

The Early Engagement of the United Nations in Disaster Risk Reduction (1970-2000): A brief history



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Citation: United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction (2022) The Early Engagement of the United Nations in Disaster Risk Reduction (1970-2000): a brief history. Geneva.

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Acronyms

ECHO	European Commission Humanitarian Office	UNEP	United Nations Environment Programme
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organization	UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation
ICSU	International Council for Science	UNGA	United Nations General Assembly
IDNDR	International Decade for Natural Disaster Reduction	UN-HABITAT	United Nations Human Settlement Programme
IDNHR	International Decade for Natural Hazard Reduction	UNICEF	United Nations Children’s Fund
ISDR	International Strategy of Disaster Reduction	UNIDO	United Nations Industrial Development Organization
ITU	International Telecommunication Union	UNISDR	United Nations International Strategy for Disaster Reduction
PAHO	Pan American Health Organization	WFP	World Food Programme
STC	Scientific and Technical Committee	WHO	World Health Organization
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme	WMO	World Meteorological Organization
UNDRO	United Nations Disaster Relief Office		

Introduction

The ‘Early Days of DRR’ initiative

This publication is the first part of the Early Days of Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR) initiative, supported by the the United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction (UNDRR). It consists of three elements:

1. This **Brief History** document focuses primarily on the International Decade for Natural Disaster Reduction (IDNDR): its origins, the 1994 Yokohama Conference, the 1999 IDNDR Closing Forum , the IDNDR DRR days and campaigns, the Sasakawa Awards, the Stop Disasters magazine, the work of the Scientific and Technical Committee and IDNDR Secretariat and the engagement of the different UN agencies. It highlights the key developments, approaches and values of the early UN pioneers in so-called ‘natural disaster reduction’.
2. A **Walk through history** webpage, consisting of different timelines focusing on the early DRR work carried out by a multitude of actors (United Nations Agencies, World

Bank, academic centres, research and training institutes, civil society organisations, regional and national actors). Also, a timeline with ‘classic’ publications and articles will be included. These timelines will present in a clear and visual way the early engagement of a wide variety of DRR pioneers.

3. **DRR pioneers’ interviews**, which are hosted on a specific UNDRR YouTube channel. A link is provided from Prevention Web and the UNDRR website to the interviews.

Time period

There are many historical examples of societies successfully dealing with natural hazards in a pro-active manner, often going back several centuries. But it took until 1970 for the United Nations General Assembly to invite the Secretary-General to submit recommendations for the first time on:

- “Pre-disaster planning at the national and international levels”
- “The application of technology to, and scientific research for, the prevention and control of natural

disasters, or the mitigation of the effects of such disasters”. As a result, DRR at the global level in its contemporary form celebrated its fiftieth anniversary in 2020. While the recent history of DRR (from 2000) is overall well documented since the establishment of the United Nations International Strategy for Disaster Reduction (UNISDR) (also online), there are serious gaps in the knowledge on the different actors and initiatives during the three early DRR decades. The current UNDRR website contains a [History section](#) , but this webpage mainly focuses on the United Nations General Assembly resolutions, while much other relevant DRR work by the United Nations system (and other stakeholders) during this period is insufficiently documented. This publication aims to fill this gap.



Rationale and objectives

For this reason, the United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction is launching this initiative to document, and more widely make available, in-depth information on these early experiences and engagements.

Three important arguments can be given for this initiative:

- a. ‘Passing the baton’: there is a new generation of DRR policy makers, researchers and practitioners, who are not always aware or have easy access to the early work. Many earlier lessons learned, and past insights, are still valuable and could still enrich the current DRR discourse and practice.
- b. Many of the primary witnesses and pioneers of this early period are ageing. It is therefore key to document as soon as possible their personal observations and reflections, making use of audio-visual means.

- c. Much information and many publications developed during this period date back from the pre-internet era and are not available online. This entails the risk that, over time, valuable information on this important period may be lost forever.

On the terminology used

During the period 1970-2000 the terms ‘natural disaster’ and ‘natural disaster reduction’ were systematically applied within the United Nations system. Only with the establishment of the United Nations International Strategy on Disaster Reduction (UNISDR) in 2000, the terms ‘disaster reduction’ and ‘disaster risk reduction’ became the standard vocabulary. The reason for the terminology change came with accepting the science that disasters result from a combination of natural hazards and social and human vulnerability, which are closely linked to development processes. Currently UNDRR is engaged in the

[#NoNaturalDisasters Campaign](#), which underlines that the use of the term ‘natural disaster’ is incorrect and misleading.



Time to say goodbye to “Natural Disasters”, Mammi Mituzori

Even so, in the early days the term ‘disaster prevention’ was used as one of the phrases in the highly critiqued Disaster Management Cycle. Prevention expresses the concept of completely avoiding potential adverse impacts of natural hazards through action taken in advance. Very often the complete avoidance of losses proved not to be feasible, especially in less wealthy countries with limited resources. Therefore, the term ‘risk reduction’ was introduced, which aims to limit the adverse impacts of disasters, without being able to entirely avoid their impact.







**DRR Pre-History: Early
Risk Reduction Practices
(Pre-1970)**

DRR Pre-History: Early Risk Reduction Practices (Pre-1970)

Many historical examples of societies anticipating natural hazards effectively can be found, often dating back several centuries. These early disaster-reduction efforts were accomplished by first improving the understanding of the hazards, their causes and effects, and then devising protective measures to counteract them.

The Chinese had already built a primitive seismograph around 2,000 years ago that identified the direction of the epicentre and quantified the intensity of earthquakes. They also built defensive dykes for over 1,000 years in anticipation of the annual flooding of the Yangtze and other important rivers.



Ancient Chinese Earthquake Detector Invented 2,000 Years Ago Really Worked! <https://www.ancient-origins.net/ancient-technology/incredible-earthquake-detector-invented-nearly-2000-years-ago-001377>

Between the thirteenth and fifteenth centuries, the Incas in the Andes took great care to build terraces to reduce landslides and conserve the scarce soil and water needed for their crops on these high slopes. Many of these terraces, as well as similar structures skilfully preserved for over 1,000 years in Indonesian and Philippine mountain provinces, still exist today.

Since the effectively eighteenth century, low-lying countries in Western Europe, such as the Netherlands, have been notable for building an elaborate system of sea dykes that have both reclaimed land and protected residents from flooding.

From the 1880s onwards, the Famine Codes in India, anticipating the impact of drought and aiming to apply protective measures against famine, prescribed a variety of policy measures and risk-reduction practices in the case of different levels of food insecurity. Many of these administrative guidelines and preparedness procedures remain relevant more than 100 years later.

Several other examples of ancient preparedness and preventive measures exist in different parts of the world.

Sources:

- [UNISDR, Living with Risk, A global review of disaster reduction initiatives, 2004 version, Volume 1, pp. 5-6](#)
- See also: Pedro Ferradas, La memoria es también porvenir. Historia mundial de los desastres, Lima, Soluciones Practicas, 2015.

| Ancient Inca terracing



© Shutterstock/Olga Kot Photo



The 1970-1990 Period

The 1970-1990 Period

The first United Nations General Assembly resolution

Despite many successful local applications of risk-reduction policies and practices in the past, some going back centuries, it took until 15 December 1970 for the United Nations General Assembly in [Resolution 2717](#), “Assistance in cases of natural disaster”, to invite the Secretary-General to submit recommendations for the first time on:

“... 5.(b) Pre-disaster planning at the national and international levels; ... (d) The application of technology to, and scientific research for, the prevention and control of natural disasters, or a mitigation of the effects of such disasters, including arrangements to disseminate effectively to all countries the fruits of research from satellites and other sophisticated technology with a view to strengthening international co-operation to determine the causes and early manifestation of impending disasters and the development and improvement of early warning systems.”

Interesting to note that at the time there was a strong belief and optimism that, thanks to advances in technology and scientific research, the impact of

disasters would eventually be prevented or to a large extent controlled.

At that moment, pre-disaster planning did not yet have a home within the United Nations system. For that purpose, the United Nations Disaster Relief Office (UNDRO) was created.

Source: [UNGA Resolution 2717](#), “Assistance in cases of natural disaster”

Establishment of United Nations Disaster Relief Office (UNDRO)

In December 1971 [Resolution 2816](#) was adopted, in which:

“The General Assembly calls upon the Secretary-General to appoint a Disaster Relief Co-ordinator, who will be authorized, on his behalf: ... (f) To promote the study, prevention, control and prediction of natural disasters, ... (g) To assist in providing advice to Governments on pre-disaster planning. It endorses the Secretary-General’s proposals for an adequate permanent office in the United Nations which shall be the focal point in the United Nations system for disaster relief matters; ... It Invites Governments ... (f) to improve national disaster warning systems”

A stamp printed in the United Nations, offices in Geneva shows seismograph recording earthquake, office of the UN disaster relief coordinator (UNDRO), circa 1979



Source: [UNGA Resolution 2816](#): “Assistance in cases of natural disasters and other disaster situations”

In January 1972, the Office of the United Nations Disaster Relief Coordinator came into being, with the appointment of Faruk N. Berkol, a Turkish diplomat, as Director. UNDRO was based in Geneva and essentially given two broad functions:

- Relief coordination: to mobilize, direct and co-ordinate external aid, provided to stricken countries;
- Prevention, pre-disaster planning and preparedness: to reduce the extent to which natural phenomena result in disasters, or to eliminate the threat altogether through preventive measures; and to promote measures of preparedness in disaster-prone countries.

Implementation of this mandate, however, was hampered from the beginning by a number of issues: a lack of funding; the vagueness of its mandate; agreement on the proper mix of relief co-ordination, preparedness and prevention work; the extent of its ‘operational’ role; and by problems in determining UNDRO’s functions in “other disaster situations”.

