

It is a great pleasure to participate in this important World Conference on Natural Disaster Reduction. I am particularly pleased to take part in this afternoon's session devoted to vulnerable communities whose needs are at the heart of our work in UNICEF.

It will surprise no one to learn that children and women are among the most vulnerable when disasters strike. The International Decade for Natural Disaster Reduction and this World Conference give all of us an opportunity to re-examine the special vulnerability of children and women, and to agree upon disaster management policies and programmes designed to reduce that vulnerability.

The term "natural" disaster can be rather misleading. In fact, vulnerability stems largely from the interaction of poverty, population growth and environmental degradation. It is these three problems which must be tackled if we are to succeed in preparing for, and dealing with the effects of, natural disasters. The fact that long-term development addresses these same problems demonstrates the close connections between our emergency and development work.

Though this conference - and decade - is about prevention and preparedness for natural disasters, five points are worth stressing about the links with war and civil conflict: 1) war & civil conflict appears to be growing in human impact, perhaps with while natural disasters declining in human impact in the last 5-10 years. 2) war and civil conflict usually create natural disasters and interact with natural disasters - usually making the combined impact much worse than either alone, e.g. Somalia, Afghanistan, Mozambique. 3) The vulnerability and impact of war & conflict continues long after the conflict may be over - through destruction of crops, displacement of people, destruction of infrastructure, presence of land mines, which can render vast tracts of agricultural land too dangerous to use - and, at the same time, physically disable, many of those who by age and responsibility would otherwise be major contributors to their families and community. 4) Many of the actions to strengthen preparedness for and prevention of natural disasters will be threatened and destroyed by conflict - or even by preparations of conflict. And finally 5) measures to prevent conflict, national and international, will also help to reduce the risk of disaster and help disaster preparedness.

In short, though this conference should concentrate on natural disaster, we should recognize in our thinking and our actions that measures to reduce conflict and risk of outbreak of conflict must be a vital and major part of disaster prevention.

Children and Women -- The First to Suffer

Children are among the first to suffer from the effects of disasters -- inadequate food and health care, lack of shelter, disruption of their education, destruction of their livelihoods. Physically weaker than other members of society, already in poor health and malnourished, they will succumb rapidly to the hunger and disease wrought by disasters. Among displaced populations, children are the most vulnerable to epidemics such as measles, cholera and respiratory diseases that spread quickly in crowded camps and settlements.

Very young children are most at risk because they are dependent on others, usually on adults, and basically on older family members, for their daily care and survival. Anything which deprives them of this is a very serious threat to their well-being and survival - be it earthquake, flood, crop-failure or other disasters which incapacitate adults and force the family to leave their normal surroundings. Young children are also more vulnerable to diarrhoea or disease, with less reserves against malnutrition and lack of warmth and shelter.

Certain groups of children have special needs. Those trapped in conflict or in poor countries subject to repeated natural disasters, will include large numbers of orphans, street children and children who have suffered physical and emotional trauma. Many children lose their parents; some even witness their violent deaths. Other children are maimed for life by the terrifying destruction of land mines, which have become a very popular weapon of war. Like wars, many natural disasters involve shocking and horrifying experiences including the death of or separation from loved ones, physical injury and destruction of homes and livelihoods. Children who are exposed to such traumatic events will need support and counselling to help them cope.

Women are similarly hard hit by the effects of disasters. A major part of the burden of coping falls upon women, who have to struggle to find food, shelter, water for their families, often in the most desperate circumstances. In this effort many women are alone, their husbands having migrated to towns in search of work or to fight in the wars that ravage so many countries. In many rural societies, women are the farmers and thus the main providers for their families. In urban areas, families frequently depend on income earned by women in the informal sector. In both these settings, family income is inherently unstable and extremely vulnerable to the effects of disasters.

Family and community life -- so important for providing support to women and children -- may be severely disrupted by disasters: homes may be lost or seriously damaged, food crops and water sources destroyed. Family members may be separated. Indeed, whole communities may break up when families are forced to migrate to new areas or to settle in temporary camps in order to survive.

Very often refugees or internally displaced people, having migrated in an attempt to ensure their survival and that of their children, find themselves living in squalid, overcrowded camp conditions, exposed to disease and abuse with few economic means. They are heavily dependent on outside assistance for all their food, clothing and medical care. When natural disasters occur, they have very little to fall back on. Their traditional community strengths and coping strategies are lost to them.

Key Areas for Action

Poverty, population growth and environmental degradation are the principal causes of vulnerability. One fifth of the world's population lives in absolute poverty. Of these, the majority live in environments which are being rapidly degraded. Poverty is the fundamental reason why certain societies are more vulnerable to disasters than others. Many families, already poorly nourished, are particularly prone to disease and lack the capacity to cope

with disasters. Epidemics can spread rapidly through communities living in squalid, overcrowded conditions of urban slums, shanty towns or relief camps. Livelihoods are tenuous. The coping strategies of communities have their limits.

