



# Living with Risk

Turning the tide on disasters  
towards sustainable development



2003

World Disaster  
Reduction Campaign



International Strategy  
**ISDR**  
for Disaster Reduction

United Nations  
International Strategy for Disaster Reduction

WATER



## Too much water...

The increasing extent of disastrous flooding can be explained by various factors, including growing urban populations, denser occupancy of flood plains and other flood-prone areas, as well as the expansion of unwise forms of watershed land use. In the period 1980-2001 a total of 163,471 deaths were associated with the occurrence of floods worldwide.

*In Mozambique, more than 80 per cent of the population live off the land. During the 2000 floods - the worst for over a century - almost all of that land was under water. Nearly one million people were forced to flee their homes, seeking refuge in trees. Floodwater levels were said to have risen from four to eight metres in a matter of days.*




## Too little water...

The nature and impact of drought is difficult to assess, due to its slow-onset character and pervasive effects lasting over many months and even years. In the above-mentioned period 1980-2001 a total of 560,300 people were reportedly killed by drought, representing nearly half of the casualties triggered by natural hazards.

*Since 2000, southern Sri Lanka has suffered a drought described by locals as being "the worst in fifty years". Communities in drought-stricken areas have suffered greatly from failing crops and malnourishment, forcing local industries to close down and villagers to head for the towns in search of work.*

# Living with Risk

## Turning the tide on disasters towards sustainable development



In keeping with the International Year of Freshwater, ISDR's 2003 World Disaster Reduction Campaign looks at how we can cope with water-related hazards. Hydrometeorological hazards (such as floods, droughts, landslides, tropical cyclones, hurricanes and typhoons) are noticeably on the rise, affecting more communities than ever due to human activities that increase vulnerability and change the natural balance of ecosystems. This is why disaster reduction needs to be successfully incorporated into the broader goals of sustainable development to enable the building of disaster resilient communities. While the statistics on the impacts of disasters are sobering enough to make us appreciate the extent of their impacts - including shocking death counts, costs and figures based on economic, social, property losses - it seems that few of us have actually taken steps to act upon this knowledge to adequately protect ourselves against the risk of disaster.

### What can you do?

As the slogan suggests - Turning the tide - the 2003 World Disaster Reduction Campaign aims at changing our perceptions and attitudes towards hydrometeorological disasters through the involvement of as many sectors as possible. While its culminating occasion will be the International Day for Natural Disaster Reduction - to be held on 8 October 2003 - the Campaign itself will in fact extend beyond the year 2003 until World Water Day on 22 March 2004. On that day UN/ISDR and the World Meteorological Organization (WMO) will together take the lead within the UN system in the international celebrations focusing specifically on water-related disasters. Both of these days represent an opportunity for national institutions, schools, community groups, media at the regional, national and local levels to highlight the subject and draw attention to lessons learned and best practices on how to reduce the vulnerability to water related hazards, organize round-tables, festivals, community contests and other events to raise awareness on disaster reduction.

In line with the International Strategy for Disaster Reduction's (ISDR) mandate of increasing public awareness to understand risk, vulnerability and disaster reduction globally, the dissemination of clear messages is crucial for the development of disaster reduction programmes at global, regional, national and local levels. International agencies, non-governmental organizations, government representatives, local decision makers, scientists, educators and local communities all have the opportunity to participate in the World Disaster Reduction Campaign, bringing each of their complementary roles and responsibilities, generating more widespread commitment and understanding to disaster reduction.

Organized by the Inter-Agency Secretariat of the International Strategy for Disaster Reduction (UN/ISDR), the overarching goal of the annual World Disaster Reduction Campaign is to raise awareness through an interactive movement in which different parties are engaged, to create social pressure and change peoples' perceptions towards reducing the risks and vulnerabilities to the negative impacts of natural hazards.

By bringing together diverse experiences and initiatives taking place worldwide, more people learn about disaster reduction, which can ultimately lead to changed perceptions and behaviours, such as the organization of educational community gatherings to design risk maps, school classes on what to do in the event of a disaster, training opportunities for disaster reduction practitioners and the development of national disaster management policies.

The Campaign builds momentum throughout the year, culminating in the International Day for Natural Disaster Reduction, whereby it is celebrated internationally by global organizations, regional institutions and local communities alike. Celebrations of the Day bring together representatives of all facets of society, such as national governments, local emergency volunteers, school children and journalists. Natural disasters can affect us all, wherever and whoever we may be.

## Water and disasters

At any time throughout the world a river somewhere is in flood and its waters are threatening communities, their properties and even their lives. At the other end of this extreme water overload are droughts that have been and are still occurring around the world at the same time.

Today, hydrometeorological hazards are having a greater impact due to human activities that increase vulnerability and change the natural balance of ecosystems, interfering more than ever with the natural surroundings that make our world a liveable home. In addition to this worrying trend, water related disasters are predicted to increase both in frequency and intensity due to climate change, environmental degradation, and phenomena such as the El Niño Southern Oscillation, affecting the patterns and intensity of natural hazards.

This is precisely the reason why sustainable development, along with the international strategies and instruments aiming at poverty reduction and environmental protection, must take into account the risk of natural hazards and their impacts. Sustainable development is not possible without addressing vulnerability to natural hazards; it is in fact a crosscutting concern related to the social, economic, environmental and humanitarian sectors.

