

Examples of the Committee's Work

Scientific Projects

At the beginning of the International Decade for the Reduction of Natural Disasters the Scientific Advisory Board of the German IDNDR Committee settled on ten projects to serve as examples of scientific initiatives within the spirit of the aims of the Decade. In the meantime the number of projects has risen to fifteen, of which most are still running though some have already been concluded.

One of these projects is the provision and deployment of a task force for natural disasters: a group of scientists from various disciplines, who are constantly prepared for deployment, enter a disaster area immediately after the disaster has occurred in order to gather important data that would end up being lost if left a little while longer. For example, the task force was

deployed in Venezuela in 1997 in the wake of a serious earthquake.

Domestic projects include the production of a natural risk and relief data atlas and a study on the consequences of climate change on the development of storms and the extreme water levels at the North Sea.

In addition, other projects deal with risk awareness in the event of a disaster, training for earthquake experts from developing countries and with ten specially selected 'Decade' volcanoes which can be regarded as a massive 'laboratory'. Here the consequences of volcanic activity on man and the environment are to be studied and emergency plans, warning systems and exercises for emergencies drawn up.

Disaster mitigation and Development

The German IDNDR Committee is making a concerted effort to have disaster mitigation play a greater role in development co-operation. In the meantime the German Ministry for Economic Co-operation and Development has begun to regard disaster mitigation as an important intra-disciplinary task which ought to be considered when developing new programmes for other sectors or when updating existing ones. Vulnerability to disaster is a major indicator for sustainable development. The Committee advocates the use of more informative indicators within the framework of Agenda 21, which will provide clearer information on the actual vulnerability of societies to natural disasters.

Political Initiatives

The Committee's political initiatives are aimed at a stronger commitment to disaster mitigation within German politics. Dialogues with the Federal Chancellery, the German Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the German Ministry of the Interior, the German Ministry of Economic Co-operation and Development, the German Ministry for Education, Science, Research and technology, the German Parliamentary Committee for Economic Co-operation and Development, the European Union and other institutions are intended to outline the need for a pro-active policy on disaster mitigation and to incorporate it more firmly into the work of these departments, institutions and authorities.

Photo: Steponaitis



Dialogue between the Insurance industry and the Climate protection sector

In addition to development and environmental organisations, the insurance industry is also active in the field of climate protection as a part of disaster mitigation. The GERMAN-WATCH North-South Initiative and the German IDNDR Committee have run seminars which resulted in the insurance industry calling for concrete action on effective climate protection. Reinsurers bemoan the fact that climate-related natural disasters are on the increase – with the enormous bills for compensation claims that such disasters bring with them. Primary insurers too are having to pay the ever increasing price for claims for storm, hail or flood damage.

Reinforcing Self-help capacities

The reinforcement of self-help capacities is one of the primary concerns of disaster mitigation. The population itself as well as local and national disaster relief organisations ought to be able to cope with the consequences of disasters and take appropriate mitigation action using their own resources. In many countries this does not happen or only happens to a limited extent. This is why the Committee is supporting the establishment of such structures, particularly in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan. Projects of this nature concentrate on training experts and advising existing institutions and organisations. In Germany too, the Committee works closely with self-help initiatives and supports their inclusion in a global disaster mitigation programme.

Lessons from the Oder floods in 1997

The Oder floods in Poland, the Czech Republic and the German federal state of Brandenburg demonstrated that more intensive efforts at mitigation could have reduced the damage considerably. This applies, for example, to uninsured waste disposal sites or to the lack of early warning systems. The German IDNDR Committee has therefore commissioned a review study intended to examine the causes, progress and consequences of the Oder floods. In order to minimise the risks in the Oder region even further disaster mitigation at local municipal level has to function well too. The German IDNDR Committee intends to mobilise partnerships between German, Czech and Polish towns and cities in order that they can optimise their disaster protection structures.

Satellite technology in Disaster management

By means of seminars and studies the German IDNDR Committee has initiated long-term contacts and joint initiatives between the German Aerospace Center (former German Space Agency) and various relief organisations on the use of satellite technology in the field of disaster management. The providers and users of this technology have exchanged information on both the technical possibilities of satellite technology and its application and the need for concrete action in disaster situations.

Disaster protection in Germany

In Germany the federal states are responsible for protecting the population from natural and technical disasters whereas the federal authorities are responsible for civil protection, that is protection from the consequences of warfare by means of non-military action. All 16 federal states have passed Acts on fire safety and/or disaster protection and/or have initiated legislative proceedings. Federal state legislation obliges the rural districts and cities that do not belong to an administrative district (kreisfreie Städte) to take appropriate measures to deal with disasters. The federal authorities have assigned the competencies for the implementation of civil protection to the federal states.

The implementation of disaster protection measures is closely linked to civil protection. The federal authorities complement the federal states' disaster protection potential in the fields of fire, public health, disaster management and so-called 'ABC' protection (German abbreviation for protection against nuclear, biological and chemical weapons) by providing additional equipment and supplementary training for volunteers. Disaster and civil protection is done by public fire brigades, the technical relief organisation as well as private relief organisations.

Thanks to their training and equipment at their disposal, but also thanks to their rapid reaction capacity, the fire brigades are always the first specialists to be deployed for defence and rescue. The technical relief organisation then steps in if additional equipment or specialised training is required, or in the case of long and complex missions. Many recent missions have demonstrated the excellent manner in which the fire brigades and technical relief organisation complement one another.

The relief organisations have over 100,000 volunteers working in disaster protection: of these the German Red Cross provides over fifty per cent. In the future, as a result of funding cuts by the German government, the work of relief organisations in the field of disaster protection will have to be reduced to providing services such as public health, evacuation and provision.

The governing units and institutions of the administrative districts and cities that do not belong to such districts have around 23,000 volunteers working in the field of disaster protection.

The federal government has reorganised civil protection by means of an Act that entered into force on April 4th 1997. It justifies the Act as follows:

Deployment potential

Fire brigade (1996)	Available manpower
Voluntary fire brigades	1,119,190
Professional fire brigades	27,888
Works fire brigades (recognised)	28,175
Company fire brigades (not recognised)	11,525
Youth fire brigades	193,341

Technical Relief Organisation (1997)

Budget	190 million DM
Vehicles	8,500
Volunteers	64,000
Local associations	665
Technical trains	810
Specialist groups	922
Regional offices	8

"The changes to the security situation in central Europe has permitted a reduction in existing defence precautions ... For civil protection this means that a series of tasks have become less significant and specialised structures can be wound up. For example the federal government will no longer promote the construction of shelters, does not intend to build and run any further emergency hospitals, will cease to stock medical supplies and will close down sanitary equipment stores ... The federal government no longer intends to provide special civil protection units: instead it will complement the federal states' disaster protection programmes by providing additional vehicles and training for volunteers in crucial areas such as fire precautions, public health, disaster management and 'ABC' training."