

Accident, Disaster, Catastrophe

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When an **accident** occurs in Canada or any other western country what follows is predictable.

Someone will call the various emergency agencies - police, fire, ambulance - or perhaps dial a number (such as 911 in Canada) and reach all the agencies with one call.

At the scene, police will establish control and try to ascertain the cause of the incident. Firefighters will put out a fire, clean up spilled chemicals and rescue anyone who is trapped. Ambulance personnel will treat the injured and transport them to hospital.

Most important, no one agency will direct others. Emergency personnel are familiar with accidents and with each other's role at them: they work together without direction. Equally important, accident response does not normally involve interaction away from the scene. One agency may tell another that something has happened or inform them help is required; but there is no need for off-site coordination of the response.

When a **disaster** occurs, things are very different.

First, there may be no 'site' - floods, cyclones, earthquakes and volcanic eruptions hit a wide area.

Second, access to the impact areas may be difficult if not impossible. Roads and bridges may be down. Debris may hamper movement.

Third, there will be communications failures. Telephones may be out. Emergency radios will be overloaded.

Fourth, these three elements - the widespread impact, the problems of moving about, the communications failures - create another problem: it is difficult to discover what has happened.

Fifth, the problems may exceed the response capacity. There may have to be decisions about which resources will be sent where. That means there must be off-site coordination.

Sixth and most important, initial response will not be by police, fire and ambulance personnel but by survivors. In a disaster, most initial search and rescue and, quite often, most initial transport to medical centres is done by survivors. After the Mexico City earthquake, for example, 99 per cent of initial search and rescue was by friends, neighbours and fellow

workers of the victims. In Edmonton, Canada, after a tornado most of the initial transport to hospital was in private cars.

Disasters, in short, are not large accidents but different types of events - requiring very different response. In a real disaster, getting information is often the most serious problem.

This message - disasters are not large accidents - is one that the American scholar, Henry Quarantelli, put forward a long time ago. Last fall in Dusseldorf, he went further. He argued there is a third category of event - the catastrophe. He said catastrophes may be as different from disasters as disasters are from accidents.

Disasters disrupt communities and create enormous problems for response agencies. **Catastrophes** damage not just a community but all its response agencies. Police, firefighters, ambulance personnel, hospitals and relief agencies are among the victims.

Quarantelli's ideas have enormous implications for those from the West who are trying to assist the developing countries deal more effectively with emergencies.

Most western countries have many large accidents - air crashes, train wrecks, shipping accidents - and, therefore, a fair amount of experience dealing with them. Most western countries have no experience with catastrophe.

That means Westerners providing advice and assistance to the developing countries, where disasters are common and catastrophes not all that rare, are moving into a new and different world. They have to adjust their thinking up two levels at once - from accident to disaster and from disaster to catastrophe.

The enormous leap of the mind explains why so many from the West are critical of how the less developed world deals with catastrophe. The critics see what is happening in terms of their own experience with accidents. They don't realize that experience is not relevant.

If an accident occurs, hospitals can gear up very quickly to handle the victims. Most hospitals can handle 15 to 25 injured without strain. If a large accident occurs, hospitals may find their resources overtaxed.

But it's assumed no matter how large the accident, those responding - police, firefighters and ambulance personnel - are not among the victims and that the equipment and facilities they use - police and fire vehicles, communications systems, hospitals - are intact.

Given an accident, such assumptions are valid. In a disaster, they may not be. In a catastrophe they aren't.

In Canada, it's assumed hospitals can discharge patients to make room for victims. In a major disaster it's possible this won't be true. In a catastrophe it's definitely not true.

(When an explosion ripped apart Halifax, Canada, in 1917, it killed 1,963, injured 10,000 and ripped the community apart. The hospitals could not discharge patients because large parts of the city had ceased to exist: many families were wiped out).

In planning for the IDNDR, it is important to think not about accidents but disasters and catastrophes.

Hospitals and schools must consider whether they are in a safe location and whether they have been constructed or retrofitted in a way which will prevent or reduce damage. They must consider whether staff and residents - whether these are patients or children - understand what threats exist. They must be tied into monitoring systems so they will have warnings. They must know what to do when these warnings come.

Hospitals must also be a source of public education about the health problems in society, especially those which accompany a disaster. Schools must become centres of education, making sure that the next generation will understand the hazards created by both people and the environment, taking the steps required to reduce these hazards and their impact on future generations.

These things will happen only if at both places there is an understanding of what is involved in accidents, disasters and in catastrophes and why the three are different.

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ACCIDENT - an unforeseen contingency, chance, fortune
DISASTER - anything ruinous or distressing that befalls, a sudden or great misfortune, a mishap, calamity
CATASTROPHE - the dénouement, the final event, a sudden and violent physical change
Reference: The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary, Vols. I & II

A Regional IDNDR Office in Latin America and the Caribbean

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Last August, the IDNDR Secretariat in Geneva, sent a Regional Programme Officer to open a small Regional Office for Latin America and the Caribbean, with headquarters located in the sub-regional office of PAHO's Emergency Preparedness and Disaster Relief Coordination Programme in Costa Rica. It was considered, that having an office closer to the countries, it would be easier to support the National IDNDR Committees, and indeed this has been shown to be true. The main objective for this office is to promote the incorporation of long-term mitigation and prevention measures in national development plans as well as encouraging an inter-institutional approach and coordination. It offers the countries support in organizing regional, disaster-related workshops, promotion of activities for the International Day for Natural Disaster Reduction, and national-

level preparation for the IDNDR World Conference in Japan next year. The agenda also includes the encouragement of universities and schools to add basic knowledge of disaster management and vulnerability reduction into their curricula.

Many disaster prevention and mitigation activities have already taken place in the Region. To facilitate the communication between the countries, to share experiences and to serve as inspiration for others, the Office recently printed a modest Bulletin, "IDNDR Informs - Latin America and the Caribbean". In this, short notices will be published on main Decade activities carried out in the region.

The International Disaster Reduction Day for 1993

The International Disaster Reduction Day for 1993 has been observed during the last years in many countries in Latin America and the Caribbean through official meetings, TV and radio programmes or activities within institutions. To encourage even more activities this year the Regional IDNDR Office together with the Panamerican Health Organization (PAHO), the Organization of American States and the Mexican Civil Protection System (SINAPROC) organized a workshop in Mexico last February, to prepare recommendations for the Ministries of Health and Education and the National IDNDR Committees on how they could observe the day. The recommendations include preparatory activities and medium term strategies for reducing vulnerability in hospitals and schools. More than 30 experts in disaster reduction in health, education and social communication, and international agencies met during three days to develop the guidelines. The Chairman of the last session of the meeting was His Excellency, Mr. Miguel de la Madrid, Chairman of the Special High Level Council for IDNDR.

Preliminary discussions referred to the slogan for 1993 "Stop Disasters: Focus on Schools and Hospitals", which was slightly modified in Spanish to have a better impact on the