

Global ISDR

World Disaster Reduction Campaign 2008-2009

The World Disaster Reduction Campaign 2008-2009: "Hospitals safe from Disasters: Reduce Risk, Protect Health Facilities, Save Lives"

During these two years, the secretariat of the United Nations International Strategy for Disaster Reduction (UNISDR), the Pan-American Health Organization/World Health Organization (PAHO/WHO), the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC), the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and Plan International, with the support of the World Bank's Global Facility for Disaster Reduction and Recovery (GFDRR), have carried out a number of activities in our region, jointly with governments, regional and international bodies, and non-governmental organizations aimed at raising awareness regarding how and why more efforts should be devoted to protect health facilities and ensure that they continue functioning and are accessible during and after a disaster or an emergency.



Foto: OPS/OMS

Specific actions have been coordinated and undertaken in order to disseminate information and raise awareness among decision-makers, health staff, the academic sector, students and the population at large about the importance of having hospitals safe from adverse natural events. A number of workshops and conferences have been held around this issue, and a variety of products and tools have been developed, such as the Hospital Safety Index, a multimedia DVD titled “Virtual Journey through a Safe Hospital”, and a guide on safe hospitals to be used by communities. In addition, an article and photo contest was organized in the context of the world campaign.

Numerous articles have been posted online and published in newspapers throughout the region. Furthermore, in 2008, the International Day for Disaster Reduction was observed in many countries with activities related to the main theme of the campaign. PAHO also devoted the World Health Day 2009 to the safety of health facilities, reinforcing the main goals of the campaign and giving more visibility to this issue.

The importance of hospitals and all types of health facilities goes beyond their direct purpose and role of saving lives. These facilities are also powerful symbols of social progress. The World Disaster Reduction Campaign 2008-2009 has work primarily on actions aimed at protecting both patients and health workers by ensuring the structural resilience of health facilities. The campaign has also sought ways to ensure that

health services and facilities continue functioning and are available in the aftermath of emergencies and disasters, when they are most needed. Through the campaign, health workers have also been able to build or improve their risk reduction capacity. Finally, some activities aimed at raising awareness about people’s rights to have safe hospitals and on the importance of health facilities in every community.

The main lesson learned from the campaign is that the most expensive hospital is the one that fails. Both hospitals and health facilities represent a significant investment in any country. Hence, their destruction imposes major economic burdens. All disasters include health-related problems and any damage to health system affects all sectors of society and nations as a whole.

It is possible to protect the most important health facilities against disasters through risk reduction when designing and building these facilities, and by reducing the vulnerability of those that already exist through retrofitting processes. Health workers are key agents to identifying potential health risks from natural hazards, and promoting risk reduction measures both at the personal and community level. It must be kept in mind that people themselves are the main actors in the field of disaster prevention, since well organized, informed and better prepared communities are more resilient and have greater recovery capacity after a disaster strikes.

Reducing disasters and avoiding economic and environmental losses: A priority in the Americas

Panama hosted the first session of the Regional Platform for Disaster Risk Reduction in the Americas.

On March 17-19, 2009, representatives of governments, international institutions, NGOs, the academic and the scientific sectors, and focal points from each country in the region gathered at the Hotel El Panama to discuss how to reduce disasters in the Americas and how to make progress in identifying effective and priority areas aimed at achieving the goals established in the Hyogo Framework for Action (HFA).

In this context, key aspects identified must be developed in the near future if we strive to make significant progress in the Americas. These aspects include the need to strengthen inter-institutional activities, the coordination of disaster reduction, climate change and development agendas, the strengthening of local actions and the empowerment of all communities involved.

Almost two years after the first session of the Global Platform for Disaster Risk Reduction, and only a few months before its second session, held in Geneva, Switzerland, the regional meeting took place in Panama. The event was organized by the United Nations Secretariat of the International Strategy for Disaster Reduction (UNISDR/Americas) and the General Secretariat of the Organization of American States, through the Executive Secretariat for Integral Development, and the Department of Sustainable Development (OAS/DSD).

The growing number of disasters in most countries of the Americas, as well as the existing level of vulnerability—particularly in countries and communities with a low development index and high poverty levels—make it necessary for countries of the region, cooperation agencies, institutions of the Inter-American and the United Nations systems, regional organizations, non-governmental organizations, the private sector, civil society, and the academic and scientific communities to join efforts.

