

PRESENT AND FUTURE OF THE PAN AMERICAN HEALTH ORGANIZATION
DISASTER MANAGEMENT ACTIVITIES

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1. INTRODUCTION

Natural Disasters

In the last twenty years, natural disasters have claimed the lives of some 3 million people in the world, injured another 800 million, and have caused immediate damages in excess of 23 billion dollars. Unfortunately, developing countries appear to be the most affected.

Research carried out by the Higher University Council of Central America reveals that between 1960-1991, more than 70 natural disasters — including earthquakes, hurricanes, floods, droughts, volcanic eruptions and landslides — were reported in this subregion. When we place this high incidence of natural disasters in the context of the Region's precarious financial climate, the substantial and direct economic impact becomes even more alarming.

The 1980s represented a "lost decade" for Latin America, as a significant number of countries saw their earnings decrease to the levels of one, two, and even three decades ago. The amount of money lost to disasters often exceeds the total annual gross income of an affected country.

The economic impact of disasters can affect the public health of a country in three main areas:

- it can have a direct effect on the health infrastructure and equipment, including water supply and sewerage systems;
- its effects can be indirect, disrupting the provision of health services;