

...and makes more people vulnerable to disasters

- ▶ The number of people affected by disasters has been growing 6% each year since 1960. Of these victims, 90% have been affected by natural disasters, many in urban areas.⁹
- ▶ Cities in industrialized countries are also at risk: the 1995 Kobe earthquake killed 6300 people and incurred financial losses of \$100 billion – the costliest disaster ever.
- ▶ Before 1987, there was only one disaster that cost insurance companies \$1 billion. Since 1987, there have been at least 15 – and most of this loss was in industrialized countries.¹⁰
- ▶ Poor people everywhere are most at risk. For example, the 1976 Guatemala earthquake is known as a “poor-quake” because nearly all of the victims in Guatemala City were in slum areas near ravines.¹¹

But we can do something...

- ▶ Current trends of rapid urban growth and ensuing environmental degradation increase people's vulnerability to disasters. If left unchanged, disasters will take an ever-greater toll on lives and property.
- ▶ Technical knowledge exists on how to reduce the effects of disasters. Structural measures are available, such as making buildings cyclone or earthquake-resistant. There are also non-structural options such as limiting types of land use or providing tax incentives that direct development away from hazard-prone areas.
- ▶ In many cases, this knowledge has been applied successfully. Warning systems installed in Caribbean countries have reduced the number of lives lost each year during the hurricane season. After new soil and grading regulations were introduced in Los Angeles, USA, losses from landslides were virtually eliminated.¹² In a 1990 earthquake in San Jose, Costa Rica, a retrofitted portion of a hospital survived intact, while ceilings fell, glass broke and walls cracked in the unreinforced part.¹³
- ▶ Such measures need not be costly. Building earthquake-resistant hospitals, for example, only adds 10% (sometimes as little as 2%) to construction costs. Nor do all of these measures have to be sophisticated. By planting trees, buildings are sheltered from strong winds, or hillsides are less prone to erosion.
- ▶ But technological knowledge alone is not enough. People need to be aware that cities are at risk, and politically committed to reduce those risks. The key message is: people can contribute to the rise of natural disasters, or they can help keep them under control.