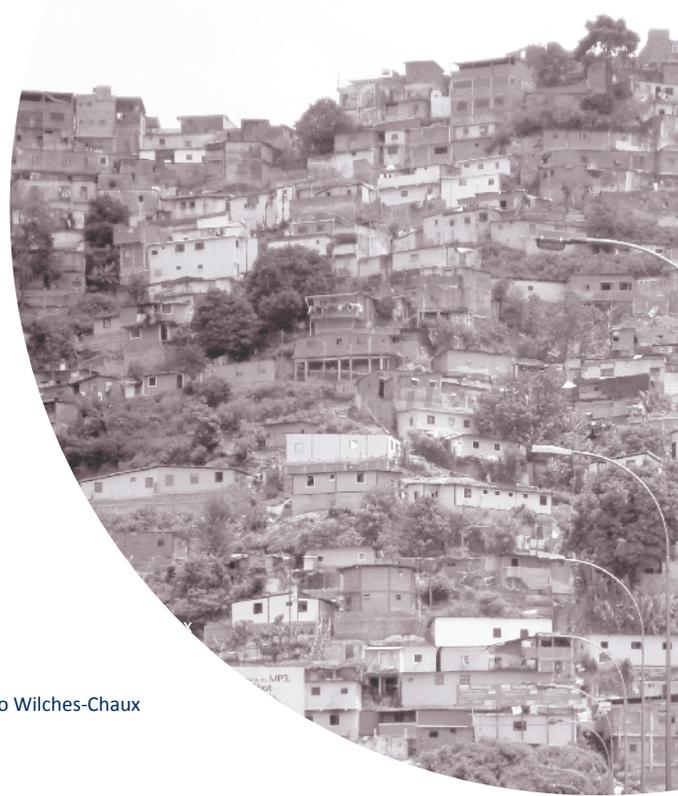


Photo:
Gustavo Wilches-Chaux

The outcome sought by these joint efforts is clearly defined in the Hyogo Framework for Action 2005-2015: Building the Resilience of Nations and Communities to Disasters: “The substantial reduction of disaster losses, in lives and in the social, economic and environmental assets of communities and countries.” During the regional meeting, discussions were held to find ways to pursue this goal.

In the Americas, the 1994 Cartagena Declaration, the Yokohama Declaration and the Hyogo Framework for Action identify the links between risk and development. Only through sustainable development we can achieve safer, more resilient lifestyles and, hence, reduce risk not only related to disasters but to other key aspects of peoples’ lives and ecosystems.

During the three-day meeting, four plenary and nine thematic sessions were held. Each plenary and thematic session had a moderator, a rapporteur, and panelists who were identified ahead of time.

The outcomes of each session are available at www.eird.org/regional-platform

The thematic sessions of the meeting were: 1) Inter-institutional Mechanisms, Networks and National Platforms; 2) Health and Safe Hospitals; 3) Water and Sanitation; 4) Urban Environments, Risk Reduction and Development; 5) Climate Change and Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR); 6) Education; 7) Communications; 8) Local Development, Risk Reduction and Good Governance; and 9) Knowledge and Information Management. Both the conclusions and presentations of each session are available online.

Pablo Gonzalez, from the OAS Department of Sustainable Development, stated that the Americas are perhaps the region with the most advanced positions on the issue of disaster reduction, adopted by the OAS member States. The Inter-American Strategic Plan for Policy on Vulnerability Reduction, Risk Management and Disaster Response (IASP), adopted in 2003 at the thirty-third regular session of the General Assembly, is a milestone in the Americas and a benchmark for the OAS as it moves away from the prevailing focus on humanitarian assistance towards integrated and multilateral cooperation for addressing the underlying causes of natural disasters: poverty, environmental degradation, the lack of risk assessment in public and

private investments, and the lack of integration of risk management into development policy and planning in each productive, economic and social sector.

GS/OAS, PAHO, IICA and other Inter-American organizations must work together to avoid duplications and achieve a more effective and efficient level of cooperation. Regional intergovernmental organizations, such as SICA, CARICOM, ACS and CAN, must also work together.

Salvano Briceño, UNISDR Director, referred to the need to link Inter-American institutions with the capacity of the International Strategy for Disaster Reduction system which, undoubtedly “will result in a stronger and more effective framework to support the needs of governments and communities throughout the region. This first session of the Regional Platform for Disaster Risk Reduction represents a milestone in the development of new regional and global alliances and in strengthening the ties established in recent years.” Mr. Briceño also stated that, “It is very likely that the Copenhagen agreement, expected to be adopted in December 2009 or early 2010, will include natural hazard risk and vulnerability reduction as a key component for climate change adaptation. Should this be the case, governments will have more resources at their disposal for implementing the Hyogo Framework for Action.”



Outcomes

Approximately 300 people participated in the first session of the Regional Platform, including representatives of national governments and ministries, UN agencies, NGOs, international cooperation and financial institutions, the private sector and the technical scientific community. About 140 of those registered were from the countries of the region and 103 were from international and regional inter-governmental organizations, among others. Out of the total of country participants, 39% were from Central America, 30% from South America, 20% from the Caribbean, and 11% from North America (the United States, Canada, and Mexico).

