



# Global ISDR

**Urban Risk Platform in LAC: An initiative from, for and by cities in the region to contribute to their safe, sustainable development**

By Fernando Ramírez Cortés

The complexity of disaster risk management in urban settings

Urban settings in large cities are highly complex from a perspective of public disaster risk management. This is basically due to the fact that risk arises from the city's own transforming processes and depends on its particular physical, environmental, economic, demographic, cultural and political characteristics. A city is a complex, dynamic system that is constantly changing and adjusting its structures and functions to the demands and relationships among people, and between them and their physical/natural or built environments. This complexity is manifested in the simultaneity of hazards and risks that have complex correlations of causality and that are changing constantly due to territorial, social and economic dynamics.

The built environment, which in an urban setting is dense, is the cumulative result of historical processes of formal and informal building. The nature, functions and spatial distribution of this environment are heterogeneous. It is also dynamic, since it ages, renews itself, changes its use, grows and modernizes. It therefore has functional or structural vulnerabilities that vary over time, depending on normative (codes, regulations, plans), economic (e.g. supply and demand for land), cultural (customary use) and demographic (pressure on unoccupied areas) factors.

The flow of goods and services, spurred by modern technological advances, along with an extensive supply of means of transportation and media outlets, drive a complex, dense network of highly specialized industrial and commercial activities that bring with them risk factors inherent in their processes. In addition, they also require adequate levels of service from utility systems (electricity, water, gas, communications, Internet), and waste disposal systems (garbage collection and disposal, and sewer systems, among others). Thus, in large cities, a critical breakdown in one of these systems has, in addition to the direct effect on residents, indirect consequences on the city's economy and productivity that are becoming increasingly more widespread and complex.

From a population perspective, large cities display at least two relevant characteristics: striking socioeconomic differentiation processes, which, among other aspects, lead to the unplanned development of densely populated, marginal areas (usually in the outskirts) that frequently are poorly located, have illegal and informal buildings, and poor infrastructure; are not connected to utility, communication and transportation systems; and have to cope with severe environmental degradation. The concentration of socioeconomic problems in these areas increases the vulnerability of these communities to socio-natural or technological hazards.

The interdependence between cities and their territorial, political-administrative and economic environments, at all levels (local, national, regional and global), also gives them a particular trait from the perspective of risk: the capital exposed (human, technological, economic, political) in a city is enormous and strategic; that is, the possible losses resulting from a disaster have serious implications for the nation or region to which it belongs. This means that controlling these risks must represent a high priority and a prevailing superior interest.

Some of the primary difficulties of risk management in cities are related to integrating strategies in a setting with many risks; the portrayal and understanding of risk-producing processes; the handling of the uncertainty inherent in this, given the snowball

effect that political decisions have on the public at large; methodological difficulties for prioritizing intervention processes, stakeholders and institutions involved; the different levels of analysis, intervention and coordination; crisis management as an everyday characteristic of city life; and fragmentation in the organization and participation of social actors, among others.

The experience in LAC with risk management in urban settings has been a new learning process, in which some large and mid-sized cities are attempting to discover alternatives for disaster risk management and control, integrating it into other development policies, among society's overriding demands, the deficit in formal urban growth, and the political and economic debate over the role of municipalities and other subnational bodies in the development of their countries.

### *The Urban Risk Platform: An initiative for bringing know-how and skills together*

During the first session of the Global Platform for Disaster Risk Reduction of the International Strategy for Disaster Reduction (ISDR) system, held in Geneva, Switzerland in June 2007, the city of Bogotá, Colombia proposed the creation of a Thematic Platform on Urban Risk for Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC) that would support local governments in building skills for disaster risk reduction in their cities. This initiative was endorsed by UNISDR's Regional Office for the Americas, and with support from the World Bank, a workshop of experts was held in Panama, on February 7-8, 2008. The event was aimed at developing a proposal for the conceptual foundation, specific objectives, key actors involved, strategic partnerships and implementation mechanisms for the Thematic Platform.

This initiative builds on and acknowledges previous experiences with the integration of cities for disaster risk management<sup>1</sup> and its rationale is based on the advance of decentralization policies, population growth and concentration trends, and current levels of vulnerability in the cities of the region. It also recognizes several needs: a more in-depth knowledge about certain risks exclusive to urban settings and the relationships among risk-producing processes; the strengthening of existing capacities for effective advocacy at all levels; and the creation of a standing body in line with global policies (the Hyogo Framework for Action) that promotes sustainability in cooperation processes between cities, and facilitates the monitoring of disaster risk reduction in the region.

The main priority of this initiative is to support local governments and build their skills for implementing and integrating risk management policies into their local development processes, according to their own contexts and priorities.