Financial problems were partly solved in 1975 by the establishment of a special voluntary trust fund. By 1980, UNDRO staff had grown from six to 50 and its annual budget had increased tenfold to \$3.6 million. In 1976, internal agreement was reached on a ‘60-30-10’ per cent concept as the appropriate ratio among its respective relief co-ordination, preparedness, and prevention functions.

While throughout its existence its relief coordination function remained challenging, and its operational role a cause of controversy within the United Nations system, UNDRO seems to have been a modest early promoter of disaster risk reduction or, at least, its more technocratic and scientific version. It thus laid the foundation for what was later to become the International Decade for Natural Disaster Reduction (IDNDR).

UNDRO’s Prevention and Planning Division’s main achievements included:

- Scientific and technical reports and publications.

The most significant are:

› [Natural Disasters and Vulnerability Analysis](#) (1979)

› UNDRO, Disaster Prevention and Mitigation: Compendium of current knowledge (1976-1986):

- Volume 1. Volcanological aspects.
- Volume 2. Hydrological aspects.
- Volume 3. Seismological aspects.
- Volume 4. Meteorological aspects.
- Volume 5. Land use aspects.
- Volume 6. Aspects Relatifs à la Construction et au Génie Civil (French)
- Volume 7. Economic aspects.
- Volume 8. Sanitation aspects.
- Volume 9. Legal aspects.
- Volume 10. Public information aspects.
- Volume 11. Preparedness aspects.
- Volume 12. Social and sociological aspects

› [Shelter after Disaster. Guidelines for Assistance](#) (1982)

› [Mitigating Natural Disasters. Phenomena, Effects and Options](#) (1991).

- Advisory field missions to assist governments in developing national disaster plans.

- A periodic newsletter, called UNDRO News.

In 1975, UNDRO started a World Survey of Disaster Damage (1960-74), which was never completed, predominantly as a result of insufficient funding. Also, the plan to formulate an International Disaster Prevention Strategy never materialized.



UNDRO, Disaster Prevention and Mitigation: Compendium of current knowledge: Volume 12 Social and Sociological Aspects (1986)

UNDRO continued its work until 1992, when it was disbanded and integrated within the newly created Department of Humanitarian Affairs (DHA), an office with a broader mandate, covering both complex emergencies, such as famines, as well as ‘natural disasters’.

Source:

- [Joint Inspection Unit, Evaluation of the Office of the United Nations Disaster Relief Co-ordinator, Geneva, 1980](#)
- John Hannigan, *Disasters without Borders, The International Politics of Natural Disasters*, Polity Press, Cambridge & Malden, 2012, pp. 52-55.

Frank Press as the ‘founding father’ of the IDNDR

Geophysical research and earthquake engineering had advanced to high levels of sophistication and efficacy by the 1970s, notably in the United States. Frank Press was a key American figure in the earthquake engineering community. He was a world-renowned geo-physician with extensive political influence. He was President Jimmy Carter’s Science Advisor from 1977 to 1981. Following that, he served as President of the United States National Academy of Sciences from 1981 to 1993, through both the Reagan and George HW Bush administrations.

He and a close engineering colleague and renowned California Institute of Technology (CalTech) professor, George Housner, were firm believers that earthquakes and other natural hazards, which were on the rise at the time and thus getting more attention, could only be addressed effectively on a global scale through a coordinated, international programme on hazard reduction and disaster mitigation. Frank Press argued strongly for the establishment of an International Decade for Natural Hazard Reduction (IDNHR or the Decade) in a keynote lecture at the 8th International Congress of Earthquake Engineering in San Francisco in 1984.

Initially, the suggested approach emphasized collaborative research, information exchange and technology transfer within the scientific community. Initially, Frank Press didn’t envision the IDNHR being labelled as a ‘United Nations decade’ or being administered by the United Nations. However, he grew increasingly conscious that it would require a broad and worldwide platform with access to governments in order to successfully advocate for the International Decade idea.

As president of the US Academy of Sciences, Press was able to personally approach United Nations Secretary-General Pérez de Cuéllar,

who enthusiastically approved of his plan. The United Nations Secretary General regarded the IDNHR as an opportunity to bring disaster risk reduction onto the United Nations agenda and to address a significant thematic gap within the United Nations system. The 1980s was a decade of unparalleled and large-scale ‘natural’ disasters, such as the Ethiopian droughts and famine of 1983–85, Nevado del Ruiz volcanic eruption in Colombia (1985) and the Mexico City (1985) and Armenia earthquakes of 1988. Despite this, there was no credible international agency or mechanism in place to promote disaster risk reduction on a global level.

Two United Nations General Assembly resolutions were adopted in 1987 ([Res. 42/169](#)) and 1988 ([Res. 43/202](#)), announcing and promoting the IDNDR Decade. To prepare for the establishment of the this, Perez de Cuellar established an International Ad Hoc Group of Experts for the IDNDR, which was chaired by Frank Press. After a series of meetings, the expert group submitted a report, known as the [Tokyo Declaration](#), presenting the future framework for the IDNDR.

On 22 December 1989, the UNGA adopted [Resolution 44/236](#), designating “the 1990s as a decade in which the international community, under the auspices of the United Nations, would pay special attention to fostering international co-operation in the field of natural disaster reduction”. The resolution also decided to designate the second Wednesday of October as International Day for Natural Disaster Reduction, to be observed annually during the Decade by the international community (see below), and adopted the International Framework of Action 1990-99. This framework highlighted the objectives and goals of the Decade and described the organizational arrangements for the Decade.

The Decade was founded on the belief that adequate scientific and technical knowledge already existed that, if used more widely, might save thousands of lives and millions of dollars in property losses. It was expected that the IDNDR would provide the necessary framework and act as a catalyst for increased disaster reduction worldwide.

Sources:

- [Lukas Schemper, Science Diplomacy and the Making of the United Nations International Decade for Natural Disaster Reduction, in: Diplomatica 1 \(2019\), 243-267](#)
- John Hannigan, *Disasters without Borders, The International Politics of Natural Disasters*, Polity Press, Cambridge & Malden, 2012, pp. 52-55.
- [UNGA Resolution 44/236 on the International Decade for Natural Disaster Reduction](#)
- Terry Jeggle, *The goals and aims of the Decade*, in: Ingleton, (ed.), *Natural Disaster Management*, Tudor Rose, 1999, pp. 24-27.



Images of Mexico City Earthquake, September 19, 1985



The 1990-99 Period: The Establishment of the IDNDR

The 1990-99 Period: The Establishment Of The IDNDR

Goals and objectives

[Resolution 44/236](#) stated that the overall **objective** of the International Decade for Natural Disaster Reduction was to “reduce through concerted international action, especially in developing countries, the loss of life, property damage and social and economic disruption caused by natural disasters such as earthquakes, windstorms, tsunamis, floods, landslides, volcanic eruptions, wildfires, grasshopper and locust infestations, drought and desertification and other calamities of natural origin”.

The **goals** of the Decade were:

- a. to improve the capacity of each country to mitigate the effects of natural disasters expeditiously and effectively
- b. to devise appropriate guidelines and strategies for applying existing scientific and technical knowledge
- c. to foster scientific and engineering endeavours aimed at closing critical gaps in knowledge, in order to reduce loss of life and property
- d. to disseminate existing and new technical information related to measures for the assessment, prediction and mitigation of natural disasters

- e. to develop measures for the assessment, prediction, prevention and mitigation of natural disasters through programmes of technical assistance and technology transfer, demonstration projects, and education and training.

It was clear from the above goals that the Decade, in the eyes of its founders, was to have a strong scientific, technical and engineering focus primarily aimed at dissemination of technical information and technology transfer. Social vulnerability in those early years of the Decade was taking a back seat to physical vulnerability reduction, primarily aiming at the protection of buildings and infrastructure.

The five IDNDR goals were embodied in three programming **targets** determined by the IDNDR Scientific and Technical Committee (STC) at its first meeting in 1991. According to the STC, all countries were encouraged to have in place by the year 2000:

- 1. Comprehensive assessment of risks from natural hazards, integrated into national development plans.
- 2. Mitigation plans of practical measures to be applied at national and local levels that would address long-term disaster prevention, preparedness and community awareness on a continuing basis.
- 3. Ready access to warning systems by those people most at risk at global, regional, national and local levels.

paredness and community awareness on a continuing basis.

- 3. Ready access to warning systems by those people most at risk at global, regional, national and local levels.

These targets would later serve as a basis for assessing the IDNDR achievements half-way and at the end of the Decade.

Source:

- Terry Jeggle. The goals and aims of the Decade, in: Ingleton (ed.), Natural Disaster Management, Tudor Rose, 1999, pp. 24-27.
- First Session of the Scientific and Technical Committee, in “Stop Disasters” N°1, May-June 1991, pp. 4-5.

See also:

- Frank Press, “The Decade as an International Reality” in “Stop Disasters” magazine, N° 0, March-April 1991
- Neelam S. Merani, “The United Nations implements the Decade”, in “Stop Disasters” magazine, N° 0, March-April 1991

International Decade for Natural Disaster Reduction



Institutional set-up

Organizationally, the IDNDR consisted of the following elements:

1. Special High-Level Council

The Special High-Level Council consisted of a limited number of internationally prominent persons (former Heads of State and prime ministers), who were to provide the United Nations Secretary General with general advice with respect to the Decade, take appropriate action to promote public awareness and mobilize the necessary financial support from the public and private sectors.