Population Growth is also a major factor in increasing vulnerability to disaster. It perpetuates poverty by putting ever-increasing pressure on land, and on the capacity of families, communities and governments to provide basic services. In the next 40 years, the population of sub-Saharan Africa is projected to rise from approximately 600 million to more than 1.6 billion. Over the same period the population of Asia will increase from over 3 billion to more than 5 billion. There are 1.8 billion children under 16 in the world today, of whom about one third are under five. In poor societies, families still rely on large numbers of children as an economic necessity. The high mortality rate for infants and children in poor communities also fuels population growth as families have more and more children to insure against those who will surely die. All this adds to vulnerability.

Environmental Degradation is becoming an ever greater threat to the future of children. Environmental destruction in the form of deforestation, overgrazing, pollution and global warming, appear to be responsible for the increased incidence of droughts and floods in various parts of the world. Natural resources are being destroyed. Drought, bushfires, floods and cyclones devastate agricultural land and forests. Across large areas of the developing world, environmental degradation has destroyed the livelihoods of families dependent on subsistence agriculture, livestock herds or fisheries. Whole communities have been obliged to migrate and settle in marginal areas, putting more pressure on natural resources and increasingly vulnerable to disaster.

The mutually reinforcing effects of poverty, population growth and environmental degradation are clear. Poverty, in the form of high child death rates, lack of security in illness and old age, lack of water supply, fuel and labour-saving devices, all encourage parents to have many children while the low status of women, lack of education, lack of confidence in the future and the feeling of powerlessness undermine family planning efforts. Poverty means that short-term exploitation of the environment (meeting today's needs) takes priority over long-term preservation; poverty also means a lack of knowledge of environmental issues and long-term consequences of today's actions. Population pressures exacerbate unemployment, low wages, landlessness and the overstretching of social services and lead to greater use of marginal lands, soil erosion, increased use of pesticides, fertilizer, irrigation, and migration to overcrowded slums. Environmental decay evidenced by soil erosion, salination, and flooding leads to declining yields, falling employment and incomes. Poor housing and overcrowding fuel disease and lower productivity.

Leadership of women. Leadership by women is too often one of the great unrecognized strengths - a potential to be drawn on in disasters just as women and women's leadership is one of the great mainstays underpinning many areas of human development in rural and urban areas alike. Women and women's organizations need therefore to be brought into the identification of hazards, into the assessment of vulnerability into the planning of disaster prevention. It might be revealing to ask in how many countries is this being done.

Accelerating action towards goals for human development

Giving women greater access to health care, nutrition, education and productive economic assets (land, credit, technology) and, particularly, to disaster management training, would go a long way toward reducing vulnerability. All this will be advanced by accelerated action towards the goals for health, education, nutrition, family planning, water and sanitation agreed at the World Summit for Children in 1990 and incorporated in Agenda-21 at the Earth Summit in Rio in 1991. Ninety-two countries have now prepared and embarked upon national programmes of action covering the 7 major goals and many of the 20 supported goals.

Goals - quantified with time bound targets - can provide an important focus for national action and international support, providing the goals are realistically adapted to the national situation, given political support and regularly monitored. Particularly important for disaster prevention and preparedness is the goal agreed in December 1992 at the International Conference for Nutrition, sponsored by FAO and WHO, with the support of many other UN agencies, governments and NGOs. The World Declaration on Nutrition included the pledge to make all efforts to eliminate before the end of this decade:

- Famine and famine-related deaths;
- Starvation and nutritional deficiency diseases in communities affected by natural and man-made disasters

Genuine Community Involvement. While natural disasters have a negative impact on the economies of affected countries, their most devastating impact is felt by families and communities. The need for awareness, education, empowerment and organization is therefore in the community, as well as in government agencies. And yet, vulnerable communities are often excluded from the process of needs assessment and preparation of plans of action. They are passive providers of data and information, or physical labour.

Finally, we must recognize that disasters set in motion a process of profound Disempowerment. When people are forced to leave their homes, when they leave behind their assets -- however meager -- they lose more than physical property. They lose their perspective. They lose control over their lives. Above all they lose a part of their identity.

Country Examples

The country case studies, which we will be discussing in detail shortly, offer some important insights into disaster prevention and management.

From the Bangladesh study we are reminded that while poverty, ill-health, physical frailty, a lack of productive assets and certain cultural traditions (*purdah*) make women (and girls) particularly vulnerable to the effects of disasters, they are not helpless victims. Often abandoned by their husbands when disaster strikes, women are strong and extremely resourceful survivors. Aided by innovative credit schemes like those developed by the Grameen Bank, women make a substantial contribution to household income in Bangladesh.