<sup>1</sup> Radius project: Earthquakes and Megacities Initiative; Project for Risk Reduction in Andean Capital Cities –UNDP / DIPECHO's Action Plan: CEPREDENAC, AECI, FEMICA meeting.



Photo: © UNISDR/Eliana Palm

### What is the Urban Risk Platform?

The Urban Risk Platform is a network of local governments in LAC that are interested in strengthening the integration of disaster risk management into development processes in their cities, by analyzing common problems, sharing experiences and knowledge, strengthening their own risk management processes and fostering initiatives for cooperation among cities and other strategic actors.

### Platform objectives

- Support and strengthen risk management processes already underway in cities; in particular by facilitating and promoting communication and consensus-building processes among the social actors involved. This will lead to decision-making for adopting and applying disaster risk reduction policies.
- Support and strengthen local governments' capacity for political advocacy to influence their own social actors, as well as national governments and other strategic actors.
- Support and strengthen existing initiatives for developing research, education and training skills.
- Develop a global perspective encompassing the past, present and future outlook on disaster risk in the region's cities.
- Promote and facilitate consistency and coordination with global disaster risk reduction policies (the Hyogo Framework for Action) and with sustainable development in general.
- Promote, support and facilitate South-South cooperation initiatives by seeking support from strategic partners, and searching for technical and economic resources.
- Facilitate coordination and relationships with other alliances or associations of cities and countries in the region.

### Platform activities

Following the workshop with experts and the preparation of a technical background document,<sup>2</sup> work is moving forward with the phase of consultation and launching of the Platform, which includes the following: identifying and selecting the initial group of representative cities from each of the subregions; working with the local governments in the chosen cities on the dissemination of information about the initiative and its validation; mapping existing networks, establishing partnerships and/or projects among cities; defining the mechanisms needed for the operation of the Platform; and designing a dissemination strategy.

Preliminary results from this first phase are expected in the second half of 2008 and include the following activities: the launching of the Platform (first meeting with local governments), validation of the background document, development of the first pipeline of projects that are of interest to local governments, preparation of the annual action plan, implementation of operating mechanisms and, finally, implementation of the dissemination strategy.

In contrast to similar networks established in other continents, both the idea and the rationale for this Platform have come from and are for the cities themselves. Therein lies the challenge of these first stages in which the initiative of Bogotá is leveraging support from the leadership of the ISDR and the World Bank, to facilitate the transition to an autonomous process led by a group of local governments in LAC.

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<sup>2</sup> See: [http://www.eird.org/wikies/index.php/Riesgo\\_urbano](http://www.eird.org/wikies/index.php/Riesgo_urbano)

## 2008-2009 World Disaster Reduction Campaign

### Hospitals Safe From Disasters: Reduce Risk, Protect Health Facilities, Save Lives

Photo: © OPS-OMSJ, Jenkins

**H**undreds of hospitals and health facilities are destroyed or damaged every year by disasters caused by natural hazards such as earthquakes, hurricanes and floods. Millions of people are left without emergency care during and after disasters when hospitals and health facilities fail to function.

“Hospitals Safe from Disasters” is a global campaign being launched this year, by the secretariat of the International Strategy for Disaster Reduction (UNISDR) and the World Health Organization (WHO), with support from the Global Facility for Disaster Reduction and Recovery (GFDRR) of the World Bank.

Hospitals, health facilities and health services are a community's lifeline in normal times and are especially critical in times of disaster.

The importance of hospitals and all types of health facilities extends beyond the direct life-saving role they play. They are also powerful symbols of social progress and a prerequisite for stability and economic development. With current knowledge and strong political commitment, countries can reduce risk in hospitals and health facilities and make them safe from disasters by reducing their vulnerability to natural hazards.

Hospitals are safe from disasters when health services are accessible and functioning, at maximum capacity, immediately after a disaster or an emergency. Apart from this, when safe they will not collapse during disasters, killing patients and staff; they can continue to function and provide services as a critical community facility when it is most needed; and they

are organized, with contingency plans in place and a health workforce trained to keep the network operational.

The price we pay for the failure of hospitals or health facilities due to disasters is too high. In comparison, the cost of making hospitals safe from disasters is minimal. Disaster damage to health systems is a human tragedy, results in huge economic losses, deals devastating blows to development goals, and **shakes social confidence**. Making hospitals and health facilities safe from disasters is an economic requirement, and also a social, moral and ethical necessity.

#### **You Can Contribute! Get Involved in the World Campaign!**

*Participate in National Platforms for Disaster Risk Reduction:* The health sector should take a proactive role in National Platforms for Disaster Risk Reduction or similar coordination mechanisms.