The Special High-Level Council held its inaugural session at the United Nations Headquarters in New York from 9 to 10 October 1991. The session was attended by the United Nations Secretary General Mr Javier Pérez de Cuéllar. The Council elected as its Chairman Mr Miguel de la Madrid Hurtado, Former President of Mexico. At the conclusion of its session the Council issued the *New-York Declaration*, calling countries to form national IDNDR committees, include natural disaster reduction activities in plans for sustainable development, and support the IDNDR Secretariat financially in carrying out its public information activities.

On 25 January 1993, the Special High-Level Council met for the second time in New York. The Secretary-General of the United Nations, Boutros Boutros-Ghali, participated in this meeting, during which Dr Olavi Elo was appointed the Director of the IDNDR Secretariat in Geneva (see below)

The Special High-Level Council was not sustained.

Source: First session of the Special High-Level Council of the IDNDR, in: “Stop Disasters” magazine, N° 3, September-October 1991, pp. 6-7; [IDNDR - Informs - Number 01](#), April-June 1993 (IDNDR).

2. Scientific and Technical committee (STC)

The committee consisted of 20 to 25 scientific and technical experts, in theory rotating every three years (although in practice this often proved difficult). The role of the committee was to develop bilateral and multilateral co-operation programmes for the Decade, as well as to evaluate the Decade activities and to make recommendations on the overall programmes in an annual report to the Secretary-General. It also was asked to assess and approve a series of demonstration projects, developed during the Decade.

The STC, in principle, held two meetings a year. In total, 11 meetings took place during the Decade: the first one being in Bonn (4 to 8 March 1991), the last one in Canberra (15 to 19 February 1999). The STC, its projects and reports undeniably added credibility to the activities of the IDNDR. Moreover, the STC members played an important role in propagating the “culture of prevention”, in their own countries and fields of competence, where they were often very influential.

For an overview of all the STC members during the Decade (49 international experts in total) and the variety of topics discussed at the 11 meetings, see: [STC Final Report of the IDNDR](#) (Annexes I and II)

Source:

- [Final report of the Scientific and Technical Committee of the International Decade for Natural Disaster Reduction, 1999](#)
- [Establishment of an Advisory Scientific and Technical Group for the ISDR, 2001](#)
- For summaries of the STC meeting reports, see “Stop Disasters” nrs. 0/1/2/7/13/17/22/26/28 and 30:

3. Secretariat

The IDNDR secretariat was established at the United Nations Office in Geneva. It was responsible for the day-to-day co-ordination of Decade activities and provided support to the Special High-Level Council and the scientific and technical committee, as well as for other related IDNDR activities. The Secretariat worked in close association with the United Nations Department of Humanitarian Affairs and reported to the Secretary-General through the Under-Secretary General for Humanitarian Affairs. The Secretariat initially had a staff of three, but this was increased to 15 in the period leading up to the Yokohama Conference in 1994.

4. Directors

During its existence, the IDNDR had three Directors:

1. In June 1990, **Mr Neelam S Merani**, who was the former director for Policy Development and External Relations at the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), was appointed as Director. He ended his assignment in May 1991. Until his successor was appointed, Mr Robert Hamilton served as officer-in-charge for IDNDR until April 1992. Then the Department of Humanitarian Affairs (DHA) assumed responsibility for directing the Decade until the new Director was selected.
2. In April 1993, **Dr Kaarle Olavi Elo**, a Finnish national, trained physician and, at that time, WHO Chief of Emergency Preparedness and Response at WHO HQ, was appointed. His key duties included organizing the United Nations International Conference on Natural Disaster Reduction in Yokohama in 1994 as the Secretary General for the Conference. Mr Elo was IDNDR Director until May 1997. (See also [interview with Dr. Elo at the United Nations Audiovisual Library](#))



Dr. Olavi Elo - Screenshot from UN Audiovisual Library: World Chronicle 547: Olavi Elo, IDNDR



Interview with Dr. Olavi Elo at: the UN Audiovisual Library

3. In May 1997, **Mr Philippe Boulé**, who had been Deputy Director at the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Assistance (OCHA), was appointed. Mr Boulé stayed in function until the end of the Decade. (See also [interview with Mr Boulé in 1991, who was then Director of the New York Office of UNDRO, discussing the important role modern science and technology can play in disaster mitigation: United Nations Audiovisual Library](#))

Source:

- U.S. Participation in the UN: Report by the President to the Congress for 1992
- “Stop Disasters” magazine, partim.

5. Additional institutional arrangements

Over time, two more institutional mechanisms were established, which facilitated (informal) dialogue and exchange between key IDNDR stakeholders:

- a. The **Inter-Agency Steering Committee for the Decade**, which provided the platform for dialogue among all relevant organizations of the United Nations system, as well as institutional interests outside the United Nations system, including regional and intergovernmental bodies concerned with disaster reduction.
- b. The **informal contact group of permanent missions** at Geneva, which ensured an action-oriented dialogue among Governments and the United Nations system on all major issues of disaster reduction following the World Conference



Philippe Boulé - Screenshot from UN Audiovisual Library: World Chronicle 445: Philippe Boulé, UNDRO



Interview with Mr. Boulé in 1991, who was then Director of the New York Office of UNDRO, discussing the important role modern science and technology can play in disaster mitigation : UN Audiovisual Library.

on Natural Disaster Reduction in 1994.

Source: [United Nations, Resolution A/54/497, International Decade for Natural Disaster Reduction: successor arrangements, Report of the Secretary-General, 1 November 1999](#)

6. The IDNDR National Committees

One of the key IDNDR goals was to “*improve the capacity of each country to mitigate the effects of natural disasters expeditiously and effectively*”. As the success of the Decade depended to a large extent on the actions taken at national and local level, the IDNDR National Committees played a vital role. The Secretariat suggested the following activities national committees could be involved in:

- Identify hazard zones and conduct hazard assessments;
- Monitor, predict and provide timely warnings;
- Institute short-term protective and preparedness measures;
- Institute long-term preventive measures;
- Promote public education and set up information campaigns.

It was proposed that an IDNDR national committee should have a broad representation of the following:

- Government agencies concerned with public works, planning, research, education, health;
- Meteorological, geological, hydrological and oceanographic departments;
- Academic institutions concerned with research on natural hazards, civil and structural engineering, social science;
- Public and private planning and investment corporations, insurance companies;
- Non-governmental organizations.

Source: National Committee: what can it do? Who should belong? in: “Stop Disasters” magazine, Number 1, May-June 1991, p. 7.

The United States was the first country to create such a committee, in 1989, established by the National Research Council. By 1990, only the United States, Germany and Japan had established national committees. However, by the end of January 1991, more than 70 governments had formed national committees or identified focal points, by the end of June 1991 more than 90, and already close to 100 by September 1991. However, as a report of the UN Secretary-General stressed. few of them were “*at this stage in a position to function effectively and [it was] evident that many of them [would need] guidance and support.*”

By January 1994, the number of countries having established a national IDNDR committee had increased to 122. By the end of the Decade, almost 140 countries identified either a focal point or set up a National Committee. According to the STC in its final report on the IDNDR :

“The effectiveness of national committees or focal points have varied from being highly effective to being parochial or inactive. Some have become a significant force for concentrating and mobilizing policy interests and professional applications in carefully conceived programs in some countries... In others, more narrowly focused organizations have not adequately involved the wide range of participation that would have been preferred... Limitations included a failure to sufficiently address the breadth of interests of all potential stakeholders, not providing adequate resources or authority, or not being fully attentive to the original intentions of the Decade “.

Source:

- Lukas Schemper, Science Diplomacy and the Making of the United Nations International Decade for Natural Disaster Reduction, in: Diplomatica 1 (2019), p. 261;

- “Stop Disasters” magazine, N° 17, January-February 1994;
- [Final report of the Scientific and Technical Committee of the International Decade for Natural Disaster Reduction, 1999, p.9](#)

7. Regional IDNDR initiatives

As the number of national committees increased, there was also an increased interest and demand for organizing regional meetings and setting up regional IDNDR structures.

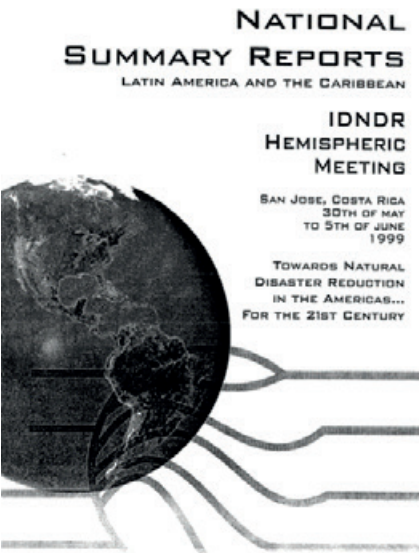
The Americas

The most active region in this regard during the initial years was Latin America. Already, in September 1991 in Guatemala City, a regional IDNDR meeting was organized by the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO). In May 1992 a Caribbean sub-regional meeting was organized in Kingston (Jamaica).

In August 1993, a regional office for Latin America and the Caribbean was set up in Costa Rica. It proved that, by establishing an office closer to the national committees, these committees could be supported more effectively. To facilitate communication between the countries, also a regional bulletin: IDNDR Informs: Latin America and the Caribbean, was published (see below).

In March 1994, an Inter-American Conference took place in Cartagena, Colombia, which approved the [Cartagena Declaration on Disasters and Development](#). The First Hemispheric Congress on Disaster Reduction and Sustainable Development was held at Miami in 1996, building on the outcome of the Cartagena Conference and the Yokohama Strategy. A second IDNDR hemispheric meeting was held in San José (Costa Rica) from 31 May to 5 June 1999, which brought together government, academic and civil society representatives from all the countries of the hemisphere and adopted the [Declaration of San José](#).

