

Introductory statement by Dr. Claude de Ville de Goyet

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Mr. Chairman, Distinguished Delegates and Participants to the World Conference on Natural Disaster Reduction.

It is an honor and a privilege for the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO), regional office of the World Health Organization (WHO), to address you at the opening of these Main Committee sessions dedicated to the presentations of reports of regional interest. On behalf of our Director, Dr. Carlyle Guerra de Macedo, I am pleased to present his personal greetings and wish you success in your deliberations. The countries of Latin America and the Caribbean, and all other disaster-prone nations, look forward to the inspiration and recommendations from this World Conference.

Allow me first to say a few words about the Organization I represent. The Pan American Health Organization is one of the oldest intergovernmental organizations—and certainly the oldest health organization—in the world. Established in 1902, this specialized health agency is both part of the Interamerican system and, since 1948, has formed part of the UN family, when the Pan American Sanitary Bureau became the Regional Office of WHO. Serving a region that is highly vulnerable to natural disasters —earthquakes that strike from Alaska to Chile; hurricanes, our local name for cyclones in the Caribbean, Central America, Mexico and the United States; floods and drought as a result of the phenomenon known as El Niño— PAHO has a long-standing commitment to reduce the impact of all disasters. Indeed, the concern of our Member States is far from limited to natural hazards. As we all know, industrial development in developing countries has also increased the risk of technological catastrophes.

In this introductory presentation, I would like to focus your attention on certain facets of disaster reduction:

- ⇒ its social or human dimension that too often is neglected compared to economic factors;
- ⇒ the increasing imbalance between emergency humanitarian assistance and disaster prevention and preparedness at the international level;
- ⇒ the regional dimension of disaster reduction and its potential for progress versus the more traditional national or global approach.

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Social versus economic impact of disasters

The IDNDR Secretariat, the National Committees and the international community pay a substantial amount of attention to the economic cost of physical damages caused by disasters. Indeed, the economic impact of natural disasters can be devastating in terms of development, and the potential savings can serve as a powerful argument for convincing the decision makers present in this room to take action.

However, we should not forget that some developing countries would gladly put themselves in the position of reporting losses in billions of dollars rather than in tens or hundreds of thousands of fatalities. Poor countries usually pay a much heavier toll in human lives than their developed counterparts. For many, disasters are, above all, a personal and social human tragedy. As a health agency, PAHO/WHO is understandably more concerned with the human or social impact of disasters on the least privileged groups. Perhaps it is opportune to remember the definition of health adopted at the World Conference in Alma Ata in 1978 ... *"Health is a complete state of physical, mental and social wellbeing and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity"*.

Beyond a doubt, you will agree that a satisfactory state of health, as defined above, cannot exist without reasonable safety from disasters. Hopelessness in the face of nature's extreme manifestations is not compatible with health as defined at Alma Ata. Therefore, it is the position of both WHO and PAHO that **disaster reduction is obviously a health priority**. The old stereotype of the health sector as simply a provider of medical care to victims of disasters has been replaced, for quite some time at least in the Americas, by a vision of the public health sector as the social conscience and advocate for prevention, mitigation and preparedness measures that reduce the vulnerability of the least privileged groups. The point we would like to make is that disaster reduction is not merely an economic or scientific issue for planners and engineers, but first and foremost a social and human aspiration of individuals and communities. Changes will not take place unless we regard safety from disasters as part of the right to physical, mental and social wellbeing recognized in the Conference of Alma Ata ... that is, the right to health.

The divorce between humanitarian response and disaster prevention

Disasters are best known by the tragic images of human suffering and destruction that are often sensationalized by the mass media. Unfortunately, in many cases, the media may focus on aspects that do not reflect real needs. Therefore, it is not uncommon to observe, with concern, that the international community also gives prominent attention to relief and response, at the cost of a less attractive development approach. The fact that this Conference stresses links between disasters and development is a most welcome step. A generous international response after disasters is, and will remain, a priority, but it rarely fills, on a

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permanent basis, gaps in development in the disaster-affected country. These gaps are the prime causal factors of the shocking disaster death toll in developing countries.

A call for a regional approach

Above all, disaster reduction is a national responsibility and duty. No external body can effect change if the national government and the local community have not firmly decided to take their destiny into their own hands.

The countries of the Americas, with their long history of natural disasters, did not wait for the declaration an international decade on natural disaster reduction to initiate their long march toward safety from disasters. Major earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, hurricanes and floods that occurred over the last 20 years had already convinced most of our Member States that disaster prevention and preparedness must be taken seriously. Beyond a doubt, the declaration of the IDNDR provided the countries of the Region and our Organization with an *additional* powerful incentive and with a tool for accelerating the pace of progress. The preparation by PAHO/WHO and the IDNDR Regional Officer, of a regional report entitled *A World Safe from Natural Disasters: The Journey of Latin America and the Caribbean* is a tribute to the dedication, pride and courage of the individuals, communities and institutions who have made this collective effort possible across traditional borders.

