

# Development at risk

Without greater commitment to reducing the impact of disasters on the world's economies, societies and environment, sustainable development will not be attainable.

## The disaster problem

Within a few hundred miles of the World Social Sustainable Development Summit in Johannesburg, 13 million men, women and children are spending their nights without food.

They are the latest victims of the combined effect of so-called 'natural' disasters and policy failure.

The world is now facing such emergencies on an unprecedented scale. 200 million people were affected by natural disasters globally each year, on average, between 1992 and 2001. During the same period, these disasters claimed 62,000 lives per year. In the year 2000, 1 in 30 people worldwide were affected by natural hazards.

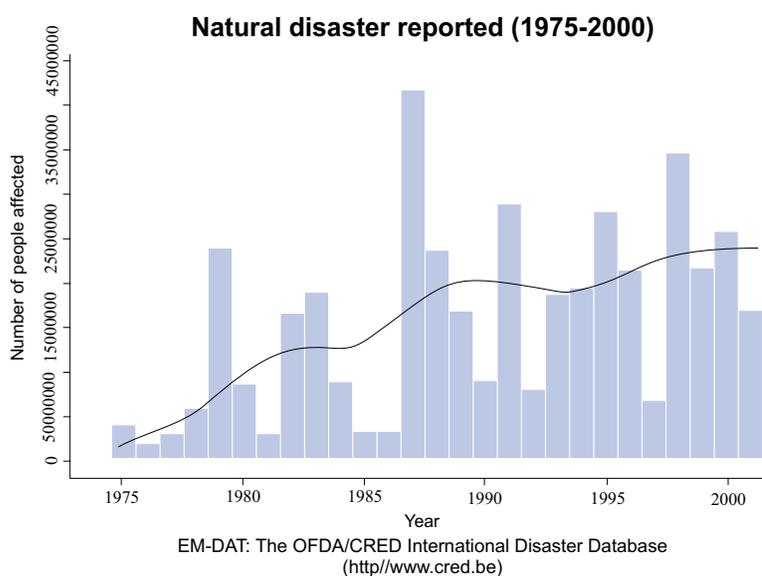
The economic cost associated with natural disasters has

increased 14 fold since the 1950s.<sup>1</sup> During the last decade, disasters caused damage of an estimated US\$69 billion per year on average.

Scientific prediction and evidence confirm that global climate change will increase the number of extreme events, creating more

frequent and intensified natural disasters and environmental emergencies.

By the year 2050 it is predicted that 100,000 lives will be lost each year to natural disasters and the global cost could top \$300 billion annually.<sup>2</sup>



The brief for The World Summit on Sustainable Development, Johannesburg, South Africa, 26 August - 4 September, 2002.



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## Disasters and sustainable development

Evidence clearly shows that the impact of natural disasters is a key factor in setting back the development process.

Disaster	Economic loss <sup>3</sup>
Bangladesh, floods 1998	9% of GDP
Honduras, Hurricane Mitch 1998	82% of GDP
Turkey, earthquakes 1999	10% of GDP

Poor nations are a soft target for disasters. One conclusion to be drawn is that some nations are poor because they face recurring disasters. The UNDP reports that 24 out of the 49 least developed countries face a high risk of disasters; at least 6 of them have been hit by between 2 to 8 major disasters per year in the last 15 years, with long term consequences for human development.<sup>4</sup>

Disasters are a crucial element in determining whether poor people escape poverty, remain poor or become even poorer.

Disasters destroy the livelihoods of poor people. 78% of rural households covered by a survey in Ethiopia in 1999 had been hit by harvest failure in the previous 20

years. A study of the impact of the 1998 Bangladesh floods revealed that '62% of all micro finance clients had lost their homes, nearly

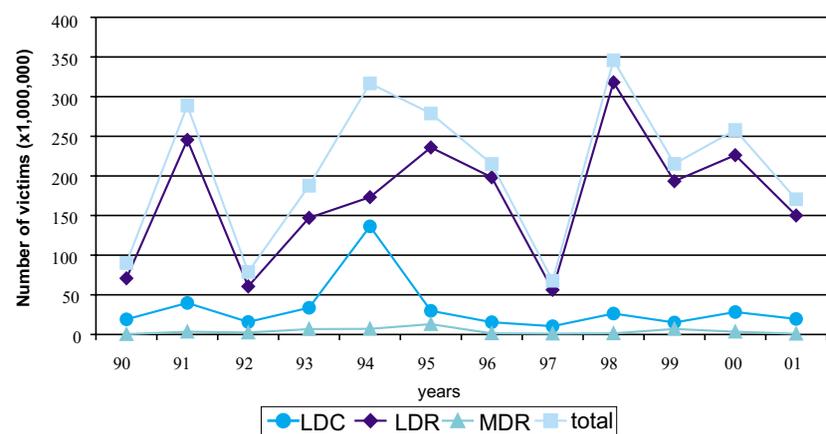
half had lost their everyday household possessions and over 75% had their ability to generate income at least suspended'.<sup>6</sup>

Experience also clearly shows that disasters erode peoples' rights and

aspirations to development as well as posing a serious threat to their security.

The United Nations argue that the 'capacity of the developing countries' economies to absorb such shocks has been eroded and the increasing occurrence of extreme events will increasingly contribute to a faltering or failing development'.

