



**Joint Meeting of the Executive Boards
of UNDP/UNFPA, UNICEF and WFP
19 and 22 January 2007
United Nations**

Background document

Agenda item 1: Natural disaster preparedness and opportunities

Background Paper for the Joint Meeting of the Executive Boards January 2007

Natural Disaster Preparedness and Opportunities

I. Challenges as opportunities

1. The first six years of the 21st century have been marked by escalating economic losses and human devastation associated with natural disasters. In 2005 alone, some 157 million people were affected by natural hazard events, an increase of 7 million over 2004. In the first half of 2006, 174 disaster events occurred in 68 countries, killing thousands of people and causing damages worth \$6.2 billion¹. Current trends indicate that the number and impact of natural hazards will continue to escalate.
2. Natural disasters and the development processes have mutual impacts. Disasters exact an enormous toll on lives and livelihoods, on homes, basic services and infrastructure. Moreover, the destruction typically has a disproportionate impact on the poorest and the most vulnerable groups, including women, children, youth and the aged. Recurrent, large-scale natural disasters erode development gains and compromise a country's prospects for achieving the Millennium Development Goals. Conversely, the process of development can have a major impact – both positive and negative – on creating or reducing disaster risks.
3. Preparedness is defined herein as early action to minimize losses and suffering, meet needs and enhance resilience. Preparedness is principally about anticipating possible circumstances and consequences, and responding to and reducing risks. The preparedness challenge is thus to prevent loss of life and damages or disruption to communities' livelihoods, basic services and infrastructure. Two general aspects of preparedness are highlighted: *preparedness for emergency response*, considering actions from the perspective of shorter-term emergency situations; and *risk reduction* as preparedness, taking a longer-term perspective of addressing risk patterns.
4. The twofold preparedness challenge—preparedness for emergency response and preparedness as risk reduction—is the central concern of the proposed dialogue on “natural disaster preparedness” in the Joint Meeting of the UNDP/UNFPA, UNICEF and WFP Executive Boards, 19 and 22 January 2007. This background paper has been jointly prepared by UNICEF, WFP, UNDP and UNFPA to outline specific opportunities where additional actions could enhance national preparedness to meet humanitarian needs and help reduce losses from natural disaster impacts.

¹ Centre for Research on the Epidemiology of Disasters.

II. Preparedness for effective response

5. Preparedness for natural disasters is as old as humankind. Notable efforts to enhance preparedness are being undertaken by Governments, civil society and communities around the world, and these efforts are clearly making a positive contribution. However, current efforts must be further enhanced to reduce loss of life, property and human suffering caused by natural disasters.
6. Disaster preparedness is generally adequate when, at the time of a natural event, essential functions are performed rapidly and effectively and in ways that minimize losses and maximize the abilities of affected societies to cope and to recover from the disaster's impacts. Three key questions can help identify actions that will address preparedness gaps: What are the actual and potential risks from natural disasters and what threats do they pose? What measures are being taken to enhance resilience so that life, property and social functions are protected? What additional measures would lead to ensuring greater protection from potential impacts and a sustainable reduction of risk factors?
7. The challenge of disaster preparedness falls principally to affected communities and national authorities. Together, they play the central role in enhancing resilience, through the entire spectrum of risk management: prevention, mitigation, preparedness, response, rehabilitation and recovery. There is no substitute for national ownership and active leadership with strong participation by all stakeholders. Thus, external support should focus on strengthening national preparedness for natural disasters.
8. Strengthening national preparedness can help reduce losses and ensure more rapid response to meeting urgent needs. However, preparedness levels vary significantly; in most cases, inadequate preparedness is linked more closely to poor response than to lack of capacity. Even where exceptional capacities exist, problems in emergency response are likely if preparations have been inadequate for the exceptional requirements of the disaster situation.
9. **Improved early warning.** Information that enables people and services to take early action in the face of an impending potential natural disaster is widely recognized as a sine qua non of preparedness. Numerous efforts have been supported to improve early warning systems, and considerably more attention has been given to this concept since the Indian Ocean tsunami. The declining overall mortality rates, particularly during storms and floods in which evacuations have been more dependably organized, are evidence of the positive contributions of such efforts. Nonetheless, there are improvements possible in all early warning systems, and national preparedness can be strengthened by addressing several key areas. Three are highlighted below.
10. *Access to tools.* Global knowledge and tools for detecting and assessing the risks of potential storms, floods and other natural hazards are rapidly improving, as are technical communication capabilities to share this information and send warning

