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Foreword

In 1992, the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro presented Agenda 21 as a master plan to achieve sustainable development. Agenda 21 demonstrates universal goodwill and commitment for a world that is prospering, just and habitable. Rio's action plan is based on the premise that sustainable development is not just an option, but an imperative. It is equally based on the firm belief that sustainable development can be achieved if appropriate action is taken.

Three years earlier, in 1989, the international community agreed on a far-reaching and innovative strategy to counter the threats of natural disasters. The United Nations General Assembly proclaimed the 1990s the International Decade for Natural Disaster Reduction, and established a multisectoral Framework of Action. IDNDR's mid-term review was carried out by the World Conference on Natural Disaster Reduction, in Yokohama, Japan in May 1994. The Yokohama Strategy and Plan of Action confirm and strengthen IDNDR's objective to reduce the loss of life, property damage and socioeconomic disruption caused by natural, technological and environmental disasters.

In June this year, the international community concluded a thorough process of developing an agenda for two themes of global importance: "Adequate shelter for all" and "Sustainable human settlements in an urbanizing world." The Second United Nations Conference on Human Settlements, held in Istanbul, brought a cycle of thematic world conferences to a successful close. The Habitat Agenda is a global call for action and offers a positive vision of sustainable human settlements.

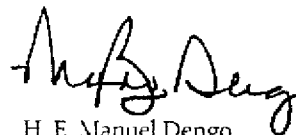
All three conferences and their plans of action are closely intertwined in their general commitment towards a safe and just world in the twenty-first century. They also have in common many areas of specific action. One of these areas is the reduction of vulnerability of people and communities at risk from the threats of nature and the earth. The protection of assets from the impacts of disasters – protection of lives, knowledge and skills, property, financial assets, means of production and infrastructure – is an indispensable part of national plans and strategies for sustainable development.

This publication highlights the threat from natural, environmental and technological hazards in an area of rising concern – urban settlements and cities of the future. It demonstrates even more amply our potential to combat these threats effectively.

On the historic commemoration of the United Nations fiftieth anniversary, in November 1995, Member States adopted on a Declaration which solemnly reaffirms the purpose and principles of the United Nations Charter. At the same time, Member States seized the opportunity to redirect the United Nations to help those who are suffering and are deeply deprived.

To foster sustained economic growth, social development, environmental protection and social justice in fulfilment of commitments made on international cooperation for development, Member States declared that they will: "intensify cooperation on natural disaster reduction and major technological and man-made disasters, disaster relief, post-disaster rehabilitation and humanitarian assistance in order to enhance the capabilities of affected countries to cope with such situations."

For "Cities at Risk," action must not be delayed.



H. E. Manuel Dengo

Ambassador of Costa Rica to the United Nations
Chairman, IDNDR Contact Group, Geneva, Switzerland

Part One: Why Focus on Disasters in Cities?

Are the cities of today and tomorrow waiting for a disaster to happen? Every day, there are news reports about cities stricken by natural or technological disasters. This is likely to continue, and become worse unless we change our policies and actions on environment and development.

Why are cities at risk? First, more people are settling in areas vulnerable to hazards. Second, rapid population growth and migration make it difficult for authorities to protect people from disasters. Finally, urbanization is upsetting balances in ecosystems, with added disasters as a result.

Kobe, Los Angeles, Medellin, Quito, Almaty... What these cities have in common is that they all have been stricken recently by major natural disasters. Disasters have become part of the image and psyche of these places.

But these cities and towns have something else in common: a new awareness and political commitment to protect their communities from future disasters. This kind of awareness and commitment, unfortunately, usually comes *after* a disaster strikes.

How to Use this Publication

This publication aims to:

- ▶ Encourage urban authorities to lead the way in protecting their cities from disasters.
- ▶ Raise awareness among local, national and international organizations about the growing need to integrate disaster prevention and emergency management in urban public policies.
- ▶ Outline policies and examples that may be adapted to local circumstances.
- ▶ Facilitate networking, an exchange of experiences, and partnerships between all organizations interested in making cities safer from disasters.

It is hoped that this report will serve as a practical tool for debate and action.