[National Summary Reports](#): Latin America and the Caribbean: IDNDR Hemispheric Meeting, San José, Costa Rica, 30th of May to 5th of June 1999.



Africa

In April 1992, the Organization of African Unity organized a first IDNDR session in Addis Ababa. Following the Yokohama Conference in May 1994 , a series of sub-regional IDNDR meetings were organized, in order to start the process of transforming the conclusions of the Yokohama Strategy and Plan of Action into practice at country level. Those meetings took place in Gaborone in November–December 1994; at Ouagadougou in May 1995 and at Nairobi in June 1995. An IDNDR/UNEP regional meeting for Africa, held at Nairobi in May 1999, advocated that cooperation among African countries in the domain of risk reduction be strengthened.

Europe

In September 1993, the European Commission Humanitarian Office (ECHO) hosted a [meeting of the IDNDR Committees within the EC membership](#). Also, regional meetings and workshops took place for the Mediterranean Region in Rome (1996) and in Valencia, Spain, in May 1999. The Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) organized a regional meeting in Moldova in May 1997 and in Armenia in September 1998.

Asia-Pacific

The first Asian Natural Disaster Reduction Conference was organized in Kobe (Japan) in December 1995. Seven annual South Pacific IDNDR disaster management meetings were held during the Decade. Another

[IDNDR regional conference for Asia](#) was organized in Bangkok in February 1999 in close collaboration with the Economic Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP), which enabled an important exchange of experiences and ideas across Asia.

Source:

- Stop Disasters magazine: partim;
- [Activities of the International Decade for Natural Disaster Reduction, Report of the Secretary-General, A/54/132, July 1999](#)

The IDNDR Public Information Strategy



Activities of the International Decade for Natural Disaster Reduction, Report of the Secretary-General

Resolution 44/236 requested the Secretary-General [...] “to assist in the formulation and implementation during the Decade of public information programmes aimed at raising public awareness of disaster prevention”.

The following communication channels and products were developed for this purpose:

1. Stop Disasters magazine

One of the most efficient communication products for the Decade was the Stop Disasters magazine, the IDNDR Newsletter. It

was a bi-monthly publication, which was edited by the Osservatorio Vesuviano in Naples (Italy) in cooperation with the IDNDR Secretariat in Geneva.



1 “Stop Disasters” magazine: a selection of covers

The first issue, Number 0, was published in March-April 1991 and the final issue, 32, was circulated in 1997. Originally, the magazine was available in English, French, Spanish and Italian. At a later stage, Russian and Chinese copies were also developed. At its peak, the magazine had a readership of 11,000 subscribers in 205 countries and territories.

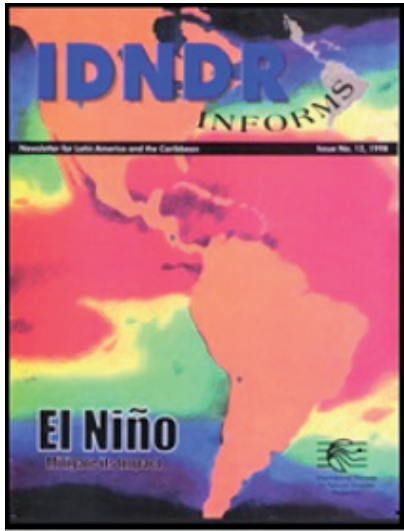
The first issues focused mainly on internal IDNDR processes, such as the sessions of the Scientific and Technical Committee, the national committees, and regional conferences and events. Over time, the issues became more thematic, often related to the topics of the IDNDR Days and the public campaigns. They are a rich source of information for everyone who wants to research and understand the dynamics of the early DRR days.

In 1998 the Stop Disasters magazine was replaced by the IDNDR Highlights, which were issued monthly by the IDNDR Secretariat.

2. Regional newsletters

Over time, as regional IDNDR offices were set up, regional newsletters were also published. The best-known regional newsletter was IDNDR Informs: Bulletin for the Americas and the Caribbean. It was published from the regional IDNDR office in San José (Costa Rica). The first issue appeared in 1993 in both Spanish and English, and had several thousand subscribers. A link to copies of the IDNDR Informs

"IDNDR Informs: Bulletin for the Americas and the Caribbean", focusing on El Niño



Bulletins (1-13) can be found [here](#). The Bulletin also continued after the Decade ended and was called ISDR Inform.

3. IDNDR publications

Publications by the IDNDR Secretariat focused to a large extent on the Decade itself and activities directly related to IDNDR at global, regional and national level. Besides the magazine, the main types of publications were:

- leaflets, folders and briefing notes on the Decade;
- IDNDR campaign documents: 1996, 1997, 1998 and 1999 campaigns (see below);
- reports on demonstration projects and IDNDR programmes, such as RADIUS, El Niño, Early Warning (six technical reports);

- Reports by the national committees on their activities and as a contribution to the IDNDR mid-term and end reviews.

Source:

[PreventionWeb: International Decade for Natural Disaster Reduction](#)

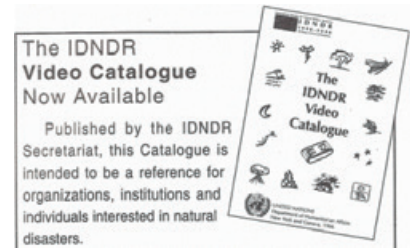
[PreventionWeb: Yokohama Conference reports](#)

[PreventionWeb: End-of-the-Decade reports](#)

4. IDNDR video catalogue

In 1996, a video catalogue was published by the IDNDR Secretariat, intended to be a reference for organizations, institutions and individuals interested in audio-visual material on natural hazards. The catalogue, which was periodically updated, listed the videos, and gave detail on how to obtain copies.

Source: Stop Disasters magazine, N° 29, p.11



The IDNDR Video Catalogue

5. IDNDR website

The IDNDR website was launched in the early part of 1999 (<http://www.idndr.org>), and provided information on the Decade to a growing number of visitors, and contained links to agencies in the wider disaster-reduction constituency. Unfortunately, the website is no longer active.

IDNDR events

Throughout the Decade, the IDNDR Secretariat engaged in a series of events and activities, aimed at promoting and raising public awareness on the importance of the Decade goals. These were:

1. The International Day for Disaster Risk Reduction

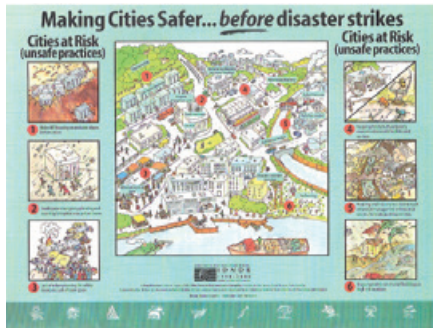
The International Day for Disaster Risk Reduction was started after a call by the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) on 22 December 1989 in [Resolution 44/236](#) for a day to promote a global culture of risk-awareness and disaster reduction:

"The GA ...decides to designate the second Wednesday of October International Day for Natural Disaster Reduction, to be observed annually during the Decade by the international community".

From 1992 onwards, a specific theme was designated each year to the International Day. The topics during the Decade were:

- 1992 – Natural Disaster Reduction and Sustainable Development
- 1993 – Disaster prevention in schools and hospitals – it's also your business!
- 1994 – Vulnerable communities – disaster prevention
- 1995 – Women and children – active participants in disaster prevention
- 1996 – Cities at risk
- 1997 – Too much water... too little – the leading cause of disasters
- 1998 – Prevention begins with information
- 1999 – Prevention pays: technology to save lives and assets

1996 "Cities at Risk" campaign poster



2000 – Disaster Prevention, Education and Youth

In 2009, the UNGA officially designated a fixed date, 13 October, as the date to commemorate the Day ([A/RES/64/200](#)).

At the end of the Decade, it was noted that the observance of the Day had indeed played a significant role in raising awareness on disaster reduction in local communities and countries around the world. More than 90 countries had participated in such observances on a regular basis in the 1990 to 1999 period. ([A/RES/54/497](#))

2. IDNDR campaigns

Linked to the International Natural Disaster Reduction days, public education and awareness raising campaigns were also initiated by the IDNDR Secretariat, whereby IDNDR National Committees were invited to initiate in their countries World IDNDR Day activities, such as press conferences, TV and radio programmes, seminars, public meetings, publications, exhibitions and competitions. In many cases,



The 1995 International Day for Natural Disaster Reduction theme: Women and Children: key to prevention: sticker and brochure

the campaign was linked to other major United Nations conferences and events during that particular year:

1992 – the campaign theme was linked to the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, also known as the Rio de Janeiro Earth Summit, a major United Nations conference held in Rio de Janeiro from 3 June to 14 June 1992.

1994 – Vulnerable communities – disaster prevention. This campaign was linked to the Social Development Summit the United Nations held in Copenhagen that year. Emphasis was placed on the need for communities to play an active role in vulnerability and risk reduction.

1995 – Women and children – active participants in disaster prevention. The campaign was linked to the World Women’s Conference, which was held in Beijing.

1996 – [Cities at risk](#). The campaign was linked to the Second Habitat Conference, held in Istanbul. Efforts were coordinated with regional and international municipal federations.



1997 – Too much water... too little – the leading cause of disasters. The campaign focused on the overwhelming impact of drought and floods. It coincided with the start of a strong ENSO (El Niño Southern Oscillation) .

1998 – Prevention begins with information. The emphasis was placed on the need to work jointly with media personnel.

1999 – Prevention pays: technology to save lives and assets. The final campaign of the Decade focused on positive experiences, showing that investing in prevention really pays off. The IDNDR Internet conference on the 1999 campaign attracted 700 participants from 60 countries.

