

# Understanding **Causes:**

the First Step to Successful Prevention



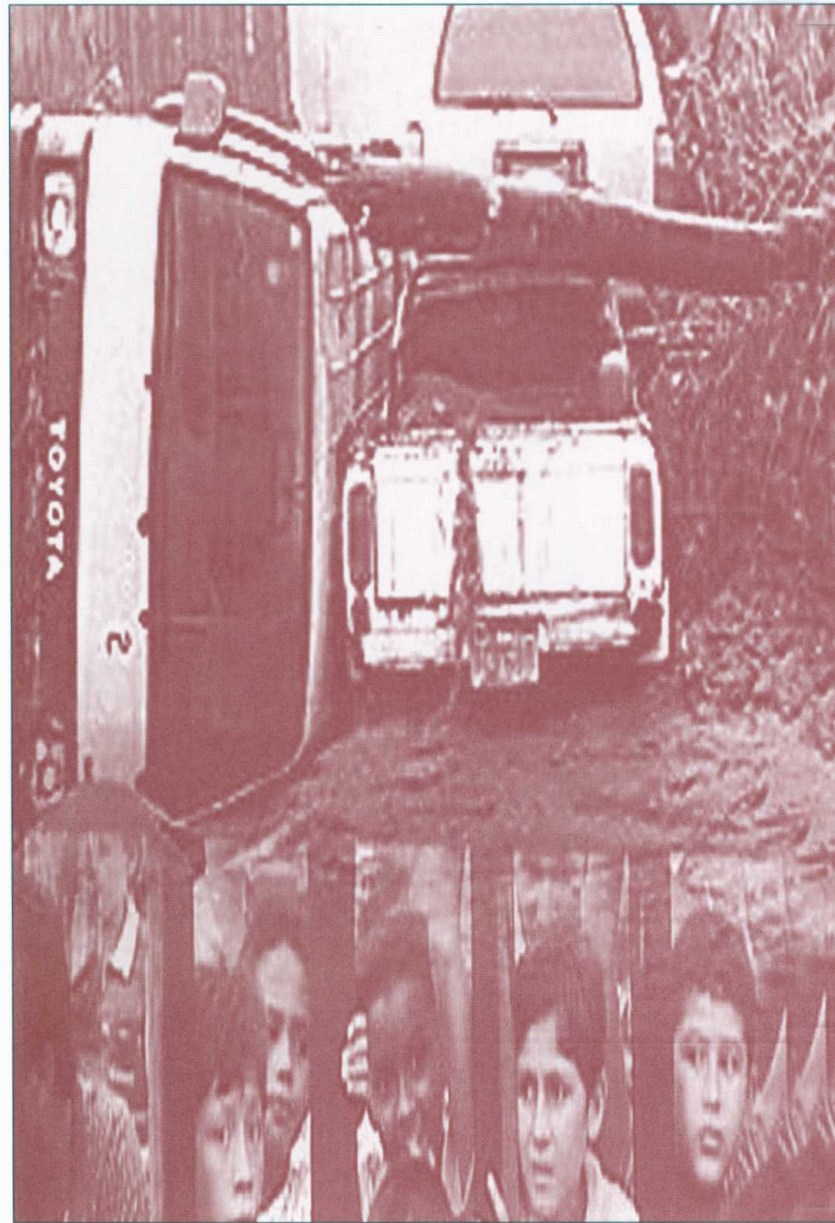


Devising preventive strategies that work requires that we first have a clear understanding of underlying causes. With respect to disasters the answers are relatively straightforward; war is a more complicated story.

Human communities will always face natural hazards—whether floods, droughts, storms or earthquakes. But today's disasters are sometimes man-made, and human action—or inaction—exacerbates virtually all of them. In fact, the term “natural” disaster has become an increasingly anachronistic misnomer. In reality, it is human behaviour that transforms natural hazards into what should be called *unnatural* disasters.