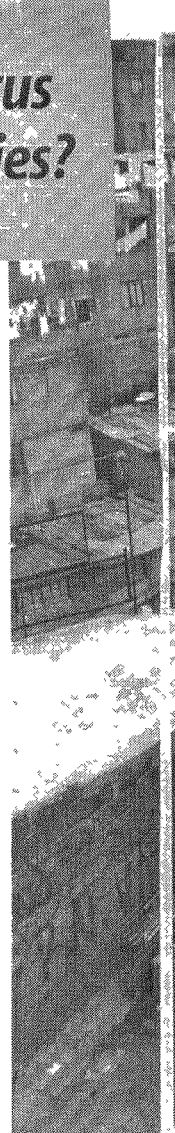
Format

The publication is divided in three parts. The first section indicates why cities are at risk, and which people are most vulnerable. The second section provides insights on how some local communities are protecting themselves. The third section provides policy guidelines, networking contacts, references, and a copy of a poster detailing solutions for cities at risk.

Public Awareness Campaign for Cities at Risk

This report is part of the 1996 public awareness campaign on Cities at Risk for the International Decade for Natural Disaster Reduction (IDNDR, 1990-2000). Each year, organizations around the world celebrate a World Disaster Reduction Day on the second Wednesday of October. The campaign is coordinated by the United Nations IDNDR Secretariat. Partners include national and local government agencies, NGOs, businesses, universities and UN agencies. Other IDNDR Secretariat campaign contributions include an Internet conference, an international poster contest, five flyers with tips for local organizers, and an internationally acclaimed community action booklet for children (reprinted from last year's campaign). These tools are designed to help interested organizations organize local campaigns for World Disaster Reduction Day. Reports are provided to the IDNDR Secretariat and published to encourage further networking and exchange.

The campaign complements the 1996 UN "City Summit," Habitat II. Habitat II discussed how cities can become environmentally, economically and socially sustainable in the 21st century, and its final document recommends more widespread use of disaster mitigation measures in urban





Children in the world's largest city - Mexico City

areas. Yet disasters were not among the priorities on Habitat II's two-week agenda. "The concept of allocating some resources for hazard mitigation in the urban Third World is in its earliest infancy," noted Spencer Haylick, a US disaster mitigation expert, in 1986. "The norm of most cities in developing nations is to cope with the immediate day-to-day challenge of biological and political survival." Ten years later, it is hoped that this report and the collective efforts of organizations involved in this year's campaign will encourage urban decision makers to make cities safer - before the next disaster strikes.

Information Sources

The report is based on primary and secondary sources, both published and unpublished. These included interviews, books, articles, conference proceedings, videos, research papers, statistics, letters and memoranda.

- ▶ **Interviews** about 25 experts working in the field of disaster management were interviewed between January and April 1996
- ▶ **Circular letters** requests for success stories of disaster reduction in urban areas and policy background materials were addressed to three groups between October and February 1996
 - (a) Mayors in selected disaster-prone cities in all geographic regions (60)
 - (b) International city associations and networks (6)
 - (c) National IDNDR Committees, members of the IDNDR Scientific and Technical Committee, international organizations, selected NGOs, and other organizations that conducted activities for IDNDR Day 1995 (1500)
- ▶ **Written and audiovisual materials** about 100 sources were reviewed between December and June 1996. Those used (directly or indirectly) are acknowledged within this report
- ▶ **Conference announcement** During the 2nd International Conference of Local Authorities Confronting Disasters and Emergencies (Amsterdam, April 1996), calls for case studies were made at the start of each of the 18 workshop sessions (600 people attended)
- ▶ **Newsletter/Internet announcements** by the Natural Hazards Observer, Disaster Research electronic bulletin (Natural Hazards Research Center), and the Disasters Newsletter (PAHO) in the first months of 1996

There were a few problems in gathering information. International and national databases do not distinguish between rural and urban areas when collecting statistics on disasters. Urban disaster statistics used in this report were pieced together through interviews and articles, on a case-by-case basis.

In addition, there were few documented urban success stories on reducing the impact of disasters. Urban disaster mitigation research is difficult to find, in part because national and international funders (not local practitioners) influence research agendas. The other reason is because disaster mitigation is, by definition, an issue that receives little visibility. Successful mitigation efforts avert disaster. They therefore receive much less attention than disaster events and subsequent relief activities.