2000 – Disaster Prevention, Education and Youth

Source: [Global IDNDR, Issue 154, 1999, World Campaign Topics during the Decade](#)

3. Sasakawa Awards



The United Nations Sasakawa Award for Disaster Reduction was one of three prestigious prizes established in 1986 by founding Chairman of the Nippon Foundation, Mr Ryoichi Sasakawa. It is worth approximately US \$50,000 and is shared among the laureates. It awards an individual or institutions that have taken active efforts in reducing disaster risk in their communities and effectively advocate for disaster risk reduction.

The laureates during the period 1987 to 2000 were:

1987 - Ratu Kamisese Mara, Fiji

1988 - ESCAP/Typhoon Committee, Philippines

1989 - Relief and Rehabilitation Commission, Ethiopia

1990 - Mr Julio Kuroiwa, Peru

1991 - Mr Franco Barberi, Italy (volcanologist)

1992 - Geophysical Institute of the National Polytechnic School, Ecuador

1993 - Dr Vit Karnik, Czech Republic

1994 - National Emergency Commission, Costa Rica

1995 - No laureate

1996 - Dr. Ian Davis, United Kingdom

1997 - Observatorio Sismológico del Sur-Occidente (OSSO), Colombia and Dr. A.S. Arya, India

1998 - H.E. Mr. Ji Cai Rang, China, Prof Wang Ang-Sheng, China

1999 - Prof Mustafa Erdik, Turkey

2000 - Fondo para la Reconstrucción y el Desarrollo Social del Eje Cafetero (FOREC), Colombia

Source: [ISDR, UN Sasakawa Award for Disaster Reduction](#)

IDNDR demonstration projects and programmes

The range of projects and programmes planned or being undertaken within the IDNDR framework was broad. The STC selected and endorsed at its first meeting a comprehensive list of international programmes and demonstration projects, including:

- The development of techniques and mechanisms for improved warning of tropical cyclones (involving WMO and the International Council for Science (ICSU);
- The comprehensive monitoring of high-risk volcanoes (UNESCO and ICSU);
- Programmes for reducing earthquake vulnerability (ICSU & UNDRO);
- The improvement of information systems including international statistical databases on natural disasters (UNDRO);
- Educational and training activities (UNDP, UNDRO; UNESCO);
- Risk assessment and preventive action(WMO/WHO);
- Mapping health emergency preparedness and response in Africa (WHO);
- Studies on the impact of disasters in large cities.

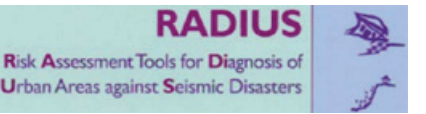
These demonstration projects were in many cases carried out by STC member institutions, which sometimes led to competition within the STC.

Source:

- Demonstration Projects endorsed by the STC, in: “Stop Disasters” magazine, N°1, May-June 1991, p.6.
- [The IDNDR – for the uninitiated, by Humanitarian Practice Network, March 1994](#)
- [Establishment of an Advisory Scientific and Technical Group for the ISDR, May 2001, Geneva](#)

The most well-known and influential IDNDR projects and programmes were the following:

1. RADIUS



Outcome of the RADIUS initiative

The IDNDR Secretariat launched the RADIUS (Risk Assessment Tools for Diagnosis of Urban Areas against Seismic Disasters) initiative in 1996 with assistance from the Government of Japan, to reduce seismic disasters in urban areas, particularly in developing countries. In collaboration with nine

selected cities around the world, the initiative developed common tools for seismic-risk assessment and management in the urban areas.

The nine case cities were Antofagasta (Chile); Guayaquil (Ecuador); Tijuana (Mexico); Bandung (Indonesia); Izmir (Turkey); Skopje (Macedonia); Tashkent (Uzbekistan); Zigong, (China); and Addis Ababa (Ethiopia). The case studies were carried out from February 1998 until July 1999 with financial assistance from the IDNDR Secretariat and technical assistance from internationally renowned institutes in this field.

A total of 93 associated towns were participating in the RADIUS programme, which assisted cities to take protective measures against the damage caused by earthquakes.

For more information on the RADIUS Initiative, see: [Outcome of the RADIUS Initiative](#) and [RADIUS \(IDNDR/ISDR\)](#).

2. The Early Warning programme

In recognition of early warning being one of IDNDR's three programme targets, a specific Technical Committee session was devoted to the subject at the Yokohama Conference.

Subsequently, at its forty-ninth session, the General Assembly called for improvements and better coordination of early-warning capacities within the United Nations system. It placed this initiative distinctly within the efforts of implementing the Yokohama Strategy

and Plan of Action, and thus within the framework of IDNDR. The IDNDR secretariat was asked to coordinate a review of the existing early-warning programmes and to suggest means by which global practices could become better coordinated and made more effective. Two reports were presented to the General Assembly ([A/50/526](#) and [A/52/561](#)), which contained, inter alia, the findings of six international expert working groups convened by the IDNDR secretariat to study different aspects of the early-warning process: geological hazards; hydrometeorological hazards, including drought and fire; environmental hazards; technological hazards; the use and transfer of related modern technologies; and national and local capabilities pertinent to the effective use of early warning.

All aspects of early warning were discussed at an [international conference](#) on Early Warning systems for the Reduction of Natural Disasters, held

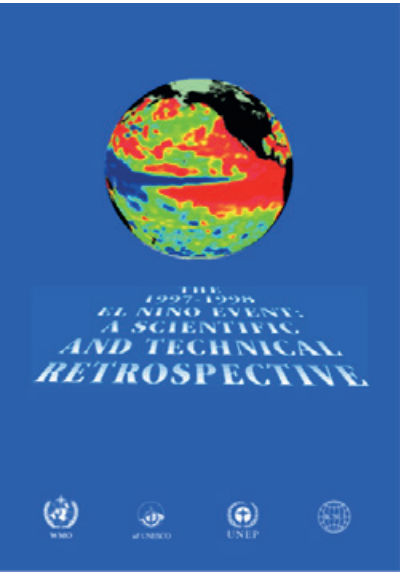
at Potsdam, Germany, in September 1998. This conference was sponsored by the Government of Germany with the collaboration of United Nations agencies, such as IDNDR, and international scientific organizations. The conference identified key early-warning accomplishments and successful local experiences that could best improve practical effectiveness for early warning into the twenty-first century.

Source: [Activities of the International Decade for Natural Disaster Reduction, Report of the Secretary-General, General Assembly, Fifty-fourth session, July 1999, A/54/132 - E/1999/80](#)

See also: [IDNDR, Guiding Principles for Effective Early Warning, October 1997](#)

3. 1997-1998 El Niño engagement

The El Niño Southern Oscillation (ENSO) phenomenon, commonly known as El Niño, had an acute impact during the period from 1997 to 1998 in several regions of the world, with particular severity and frequency in the coastal countries of the Pacific Ocean. Therefore, the United Nations General Assembly in its resolutions 52/200, 53/185, 54/220, 55/197, invited the states involved in the Decade to participate in its activities, including those related to international cooperation to reduce the impact of El Niño. In response to the GA resolutions, the IDNDR Secretariat in November 1997 established an [Inter-Agency Task Force on El Niño](#).



A multi-agency Retrospective study on the 1997-1998 El Niño event in which the IDNDR was engaged https://library.wmo.int/doc_num.php?explnum_id=8925



The response to El Niño was also debated at the tenth meeting of the Scientific and Technical Committee (STC), held at the World Bank in Washington DC, from 8 to 12 June 1998. According to STC members, reflecting on the El Niño response, progress had been achieved to mitigate the impact through natural disaster reduction strategies:

“Scientists predicted in an early stage the onset of El Niño in 1997 which led to the elaboration of mitigation strategies and measures in many affected countries in South America. Drought management in India and Africa is [also] improving.”

Source:

- [United Nations Inter-Agency Task Force on El Niño established, 19 November 1997, Press Release IHA/637](#)
- [OCHA, Experts tell committee meeting of the IDNDR that El Niño is in its dying stage, Press Release, June 1998](#)
- IDNDR Informs, Issue N° 15, 1999, The El Niño (ENSO) Phenomenon, a Proposal from Ecuador

Global conferences and meetings

1. The Yokohama World Conference in May 1994

The World Conference for Natural Disaster Reduction took place from 23 May to 27 May 1994, in Yokohama, Japan. This gathering was an important watershed and the first global conference on disasters to be held under the United Nations auspices, bringing together representatives from 149 member states. The number of delegates varied according to the source, from 2,000+ to 5,000 on the busiest day. Many delegations were represented at ministerial level.

The objectives of the Conference were to:

- review the accomplishments of the Decade at national, regional and international levels. For that purpose, the member states produced [country reports](#), in which they highlighted their achievements and challenges
- chart a Programme of Action for the future
- exchange information on the implementation of Decade programmes and policies
- increase awareness of the importance of disaster reduction policies.

The Conference consisted of:

- Plenary Sessions.
- Technical Panel Sessions (on respectively: Vulnerable Communities; Hazard-Resistant Construction; The Effects of Disasters on Modern Societies; Technological and Natural Hazards Interrelationships, Economic aspects of Disaster Reduction for Sustainable Development; Warning Systems and Drought Management.
- Scientific and Technical Poster Sessions: an informal Forum with 220 presentations and over 800 visitors.

The Conference produced two important policy statements: the [Yokohama Message](#) and the [Yokohama Strategy and Plan of Action for a Safer World](#). In the Strategy document ten key Principles for successful disaster reduction policies and measures were listed. The document also contained a Plan of Action for the future, comprising recommendations for specific actions at community and national levels, regional and sub-regional levels and at international level, through bilateral arrangements and multilateral cooperation. These recommendations were to form the basis for the IDNDR Action Plans in the remaining years of the Decade.



