



World Conference on Disaster Reduction

18-22 January 2005, Kobe, Hyogo, Japan

United Nations - Nations Unies

Secretariat for the World Conference on Disaster Reduction – Secrétariat de la Conférence mondiale pour la prévention des catastrophes

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HAITI

Poverty generates disasters

In May 2004, rains killed 2,665 people in Haiti. This week they have caused another 2,000 deaths yet only 11 are reported dead in the Dominican Republic. The force of rains in Haiti were less strong than the ones that struck the Dominican Republic, but nevertheless the loss in lives and livelihoods were much higher in Haiti than in the rest of the Caribbean. Why?

The impact of the hazards is much greater in Haiti because the vulnerability of people there is higher. Rapid urbanization, lack of land management, the exploitation of charcoal and consequent deforestation make Haitian people more vulnerable to mudslides. In Haiti, 60 per cent of the people rely heavily on charcoal for their survival. This has a terrible effect on deforestation whereas the Dominican Republic depends entirely on natural gas to cook.

Deforestation is not the only problem; the lack of early warning facilities is another one. A survey conducted in July 2003 for the Second International Conference on Early Warning, in Bonn, Germany, found many early warning systems in the Caribbean; none in Haiti. Without early warning and preparedness, people are caught unawares and are highly vulnerable to death or injury.

For a poor country like Haiti, disaster early warning and preparedness systems are not a top priority when the sun is shining, but the capacities those entail are essential to save lives when it rains. Effective and low cost systems could be implemented easily with the help of the International community. In the nearby Dominican Republic, the government and Civil Defence have implemented a National Commission of Emergencies. “Thanks to the aid of the European Union and the United States we have a good alert system” explains Louis Luna Paulino, director of Civil Defence and of the National Commission of Emergencies in the Dominican Republic. “When there is an alert, people go to shelters and everybody is warned by radio and television.”

“Haiti has limited institutional capacity to finance disaster preparedness and response itself but the international community should work with the Haitian Government and invest better in long term measures rather than only producing funds for relief after disaster has hit. Thinking ahead will save lives and livelihood” said Salvano Briceño, director of ISDR, the UN Secretariat in Geneva that focuses on disaster reduction. “What is happening in Haiti is an illustration of a combination of vulnerabilities that was bound to happen. Vulnerabilities have been allowed to grow in Haiti in proportions such that any natural hazard would lead to great disaster”.

The UN World Conference on Disaster Reduction that will take place in Kobe, Hyogo (Japan) from 18 to 22 January 2005 will be an opportunity to make a clear and strong point that the reduction of vulnerability has to be an explicit objective of developing planning.

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