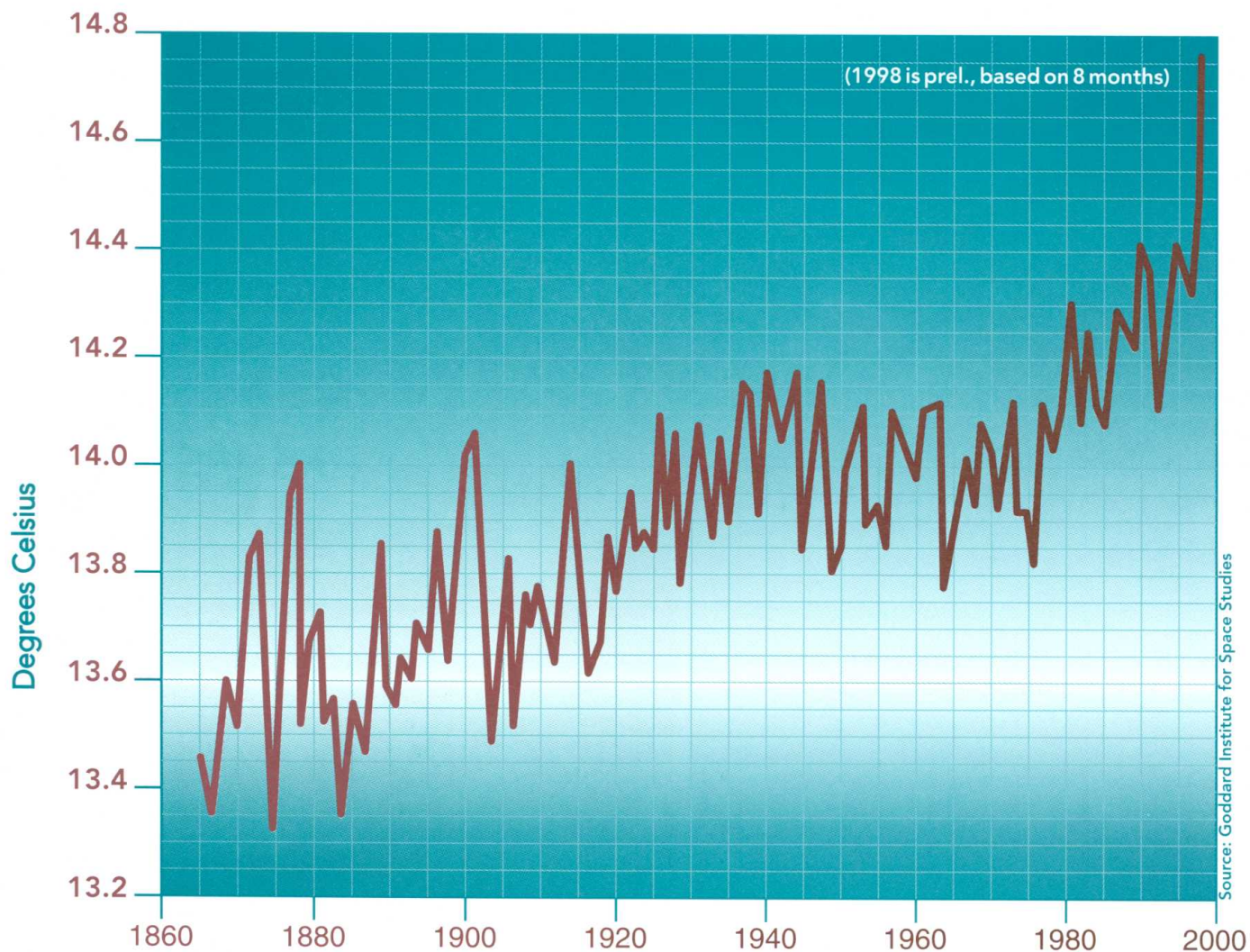
Poverty and population pressures increase the costs of natural hazards because more and more people have been forced to live in harm's way—on flood plains, earthquake-prone zones and unstable hillsides. It is no accident that more than 90 per cent of all disaster victims worldwide live in developing countries.

Unsustainable development practices also contribute to the rising impact of natural hazards. Massive logging operations reduce the soil's ability to absorb heavy rainfall, making erosion and flooding more likely. The destruction of wetlands reduces the ability of the land to absorb heavy run-off, which in turn increases the risk of flooding. In 1998, an estimated 25 million people were driven off their lands into overcrowded and often disaster-prone cities by these and related forms of environmental malpractice.





## Average Temperature at the Earth's Surface



While the earth has always experienced natural cycles of warming and cooling, the 14 hottest years since measurements first began in the 1860s have occurred in the past two decades, and 1998 was the hottest year on record. Although still contested in

some quarters, the evidence is steadily accumulating that the current wave of warming and the extreme climatic events associated with it are the product of increased carbon emissions, a large fraction of which is generated by human activity.