

PREFACE

Water is a necessity of life. All living things depend upon it, and from the time of the earliest human settlements it has determined the economic basis for most societies. However, the force of excessive or uncontrolled water, or its intrusion into areas reserved for other purposes, represents a hazard to people's way of life and their social well-being. Water provides for life, but it also becomes the most frequent and damaging of all types of natural disasters. Few countries are spared the effects of floods and between 1991 and 1995 alone, floods caused more than US\$ 200 billion in losses almost half of all economic damage caused by disasters during the same time-span. Each year floods are responsible for 26 per cent of deaths due to natural disasters and in 1996 alone about 60 million people were affected by this natural hazard.

The United Nations Department of Humanitarian Affairs is pleased to publish this book on flood hazards (*Floods-People at Risk, Strategies for Prevention*) as a contribution to realizing the objectives of the International Decade for Natural Disaster Reduction (IDNDR), and in particular to promote greater awareness of the need for disaster reduction.

In order to further this public awareness, Water: Too much ... Too little ... A leading cause of natural disasters has been selected as the annual theme by the International Decade for Natural Disaster Reduction (IDNDR) for its 1997 campaign - which is being promoted through the concerted efforts of scientific and technical institutions, national and local government authorities, commercial interests, international organizations, non-governmental organizations and other constituencies.

This volume is intended, first, to give a general indication of the extent and nature of floods by drawing on recent case examples. In recent years, the western, central and eastern parts of the United States of America, central Canada, western and central Europe, south-east Asia, China, and Australia, and other parts of the world have all experienced unprecedented floods. The dramatic consequence of

these floods has called for the growing attention for the need for prevention within these countries and internationally. Our societies are increasingly affected by the growing cost and physical damage induced by floods. *Floods-People at Risk, Strategies for Prevention* seeks to show by other examples how societies can and do prepare for the risk of floods by undertaking hazard assessments beforehand. A number of mitigation measures which involve both structural measures and other forms of policy application are being used successfully to reduce susceptibility to flood damage. By linking informed risk management practices to a greater appreciation of other environmental factors, such as soil and water conservation measures, this volume may help us to recognize that, while natural hazards cannot necessarily be prevented from occurring, their most devastating effects can be minimized.

Finally, this volume is addressed to the non-expert and aims to provide authoritative scientific and technical information in an attractive, illustrated, easy-to-read format. The intended audience is the lay person who is interested in learning more about how the impact of natural disasters may be reduced, but it is also hoped that the manual will be of use in providing an introduction to the subject for the policy maker or administrator who has taken on responsibility for disaster mitigation and prevention.

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