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Increasing impact of disaster such as wildfires shows urgent need for better urban planning

After the fires in southern California (USA) the ISDR secretariat – the UN agency dealing with disaster reduction – is highlighting the importance of urban planning and building regulations to reduce our vulnerability to all disasters.

Wildfires are significant hazards that affect millions of people every year and cause huge losses. The last fires in Greece killed 70 people and caused enormous destruction. The damage of the current Californian fires destroyed more than 2000 houses and will remain as one of the costliest fires in the USA.

“How and where we build our houses are crucial decisions that can reduce or increase our vulnerability to disasters. This is true whether for fires, floods, landslides, volcanic eruptions or earthquakes. When cities are vulnerable to disaster, millions of people are at risk in them every day. Increased urbanization combined with climate change is creating new stresses on cities – and this intensified urban vulnerability needs to be systematically addressed, if we are to better protect the world’s rapidly growing urban population and avoid more tragedies,” says Salvano Briceño, Director of the ISDR secretariat.

The Hyogo Framework for Action adopted by 168 governments in January 2005 shortly after the 26 December 2004 tsunami lists practical measures that can reduce hazard risk and vulnerability for cities. Better urban planning and land use planning, improved building codes, and using disaster resistant materials are some ways we can better protect our houses and neighborhoods. Residential areas located in high risk zones bordering forests, grasslands, or bushlands can be protected by preventive measures such as the construction of buffer zones, clearing of combustible materials and building houses using fire-resistant materials.

The Nobel Peace Prize-winning Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change predicted in its last report that climate change will increase the frequency and severity of extreme weather events, including droughts and heat waves. This will increase fire risks and make more communities vulnerable to fires. The Global Wildland Fire Network, in which 13 regions of the world are organized, is addressing the increasing fire threats by enhancing international cooperative and collective efforts in fire disaster reduction. The global network is an outreach programme of the ISDR and facilitated by the Global Fire Monitoring Center (GFMC) based in Freiburg, Germany.