



## *Una Reunión Internacional sobre el Uso de Internet en los Desastres y las Epidemias*

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## **Conclusions and Recommendations**

Communicable diseases, as well as natural and manmade disasters, do not respect borders. As epidemics of influenza, cholera or malaria, global warming and, more recently, the "El Niño" phenomenon demonstrate, prevention and response are not only a local concern.

The participants of more than 40 countries present at the international meeting of **Health Crisis and the Internet: Harnessing the Power of the Internet for Disasters and Epidemics**, stressed that health crisis management cannot be accomplished without access to and management of timely and quality information. Without direct communication between and among decision makers and operational implementers, and without a free flow of reliable information among all involved, effective contingency planning and emergency response will not be possible.

This Meeting endorses the goals of the International Decade for Natural Disaster Reduction and the conclusions of the World Conference on Natural Disaster Reduction held in Yokohama, Japan in 1994.

The participants recognize that establishing a global culture of prevention implies adopting a global culture of information by which actors at the local, national, regional, subregional, and international levels are encouraged and enabled to exchange information, ideas and experiences, communicate freely across institutional and geographical borders, and consult with individual experts or collective databases to improve the performance of their duties and functions in the context of disaster reduction.

Similarly, the WHO/PAHO target of **Health For All by the year 2000**, particularly the eradication of selected diseases and the prevention of emerging diseases, demand



that responsible health services in each country cooperate with their global partners in detecting and reporting vital information about these diseases by the quickest and most cost-effective means.

The participants recall that strengthening or expanding subregional and regional links among countries is a political priority in Europe, North America, the Caribbean and both Central and South America. For the people of the Americas, integration not only means free circulation of goods and money but, above all, equal access to knowledge, health and welfare.

Noting the rapid growth of the Internet as a low-cost tool for global and local communications and circulation of data, the conferees observed that many successful Internet disaster applications have been designed to assist the decision making process of the international community and humanitarian organizations, nevertheless, less attention has been given to the needs of Latin American and Caribbean institutions, agencies and communities. Therefore, the participants noted with appreciation the efforts of the Ministries of Health and other agencies or sectors to improve their Internet connectivity. Also noted were projects such as: the Regional Disaster Information Center, which provide disaster managers with technical information, the active electronic discussion groups established in Central America and South America to promote open dialogue; the "Intranet" project of the health sector in the Andean Region; and the global IDNDR "virtual conferences" with strong participation from the Region.

## **CONSIDERATIONS**

The participants:

- observed with concern that many countries either do not have or have not yet mobilized the necessary resources to promote the participation of their communities and exploit the enormous potential of the Internet for education, public health and disaster reduction;
- called attention to the widening gap between those with unlimited access to information and knowledge and those whose access is restricted economic, linguistic, cultural or administrative constraints,

- expressed the urgent need for action to ensure that public health, emergency planning, and disaster reduction and response in Latin America and the Caribbean benefit fully from the availability of low-cost global communications and information provided by Internet;
- recognized the contribution of the telecommunications and Internet providers in disaster response and relief,
- concluded that the benefits of an informed health manpower with unlimited access to Internet far offset the potential cost of abuses by a minority of users, and that an open policy of reliable electronic dissemination and sharing of health and disaster information is in the best interest of the health and welfare of the population;
- noted that by such collaborations as are proposed below, and by using appropriate technologies, the cost of access to and use of Internet need not be expensive;
- conscious that adoption of this *culture of information* requires a change in attitude of everyone involved as well as a political commitment at the highest level, the participants offer the following recommendations; and
- that full access to electronic information exchange requires an appropriate regulatory framework, particularly for the use of radiocommunications links.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

### **To the highest authorities at national and international levels:**

- to consider the unrestricted communication and free exchange of electronic information among individuals and institutions as a cornerstone for the political and economic integration of the countries, with particular regard to disaster reduction as an integral element of economic and human sustainable development;
- to place a high priority on reducing the widening informational and educational gap between countries, by increasing Internet access and training to greater numbers of users. This gap results in part from the lack of low cost and easy access to the

“information superhighway” in many countries of Latin America and the Caribbean; and

- to include electronic access to information for health and disaster managers on the agenda of discussions at forthcoming regional and inter-regional summits.