**Victims of natural disaster by level of development : 1990 - 2001**



LDC= Least Developed Countries; LDR= Less Developed Regions; MDR= More Developed Regions.

Disaster: CRED criteria; Level of Development: UN categories<sup>5</sup>

## Missed opportunities

Experience clearly shows that the disaster problem can be tackled and -reversed.

Where institutional capacity is high, development policies and practices are informed by disaster risk, and people are aware and able to manage, society is less vulnerable to disasters.

There is powerful evidence that mitigation and preparedness help

to reduce disasters' impact.

For example, when Hurricane Michelle hit Cuba in November 2001, effective disaster planning and preparedness ensured that 700,000 people were evacuated to safety.<sup>7</sup>

In Ghana, grain banks set up with ActionAid's support have made people less vulnerable to food shortages, eliminated exploitation of farmers by middlemen and

increased their market opportunities.<sup>8</sup>

However, current development policies and practices neglect both the disaster problem and the potential for tackling it.

A recent study of international relief and development NGOs concludes that 'Thinking about disasters and vulnerability is beginning to penetrate NGO consciousness at policy level but

translated to the operational level, where disaster risk-reduction activity tends to be sporadic, poorly integrated with development planning, and largely unsupported by institutional structures and systems'.<sup>9</sup>

Thousands of lives are lost and millions of people left weakened each year because donors are reluctant to invest in measures that reduce the impact of disasters. The Director of the Centre for Research on the Epidemiology of Disasters, Professor Debarati Guha-Sapir, points out that, among disaster-prone countries and international donors alike, 'funding patterns, an undeniable indicator of real

priorities, show that it is disaster relief, not reduction that tops the list of all disaster management funding'.<sup>10</sup>

It is the same at international level. The UN Secretary-General's report on implementing Agenda 21 (the comprehensive plan of action on environment and development adopted in Rio de Janeiro in 1992) notes that 'attempts to promote human development and to reverse environmental degradation have not, in general, been effective over the last decade'.<sup>11</sup>

The major obstacles are: too few resources, a lack of political will, and a piecemeal and uncoordinated approach.

## Disaster reduction is affordable

Cost-benefit analysis of a wide range of initiatives, from local to global levels, shows that every \$1 spent on mitigation can typically save \$4-10 in the cost of recovering from disasters.

Can this saved money be used for the implementation of Agenda 21? Or to meet the millennium development goals (MDGs)?

An additional \$50 billion per year is needed to meet the MDGs worldwide, including \$12 billion for primary education, \$10 for health and \$20 billion for poverty eradication.<sup>12</sup>

## A four-point plan for a safer world

### 1. Strengthen society's resilience

- Accelerate global and national poverty eradication initiatives, informed by people's vulnerability to disasters.
- Put the concerns of vulnerable people at the centre of development policy and practice at all levels.
- Review existing long-term development policies and programmes from a vulnerability point of view.
- Incorporate vulnerability indicators in national and international programme reviews and evaluations.
- Make globalisation work for the poor and poor nations.

### 2. Integrate and support disaster reduction measures

- Invest in preparedness and mitigation in disaster-prone countries, ideally as a central component of development policy and programming.
- Build the capacity of state institutions, civil society organisations and vulnerable populations.
- Develop and promote regional and sub-regional approaches, and assist vulnerable countries in international negotiations.

### 3. Tackle sources of risk

- Deepen political commitment to environmental protection and renewal -in particular, to full implementation of the Kyoto Protocols and recommendations of the Inter-governmental Panel for Climate Change.
- Ensure that development efforts at various levels do not increase vulnerability to natural hazards.
- Promote responsive governance at all levels, that protects citizens' rights to security of life and livelihood.

### 4. Improve accountability

- Make disaster response and recovery more accountable to the needs of disaster-affected people.
- Promote a culture of respecting the rights of disaster-affected populations.
- Set specific commitments, targets and indicators for disaster reduction.
- Donors should allocate sufficient funding for international initiatives that reduce the impact of emergencies.

## What WSSD should do

Reduction of disasters' impact on sustainable development requires the political commitment of the global community: the United Nations, donor agencies, governments, business, academic institutions and civil society.

Our recommendations are based on our global experience, learning directly from poor and vulnerable people, and on research around these issues.

In order to eradicate poverty and achieve sustainable development, we strongly recommend the Summit to:

1. Call for a global partnership for disaster reduction: as in Agenda 21, all governments, donors, civil society, and the UN must act together and share responsibility for it.

2. Pledge itself to a higher political commitment at all levels, through policies, resourcing and practice.

3. Adopt and promote a coherent approach that puts greater emphasis on the long-term reduction of disasters in order to achieve sustainable development.

More effective prevention strategies would save not only tens of billions of dollars, but save tens of thousands of lives. Funds currently spent on intervention and relief could be devoted to enhancing equitable and sustainable development instead, which would further reduce the risk for war and disaster. Building a culture of prevention is not easy. While the costs of prevention has to be paid in the present, its benefits lie in the distant future. Moreover, the benefits are not tangible; they are the disasters that did NOT happen.

**Kofi Annan**, UN Secretary-General, quoted in *Disaster Reduction and Sustainable Development* (UN International Strategy for Disaster Reduction Background Document for the WSSD, 2002). <http://www.unisdr.org>

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