

DISASTER RISK REDUCTION IN THE HEALTH SECTOR

Statement made to the plenary session of the Global Platform for Disaster Risk Reduction on the consensus of the Health Workshop 7 June 2007

Health is a unifying force for action in the field of disaster risk reduction.

In the last 20 years, natural disasters caused, on average, 205 deaths a day worldwide. During that same period, traffic accidents were the cause of 3,287 deaths each day, 16 times the number of deaths as compared to natural disasters. Communicable diseases, however, were responsible for the loss of 36,438 lives daily: 11 times the number attributed to traffic accidents and 177 times the number attributed to natural disasters.

Health, as defined by the World Health Organization, is the state of complete physical, mental and social wellbeing and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity. Health is a basic right for women and men everywhere. In disasters and emergency situations, the health sector's first responsibility is to save lives, provide urgent health care to the injured and reduce the risk of communicable diseases and other health risks. This responsibility can only be performed if health facilities and health services are fully operational.

Safeguarding physical infrastructure is of the utmost importance, but equally important is preserving the ability of health facilities to remain functional and organizational aspects of health services. In countless situations, health services have broken down in crisis situations due to the loss of essential components such as water or electricity, which have left the facilities unable to function.

The most expensive hospital is the one that fails and no country can afford this expense. It costs the same to build a safe hospital as a vulnerable one. Therefore it is politically, economically and ethically unacceptable to continue building health facilities that may not function when they are most needed

Despite the fact that health a key concern in crisis situations, the health sector has often been left out of the disaster risk reduction decision making processes. The health sector must have a pivotal role in risk reduction at local, national and international levels for many reasons, including the protection of infrastructure and delivery of health care when it is most needed.

Within the Hyogo Framework for Action, which calls on nations to ensure that all health facilities, large and small, new and existing, remain functional in case of disasters, there is a need to foster collaboration and develop a strong multisectoral approach in the implementation of the 2008-2009 ISDR World Disaster Reduction Campaign on Safe Hospitals.

The health sector recognizes the importance of incorporating all five HFA priority areas into its disaster risk reduction planning.

There is an urgent need for all actors represented at this Platform Meeting to develop an integrated community approach to disaster risk reduction rather than many sector-specific approaches.