messages. Future disaster response will depend on the access to and use of available global and national early warning information as well as on the link to national and local response teams. As a result, significant improvements can be made where organizations and disaster-prone communities enhance the integration of available early warning into ongoing processes and activities, and where early warning and assessment tools can be further adapted to local use.

11. *Focus of early warning and preparedness.* There is growing recognition that early warning and preparedness efforts should integrate indicators of human welfare and factors influencing resilience and coping capacities. For example, crop assessments and other types of drought-monitoring alone provide insufficient warning indicators of the need for an emergency response to child malnutrition. This is because drought and crop failure only partially explain high levels of malnutrition, since household food distribution, weaning practices and poor health status, for example, also exacerbate existing vulnerabilities. Similarly, regarding needs in other types of natural hazards, shifting the early warning focus to a greater recognition of factors influencing resilience and coping capacities of affected communities provides an important opportunity for enhancing the effectiveness of national preparedness and early warning efforts.

12. *Social and cultural factors.* Improving the linkages between ‘early warnings’ and action is also essential. Warnings that do not lead to appropriate action contribute little, and action in response to warnings is only partly dependent on technical alerts or technology. How families and communities perceive threats, understand warnings, and know the appropriate action to take constitute but a few of the factors that influence whether correct action is taken. In this regard, local knowledge and traditional warning systems can play vital roles, underlining the importance of engaging the most vulnerable groups, including children. Taken together, the effectiveness of preparedness and early warning can be significantly improved through better understanding and integration of the social factors that influence decision-making at all levels.

13. **Improving the dependability of emergency response.** This remains an ongoing goal of preparedness efforts. Emergency response systems have moved towards more structured systems to guide emergency response, and to more systematic action protocols, including standard operating procedures. While effective response to emergencies will always require flexibility and innovation, the ongoing processes to strengthen existing structures and to utilize standard operating procedures will further enhance national preparedness for natural disasters.

14. Broad-based contingency planning is increasingly recognized as a helpful process in improving the dependability of emergency response. Contingency planning attempts to identify both response requirements and agreed arrangements to avoid or overcome obstacles that may impede effective action. As a vital preparedness tool, the practice of contingency planning still varies widely and the challenges to effective contingency planning are seen across all systems. Recent experience has underlined that effective contingency planning should (a) be a process of dynamic planning; (b) be carried out

with rather than *for* those who must act; (c) be monitored for quality of planning and preparedness; and (d) lead to action on essential preparedness measures.

15. **Mobilization emergency response.** Enhanced capacities to mobilize and manage emergency response can significantly improve national preparedness. Effective mobilization in response to natural disasters requires a series of actions, including the following: improved assessment, putting in place action plans, setting standards and guiding action, fielding staff to manage and support efforts; mobilizing resources, supplies and logistics; managing information; and managing internal as well as external assistance, among many other functions.

16. *Benefiting from local capacity.* Often underestimated in the response to natural disasters, this element has proven fundamental to enhancing national preparedness. National systems, families, communities, and public and private resources all have capacities that contribute enormously to emergency response. In enhancing national preparedness, a key challenge is thus to help foster resilience in all segments of society so that existing capacities can be effectively identified and mobilized to address the needs created by disasters and to foster more rapid recovery.

