

Preface

Dr. Klaus Kinkel



Since the beginning of the International Decade for the Reduction of Natural Disasters (IDNDR, 1990-1999), the need for disaster mitigation has become increasingly clear. Vulnerability to disasters is increasing throughout the world. Reducing this vulnerability is a pressing task for the global community, requiring heightened political, technical and scientific effort in order better to protect the citizens, their homes and the foundations of their economic and social existence against disasters. Furthermore, it is also our duty to surmount the problems of poverty and to promote an environmentally-sound way of life.

Therefore I accord enormous importance to the International Decade for the Reduction of Natural Disasters. The scope of its activities are among the primary requirements for sustainable development, as laid down in Agenda 21 at the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development in Rio de Janeiro in 1992. In 1993, speaking before the United Nations General Assembly, I called for the strengthening of early-warning capacities world wide. This has become one of the key fields of activity of the Decade, one which has enjoyed considerable support from Germany.

Credit must also be given to the German relief organisations, whose readiness and ability to provide swift and efficient humanitarian assistance constitute a valuable contribution to coping with, and keeping in check, the damage caused by natural disasters. But in the field of disaster mitigation in the narrower sense, too, Germany has considerable knowledge and experience. Bundling the opportunities for

assistance available to us and supporting any necessary action undertaken by the global community in a manner commensurate with our skills and capacities is a key aspect of German foreign policy. The German Ministry of Foreign Affairs has therefore been an enthusiastic supporter of German involvement in the International Decade for the Reduction of Natural Disasters from the outset.

In the last few years the work of the German IDNDR Committee has provided significant impetus for disaster mitigation both at home and abroad. The international projects sponsored by the Committee and its members serve as shining examples. They demonstrate how effective mitigation can be achieved by means of relatively small-scale projects.

In the future, too, the German government intends to step up its commitment in the field of disaster mitigation – particularly given the ever increasing need for humanitarian assistance – in order to prevent disasters and to minimise the consequences for persons and property as far as possible. The International Decade for the Reduction of Natural Disasters is set to end in 1999. The urgent need for action in the field of disaster mitigation will continue, however. Therefore it is the intention of the German government to ensure that, after 1999 too, disaster mitigation will retain its permanent place in German and international policy, in development co-operation and in research. May I take this opportunity to wish the German IDNDR Committee for Natural Disaster Reduction every success in its important work.

Dr. Klaus Kinkel
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Hans Koschnick

The damage caused by natural disasters is on the increase throughout the world. It is not only developing countries, whose lack of financial and technical resources means that they often suffer particularly as a result of the consequences of extreme natural disasters, that are affected. The earthquake in Kobe, Japan (1995), was a painful reminder that modern industrialised countries too are vulnerable to the ravages of natural disasters.

We have no means of preventing a volcano from erupting or an earthquake from occurring. But we can do much to mitigate the effects on life, health and property such natural disasters have. This objective of preventing natural phenomena from developing into natural disasters is at the heart of the International Decade for the Reduction of Natural Disasters and, hence, forms the core of the work of the German IDNDR Committee.

There are, however, also types of natural disaster that can be prevented by man because they have been caused by man. In the case of technical disasters and political disasters such as civil wars this is obvious. However, man often has a hand in so-called natural disasters too. Landslips are frequently the result of widespread deforestation; floods may be caused by human interference with water resources.

Many of the consequences of the much-feared climate change cannot yet be foreseen. One thing is certain

though: the expected changes to our climate will make our planet even more vulnerable to disaster. The climatic phenomenon, El Niño, has shown in the entire Pacific Region what catastrophic effects climatic fluctuations can have.

Given the scale of the problem the German IDNDR Committee can only make a small contribution. This is why the Committee is focussing its international activities on six partner countries that are particularly affected by natural disasters: Nicaragua, the Maghreb states of Tunisia, Algeria and Morocco as well as Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan in Central Asia.

The work of the German IDNDR Committee is increasingly characterised by action at home too. German disaster relief is regarded as exemplary. However, it is still urgently necessary for us to keep pace with changing circumstances around us. The floods on the Oder and the Rhine have forced us in Germany too – although we are not as at risk from natural disasters as other countries – to think more intensively about the need for disaster mitigation measures.

In a multitude of ways, the Committee is dedicated to raising the awareness of decision-makers and the general public with regard to improving national and international disaster mitigation. This publication is intended to further contribute to this cause as well as to introduce our activities.

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Committee for Natural Disaster Reduction