Yokohama Strategy and Plan of Action for a Safer World

I The Yokohama Conference poster



One of the key aims of the Conference was also to provide a mid-term evaluation of the Decade, identifying a number of accomplishments as well as failures. The Yokohama Strategy first listed some key challenges:

- "Awareness of the potential benefits of disaster reduction is still limited to specialized circles and has not yet been successfully communicated to all sectors of society in particular policy makers and the general public."*
- It was also noted that *"new efforts in the field of disaster reduction have not systematically been part of multilateral and bilateral development policies. Education and training programmes and facilities for people professionally involved and the public at large have not been sufficiently developed with a focus on ways and means to reduce disasters. Also, the potential of the information media, industry, scientific community, the private sector at large has not been sufficiently mobilized"*.

But the Yokohama Strategy also highlighted some moderate achievements:

"A number of positive results have been achieved during the first five years of the Decade, although unevenly and not in the concerted and systematic way as envisaged by the General Assembly. [...] activities during the first years of the Decade in training, technical applications and research at local, national and international levels and in regional cooperation, [also] have had positive results in some regions in reducing disaster losses".

Finally, interesting to note was a shift of emphasis in the policy documents in three particular areas, which had in the first years of the Decade been given limited attention:

- Community-level engagement and local knowledge:** "There is a strong

need to strengthen the resilience and self-confidence of local communities to cope with natural disasters through recognition and propagation of their traditional knowledge, practices and values as part of development activities". (Midway Assessment, #H)

- The link with so-called 'other disaster situations':** "...although not a part of the mandate of the Decade, the concept of disaster reduction should be enlarged to cover natural and other disaster situations including environmental and technological disasters and their interrelationship can have a significant impact on social, economic, cultural environmental systems, in particular in developing countries". (Midway Assessment, #H)

- Droughts and 'slow-impact' natural disasters:** "Developing countries affected by desertification, drought and other types of natural disasters are also vulnerable and insufficiently equipped to mitigate natural disasters" (Basis for the Strategy, #2).

Source:

- [Yokohama Strategy and Plan of Action for a Safer World. Guidelines for Natural Disaster Prevention, Preparedness and Mitigation, World Conference on Natural Disaster Reduction, Yokohama, Japan, 23-27 May 1994](#)
- [United Nations, Report of the World Conference on Natural Disaster Reduction](#) (Yokohama, 23-27 May 1994)
- "Stop Disasters" magazine, Double Issue, May-August 1994, The World Conference, pp. 8-21
- Terry Jeggle, The goals and aims of the Decade, in: Ingleton, J. (ed.), Natural Disaster Management, Tudor Rose, 1999 pp. 24-27
- John Hannigan, Disasters without Borders, The International Politics of Natural Disasters, Polity Press, Cambridge & Malden, 2012, pp. 67-69

- See: [video on the World Conference on Natural Disaster Reduction in Yokohama, Japan, 23-27 May 1994](#)



I Yokohama Conference: opening ceremony

2. The legacy of the Yokohama Conference

In hindsight, the Yokohama Conference was a milestone event and a turning point in the IDNDR process, as it announced the introduction of new strategies and emphasis for the second half of the Decade. These new strategies, as reflected in the wording of the Yokohama Strategy and Plan of Action for a Safer World, were according to a Report by the Secretary-General to the General Assembly (July 1999), characterized, inter alia, by the following:

- a. **A stronger focus on social sciences and issues.** In the late 1980s, the international scientific and engineering community had spearheaded the initiative to increase reliance on research and technology, establishing the Decade's scientific foundation from the start. This concept was broadened during the Yokohama Conference, with a larger emphasis on social sciences in research, policy formation, and implementation.
- b. **Focus on public policy.** Many countries implemented new legislation and national disaster reduction policies as a result of the momentum created by the Yokohama Conference.
- c. **Development of regional and sub-regional approaches.** Regional approaches evolved as a crucial effect of countries conducting a national review process for Yokohama and sharing the evaluation process with neighbouring countries. Since then, regional networking for information exchange and technical cooperation has become a key goal for the Decade's partner organizations.
- d. **Shift from emergency preparedness to vulnerability and risk reduction.** During the early years of the Decade, emergency preparedness was still a major focus in disaster reduction. The Yokohama Conference emphasized the need to link disaster reduction and long-term development. Natural disaster reduction has subsequently formed part of the United Nations system's strategy in support of sustainable development, natural resource protection, and solid environmental management, as reinforced by the mid-term review.

e. **Emphasis on tangible and practical application of science and technology to disaster reduction.** Both the preparations for the Yokohama Conference, and the debates at the Conference itself, raised awareness and commitment to expanding the use of natural disaster reduction strategies in national development planning. Local communities' active participation has been acknowledged as a critical aspect in this regard.

Source: [Activities of the International Decade for Natural Disaster Reduction, Report of the Secretary-General, General Assembly, Fifty-fourth session, July 1999, A/54/132 - E/1999/80](#)

3. The IDNDR Program Plan 1997-1999

These new directions, as a follow-up to the Yokohama Conference, were concreted in an IDNDR Secretariat Plan for the remainder of the Decade.

The IDNDR Program Plan for 1997-1999 was built on five primary themes : hazard, vulnerability and risk assessment, early-warning issues, disasters and sustainable development, political and public policy commitment, shared knowledge, and technology transfer. These themes served to structure and provide a focus to the Decade's mid-term review, assess remaining gaps, and make proposals for effective application of disaster reduction strategies after the year 2000.

The key objectives and priorities of the Plan were to:

- a. consolidate the achievements of the Decade by compiling and reporting on its achievements at the different spatial levels between 1990 and 1999
- b. identify a Platform for the Future: recommend an institutional mechanism for continued commitment to disaster reduction in the twenty-first century
- c. prepare an IDNDR Closing Event: develop recommendations for thematic priorities for action to be discussed at a Programme Forum in Geneva in 1999.

Source: [Francesco Pisano, About the International Decade for Natural Disaster Reduction, in: La Houille Blanche N° 2:1998](#)

4. IDNDR Closing Session/ Programme Forum in Geneva (1999)

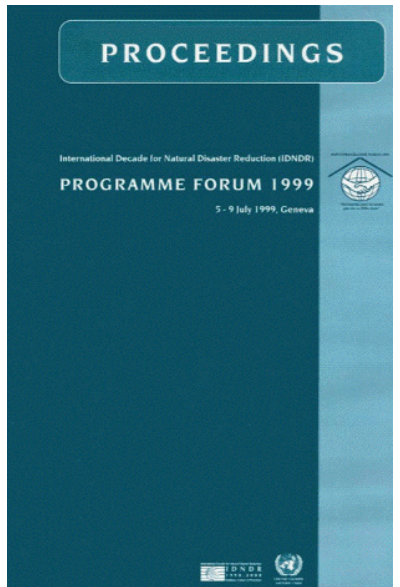


The Programme Forum was held from 5 to 9 July 1999, in Geneva, Switzerland. It coincided with a WMO/ UNESCO Sub-Forum on Science and Technology in support of natural disaster reduction.

The Forum was officially opened by the United Nations Secretary-General, Mr Kofi Annan, and was regarded as the substantive closing event for IDNDR with the objectives to:

- a. exchange information on the achievements of the IDNDR programmes. For that purpose, the member states produced ["end of the Decade" country reports](#)
- b. identify remaining gaps and future research needs in the field of disaster reduction
- c. propose a feasible and effective disaster reduction strategy for the twenty-first century
- d. agree on a future framework for action in the context of the United Nations.

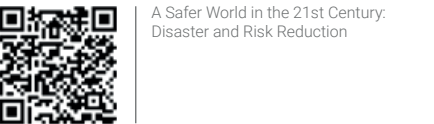
The IDNDR 1999 Programme Forum Proceedings Document



The five-day Forum was organized around different clusters and consisted of plenary sessions and side events. The cluster sessions focused on: A. Action Towards the Twenty-first Century; B. Educational and Socio-Economic Concerns; C. Scientific and Technological Concerns; and D. Development and Environmental Concerns. A document with the [Proceedings](#) provided a detailed overview of all the sessions and their outcomes.

The Forum facilitated a rich multisectoral and inter-disciplinary dialogue between a wide variety of IDNDR stakeholders. The key conclusions are reflected in the summary presentation of the key results of the Forum, presented by the Rapporteur General, Dr Robert Hamilton, Chairman of the Scientific and Technical Committee, at the event's concluding session, (an overview of the Programme Forum results can be found [here](#)).

The concluding session also resulted in the adoption of the strategy [A Safer World in the 21st Century: Risk and Disaster Reduction](#) and the [Geneva Mandate on Disaster Reduction](#) (§82). Both these documents constituted a major input into the United Nations deliberations on disaster reduction issues in the new millennium and provided fertile soil for the announcement of the successor arrangements to the IDNDR.