*Become an agent of disaster risk reduction:* An intimate knowledge of one's own work environment can help make a health facility safe from disasters. Hospital plans are everyone's business and all health workers must contribute to their preparation.

Seek opportunities to update skills and knowledge: Health workers and all staff working in health facilities — from the largest to the smallest — must constantly update their knowledge and skills about hazards and risk reduction to improve their leadership role in emergency situations.

**The most expensive hospital is the one that fails:**

Hospitals and health facilities represent an enormous investment for any country. Their destruction imposes major economic burdens.

**Disasters are a health and a social issue:**

Not only is health treatment critical in the aftermath of a disaster, damage to health facilities and systems affects development long into the future.

**The health workforce must be agents of disaster risk reduction:**

Health workers are central to identifying potential health risks from natural hazards and promoting personal and community risk reduction measures.



Photo: © OPS-OMS/ J. Jenkins

The UN global disaster reduction campaigns are important communication initiatives organized by the ISDR secretariat. They are designed to raise awareness among people all over the world, as well as among all professional sectors with regard to what they can do to protect their countries and communities from the negative effects caused by natural hazards. As part of the campaigns, a number of activities are organized, each year, based on different themes, and as of 2006 every two years. Their primary goals to build local capacities to strengthen a system for disaster reduction (at local, regional and international levels).

**The International Day for Natural Disaster Reduction: October 8, 2008**

The World Disaster Reduction Campaign, which extends throughout the year, culminates on the International Day for Disaster Reduction. The United Nations designated the second Wednesday of each October as the day devoted to highlight the importance of disaster reduction throughout the world. In 2008, the International Day will be commemorated on October 8.

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## Greater Caribbean adopts HFA priorities into Plan of Action



Photo: ©UNISDR/Lydia Lopez

In November of 2007 in Saint-Marc, Haiti and by mandate of its Member States, the Association of the Caribbean States (ACS), along with the Government of Haiti, hosted a High Level Conference focusing on disaster reduction. The objectives of this meeting were to exchange experiences, lessons learnt and best practices in the areas of disaster risk reduction, mitigation and recovery within the region, as well as determine areas for intraregional cooperation. Building on the Hyogo Framework for Action, the Kingston Declaration and the Havana Consensus, amongst others; this conference explored possibilities for expanding and strengthening regional mechanisms for cooperation among Member States and Associate Members of the ACS.

One of the major outcomes of this conference was the unanimous adoption of a regional Resolution and Plan of Action on disaster risk reduction for the Greater Caribbean. The Plan's comprehensive list of 27 actions to guide the work of the Association of Caribbean States' Special Committee on Natural Disasters over the next five years includes: commitments on strengthening the ACS role as the key regional DRR forum, evaluating regional progress towards achieving HFA priorities, promoting DRR national platforms and their links to the Global Platform, mainstreaming of DRR, gender and adaptation to climate change within national and regional planning and policy development frameworks, strengthening networks and multi-stakeholder policies and practices at all levels with

particular focus on community-based programmes; action on early warning, risk evaluation, tracking of progress and environmental well-being, as well as on education, building codes, and land use; promoting synergies between the HFA and mechanisms that relate to Small Island Developing States such as the UNFCCC and Barbados Plan of Action; and mobilizing resources and support for national and regional financial coping mechanisms.

This meeting was attended by a record number of countries, representing over 75% of all countries and territories in the Greater Caribbean. It served to emphasize the need for a common strategy on the region's sustainable development; and in particular defining the priority action areas in the Greater Caribbean region for implementing the HFA over the next five years. It was marked by the highest ever turnout of Caribbean States on DRR issues, and was also attended by the UNISDR secretariat, OCHA, UNDP, CDERA, IFRC, ECLAC and others. The POA translates the Hyogo Framework for Action into the realities of the Greater Caribbean and was endorsed fully by all attending States. Both the Resolution and the Plan of Action are available in English, French and Spanish through the ACS.

For more information, visit the official ACS conference website: [http://www.acs-aec.org/Disasters/CANREDES\\_EN.htm](http://www.acs-aec.org/Disasters/CANREDES_EN.htm)

\*UNFCCC - United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change

## The HFA Monitor

The HFA Monitor is the UNISDR's new online tool for monitoring, reviewing and informing upon the progress made and the challenges identified in the implementation of disaster risk reduction as well as the actions for disaster recovery undertaken at the national level.



In keeping with UNISDR's institutional mandate as well as the commitment to support nations in their efforts towards DRR and the implementation of the Hyogo Framework for Action 2005-2015, UNISDR is facilitating biennial reviews to monitor progress on the implementation of the HFA at the national, regional and international levels through this new tool aimed at assisting countries to obtain more in-depth and meaningful analytical evaluations on the progress being made.

