

**ECOSOC MEETING ON THE TRANSITION FROM RELIEF TO DEVELOPMENT  
FOLLOWING NATURAL DISASTERS  
ECOSOC CHAMBER  
Monday 28 February 2005, 10:00**

**Briefing Note**

**Background**

In the least ten years, natural disasters have claimed the lives of close to 600,000 people and have cost more than \$670 billion in material damage. Such figures, while staggering, do not include the immense social and economic impact of disasters on those who have lost their livelihoods, nor the immeasurable psychological toll such levels of destruction and displacement bring on.

A number of emerging trends suggest that the frequency of and vulnerability to such hazards is likely to get worse. Predictions of climate change point to rising sea levels, more variability in rainfall and temperatures with knock-on effects such as floods and droughts and extreme weather events, such as hurricanes and tornadoes.

Growing vulnerability to natural hazards will have adverse socio-economic impacts, with implications for livelihoods, migration patterns and violence. An inability to reduce the risk of disasters will also have implications for humanitarian and development actors, as economic disparities between rich and poor undermine human security. Poor countries will be least able to adapt to changes or to pursue strategies that will reduce, for example, the impact of droughts, flooding or disease, and the resulting dependence on life-saving response may divert time, energy and resources from activities needed to address longer-term development.

As risk and vulnerability to natural disasters increases, it is time we take stock of our past achievements and setbacks, evaluate our performance and improve our ability to not only respond to disasters in a timely, efficient and equitable way, but to prevent such catastrophes from occurring in the first place by reducing disaster risk. The Indian Ocean earthquake/tsunami of December 2004, while a tragic event, does offer what is perhaps an unprecedented opportunity to build on the goodwill it has generated among the United Nations, governments and civil society groups to improve the international disaster management system and sustain an open and productive political climate where real change can take place.

**Issues and Challenges**

While it is clear that every type of disaster presents a unique set of problems and challenges, there are issues common to most natural disasters, and lessons to be learned from experience addressing these challenges across the board.

**Building local, national and regional capacity**

Building local, national and regional capacity is an essential element of disaster relief, recovery and risk reduction. In the immediate aftermath of a crisis, it is often family, neighbors, communities and local response actors that provide the first line of defense. Moreover, national response teams are often the most effective at carrying out rapid assessments and coordinating the initial response because they can more easily overcome obstacles that beset their international counterparts. While international disaster response networks and tools, such as United Nations Disaster Assessment and Coordination Teams (UNDAC) or the International Search and Rescue Advisory Group (INSARAG) are very critical to rapid-response efforts, such tools should complement robust national and local disaster management mechanisms and institutions to make these life-saving efforts more effective.

National actors must lead the recovery efforts from the outset. Participation from local disaster management experts and technicians will help ensure that recovery programming considers the needs and capacities of the affected population and involvement of national decision makers is critical to building consensus around recovery priorities, roles, responsibilities and resources.

To ensure that such ownership by national actors takes hold, external support must build upon – not duplicate – existing capacities, knowledge and strengths, and build up local actors and institutions through transfer of technology and know-how and through public education. Such an approach should include assistance with the formulation/revision of disaster preparedness plans, hazards and risk mapping, training and simulations exercises, international investment in community, local, national and regional disaster preparedness and response institutions, advocacy and awareness campaigns and the development of early warning capacities.

#### Investing in post-disaster recovery and risk reduction

The quick and munificent response from governments and the private sector following the Indian Ocean earthquake/tsunami was a welcome and encouraging demonstration of generosity and humanity. However, experience suggests that while relief teams, material assistance and funding are readily available – and often abundant – during the immediate response phase of a disaster, such support drops off once the response phase is complete and media and public interest has subsided. Such was the case after Hurricane Mitch in 1998, where only a small percentage of funds promised were ever paid out, and after the Bam earthquake in December 2003 where many of those displaced by the crisis still live in temporary shelter, more than one year after the quake.

Failing to invest in post-disaster recovery and rehabilitation is also ignoring a potentially valuable development and risk-reduction opportunity. Events during the past year serve as evidence that attention to risk reduction and prevention strategies can curb vulnerability to natural hazards. Widespread flooding across South Asia in July 2004, although severe and deadly for many, had a less destructive impact than comparable flooding a few decades ago because of the increased attention in recent years to building local preparedness and response capacities. Similarly, the focus by humanitarian and development partners and by donors to address – and fund – the structural obstacles to food security in the Horn of Africa has averted a major famine from the drought cycle that began in 2002.

It is therefore important that international interest and support to natural disaster recovery be maintained well past the relief phase and that future UN efforts on the transition from relief to development comprise explicit programming and funding mechanisms for natural disasters.

#### Incorporating risk reduction into development planning

While natural hazards do not discriminate in where and when they strike, it is the poor, vulnerable and oppressed that are most likely to suffer their consequences – in death and displacement and in the systematic loss of development gains. Unsustainable development practices, such as rapid urbanization, unsafe building practices, and environmental degradation only contribute to increased risk and vulnerability to disasters, and such vulnerability is likely to become chronic as hazards become more frequent and intense.

It is therefore critical that the international community address the socio-economic activities that increase vulnerability and to strengthen the capability of disaster-prone communities to cope with disaster risks. Similarly, it is essential that such efforts be met with political and institutional commitment from disaster-prone countries to improve national disaster legislation and integrate disaster risk reduction into country development plans and poverty eradication programmes.

### Improving/maintaining coordination and coherence in implementation

The coordination challenges in any natural disaster are complex – regardless of the magnitude and scope of the event. Coordination of operations is labour intensive, both in traditional sectors, such as shelter, as well as in areas that may not immediately come to mind, such as information and media management and financial tracking. Coordination among local, national, regional and international response teams is essential, as the inevitable convergence of multiple response actors on the scene will complicate, rather than contribute to the overall relief and recovery effort if roles and responsibilities are not clearly defined from the outset.

Maintaining a coordinated and coherent approach to disaster management is key to its effectiveness and must be sustained in the medium- and long-term. Strategic planning is critical to fitting early response efforts into overall relief priorities, risk reduction, resource mobilization and long-term planning. And creating “bottom-up” coordination approaches and structures that pro-actively involve and strengthen key local players from the outset will ensure coherence throughout all phases of the recovery effort and will leave behind improved local and national mechanisms to better prepare for disasters and to mitigate the level of impact.

### **Conclusions**

There is no simple way to prevent the occurrence of disasters or to reduce the impact of their destructive effects. However, 2005 is indeed a pivotal year for the United Nations and presents an opportunity for focus on such issues and for enacting real change. By considering the analysis of the High-Level Panel report and the practical recommendations offered by the Millennium Project, the United Nations and its Member States are taking essential steps in identifying new threats to peace and security and addressing the challenges that have slowed the achievements of the Millennium Development Goals. In this context, it is important that United Nations acknowledge that disasters contribute to violence and global stability, and can erase – in an instant – standards of development that may have taken decades to achieve. By working to improve the international system’s ability to prevent, mitigate and manage natural disasters, the United Nations will maximize the prospects for long-term peace and stability by creating an environment where lasting peace can take hold. And by reducing future disaster risk, the international community can help curb vicious cycles of poverty and set millions of people squarely on the development track.

It is important that on the heels of what has been a tragic and trying year for those countries and communities prone to disasters, we must find a way of capturing the current climate of openness and generosity and bringing it to bear on other crises in the world.