During the plenary sessions, presentations were made by representatives of the Inter-American system, focusing on a vision of and an integrated perspective on risk management within the ACS, CARICOM, CAN and SICA systems. In addition, the conclusions of three independent studies in Central America, by David Smith, the hemisphere, by Stephen Bender, and the Caribbean States, by Franklin McDonald, were presented.

Key messages

- The issue has been gaining political space in the region;
- Better networking and horizontal cooperation is being achieved;
- The emphasis of actions is still on response, although serious DRR research efforts can be seen, but they are still not linked to decision-making;
- The need to continue counting on international cooperation and technical assistance is required by both countries and organizations;
- It is foreseen that disasters will generate an enormous impact in different countries, especially regarding climate-related events;
- The impact that the Hyogo Framework for Action has had on the design of policies and strategies in the different sub-regions and countries stands out. The HFA is often used as a reference point;
- There is the need to link the development agenda to the ones related to disaster reduction and adaptation to climate change;
- There is the need to invite civil society and get it more involved so that all its segments join and are part of the national, sub-regional and regional platforms; and
- Risks should be looked at globally, but with DRR actions at the local level, and to this end, they should be included in a common agenda for the future.

The Regional Platform for the Americas is being established as a process and not as an administrative or organic structure, and is grounded in institutional arrangements and regional and sub-regional intergovernmental agencies, primarily the Inter-American system (OAS/GS, IDB, PAHO, IICA, etc.) and regional systems (MERCOSUR, CAN, CARICOM, SICA and ACS). The Regional Platform also includes other segments, such as academia and universities, NGOs, financial institutions, multilateral and bilateral donors.

The Regional Platform will be recognized by its political and strategic work, providing support to the National Platforms. Cooperating agencies are encouraged to continue supporting those countries and States that are the most vulnerable to disasters. In addition, the OAS/GS and the UNISDR are urged to convene a new session of the Regional Platform, which is expected to take place in 2011.

The meeting of the Regional Platform concluded with the participants' commitment to devoting efforts so that disaster risk reduction in the Americas becomes a reality and not only an issue to be discussed and analyzed.

Interview with Mr. Sálvamo Briceño, UNISDR Director



Photo:UNISDR

In your opinion, what should be done so that efforts for disaster risk reduction are more effective? What would be the key changes?

The most important change must take place at the political level, among decision-makers. The leadership in a country must prioritize the issue because it requires a change of attitude, values and behavior. All this must be encouraged by those in leadership positions. This is the most important change. In countries where the authorities take the lead in risk reduction, people follow and pay more attention.

In your opinion, what are the major challenges that people face in the region to reduce both risk and vulnerabilities? How can these be overcome?

There are two obstacles that, while not very common, are very real: the first is a culture of believing that disasters are natural. With this mindset, people assume that disasters are inevitable. If they are natural, then nothing can be done to prevent them. But what is actually natural is the hazard or the danger, not the disaster itself. There are natural hazards, but disasters are manmade, for instance, by building houses in places where they should not be built. How can we change this culture so that disasters are not regarded as natural? By insisting that disasters are caused by vulnerability to natural hazards.

In your opinion, what is the greatest obstacle to disaster reduction, lack of political will or scarce economic resources?

I believe that it is primarily the lack of political will because that is what is required to bring about change. If we want to change a situation there must be political will among government leaders, heads of State and government, and the ministries. Economic leaders and the private sector should also promote risk reduction. This is what makes change happen.

Which do you think is more important for risk reduction, technology or education? Why?

Definitely education. Technology is also important but we have to begin by educating people. If they are not aware, do not understand, and do not know what this is all about, then they will not use the technology either. So education must come first. Once people understand that they can do something to reduce their vulnerability —by looking at how and where their houses are built, how their children's schools, hospitals and workplaces are built— then they will do something about it.

How would you define a “culture of prevention”? In your opinion, what should be done to change people’s attitudes?

It is very similar to what happens with health. Over the past few years, we have seen how people have learned to take better care of themselves, to eat better, to exercise, to take a number of measures to reduce the risk of becoming sick. Now everyone knows that if they eat well, exercise and take care of themselves, they will get sick less often. The same is true of natural hazards. People who pay attention to how their houses are built — the materials used, whether flammable materials are involved, whether their houses are vulnerable to wind, hurricanes or earthquakes—, can prevent disasters. Preventing is anticipating what could happen. This is true of health and disasters, which also affect everyone.

Realistically speaking, of the initiatives in which the UNISDR has been involved, which have had a significant impact in terms of risk reduction in the region in recent years? Why? How?