17. *National management of assistance.* External assistance from other national systems, regional and United Nations organizations, private industry, civil society organizations and global networks can also make positive contributions to emergency response and recovery. However, the number of groups offering to help and the types of assistance offered in natural disasters has increased rapidly. Strong national management of assistance must therefore be an essential element in national preparedness efforts. Without such strong coordination, large-scale assistance, however well-intentioned, can undermine recovery and local capacities, whereas well-managed external assistance can considerably enhance local efforts.

III. Risk reduction as national preparedness

18. The impact of hazard events is determined by how risks are managed by societies. Whether or not threats become disasters depends on the protective measures put in place to mitigate potential impact, including reduction of the risk itself and the reduction of human vulnerability. Risk is a function of exposure to hazards and a population's underlying vulnerability. For example, a population may be 'at risk' when, because of a changing climate, environmental degradation, unsafe construction practices, increasing population density and poverty, communities have limited opportunities to take sufficient protective measures against storms and floods.

19. Risk reduction may thus be anticipatory – ensuring, through measures such as land-use planning, building controls and others, that development does not generate new risk. It may also be compensatory – concerned with the development of early warning systems, training personnel for response management, the development of evacuation plans, etc. These latter measures are meant to mitigate the losses from accumulated and

current risk. The recovery phase after major disasters is a unique opportunity to engage in both types of risk reduction.

20. In January 2005, 168 countries adopted the *Hyogo Declaration* at the World Conference on Disaster Reduction, in Kobe, Japan, towards implementing the *Hyogo Framework for Action*. Implementation of this global consensus calls on countries to carry out five tasks:

- Ensure that disaster risk reduction is a national and local priority, with a strong institutional basis for implementation.
- Identify, assess and monitor disaster risks and enhance early warning.
- Use knowledge, innovation and education to build a culture of safety and resilience.
- Reduce the underlying risk factors.
- Strengthen disaster preparedness for response at all levels.

Some 92 countries to date have established or are in the process of establishing national risk reduction platforms. The goal of universal coverage will help the Hyogo Framework for Action initiative make a global contribution to national preparedness.

21. Risk-reduction programmes represent key opportunities to enhance national preparedness for natural disasters. Potential losses from natural disasters can be reduced, and societies can be better able to deal with disasters, when appropriate action is stimulated at national and local levels. Central to stimulating action is the need to raise awareness, engender wide engagement in preparedness in all parts of society, and translate assessment of local risks into protective measures. To achieve these goals, preparedness and risk reduction programmes will need priority support through enhanced advocacy, financial backing and strong national efforts to translate preparedness principles to practical action.

IV. The contributions of UNDP, UNFPA, UNICEF and WFP

22. The United Nations funds and programmes have invested significant resources and efforts to establish effective emergency preparedness and response capacities. These efforts are focused on reinforcing national disaster preparedness, strengthening the preparedness and response capacities of the United Nations system to provide support, and improving the work of humanitarian agencies to prepare for and respond to emergencies.

23. *United Nations agencies' support of national preparedness.* Member States and agencies of the United Nations have supported national capacity-building for emergencies from the inception of the organization. For UNICEF, the focus on emergencies began with its founding in 1946; building national capacities was enshrined in the organization's founding principles. WFP, since it was founded in 1963, has shifted from mainly providing development aid to predominantly supporting international and national responses to relief and recovery operations. UNDP, for its part, has long

supported the development of national emergency systems. UNFPA has increasingly recognized the strong role it has to play in emergencies, particularly regarding population issues, demographics, gender, including sexual and gender-based violence, and reproductive health.