Source:

- [Proceedings, International Decade for Natural Disaster Reduction \(IDNDR\), Programme Forum 1999, Geneva, 5-9 July 1999](#)
- [Proceedings of the WMO/UNESCO Sub-Forum on Science and Technology in support of Natural Disaster Reduction, 6-8 July, 1999, Geneva](#)
- IDNDR Informs, Issue N°15, 1999, International Strategy for Disaster Reduction A SAFER WORLD in the 21st CENTURY: Disaster and Risk Reduction

The International Strategy of Disaster Reduction (ISDR) as the successor to the IDNDR



International Decade for Natural Disaster Reduction: successor arrangements

The General Assembly Resolution (A/54/219) of February 2000 endorsed the recommendations of the United Nations Secretary-General's report (A/54/497) to adopt the International Strategy for Disaster Reduction (ISDR) as the framework for the future activities of the United Nations system in the area of disaster reduction. It agreed to establish, from 1 January 2000, onwards:

- an **Inter-Agency Task Force**, with representation from all relevant United Nations bodies, civil society, the NGO community and regional entities to serve as the main forum within the United Nations for defining strategies for internal cooperation at all levels on disaster reduction. The Task Force could thus be seen as the political arm of ISDR.
- an **Inter-Agency Secretariat** for natural disaster reduction as a distinct entity to implement ISDR and to provide support to the work of the Task Force.

The Task Force and the Secretariat were placed under the direct authority of the

Undersecretary General for Humanitarian Affairs.

The main objectives of the International Strategy were:

- a. *“to enable communities to become resilient to the effects of natural, technological and environmental hazards, thus reducing the compound risk posed to social and economic vulnerabilities within modern societies.”*
- b. *“to proceed from protection against hazards to the management of risk, by integrating risk prevention strategies into sustainable development activities.”*

The explicit emphasis on the objectives of community resilience, vulnerability reduction and risk management indicated that ISDR was not intended to be just a blueprint of IDNDR. Another important departure from the IDNDR was that ISDR was aimed to be a system of partnerships between all possible stakeholders (governments, NGOs and IGOs, scientific and technical institutions, international financial institutions as well as civil society and the private sector), leading to a worldwide disaster reduction movement.

Source:

- [United Nations, Resolution A/54/497, International Decade for Natural Disaster Reduction: successor arrangements, Report of the Secretary-General, 1 November 1999](#)

- [Van Niekerk, D., From disaster relief to disaster risk reduction: a consideration of the evolving international relief mechanism, in: The Journal for Transdisciplinary Research in Southern Africa, Vol. 4 no. 2, December 2008, pp. 355-376](#)

Reflecting on the International Decade for Natural Disaster Reduction

Observers of the Decade had differing opinions regarding its achievements. Some emphasized that, thanks to the Decade, an international framework was established that did not exist nine years previously. Moreover, several United Nations agencies had either increased or adapted their efforts in support of the Decade. Conferences, workshops, technology transfer, and pilot projects, particularly at regional level, had boomed. In addition, disaster politics’ vocabulary had been expanded to cover development problems as well as social-vulnerability-related issues.

Also, the IDNDR played a significant role in encouraging governments to develop disaster-management plans through the national committees. However, the majority of the plans still focused primarily on organizing emergency response. Where plans mentioned long-term mitigation and preparedness, they often lacked detail and dedicated financial resources.

In retrospect, funding proved to be the Achilles heel of disaster reduction during the Decade. This not only limited the IDNDR Secretariat activities but also governmental and local programmes, despite the fact that effective disaster preparedness and reduction offered attractive financial cost-benefits for governments and donor agencies.

In his 1999 report on ISDR, Kofi Annan again underlined what was needed to turn the tide:

“Programmes of disaster reduction as well as the institutional arrangements to implement them will not yield the desired results unless there is political will and the necessary resources to support the required measures and policies.... Prevention pays!. This message should be heeded by Governments by increasing the amount of resources provided to prevention activities, including those for the implementation of the International Strategy for Disaster Reduction.”

Source:

- John Hannigan, Disasters without Borders, The International Politics of Natural Disasters, Polity Press, Cambridge & Malden, 2012, pp. 69-71
- [IFRC, World Disaster Report, 2002, Focusing on reducing risk, p. 25](#)
- [United Nations, Resolution A/54/497, International Decade for Natural Disaster Reduction: successor arrangements, Report of the Secretary-General, 1 November 1999, p.6](#)



Engagement By Other United Nations Agencies During This Period

Engagement By Other United Nations Agencies During This Period

As highlighted in the above overview, many United Nations organizations and specialized agencies participated in the International Decade of Natural Disaster Reduction, working closely with the IDNDR Scientific and Technical Committee and Secretariat. Some of these agencies also engaged in disaster reduction in a more independent way, or were already engaging in these activities before the Decade started.

Below a non-exhaustive overview is given of some of the key engagements of these United Nations agencies in the pre-2000 period.

United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO)



UNESCO was until the 1970s one of the few United Nations

organizations to systematically consider and engage in disaster risk reduction. Already in the 1960s, it organized seismological missions and was involved in the creation of a

tsunami-alert system in the Pacific. Over the decades, UNESCO expanded its disaster reduction activities significantly, including other types of hazards such as volcanic eruptions, landslides, and flooding. UNESCO also produced training and educational material to develop awareness and provide information to the general public and disaster reduction practitioners. It also provided technical advice on the construction of hazard-resistant schools and for the protection of cultural heritage.

The Decade has had a profound impact on all the UNESCO competence areas: education, natural and social sciences, culture and communication. The programmes of UNESCO and its Intergovernmental Oceanographic Commission (IOC) in environmental sciences and education were significantly reoriented in view of addressing the Decade priorities. As a result, UNESCO developed more integrated and multi-disciplinary approaches, in line with the Yokohama Plan of Action and Strategy.

Source:

- [Lukas Schemper, Science Diplomacy and the Making of the United Nations International Decade for Natural Disaster](#)

[Reduction, in: Diplomatica 1 \(2019\), pp. 255-256](#)

- [Activities of the International Decade for Natural Disaster Reduction, Report of the Secretary-General, General Assembly, Fifty-fourth session, July 1999, A/54/132 - E/1999/80, p.13](#)
- ISDR, Living with Risk, A global review of disaster reduction initiatives, Volume 2, Geneva 2004, UNDP: p.83-84

World Meteorological Organization (WMO)



WMO's vision is to provide global leadership in expertise and international cooperation in weather, climate, hydrology and water resources and related environmental issues, thereby contributing to the safety and wellbeing of people throughout the world.

Many activities of WMO, in particular under its World Weather Watch and Hydrology and Water Resources

Program, were indistinguishably geared towards supporting the aims of the Decade.

In cooperation with UNESCO and its Intergovernmental Oceanographic Commission, and the International Council of Scientific Unions (ICSU), WMO has been the scientific and technical driving force for many IDNDR activities on weather and climate-related disasters. As the Decade coincided with an increased interest in global climate modelling, forecasting and monitoring, WMO played a key role in this regard. It was also engaged in the early stages of development of the WMO/UNEP-administered Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change and the secretariat of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change. WMO's World Climate Program has been a steady technical partner of IDNDR in the Inter-Agency Task Force on El Niño.

Together with UNESCO it co-organized the [Sub-Forum on Science and Technology in support of natural disaster reduction](#), which happened simultaneously with the IDNDR Programme Forum in Geneva in July 1999.

Source:

- [Activities of the International Decade for Natural Disaster Reduction, Report of the Secretary-General, General Assembly, Fifty-fourth session, July 1999, A/54/132 - E/1999/80, p.13](#)
- Disaster Reduction Training Activities of the WMO, in "Stop Disasters" Magazine, Number 26, IV/1995, p.19
- ISDR, Living with Risk, A global review of disaster reduction initiatives, Volume 2, Geneva 2004, pp. 89-91

World Health Organisation (WHO)/Pan-American Health Organization (PAHO)



WHO, with its headquarters in Geneva, Switzerland, has collaborated in IDNDR initiatives since the launch of the Decade. WHO's approach to disaster reduction concentrated during that period on the reduction of health-

related disaster vulnerabilities and the strengthening of public health systems and infrastructures through better preparedness and mitigation. WHO provided training to ministries of health and their staff, and distributed guidelines, publications and audio-visual material on ways to prepare for and assess the health impact of disasters. WHO had several collaborating centres on disaster reduction around the world, including the renowned [Centre for Research on the Epidemiology of Disasters \(CRED\)](#) at the University of Louvain in Brussels.

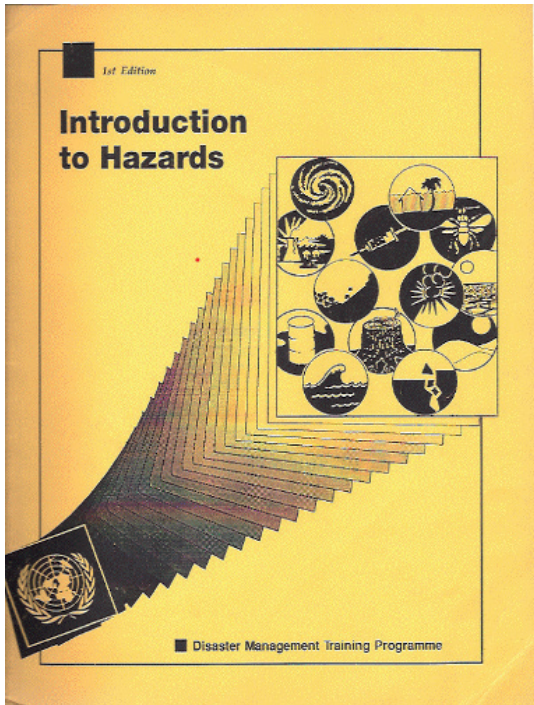


The Pan-American Health Organization (PAHO), the WHO Regional Office for the Americas, was (and is)

the most active WHO regional office in the field of disaster reduction. PAHO was a close collaborator and contributor to IDNDR and its regional office in Latin-America and the Caribbean (LAC). It co-organized several regional IDNDR meetings in the Americas (see above) and was prominently engaged in most IDNDR campaigns and disaster reduction days in the LAC region. It also published the influential *Disasters, Preparedness and Mitigation in the Americas/ Desastres, Preparativos y Mitigación en las Américas*, news and information Letter, (all issues since 1995 can be accessed here). In February 1997, PAHO, in collaboration with the IDNDR Regional Office and various agencies and humanitarian organizations, decided to expand the existing Center for Disaster Documentation (CDD) in San José, Costa Rica, and create the [Regional Center for Information on Disasters \(CRID\)](#) as a platform for coordination and intersectoral collaboration in the area of information on disasters.

