

# Training for Disaster Reduction in Latin America and the Caribbean

*The activities promoted and carried out by PAHO/WHO for training in disaster reduction*

Natural disasters are not about climate or tectonic plates, technology or economy, but about human beings, their welfare and safety. Only through the individual's better understanding of his or her own vulnerability, and ways of reducing it, will society as a whole be safer from the consequences of natural disasters.

It should therefore be of no surprise that the Pan American Health Organization, jointly with the Regional Office of the IDNDR Secretariat, and other regional organizations, attach the highest priority to the development of human resources rather than on technology or the stockpiling of supplies. Training and education are the keys to disaster reduction and consequently to health.\*

Two complementary training approaches are adopted in the region:

- 1) **The short-cut:** *ad hoc* courses and workshops are easy to organize but short-lived. Internationally-sponsored training activities depend on the unpredictable availability of funds. Once the funds stop, so do the activities.
- 2) **The long-term approach:** includes disaster reduction in official pre- and post-graduate institutions in the field of health and civil and sanitary engineering. A decade is not too long to solidly implant the teaching of disaster reduction as an integral part of the education of new professionals. It involves time-consuming negotiation in each university, but it yields potentially long-term benefits which will outlast this decade's initiative. It is far more difficult to suppress than add courses to the academic curricula.

Here are some changes that have taken place in this region since the beginning of the IDNDR, and especially since the Yokohama Conference in 1994:

## COURSES AND WORKSHOPS:

Approximately 250 courses/workshops have been organized annually by PAHO/WHO in this region with the following objectives:

- The traditional claim of **transfer of knowledge** from "those who know to those in the dark" is somewhat pretentious for courses

that have an average duration of five days. Obviously, some formal learning does take place but that is not the main justification for organizing 250 events a year.

- **Change of attitude** is the real objective sought in preparation of training materials\*\* and selection of audiences (no more than 35 - 45 participants at the inter-disciplinary, executive / decision-making level).
- **Breaking artificial barriers** between disciplines, sectors, institutions and countries is another key objective. Latin America and the Caribbean are probably not lacking natural resources, competent professionals, prestigious research or academic institutions. However, all share strict compartmentalization that impedes the flow of information, dialogue and consultation between offices and institutions pursuing similar goals. As a rule, PAHO will insist on broad participation: public sectors, NGOs, various disciplines.

In brief, it is more important for us that the "trainee" deeply feels that he / she needs to do something about disasters, and have an idea of what needs to be done, rather than master the comparative definitions of magnitude / intensity, alert / alarm, hazard / risk / vulnerability - terms which are often misused even by experienced professionals.

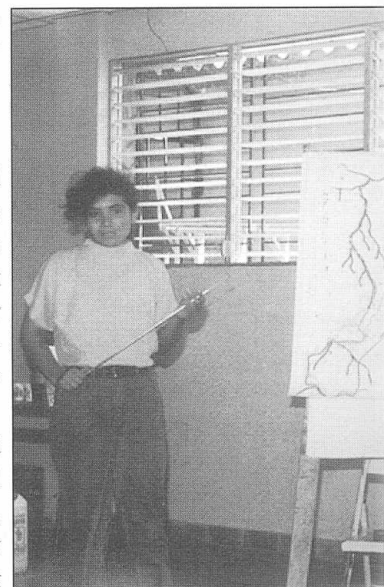
Developing converts to disaster prevention is required if the disaster reduction culture, promoted in Yokohama, is to become a reality.

## The audience:

PAHO/WHO is an agency specialized in health (not medicine). However, we do not teach or organize courses on how to provide care to the individual patient, but how to prevent / mitigate the disaster impact and prepare and manage the response at national, institutional or community level.