24. UNDP and UNICEF, for example, have for years collaboratively supported a national disaster preparedness training programme in Bangladesh. UNDP, working with ministerial partners, continues to support the establishment of national institutional and legislative systems for disaster risk management, which, in turn, influences and shapes national policies to integrate risk reduction concerns into development plans. Through its direct technical support, UNDP actively contributes to integrating the planning and management of risk reduction into recovery phases following major disasters. UNICEF supports national capacity-building with regard to essential threats to children in emergencies. The organization has also begun a four-year global initiative to build capacities in the area of education in emergencies, with these efforts to include risk-reduction measures, and is collaborating with the Inter-Agency Secretariat of the International Strategy for Disaster Reduction (ISDR) on promoting global use of a children's learning tool about safety and risk, called "Riskland." WFP is actively working alongside Governments to support the implementation of the Hyogo Declaration. UNFPA has increasingly supported national capacity-building in emergency preparedness as an integral part of regular country programme activities. For instance, in Iran, UNFPA assists national partners in strengthening their preparedness capacity to address reproductive health concerns in emergency and post-conflict situations. Protocols have been developed and training organized on how to provide reproductive health information and services during humanitarian crises.

25. Other United Nations agencies have also supported national preparedness, typically, as an extension of ongoing functions – UNHCR with regard to refugee issues, WHO with regard to health risks, UNEP with regard to environmental risks, and so forth. The United Nations Disaster Relief Organization, the predecessor of OCHA, was established in 1972 to further enhance international support and coordination of emergency issues, particularly for natural disasters. Today, OCHA is helping to coordinate and support national preparedness efforts.

26. *Enhancing the capacities of funds and programmes to better support national efforts.* With the support of Member States and partners, agencies such as UNICEF, WFP, UNDP and UNFPA have substantially enhanced their internal preparedness and emergency response capacities to better support national efforts. UNICEF, for example, has strengthened emergency support functions at all levels, has institutionalized preparedness and contingency planning in all offices, has enhanced policy and operational capacities and has developed new training and simulation modules. WFP has similarly improved its capacities to prepare for and respond in emergencies through the upgrading of its assessment, contingency planning and operational capacities. WFP has mainstreamed emergency preparedness throughout the organization, now widely using contingency and operational planning as strategic planning tools and as part of the organization's enterprise risk management initiative. Similarly, regional response

facilities, such as the United Nations Humanitarian Response Depots, have been established to ensure a more timely, effective and appropriate response. UNDP has enhanced its capacities to assist national partners through support of national preparedness for natural disasters and with regard to prevention, risk reduction and recovery. The UNDP/UNFPA Executive Board in September 2006 endorsed a new UNFPA strategy for emergency preparedness, humanitarian response, transition and recovery. Such efforts by all our agencies are being carried out in partnership with government entities, civil society organizations, technical institutes and centres of excellence.

27. *Working together to enhance national preparedness.* United Nations agencies are collaborating closely in efforts to enhance national emergency preparedness, a process further enhanced by the ongoing United Nations reform processes, including very promising possibilities through the new ‘cluster approach’ for improved emergency response. UNICEF, WFP, UNDP and UNFPA share information about preparedness programmes and strategies on an ongoing basis, and work closely in the Inter-Agency Standing Committee sub-Working Group on Preparedness and Contingency Planning, which brings together the various United Nations agencies and other stakeholders to encourage common analysis and coordinated contingency planning for natural disaster and other threats.

28. At the national level, United Nations country teams have been encouraged to give higher priority to preparedness and to include risk reduction concerns in national support efforts and in common planning cycles (e.g., Common Country Assessment/United Nations Development Assistance Framework). Consequently, these concerns are reflected in the country programmes of each of the United Nations funds and programmes. This work is being coordinated with the ISDR to provide more coherent and consolidated disaster-reduction support to Governments, linking the system to national development strategies, with a view to ‘disaster-proofing’ the Millennium Development Goals.

V. Conclusion

29. National emergency preparedness is a long-running process in which societies around the world work to protect their citizens and assets. While substantial achievements can be credited to these efforts, the losses from natural disasters continue to increase. Enhancing national preparedness needs to include a two-pronged emphasis – improving national preparedness to effectively meet needs when disasters occur, and risk reduction to support longer-term preparedness. These efforts require a higher public visibility, backed by resources and practical action, and wide-scale mobilization, with an emphasis on community preparedness. The funds and programmes of the United Nations system are jointly committed to supporting national efforts in the global challenge to reduce the impact of natural disasters.