Source:

- ISDR, Living with Risk, A global review of disaster reduction initiatives, Volume 2, Geneva 2004, UNDP: pp. 89-90.
- [CRID, What is the CRID?](#)



United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)



UNDP's work during the early years of the Decade focused mainly on education and training activities. Together with UNDRO (later DHA), it managed the Disaster Management Training Programme (DMTP), which was launched in 1991, with support from the Disaster Management Center of the University of Wisconsin (USA). Training modules focused on key aspects of disaster reduction, such as Introduction to Hazards, Disaster Mitigation,

Disaster Preparedness, Disasters and Development, Disaster and the Environment, Vulnerability and Risk Assessment. The modules were one of the earliest global efforts to compile all available knowledge at that time on disaster reduction (and humanitarian action). An overview of the DMTP material can be found [here](#).

UNDP was an active member of the Inter-Agency Steering Committee for the Decade, and engaged in a number of IDNDR Demonstration Projects and Programmes (see above).

In 1998 the United Nations General Assembly decided to, "transfer to UNDP the responsibilities of the Emergency Relief Coordinator (head of OCHA) for operational activities for natural disaster mitigation, prevention and preparedness". As a result, UNDP in the following years expanded its activities in risk and vulnerability reduction in developing countries and played a more active and prominent role in the post-2000 ISDR period through its Bureau for Crisis Prevention and Recovery (BCPR).

Source:

- ISDR, Living with Risk, A global review of disaster reduction initiatives, Volume 2, Geneva 2004, UNDP: p.81-83.
- Disasters Preparedness and Mitigation - Issue No. 43 - July, 1990 (PAHO), UNDP prepares to meet challenges of the IDNDR

United Nations Environmental Programme (UNEP)



UNEP, based in Nairobi, is the leading global environmental authority and promotes the implementation of the environmental dimension in sustainable development and disaster reduction work within the United Nations. Already, in 1988, UNEP had published the pioneering study: Awareness and Preparedness for Emergencies at the Local Level

(APELL): A Process for Responding to Technological Accidents (Geneva). UNEP was a member of the IDNDR Inter-Agency Steering Committee and played a central role in the organization of the IDNDR/UNEP regional meeting for Africa in May 1999, which took place in Nairobi.

Source: ISDR, Living with Risk, A global review of disaster reduction initiatives, Volume 2, Geneva 2004, UNDP: pp. 84-85

Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO)



During the Decade, FAO recognized the importance of disaster reduction in its work. The [Rome Declaration on World Food Security](#) (November 1996) specifically stated that FAO would endeavour to prevent and be prepared for disasters and other emergencies, focusing on food-production requirements and rehabilitation activities. In 1994, FAO established a [Special Programme for Food Security](#), aiming to address the need of better disaster reduction through, inter alia, enhanced water control and the diversification of production. FAO's [Global Information and Early Warning Service \(GIEWS\)](#) continuously monitors crops and food-supply conditions worldwide and provides warning of impending food shortages to the international community.

GIEWS has extensively monitored the impact of El Niño on the crop and food supply situation in affected countries. In 1998, FAO regularly reported to the IDNDR secretariat on the impact of the El Niño and La Niña phenomena on food and the agricultural sector. FAO also participated in the international IDNDR conference on early warning for the reduction of disasters, held at Potsdam, Germany, in September 1998.

Source:

- ISDR, Living with Risk, A global review of disaster reduction initiatives, Volume 2, Geneva 2004, pp.78-79
- [Activities of the International Decade for Natural Disaster Reduction, Report of the Secretary-General, General Assembly, Fifty-fourth session, July 1999, A/54/132 - E/1999/80, \(p.12\)](#)

World Food Programme (WFP)

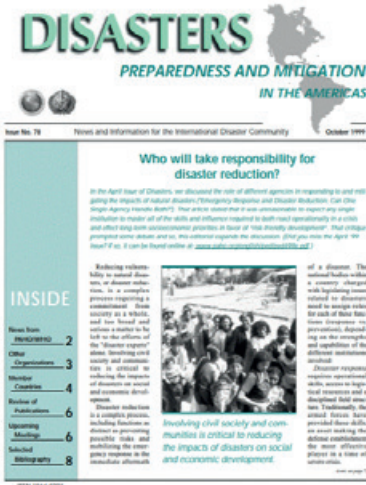


WFP is mandated by the United Nations to combat global hunger. At the end of the Decade, WFP became increasingly engaged in disaster reduction issues. In 1999, the WFP key strategy document, [Enabling Development](#), identified disaster mitigation as one of

five priority areas of action, expressing a focus on reduction of the impact of natural hazards on food security for vulnerable populations. A steering committee for disaster mitigation was established to assist country and regional offices in integrating disaster mitigation activities into their development programmes. Guidelines on disaster mitigation were prepared and tested in pilot projects in selected country offices. The formalization of the WFP role in disaster mitigation was reflected in a new generation of programming documents. In 2000, nine of the 11 country strategy outlines and country programmes included disaster mitigation activities.

Source:

- ISDR, Living with Risk, A global review of disaster reduction initiatives, Volume 2, Geneva 2004, pp.88-89



Living with Risk, A global review of disaster reduction initiatives, Volume 2, Geneva 2004

United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF)



The UNICEF mandate is to protect and improve the wellbeing of the most vulnerable groups, children and women, anywhere in the world. By definition, this includes aspects of disaster preparedness and prevention. Following the recommendation of the Yokohama Strategy and Plan of Action for a Safer World to include disaster reduction into national development plans, UNICEF programme and policy guidance incorporated disaster reduction elements into country programmes in disaster-prone countries. Vulnerability and capacity assessments in relation to natural hazards were being introduced as integral to the situation analysis process at country level. UNICEF also increasingly cooperated with UNDP as part of United Nations country teams in support of disaster preparedness activities in national development plans.

Source:

- ISDR, Living with Risk, A global review of disaster reduction initiatives, Volume 2, Geneva 2004, p.81

International Telecommunication Union (ITU)



Through its mandate in telecommunications, the International Telecommunication Union (ITU) has played a major role throughout the Decade in promoting and guiding the further growth and spread of cheap and convenient telecommunication systems worldwide. Along with the spectacular development of the World Wide Web, this has helped to make telecommunications more accessible, more versatile and more valuable for disaster reduction, especially in communications for purposes of early warning.

Source:

- [Activities of the International Decade for Natural Disaster Reduction, Report of the Secretary-General, General Assembly, Fifty-fourth session, July 1999, A/54/132 - E/1999/80 \(pp.12-13\)](#)
- ISDR, Living with Risk, A global review of disaster reduction initiatives, Volume 2, Geneva 2004, p.80

UNIDO (United Nations Industrial Development Organization)



UNIDO contributed to the goals of IDNDR through the technical assistance it provided to the construction sector. This assistance related to improved structural design, promotion of disaster-resistant building shapes and the use of improved materials and fixing methods. UNIDO also contributed to disaster reduction in coastal areas through the promotion of risk-assessment methods in its coastal-zone management and tools for environmental risk assessment program.

Source: [Activities of the International Decade for Natural Disaster Reduction, Report of the Secretary-General, General Assembly, Fifty-fourth session, July 1999, A/54/132 - E/1999/80, p.13](#)

UN-HABITAT



UN-HABITAT promotes socially and environmentally

sustainable towns and cities with the goal of providing adequate shelter for all. The Habitat Agenda, adopted at the HABITAT II Conference in Istanbul (1996), called upon the agency to assist member states in disaster prevention, mitigation and preparedness, and post-disaster rehabilitation capabilities in human settlements, taking into account the outcome of the Yokohama Conference and Strategy. The 1996 IDNDR Campaign: ‘Cities at Risk’ was closely associated with the HABITAT II Conference.

Source:

- [ISDR, Disaster Risk Reduction in the United Nations Roles, mandates and areas of work of key United Nations entities, Geneva, 2009, p.58](#)
- ISDR, Living with Risk, A global review of disaster reduction initiatives, Volume 2, Geneva 2004, UNDP: pp. 85-86

The World Bank Group



The World Bank Group, based in Washington DC, (USA) had, as one

of the world’s largest sources of development assistance, the ability to play a significant role in disaster reduction. Towards the end of the IDNDR, development institutions started to increasingly address disaster risk as an integral part of development. A key milestone for the World Bank in this process was the establishment of the Disaster Management Facility (DMF) in July 1998. DMF promoted disaster risk management as a priority area for poverty reduction through the integration of (disaster) risk analysis into project design and the inclusion of effective prevention and mitigation measures into the Bank’s Country Assistance Strategies. World Bank trained staff to design safer

investments aimed at empowering communities to reduce their vulnerability to hazards. In the new millennium the World Bank would play an even more pivotal role in disaster reduction at global level through the establishment of the [ProVention Consortium](#) in 2000.

Source:

- ISDR, Living with Risk, A global review of disaster reduction initiatives, Volume 2, Geneva 2004, pp. 87-88.
- Margaret Arnold, International planning systems for disaster, in: Ben Wisner, JC Gaillard and Ilan Kelman, *The Routledge Handbook of Hazards and Disaster Risk Reduction*, London/New-York, 2012, pp. 603 - 619



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