majority of housing in developing countries.*
- *Training programmes should be extended to government officials and planners and community and non-governmental organizations to cover all aspects of disaster mitigation, such as early warning techniques, pre-disaster planning and construction, post disaster construction and rehabilitation”*

13. The Yokohama Strategy, adopted at the World Conference on Natural Disaster Reduction in May 1994, mentioned “human and institutional capacity-building and strengthening” as an important component of the prevention, reduction and mitigation of natural disasters. The Strategy also noted that “the development and strengthening of capacities to prevent, reduce and mitigate disasters is a top priority area to be addressed during the Decade so as to provide a strong basis for follow-up activities to the Decade”.

14. In July 1999, at the IDNDR Programme Forum, many references were made to capacity building in developing countries in relation to the goal of disaster reduction. The issue was discussed, in particular, at the session on “**Capacitating Developing Countries**”. The focus of the discussion was

on capacity building in government, in particular in establishing coordination mechanisms, early warning systems as well as local and national information systems and networks.

15. Currently, a wide range of ongoing efforts and activities by the members of the Task Force and other organizations already contribute to "capacity building efforts" in their respective domains, for example various training programmes (UNESCO, ADPC, World Bank, UNDP); food security programmes (WFP); capacity building at the national levels (UNDP as the coordinator of the Disaster Management Training Programme and Disaster Reduction and Recovery Programme); capacity building of National Societies of Red Cross and Red Crescent (IFRC); micro credit and reconstruction programmes (World Bank Disaster Management Facility jointly with UNDP).

iii. Current Approaches and Lessons Learned :

16. Over the past decades, the emphasis in capacity building efforts has evolved from an institution specific and skill based training approach into more **systemic approach** in which the interactions among various factors and the establishment of a broader enabling environment are emphasized.

17. In order to reduce vulnerability to natural and other types of hazards, the public sector and concerned stakeholders should be **institutionally organized, adequately staffed and trained**. In the absence of adequate institutional capacity other efforts aimed at reducing vulnerability cannot be effectively realized.

18. **Communities at risk** are the first to respond when a disaster strikes. Therefore they should be adequately trained and prepared to cope with disasters.

19. Capacity building efforts should be **process** rather than product oriented. The process itself facilitates internal change, which is the overall aim of capacity development.

20. In view of the wide variation among countries (as well as within countries) the first step in any capacity development activity should be a **comprehensive assessment** of capacity gaps.

III. Areas of focus for the ISDR Secretariat:

The ISDR Secretariat will continue to focus its activities on the following areas:

- (a) assist the ISDR National Platforms in developing countries, **in the field of information and experience sharing**, through the following activities: assistance in the preparation of webpages (for those who do not have the means to do so), dissemination of information of "success stories" and case studies and providing a forum for discussion on specific topics.
- (b) identifying innovative methods as well as new partners and networks in order to ensure that information is made available in support of capacity building efforts. Special attention will be given to those groups that do not have access to the Internet.
- (c) supporting the dissemination of ongoing initiatives (of the Task Force Members and others), which contribute to specific capacity building efforts, in various aspects of disaster prevention, through the ISDR website.

IV. Proposals for Consideration by the Task Force

21. Capacity building is a prerequisite for any successful disaster reduction effort. The concept of capacity building is therefore "embodied" in other priority areas of common concern of IATF such as Early Warning, Science and Technology as well as Public Awareness. The following proposals/approaches are intended to facilitate discussion and could be further developed and refined based on the proposals made by the Task Force:

- (a) Formulating a framework for consultative national capacity needs assessment.
- (b) Given the cross-cutting character of the concept, it is important to identify the **priority target groups/organisations** and **fields** that most urgently need “to strengthen capacities”, for example local authorities and vulnerable groups and communities, ISDR National Platforms in developing countries, national governments, sub-regional and regional organisations.
- (c) There is also a need to establish new networks and consolidate existing networks at both national, sub-regional and regional levels in various sectors.
- (d) The Task Force may wish to focus their discussions each year on one or two specific target groups or themes. This could also be linked to the theme of the annual ISDR public awareness campaigns
- (e) The Task Force may wish to define/agree on **indicators** in order to measure “capacity” in different domains as well as **benchmarks** to evaluate progress made in capacity building efforts in this field. This work should proceed in concert with the existing working groups, in particular WG 3 on Risk, Vulnerability and Disaster Impact Assessment.
- (f) The Task Force members are encouraged to share their own experiences (lessons learned) from successful capacity building efforts in their respective areas of competence. These could be compiled, analyzed and disseminated by the ISDR Secretariat to the various constituencies active in the field of disaster reduction.
- (g) The existing working groups may consider how their work could contribute to establishing the component elements of a framework for strengthening capacity development.
- (h) A member of the Task Force (or several members working together), in collaboration with the ISDR Secretariat, may wish to take the lead in drafting a policy paper on capacity building in the field of disaster reduction, in order to develop a common approach to the issue.