Left to their own human and material resources, most developing countries are not in a position to make rapid progress toward reaching the targets and meeting the goals of the IDNDR. They require the strong and lasting commitment of the international community. Nor will the international community, which is too often inclined to support short-term relief activities, be able to master the necessary resources to meet their medium-term needs for cooperation in disaster mitigation or preparedness.

The obvious and perhaps only route available is close cooperation and collaboration among these countries. Because they share the same risk of natural hazards and the same vulnerability of their weak infrastructure to natural disasters, it is only logical that they also share efforts to seek solutions to reduce their vulnerability. The political and administrative responsibility for providing safety from natural hazards does respect national borders. Perhaps it is the only aspect of disaster management that does. The future of disaster reduction, especially in smaller countries, lies in proactive collaboration between neighboring countries, mutual assistance agreements and finally, in specialized subregional or regional programs or institutions. For this purpose, we take some liberty with the official political definition of 'region'. Let natural hazards dictate to us the definition of 'region' as a **group of countries sharing a common exposure and vulnerability to a specific hazard.**

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The examples of cooperative ventures among countries abound, as you will see from the various presentations in this session. I would like to request your indulgence in offering some illustrations from our Region:

The IDNDR Project on Hospital Mitigation in Latin America and the Caribbean: Almost everyone recognizes the critical importance of a safe design and operation of hospitals in case of disaster. The total collapse of a modern wing of the Hospital Juarez in Mexico following the 1985 earthquake, in which most of the patients and staff died, vividly brought home the point to all Ministries of Health that prevention measures were long overdue. The problem is common to all countries of the Region. More than half of the 13,000 hospitals and health facilities in Latin America and the Caribbean are exposed to seismic hazards. However, very few developing countries have the human and material resources to develop national guidelines and training and awareness material for professionals and administrators. Now, through an IDNDR demonstration project, significant advance have been made collectively. Norms and criteria have been standardized, and more importantly, the success of the most enthusiastic or most motivated countries has stimulated those that lack the political commitment to emulate their more advanced neighbors. Pilot projects do work

The Regional Disaster Documentation Center: Lack of access to scientific publications as well as to reports and documents from other countries is one of the most frequent complaints of disaster practitioners in developing countries. Services offered by national scientific institutions have been dramatically curtailed for economic reasons. Unpublished reports and local studies, often the most pertinent to the reality they face, are altogether unavailable on a global basis. The Regional Disaster Documentation Center, established in cooperation with the Government of Costa Rica, is a low-cost intercountry initiative that provides, free of charge, formal and informal documentation throughout the Region. No national or global initiative could serve as well the needs of a large community of disaster reduction users.

The SUMA Project: Following sudden-impact disasters, relief supplies—solicited or unsolicited, useful or not—pour into the affected country, often exceeding the management capacity of the relief authorities. Indeed, few countries can afford the luxury of maintaining or mobilizing a team of logistic experts, pharmacists and other health professionals to sort, classify, inventory and distribute incoming donations. There is no cost-effective solution to this problem at the national level. It is here that a joint preparedness effort between developing countries is much more effective than a global stand-by mechanism spearheaded by developed countries. *SUMA*, another IDNDR Demonstration Project responds to this need. *SUMA* (from *SUPplies MANagement*) has developed a common regional methodology and software programs, trained national teams to respond locally or in neighboring countries, and stockpiled equipment such as portable computers, communications equipment and other supplies subregionally. PAHO/WHO is proud to have contributed modestly to the development of this collective project.

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The Caribbean Disaster Emergency Response Agency: A collaborative preparedness and response mechanism is particularly critical for small island nations where a public transportation accident may overtax the limited medical facilities. It is with a deep satisfaction that we have taken note the creation in 1991 of CDERA, a permanent agency dedicated to the collective management of disasters. Particularly encouraging is that the Member Countries have made the financial commitment to share operating costs, making CDERA a genuine subregional initiative.

Once again, please forgive the regional nature of these examples. From the presentations during these two days, it will become clear that while considerable collaboration has and is taking place among developing countries exposed to the same risks, it is still too early to become complacent or to engage in self-congratulation. The ambitious goals for the second half of the Decade, which will be drafted by this Main Committee, will require a substantial effort at all levels: local communities, countries, regional groups, and the international community at large.

The main objective of this session is to promote intercountry collaboration in order to reach these goals. The recommendations from this Committee should:

- a) identify those aspects of the proposed plan of action for the second half of the Decade which will be best undertaken on a regional basis rather than nationally or globally, and
- b) be submitted them for possible inclusion in the proposed Yokohama Declaration.

Developing countries alone cannot be expected to shoulder the entire burden of disaster reduction, either individually or collectively. Developed countries also should shift emphasis and resources from the present trend toward bilateral emergency or humanitarian assistance toward support for subregional and regional collaboration among developing countries. This approach has shown to be more cost-effective and development-friendly.

As a concluding remark, I would like to share with you my amazement that even during the convulsive years of civil conflict in Central America in the 1980s, institutions and agencies were willing and able to temporarily put aside their ideological and political differences and work together to prepare for and respond to natural disasters. This leads me to believe that regional collaboration for natural disaster reduction will contribute substantially to a world safer from natural as well as manmade disasters. I thank you for your attention.