#### **To the health sector:**

- to intensify efforts to provide direct Internet access to health disaster coordinators and professionals in charge of detection, early warning, monitoring and control of communicable diseases and disasters;
- to make available on the Internet timely and detailed data and information on the health situation in the countries, and in particular on the incidence of reportable diseases; the measures taken to control them; the occurrence and impact of disasters; the organization of health services and their policies; and other information of potential interest to local and national population and the international community;
- to identify and post on the Internet -- in languages of the region -- studies, other documents and publications presently available only on a limited basis, primarily in print format; and

#### **To national disaster and emergency institutions:**

- to increase efforts to establish a dynamic Internet network linking all actors in the public sector, NGOs, and private sector to promote a direct dialogue and a free exchange of information on matters related to disaster prevention, mitigation, preparedness and response, in the spirit of the International Decade for Natural Disaster Reduction; and
- to share globally through the Internet publications, studies, emergency plans and post-disaster situation reports, with a view to increasing public awareness and building institutional capacity.

### **To telecommunications authorities and Internet Service Providers:**

- to provide for, on a priority basis at preferential rates, or at no cost, communications and connectivity needs of the health sector and the crisis management community in developing countries for the purpose of disaster preparedness and mitigation, including early warning, the detection and control of disease outbreaks, the reduction of vulnerability to disasters, and the attention to populations who are victims of violence; and
- to collaborate, on a voluntary basis, with national disaster and emergency institutions, NGOs, the private sector and other groups providing training and technical support to disaster and health service managers and community groups engaged in emergency management;
- to facilitate and to encourage the use of decentralized radio networks such as but not limited to mobile satellite and radio amateurs for emergency telecommunications,
- to participate in the Intergovernmental Conference on Emergency Telecommunications (ICET) scheduled from 16 to 18 June 1998 in Tampere (Finland) which expected to adopt the "Convention on Disasters Communications".

### **To the financing institutions and the donors:**

- to consider the social and economic benefits of investing in the development of human resources to manage health crises through access to Internet;
- to include in their telecommunications or Internet infrastructure projects sufficient funding -- on a non-reimbursable basis -- for training and technical support to users of priority services such as control of emerging diseases and management of disasters;
- to continue supporting existing Internet projects which have demonstrated a positive impact in the region,

### **To WHO and PAHO:**

- to seek resources and provide technical cooperation to link through Internet all the departments of epidemiology of and disasters within the ministries of health with other national actors involved in disaster reduction and management, the WHO Collaborating Centers and the WHO offices in the countries;
- to encourage countries to adapt existing information and data to electronic dissemination and adopt an open, liberal policy with regard to access and dissemination of disease surveillance and health information from all reliable sources; and
- to develop search tools, at the global level, to facilitate navigation of the Internet and to help identify links to sources of quality health information, especially for epidemiological and disaster management purposes.

### **To the Council of Europe and the European Union:**

- to contribute to the development of an inter-regional network to increase direct collaboration, *via* the Internet, between and among decision makers, scientific institutions, epidemiologists and disaster managers in Europe, Latin America, and the Caribbean. This initiative would be based on the program initiated between PAHO and the European Union which resulted in an agreement with the European Federation of Scientific Networks (FER) in cooperation with the EUR-OPA Major Hazards Agreement of the Council of Europe; and
- to collaborate on the development of an inter-regional disaster information center, between Latin America, the Caribbean, and Europe, based on the model developed by the agencies that have cosponsored the CRID<sup>1\*</sup> in San Jose, Costa Rica and the European Center on Information of Madrid, Spain.

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<sup>1</sup> IDNDR, PAHO/WHO, IFRC, CEPREDENAC, MSF, and CNE of Costa Rica

**To all parties:**

- to cooperate in developing standard formats for collecting, managing and exchanging disaster and health status information, thereby integrating and making usable to all, existing regional databases and information sources.