Disasters and Databases: Experiences of the CRED EM-DAT Project

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Introduction

The need for systematic data for the field of disaster response and management has been of increasing concern to relief agencies at both the international and the national levels. Until recently, agencies tended to approach the problem in an *ad hoc* manner, by collecting information at the time of the emergency. Often the resulting data was incomplete, outdated or unusable. The need to obtain more accurate, verifiable data after the disaster was rarely considered important enough to rank high on the list of funding and policy priorities.

This situation reflected a lack of professionalism that has cost international and national authorities years of relief expenditure without a corresponding reduction in future vulnerability. However, with an increase in the number of disasters which require external assistance, national governments and international aid agencies have recognized the need for a more systematic approach to disaster relief, and a fundamental change aimed at more rational, long-term, management-oriented policies is now taking place. This approach is spearheaded by major U.N. agencies, such as UNDRO, UNDP and WHO, as well as scientific institutions. Within this context, CRED began to explore the feasibility of constructing a system of databases to help strengthen the system of disaster management on a global basis. The three databases which were eventually designed are:

- **Disaster Events and their characteristics (EM-DAT);**
- **Disaster Institutional and Human Resources (EM-RES);**
- **Key facts related to Disasters by country (EM-FACT).**

The first and third of these were implemented with the active support and collaboration of UNDRO and WHO. This article presents the first of these databases - Disaster Events Database or EM-DAT.

EM-DAT - Design and scope

The database EM-DAT was conceived as an integral part of a complete information system, the design of which is presented in *Figure 1*. It is a working database housed at CRED in Brussels and at UNDRO-Geneva. It operates by means of a compiled, menu-driven software programme and provides

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