

## **El Niño; the Weather Vane that Points to our Alarming Lack of Disaster Preparedness**

*The neglect by governments around the world of Disaster Preparedness techniques that could soften the impact of natural disasters is irresponsible and short-sighted, says Giovanni Rufini*

The El Niño weather phenomenon has wrought floods, droughts, hurricanes and fires around the globe during the last two years. The 1990s have been proclaimed the International Decade for Disaster Reduction, and El Niño has been the leading indicator for gauging the current state of Disaster Preparedness, or DP.

The result of these measurements now reveals an alarming lack of satisfactory policies and public awareness.

Unfortunately, DP continues to be grouped by international officialdom with humanitarian activities, instead of being seen as an integral part of development programmes. An emergency hardly offers ideal conditions to work on crisis prevention, whereas development programmes are much more likely to produce acceptable levels of preparedness.

The lack of visibility that has dogged DP programmes is due largely to the much greater political rewards that governments feel they can get from highly-publicised emergency aid. Public opinion is steadfastly sensitive to crisis. TV images of starving, homeless children raise public awareness and encourage support and donations. Governments think it unlikely that the construction of earthquake-resistant houses yields the same level of support and sympathy.

### **The Creation of ‘Complex Emergencies’**

Yet the importance of DP is highlighted by the fact that since 1960, some 8,000 natural disasters requiring massive international aid have occurred. As these weather-related disasters increasingly become more violent, the ability of developed countries to deal effectively with them has diminished. The overlapping of man-made crises and natural disasters has created ‘complex emergencies’ which blend immediate casualties and refugees with longer-term challenges like droughts, famines or floods. “The real tragedy is that with better planning, many of the victims might not have suffered so badly,” reports the European Commission’s ECHO, which has put aside little more than a 1% of its yearly budget to implement DP pilot programmes in Central America, the Caribbean and Asia.

In 1997, the Intermediate Technology research group undertook a study of the involvement of NGOs in disaster-resistant housing reconstruction, including various aspects of mitigation and preparedness. Their enquiry highlighted either the inaccessibility or non-existence of the sort of information needed to construct detailed case studies. Despite being hampered by the reticence, if not downright hostility, of certain prominent organisations and experts, Intermediate Technology’s experts were able to document and reveal the alarming lack of project activity oriented towards Disaster Preparedness.

So far as El Niño is concerned, an effective remote warning system has in fact been set up since the 1980's. It consists of a number of buoys spread at different depths in the ocean that transmit data on water temperature. In addition, the Franco-American TOPEX/POSEIDON satellite constantly checks the water level and the flows of oceanic streams, significantly improving forecasts on the evolution of El Niño so that these are now available six months in advance. Nonetheless, like weather forecasts in general, such predictions are not always accurate - several predicted droughts have instead turned out to be floods. This advance warning system remains, however, vital. Yves du Penhoat, Director of Research at the French ORSTOM, research institute told a VOICE seminar in Brussels earlier this year in March, that the 1997-98 effects of El Niño have been particularly damaging - highlighting the increasing problem of global warming.

### **Contingency Planning not Enough**

Evidence of this can be found in the serious droughts that have hit Papua New Guinea, Australia and Indonesia, with widespread bush fires causing spectacularly serious air pollution all over South East Asia. There have also been unusual tropical cyclones in Polynesia, floods in Latin America and California and unusually heavy rainfalls have plagued East Africa, Europe, China, Korea and Bangladesh. The result has been thousands of deaths, with millions made homeless. Epidemics of cholera and leptospirosis have broken out in Peru and Ecuador, an increase of Dengue fever in Brazil and malaria has devastated East Africa. Famine has killed thousands in Indonesia and Papua New Guinea.

Oxfam expert Mark Allison has characterised El Niño as “a widespread event, demonstrating itself as a series of small unpredictable disasters rather than a few large scale ones. This presents different challenges rather than localised large scale emergencies, and strategies need to take this into account. Removing potential blocks to accessing European Commission funds is crucial and streamlining the bureaucracy should be a key aim in planning both for NGOs and the Commission.”

These challenges remain very real. Contingency plans prepared by international relief agencies many have provided immediate measures in directly affected countries during El Niño's peak periods of activity, but little or no action has been planned in neighbouring or far-flung regions.

### **NGOs Need to Work Closer Together**

The shortage of information-sharing and common research programmes leads seasoned aid workers to complain that they see the same basic mistakes being made over and over again. Organisations too often fail to institutionalise their emergency response capacities. “Every new emergency is like the first day of school,” comments one expert, who adds that “NGOs, local and international, need to work closer together before an emergency happens.”

Looking on the brighter side, it is important to note that the principles of linking relief, rehabilitation and development - a methodological assumption of most humanitarian

NGOs - point towards increasing current levels of cooperation. A document produced during the VOICE seminar in Brussels in March of this year stated that: "The position of Disaster Preparedness within the Relief-Rehabilitation-Development continuum is a key subject for debate...and the reduction of poverty, distress and suffering involves a broad spectrum of activities. It is, however, increasingly recognised that the role of Disaster Preparedness is integral to the process of sustainable development and as such can reduce the need for relief assistance when disaster strikes."

Disaster Preparedness also requires the participation, organisation and training of a country's institutions - along with schools, hospitals, blood banks, and airports. The success of these efforts has varied from country to country, depending primarily on the amount of authority that the co-ordinating agency responsible for emergencies has, along with the level of cooperation that exists between governmental and non-governmental organisations, as well as between a nation's civilian and military sectors.

### **Next Steps Towards Disaster Reduction**

A multisectoral focus covering topics ranging from geology to the economy, from the design of seismic-resistant housing and public works to the design of a disaster curriculum for concerned faculties is now needed to give disaster reduction the boost it needs. Additionally, programmes for agriculture, health, water management, land use, education, transport and infrastructure must be revised and integrated. DP must be seen as a component of human development, and must therefore be able to rely on better co-ordination between the implementing agencies and the institutions that finance them.

Once again, I should stress that development offers the solution to the current lack of adequate DP. We would do well to remember the words of former UN Secretary-General Boutros Boutros Ghali, who warned: "Humanitarian emergencies fill the headlines and consume our energies, but underlying many of these tragic events is the silent crisis of underdevelopment: chronic and growing poverty, mounting population pressure and unemployment, and widespread environmental destruction."