Through the innovative use of indicators and benchmarks, the HFA Monitor allows reporting nations to both qualitatively and quantitatively evaluate the level of progress being made under each of the HFA's five priorities for action, while gaining insight into key aspects of current national focus, the drivers of progress that serve as catalysts for the progress being made, as well as overall challenges and future outlook. In this way, the HFA monitor will assist in disaggregating a country's complex array of factors that lead to vulnerability, bringing to light new insight into progress and trends and providing national authorities with a mechanism for tracking their nation's progress over time.

Now available online through PreventionWeb ([www.preventionweb.net](http://www.preventionweb.net)) in English, French and Spanish; the HFA Monitor is based on the strategic goals and priorities for action set out in the HFA, with an added value: generic indicators and benchmarks that support national progress reviews in a meaningful and analytical way. It aims to assist countries to

periodically review their national progress and monitor trends across the years by building on existing disaster risk information, as well as to strengthen the coordination among partners at the national level and facilitate the prioritization of strategic areas to be addressed through national, sub/regional and global disaster risk reduction initiatives.

Through national processes of consultation with partners from all levels and sectors, country inputs are to be managed by the national HFA focal point, the authority ultimately responsible for approving the nation's progress review prior to online submittal. While only the national authority designated as HFA Focal point can directly access the HFA Monitor online, a downloadable template for use in national consultation processes with partners from all levels and sectors is available online or through the regional unit of the UNISDR secretariat.

For the current 2007 – 2009 period of review, inputs received online by 28 July 2008 will be featured in the Regional Assessment Report and the Global Assessment Report on DRR, as well as in the second session of the Global Platform for DRR scheduled for the week of June 15-19, 2009 in Geneva, Switzerland.

For further information, please contact Jennifer Guralnick, the HFA Monitor focal point for UNISDR the Americas at [jguralnick@eird.org](mailto:jguralnick@eird.org).

## The HFA-Pedia



When we consider the most powerful tools at our disposal for reducing the risk of disasters and the resulting negative effects, whether in terms of loss of life or livelihoods or even loss of investments made to processes of sustainable development, one factor that inevitably comes to mind is information. Information, the sharing and exchange of knowledge, experience and lessons learned; the who, when, where and how to assist us in reducing our vulnerability and to respond to emergency situations in a timely and appropriate fashion so as to diminish our exposure and ensure proper response, are all factors that could mean the difference when it matters most.

It is with this in mind that the UNISDR is pleased to announce a new tool that we feel certain will assist individuals from all sectors of society in their pursuit of disaster risk reduction information and a greater understanding of efforts towards implementing the Hyogo Framework for Action as the internationally agreed upon framework for building the resilience of communities and nations to disaster risk.

This new tool, the HFA-Pedia, marks a significant advance towards increased awareness, the open exchange of relevant and timely information, as well as a facilitating mechanism for more analytical and significant HFA reporting at both the country and the regional level. Through the use of MediaWiki open source software, a wealth of HFA-related information is being made available to interested parties from all sectors of society, and in an easy to use and interactive way. This, in turn, is making it easier for the DRR community to share important information, link it to country profiles, update contact data and meet many other information needs.

Based upon two main axes, namely, geographic and thematic; HFA-Pedia is designed to facilitate the search of relevant information in a manner that will satisfy the information needs of virtually all users from all levels and sectors of society.

Through its initial portal, users can choose to explore either the English or Spanish version of the system that will lead them to a simplified user menu for those wishing to explore or see what's new. For more advanced users, an easy-to-use search engine can quickly lead the user to more precise information of interest.

Currently hosting National Pages for all the countries and territories belonging to the Americas region, as well as pages of thematic and institutional interest, HFA-Pedia is designed for continuous growth and evolution in a way that can accommodate different geographical regions and languages, as well as its own exponential growth.

Whether you are interested in country-specific information, information surrounding a particular issue of interest, or wish to merely expand your knowledge of the HFA, HFA-Pedia allows you to consult as well as edit existing pages or create new pages that are of interest to you.

As with any information system however, the sum of its contents depend upon the character of its inputs and the collaboration of its user community. As such, in our continuous efforts to make information more readily available, increase the exchange of data and information, assist governments and individuals to enhance their knowledge base and facilitate more significant and analytical reporting and information exchange, we invite you to make use of this new online interactive tool and contribute to the new generation of information management as it relates to disaster risk reduction and the implementation of the HFA.

To access HFA-Pedia, please visit the following link:  
<http://www.eird.org/hfa.html>.

For further information, please write to us at:  
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