There are initiatives at different levels. Some have been undertaken jointly with governments, such as the creation and promotion of national platforms. This has led some countries, such as Mexico, Cuba, Jamaica and Chile, to take more of an interest in the issue. Some countries are doing very good work that began with a process we supported. There are also specific initiatives such as radio drama series. In Central America, the series have influenced people to think about the issue and realize that there is something they can do. The first radio drama was called “Tiempos de Huracanes” [Times of Hurricanes], and the second was “Réplicas del Corazón” [Tremors of the Heart]. These have been very good educational initiatives. In addition, Riskland is a board game that children are playing more and more, and they are learning a lot from it. Therefore, there are many initiatives I could mention.

Do you think that we can learn more from past good practices or from bad practices? Please provide examples.

I think that, generally speaking, one learns more from bad practices than from good ones, because when we make a mistake and then suffer the consequences, we become more interested in change. However, there are some very important and useful practices too. When,

for instance, we see a country where no one dies in a hurricane —such as in Cuba, where almost nobody dies when a hurricane hits— while next door, the same hurricane kills one or two thousand people, such as in Haiti, this should tell us something. We must learn from the good practices in Cuba in order to reduce risk in countries like Haiti. In addition, there is more clarity about many activities. For instance, we now know what type of construction and materials create risk and lead to the destruction of a house or a building when facing a natural hazard.

What makes investments in risk reduction cost-effective for governments and how does this translate into practical terms?

This is a very important issue that we are currently studying. We are working jointly with the World Bank and the UN Secretariat on a cost-benefit analysis of investment in prevention, because it is very easy to say that investing in prevention saves money, but governments want specific figures. We are currently working on this. There is no question that disaster response is becoming more costly and that disasters are having increasingly serious impacts. This is not because natural hazards are worse, but because there are more people on the planet who live in high-risk areas and behave inappropriately. As vulnerability increases, disasters will worsen and become more expensive. Prevention will become increasingly justifiable. Again, we are conducting a cost-benefit analysis to equip governments with more specific arguments in favor of investing in prevention.

What is the role of governance in this context?

Well, governance is what we discussed at the beginning: the need for leaders to get involved. If the president of a country states that the government plan will prioritize risk reduction, in order to reduce mortality and the economic impact of natural hazards, then s/he will prioritize the issue and organize the administration around it, since risk reduction requires the involvement of many sectors. This is a common theme in terms of the governance needed to address this issue, because when it comes to risk reduction, no single ministry can do it all. They must all be involved along with civil society representatives, the private sector and the media. Everyone must play a role in terms of advocacy and risk prevention, but actions must begin at the highest levels.

In an ideal world, free of political interests, what approach would you apply to risk reduction? Why?

First, I do not think that in an ideal world there should be no political interests, because these are also people's interests. Hence, in a world full of people, we will always have political interests. I do think that we should avoid selfish interests, selfish political interests, or as we say political maneuvering. But politics is necessary. Politics is the art of co-existing as a society and it is inevitable. It is not a matter of just doing politics, but rather of doing better politics. In this sense, it would be ideal if politicians showed concern for people's well-being, especially that of the most vulnerable, poorest groups, rather than just help the richest, as is so often the case. People with money and resources have the ability to advocate for themselves. Those lacking such resources need the government's help. So, in an ideal world, governments should work more to improve the living conditions of the poorest.

Pretend you are an inventor with a limited budget. What would be the three innovations you would propose for reducing risk in an efficient manner?

I think that the most important thing is to invest in education at all levels. Education refers not only to school children. Education is also for parents and citizens. There are many different ways to educate people. In this context, it would be important to look at high-profile issues, such as climate change, environmental protection and even the economic crisis. One way to address the current economic crisis is by reducing the risks associated with natural hazards, because they are very costly. This would be a way to save money in order to mitigate the economic crisis. Risk reduction is key in the area of climate change,

both in terms of adapting to it and reducing its adverse effects. So we must include the issue of risk reduction in all these areas, and this is what I would promote if I had enough money to raise awareness on the issue.

What are your expectations for the Regional Platform for Disaster Risk Reduction? In your opinion, what changes will it bring about?

During this session of the Regional Platform, we expect to start a team-building process with agencies working in disaster risk reduction in the region and with governments. The idea is that governments get used to more frequent, regular discussions among themselves and with agencies, in order to find common solutions to address hazards, which pose a risk to all countries. The Regional Platform would facilitate this discussion and serve as a forum. This is what we would like to see come out of this meeting.

Do you feel like you are making a difference through your daily work? What is the vision that guides you?

In my everyday work, I try to explain this issue as much as I can with everyone I talk to, but without becoming tedious, because one cannot only talk about this all the time. But I think that there are many occasions — when I am talking to friends, relatives, or at the office— when it is appropriate to raise the issue of risk reduction. I also reinforce the idea that there are very simple actions that people can take in their daily lives to reduce risk. What I try to do every day is to talk about and promote this issue as much as I can. It is like missionary work, like religion. Some espouse a particular religion, while we are doing something similar by raising awareness among people that they must and they can reduce risk to natural hazards in their daily lives.

