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Preparedness and Response to Natural Disasters: Background Note

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Background

Preparedness and response to natural disasters was selected by the IASC as a main issue of focus in 2003. Specifically, the IASC aims to enhance coordination and response capacity by reviewing a set of recommendations made by the IASC Reference Group on Natural Disasters in May 2000.

This paper highlights key issues, gaps and challenges in the area of preparedness and response to natural disasters, based on a brief overview of the work done by the IASC Reference Group on this subject, and suggests issues for further reflection by the IASC.

Current trends in the area of natural disasters

The past decade has seen considerable growth in the incidence of natural disasters and its impact on people and assets. Environmental degradation, rapid unplanned urbanisation, poor development practices and possible climate change indicate that this trend will continue. The impact of natural disasters is reinforced by growing structural vulnerability which includes different kinds of marginalization of e.g. minorities, migrants, displaced populations, and people living with HIV/AIDS.

A number of countries are affected by predictable, cyclical natural hazards, such as floods, hurricanes and drought, and require a more planned approach, including a clearer focus on community preparedness, mitigation and vulnerability reduction link. At the same time there is increased evidence of "complex" disasters, which - although caused by natural hazards - are compounded by social, economic, political and environmental factors, even conflict. In these situations, traditional tools, mechanisms and capacities need to be complemented by other actors and instruments.

International Federation approach

Disaster preparedness and the broader issue of disaster risk reduction in relation to natural disasters is a priority area of work for the International Federation. The publication *World Disasters Report 2002 – Reducing Risk* gives examples of good disaster preparedness and illustrates that "disaster preparedness pays". The increasing vulnerability to disasters calls for additional, broader and joint strategies and partnerships, which include development and other actors.

The International Federation is also in the process of collecting and examining hundreds of existing international disaster response laws (IDRL) provisions and other instruments in order to promote their improved harmonisation and implementation. This exercise will also identify any gaps or inadequacies, which could become subject to future examination by the international community. The purpose of such examination would be to further strengthen the legal and policy framework surrounding international disaster response activities.

IASC Reference Group on Natural Disasters

In May 2000 the IASC Reference Group on Natural Disasters submitted its report and recommendations. The Reference Group identified issues and made recommendations in a wide range of areas under the headlines of overall coordination, pre-disaster contingency planning, assessment, targeting and implementation, logistics management, funding, reporting and information sharing. The Reference Group decided to focus its work on reactive measures in response to sudden onset, large-scale disasters, within the areas of competence of IASC members. The final report outlined action points for further work.

Since 2000, progress has been made in a number of areas. Among the early achievements were the Inter-Agency Contingency Planning Guidelines for Humanitarian Assistance (Contingency Planning Guidelines), in which the IASC assumed a pivotal role. The regional contingency planning and preparedness efforts undertaken before the wars in Iraq and West Africa (Côte d'Ivoire) are recent examples of practical application of those guidelines.

However, much remains to be done, and most recommendations are relevant and should be further pursued. Several of them have not yet resulted in systematic knowledge, and most areas can be further enhanced. This short paper does not permit a survey of all the recommendations made by the Reference Group, including action done by all IASC members. Rather, it is proposed that such a survey is undertaken by the IASC WG or a subsidiary body, as appropriate. If the IASC WG agrees to take this work further, it should be recalled that the original Reference Group's terms of reference (January 1999) were fairly ambitious, and that the 2002 recommendations were broad in nature.

Issues proposed for further consideration by the IASC

There is a general need to move further in the direction of a "humanitarian systems" approach to disaster preparedness and response to natural disasters. As indicated above, it would be useful to take stock of progress made and consider the merit of further cooperation and coordination. An analysis of work done so far, lessons learnt and good practice would serve as a basis for identifying priority areas. The IASC WG, or a subsidiary body as appropriate, could give further consideration to those elements of the original Reference Group's ToR which were not addressed. These relate, for example, to enhanced coordination between UN DMTs of affected countries and the use of existing capacities within the region, and the relationship between coordination of relief and recovery activities.

This could also be a good opportunity to consider the wider issues raised by recent natural disasters. For example, the scope could be broadened to include slow-onset disasters, in particular our joint experience from assessments in Southern Africa and strategies in the Horn.

The Good donorship conference in Stockholm, 16-17 June, emphasised the need to ensure proportionality in needs assessments. In line with this observation, joint/coordinated needs assessments should be considered by humanitarian agencies, in order to enhance the relevance of such assessments.

The IASC workplan for 2003 highlights "improved preparedness and response for cyclical natural disasters". One cyclical hazard context could be informed by a vulnerability and capacity assessment jointly carried out by IASC members and national government, including local level preparedness. In the aftermath of a disaster, analysis can show if/how this type of assessment improves/changes preparedness and response strategies.

Joint action research, monitoring and peer reviews may improve coordination and collaboration, clarify performance levels and help learning. There are many opportunities, related to cyclical or other disasters, such as the current hurricanes in the Caribbean, or floods and cyclones in Asia, where regional coordination can be studied.

A case study could be carried out to illustrate who does what, using which tools, coordination aspects, links to and use of local capacity in disaster preparedness and how the recovery phase is used for building capacity in disaster preparedness and advocating for mitigation. Such a case study could be based on any recent disaster, for example the Algeria earthquake.

Proposed Action Points/Decisions by IASC WG

- Task a subsidiary body of the IASC to analyse progress made in relation to the original ToR of the Reference Group on Natural Disasters, and propose priorities for further work. This initial exploration should address some of the proposals made by the Reference Group in the areas of joint action research, assessments, monitoring and peer reviews.
- Make it a priority to address the issues raised by slow onset disasters, drawing on recent experience from joint assessments of the Southern Africa food crisis. This work should take into account the proposals made at the Good Donorship conference in Stockholm on 16-17 June, on joint/coordinated agency assessment.
- Initiate a joint vulnerability and capacity assessment in one pre-operational context, in order to link disaster preparedness planning and other forms of disaster risk reduction to national and local government, NGOs, Red Cross Red Crescent and multilateral actors.
- Use existing knowledge on cyclical disasters to develop a more planned and joint approach, e.g. for the Caribbean hurricane season.
- Undertake joint monitoring or peer review of a natural disasters operation, using the Code of conduct for disaster relief, Sphere and/or other performance tools in relation to values.
- Undertake a case study to illustrate who does what, using which tools, coordination aspects, links to and use of local capacity on disaster preparedness, and how the recovery phase is used for building capacity in disaster preparedness and advocating for mitigation, e.g. Algeria earth-quake.

Prepared by: IFRC