As a result, courses will be also directed to engineers, architects, planners, civil defense leaders, diplomats, armed forces, legislators, mass media and others who play a significant role in preventing or responding

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**TRAINING ACTIVITIES  
ON HEALTH  
MANAGEMENT  
SPONSORED /  
CONDUCTED  
BY PAHO / WHO**

1. Emergency Health Management
2. Hospital Preparedness and Mitigation
3. Environmental Health Management After Disasters
4. Supplies Management (SUMA)
5. Role of Ministries of Foreign Affairs in Disasters
6. Mass Media and Public Information in Case of Disaster
7. Emergency Health Management for Universities
8. Community Preparedness

*The detailed list can be obtained from the author.*

\* Health is a complete state of physical and mental well-being and not only the absence of disease and infirmity. (Constitution of the World Health Organization)

\*\* List available on request

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to major disasters. Emphasis is on management, co-ordination and institutional strengthening, not on clinical skills.

**The topics:**

In the annex we offer a list of courses most often organized. Over the past five years, under the influence of the IDNDR, increasing focus has been placed on mitigation and assessment of vulnerability of health facilities, taking PAHO / WHO further away from the traditionally narrow medical / clinical field.

**The future of short courses / workshops:**

The demand on PAHO / WHO's local representatives for assistance in training is increasing. As PAHO's country offices are now assuming a greater role and more ownership in the promotion of IDNDR objectives, more courses will be done locally at a lower cost.

The *regional* resources will be diverted to the development of new areas. Today regional efforts are on mitigation of damages to hospitals. Tomorrow, we hope that we will be able to use our resources on, for example, mitigation of damages to water supply systems, a new field, a new technology, and a new audience. In international training, as in technology, failure to innovate, renovate or create is, in itself, a failure.

**Formal pre- and post-graduate teaching**

While the Ministries of Health, PAHO and other international agencies might increase on-the-job opportunities for short-term training / exposure to disaster reduction, the number of these beneficiaries per year will never match the audience in academic institutions and the number of professionals graduated annually.

Every graduating health professional, engineer, architect or planner should be academically exposed and professionally sensitized to disaster, prevention, mitigation, and preparedness, at a fraction of a cost of present courses and workshops. This is a long-term dream of our organization - a dream that is closer to reality every day.

PAHO / WHO, with the help of the WHO Collaborating Center at the University of Antioquia School of Public Health (Colombia) has, throughout the first part of the decade, intensified its efforts to co-opt academic institutions in the health field through meetings with deans and professors, courses/workshops for faculty, donation of materials, and support of consultants in the initial phase.

As a result, schools and universities are responding enthusiastically by including this topic within their core or optional material. We

have reached a point where a regional survey of the existing academic initiatives and practices is overdue. A registry of formal pre- or post-graduate courses offered by private or public educational establishments will be prepared in 1996 to record the explosion of academic interest stimulated by the IDNDR in Latin America and the Caribbean.

The response of the formal educational sector is the guarantee that the spirit created by Yokohama is not vanishing in this region. The new generation of professionals will ensure that the next millenium will indeed be safer.

**Training Courses/Conferences by WHO/PAHO**

Conference title:	Intern. Conf. on Disaster Mitigation in Health Facilities
Date(s) and place:	26-28 February 1996, Mexico City
Title of the course:	Disaster Management for University Faculty
Date(s) and place:	15-28 February, 1996 University of Buenos Aires, Argentina
Title of the course:	Emergency and Disaster Medicine Course
Date(s) and place:	28 February- 16 May & 6 - 22 June 1996. University of West Indies, Barbados.
Title of the course:	International Seminar on Medical Response during Disasters
Date(s) and place:	24-26 April 1996; Viña del Mar, Chile
Title of the course:	Workshop for Developing Airport Emergency Plans
Date(s) and place:	1-15 March 1996, Lima Peru
Title of the course:	Training in the application of SUMA (Supply Management following Disasters)
Date(s) and place:	Given region-wide throughout the year
Theme of the course:	Software and other issues related to relief supply management
Name of Org/Inst:	Pan American Health Organization (PAHO) in collaboration with the Faculty of Public Health at the University of Antioquia, Medellin, Colombia.
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