Water related disasters - too much or too little water - have major impacts on the well being of countries in all of these sectors, and appropriate policies for the assessment of risk and vulnerability, strategies to reduce and share risk, as well as strengthened preparedness, early warning and response measures are essential for the successful incorporation of disaster reduction into sustainable development. Disaster reduction includes the activities taken to assess and reduce both vulnerable conditions and, when possible, the impact of the hazard especially when addressing droughts, floods and landslides.

## The International Year of Freshwater

In December 2000, the United Nations General Assembly proclaimed 2003 to be the International Year of Freshwater. Supported by 149 countries, the UN resolution encourages increased awareness of the importance of sustainable freshwater use, management and protection. The International Year of Freshwater is a platform for promoting activities and spearheading new initiatives in water resources at the international, regional and national levels.

The International Year of Freshwater is expected to follow up on agreements reached at the World Summit on Sustainable Development (Johannesburg, August-September 2002) and the World Water Forum (Kyoto, March 2003), and should have an impact far beyond 2003.

The activities for the Year are being coordinated by the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UN/DESA) and the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO).

[www.wateryear2003.org](http://www.wateryear2003.org)

## Call for contributions

UN/ISDR will produce various supporting information materials for the World Disaster Reduction Campaign available in English, French and Spanish for dissemination worldwide, including an information kit comprising facts and figures, definitions of key concepts, success stories and lessons learned and resource and website listings.

We invite you to contribute to the information kit in the form of feature articles addressing the Campaign theme Living with Risk - Turning the tide on disasters towards sustainable development. Please provide us with stories, examples from local, national or transborder integrated management of floods, of drought or other water-related hazards, briefs on methodologies or specific risk reduction projects or policies that have proved successful (or unsuccessful) in approximately 500 words, accompanied by images and/or graphics and with relevant contact details for those who would like to seek further information.

To submit proposals for contributions for the 2003 World Disaster Reduction Campaign, please contact Nicole Rencoret, UN/ISDR, [rencoret@un.org](mailto:rencoret@un.org).

# Disaster reduction towards sustainable development

*By integrating disaster reduction measures into long-term sustainable development planning and action, people's lives of today and tomorrow have the best chance of functioning without being disrupted or compromised by a natural disaster.*

## Disasters the result of the impact of natural hazards

Natural hazards are phenomena such as earthquakes; volcanic activity; landslides and avalanches; tsunamis; tropical cyclones and other severe storms; tornadoes and high winds; river floods and coastal flooding; wildfires and associated haze; drought; desertification; heat waves; sand/dust storms.

Natural hazards themselves do not necessarily lead to disasters. It is only their interaction with people and their environment that generates impacts, which may reach disastrous proportions. Natural hazards have the potential to become natural disasters by the serious disruption to the functioning of societies, causing widespread human, material and environmental losses, often exceeding the ability of the affected society to cope.

## We are all vulnerable to natural disasters

People and societies are becoming more vulnerable to natural disasters due to their own activities that lead to increasing poverty, population growth and density (particularly in the context of rapid urbanisation), environmental degradation and climate change. Although societies have always been threatened by natural hazards, in recent years they have been increasingly affected by their impact, leading to major disasters. Natural hazards can threaten everyone but in practice, proportionally, they tend to harm the poor most of all. People who have to struggle every day just to survive do not have the time or the strength to worry about seemingly distant natural hazards.

## From disaster response to disaster reduction

While disaster response and relief are important following a natural disaster, conscious risk management is essential to motivate and enable societies to become resilient to the effects of natural hazards and related technological and environmental disasters.

**Disaster reduction** is the sum of all policies and measures a society can undertake to protect itself from the negative effects of natural hazards, involving a wide variety of interrelated activities at the local, national, regional and international levels. It involves risk assessments, knowledge development and education, institutional arrangements to deal with risk, integration of risk management in sustainable development and poverty reduction plans and practices, access to early warning systems, among others. It has traditionally been described as disaster preparedness, mitigation and prevention:

- **Disaster preparedness** involves measures taken in advance that prepare a society for an oncoming disaster through early warning systems and evacuation infrastructures.
- **Disaster mitigation** involves measures that reduce the effect of a disaster, for example the upgrading of buildings to withstand a disaster.
- **Disaster prevention** involves avoiding a disaster entirely through advanced planning, such as refraining from building in disaster-prone areas.



## International Strategy for Disaster Reduction (ISDR)

Recognising that natural hazards can threaten any one of us, the ISDR builds on partnerships and takes a global approach to disaster reduction, seeking to involve every individual and every community towards the goals of reducing the loss of lives, the socio-economic setbacks and the environmental damages caused by natural hazards. In order to achieve these goals, the ISDR promotes four objectives as tools towards reaching disaster reduction for all:

1. Increase public awareness to understand risk, vulnerability and disaster reduction globally
2. Obtain commitment from public authorities to implement disaster reduction policies and actions
3. Stimulate interdisciplinary and intersectoral partnerships, including the expansion of risk reduction networks
4. Improve scientific knowledge about disaster reduction

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