And, their proven ability to work cooperatively with one another is particularly valuable in the context of disasters. As the case study makes clear, women's active participation in immunization campaigns and in the promotion of oral rehydration therapy have been vital to minimizing infant and child mortality in the wake of Bangladesh's frequent cyclones.

The study of Southern Africa's recent, and extremely encouraging experience with drought management offers other lessons. While the drought affected more than 20 million people, strong mutual support among families and communities backed up by extremely effective collaboration among governments in the region, allowed Southern Africa to avert famine. Families supported each other by sharing food stocks and remittances from relatives working in towns. Children were sent to stay with better-off families. And, families diversified their incomes by enrolling in food-for-work or cash-for-work programmes, working in the informal sector, and, in extreme cases, by selling off their livestock and other assets. Meanwhile, under the aegis of the Southern Africa Development Community (SADC), governments in the region undertook a series of measures to combat the drought, including: maintenance of ports, railways and roads; targeted food-for-work programmes; regional cooperation to assist those facing the greatest food deficits and a successful joint appeal to donors.

Ten Points Agenda for Action

Let me conclude with ten points which we in UNICEF believe are critical for improving our collective disaster prevention and disaster management strategies.

First, national governments and international agencies must work more closely together to strengthen capacity at all levels -- families, communities, local and national government -- to deal with the human consequences of disasters. Giving people greater access to good quality basic services is vital to vulnerability reduction. Stronger, healthier, better educated people are clearly much better able to cope with disasters and, more broadly, to pursue their goals of sustainable development and a better standard of living for their children.

Second, achieving the mid-decade and Year 2000 goals for children and women would go a long way toward reducing vulnerability. These goals, which cover health, nutrition, education, water and sanitation, and family planning were adopted by governments at the World Summit for Children in 1990 and subsequently endorsed at a series of regional summits. They were also incorporated into UNCED's Agenda 21. The fact that these goals are equally relevant in emergency and non-emergency contexts is yet more evidence of the close connection between relief and development activities.

Third, all of us working in this critical area of disaster management must develop a human-focused framework to understand the various causes of, and multisector responses to, vulnerability. When large amounts of resources are disbursed quickly, we need to ensure that our decisions are based on thorough needs assessments and a proper understanding the many factors at work in any given emergency.

Fourth, we need to develop new perspectives on how to support communities in their efforts to solve their own problems. In recent years, UNICEF's new approach to nutrition has given us new insights in this area. We have learned that empowerment above all, is the result of a process in which communities assess their own problems, analyze the causes of those problems and design appropriate actions for overcoming them. Clearly, this process is particularly well-suited to strengthening the capacity of vulnerable communities to deal with the effects of disasters.

Fifth, our experience in UNICEF has shown that, in addition to adequate food, health care, shelter and water and sanitation, communities struck by disasters need special care to deal particularly with the effects of trauma. This is an area of emergency response which deserves much greater attention than it has received to date. Dealing quickly and effectively with trauma would provide two very important benefits. It would help children to escape the permanent scars that debilitate so many young victims of trauma. And it would help families to revert as quickly as possible to some semblance of a normal life. In this connection, we should remember that re-establishing schools is one of the most effective ways of restoring to children a sense of hope which is so important to trauma recovery.

Sixth, we must develop effective approaches to post-disaster rehabilitation. Relief is about saving lives. Rehabilitation is about restoring livelihoods. Apart from their labour, victims of disasters are likely to lack any productive assets. They may not qualify for conventional credit programmes; they are likely to be living on land they do not own. Rehabilitation should focus on restoring to people the tools they need to restart their economic lives.

Seventh we need to find ways to reverse the disempowerment that disasters entail. At a minimum, we must make every effort not to uproot people from their homes and communities, which are such a vital part of their identity.

Eighth, each country should be encouraged to incorporate a strong component of community action within its national or sub-national programmes for disaster prevention and preparedness.

Ninth, the UN agencies, together with governments and NGOs, should focus a special effort for countries in Africa and least developed countries in other regions to assist in the preparation of and support for national programmes of disaster prevention and preparedness. Support for these programmes should be an area for collaboration among the UN agencies and incorporated in the country's Country Strategy Note for UN support.

Tenth, we need to strengthen the vision worldwide that though natural disasters are inevitable, the tragic human consequences need not be. We can and need to work towards the goal of ending by the end of this decade deaths from famine and ending starvation and nutritional deficiency diseases in communities affected by natural and man-made disasters. This should be the major part of creating the safer world for the 21st Century.

Thank you.