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International Decade for Natural Disaster Reduction

A concerted global effort to reduce the destructive impact of natural disaster was launched on 22 December 1989 when the United Nations General Assembly proclaimed 1990 the International Decade for Natural Disaster Reduction (IDNDR), beginning on 1 January 1990. Over the next ten years, nations throughout the World are asked to give special attention to programmes and projects designed to reduce loss of life, property damage and economic and social disruption caused by natural disasters. Such disasters alone during the past two decades have killed an estimated 3 million people.* The overall objective of achieving a substantive reduction in the impact of natural disasters will be pursued through new emphasis on pre-disaster activities including planning, prevention and preparedness; an innovative approach based on state-of-the-art scientific and technological knowledge will aim at reducing the vulnerability of society, through the participation of all sectors.

The proclamation of the Decade will reflect two main developments, namely: the increasing impact of natural disasters in terms of loss of life, physical damage and effects on the economic development of vulnerable countries; and the progress achieved in scientific and technological knowledge which has been such as to allow its application to disaster mitigation through transfer of technology.

Framework adopted by the UN General Assembly

The General Assembly adopted an international framework for the implementation of the Decade comprising several key elements among which:

- a call on all Governments to adopt specific policy measures at the national level designed to achieve disaster mitigation, and to participate in a concerned international effort;
- a call to scientific and technological institutions, financial institutions, foundations, and related national and international non-governmental organizations to participate fully in the activities of the Decade;

* According will to the annual report of an international insurance company, 1989 go into history as a year of disasters. 292 natural disasters and big industrial disasters have caused losses of at least 15000 human beings and at least 14 billions US dollars. Four events have caused in 1989 insured damages of 7 billions US dollars:

- hurricane «Hugo» in the Caribbean area (4,3 billions \$)
- explosion of a petro chemical plant in Pasadena, CA, USA (1,3 billion \$)
- earthquake in San Francisco, CA, USA (1 billion \$)
- pollution of the tanker «Exxon Valdez» (0,4 billion \$).

- guidelines for actions to be taken by organisations and bodies of the United Nations system in order to give priority, in their activities, to the reduction of the impact of natural disasters; and
- organizational and financial arrangements at the international level comprising:
 - a Special High Level Council responsible for developing overall programmes addressing priorities and gaps identified at the national level, for evaluating activities carried out during the Decade; and
 - a small secretariat is to be established in close association with UNDRO at Geneva to be responsible for substantive and secretarial support to the international mechanisms and for day-to-day co-ordination of activities.

The General Assembly reaffirmed the *overall objective of the Decade* – that is, to reduce loss of life, Property damage and economic and social disruption caused by natural disasters, as well as the following *specific goals*:

- to improve the capacity of each country to mitigate the effects of natural disasters expeditiously and effectively, paying special attention to assisting developing countries in the assessment of disaster damage potential and in the establishment of early warning systems and disaster-resistant structures when and where needed;
- to devise appropriate guidelines and strategies for applying existing scientific and technical knowledge, taking into account the cultural and economic diversity among nations;
- to foster scientific and engineering endeavours aimed at closing critical gaps in knowledge in order to reduce loss of life and property;
- to disseminate existing and new technical information related to measures for the assessment, prediction and mitigation of natural disasters; and
- to develop measures for the assessment, prediction, prevention, and mitigation of natural disasters through programmes of technical assistance and technology transfer, demonstration projects, and education and training, tailored to specific disasters and locations, and to evaluate the effectiveness of those programmes.

The Decade calls for a broad international effort intended to promote the adoption and universal application of advanced approaches to disaster reduction, develop techniques of implementation that are low-cost, broadly applicable and adaptable to the needs of all societies, and bring about a better appreciation of the positive relationship between disaster reduction and the continuation of economic and social development.

New approaches adopted to guide actions during the Decade

- a shift in emphasis to pre-disaster planning and preparedness while sustaining and further improving post-disaster relief and management capabilities;
- an acceptance of an integrated approach to disaster reduction that would include a shift in public attitudes towards disaster mitigation and the development of programmes linking prevention, warning, research, preparedness in order to reduce vulnerability;
- public education to shift society's perspective from passive acceptance of disaster consequences to awareness of the opportunity for disaster mitigation and the role of individuals in protecting themselves;
- integration of disaster prevention and preparedness into the national and local planning process;
- enhancement of organizational strengths and training of specialists to improve disaster mitigation resources; and
- promotion of increased technology and knowledge transfer to those at risk.

Mechanism for worldwide participation created

An essential feature of the Decade will be the mechanism for worldwide participation, designed to reach out to all sectors of society that have the potential to bring about a reduction in the impact of disasters and mitigate their effects through the following elements:

- National Committees or entities responsible for implementation of national programmes, for co-operation on a regional basis, and for providing assistance to other countries – in particular, the national entities should survey existing mechanisms and facilities for hazard reduction, assess the particular requirements of their countries and develop national strategies to attain the Decade's goals;
- the United Nations system is called upon to accord priorities in the operational activities of its organizations and bodies, in a concerned manner, to natural disaster preparedness, prevention, relief and short-term recovery including economic damage risk assessment;
- the United Nations is also requested to formulate and implement public information programmes aimed at raising awareness of disaster prevention among the general public. In fact, in the recommendations put before the General Assembly, specific functions in the overall effort called for the Decade are identified for the information media in view of the need to increase the general public's perception of the mitigation potential of disaster prevention and preparedness activities;
- Scientific and professional societies which are well equipped to contribute to the Decade by promoting the application of existing knowledge to disasters of all types in widely different communities and by fostering endeavours to close the critical gaps in knowledge of hazards and their impacts;
- National and international non-governmental organizations which by their capabilities, experience and diversity, will contribute in many significant ways that often are unique to each organization – for example, public education on self-help procedures, and the efforts of the International Council of Voluntary Agencies to

facilitate the sharing of disaster experiences among all voluntary groups; and

- Donor organizations, industrial and financial institutions, such as insurance, banking, and construction, and the communications industry are expected to play a major role in the Decade. Finally, there will be mechanisms to involve the general public – both in the receiving of education and information and in contributing through community and individual actions; the best prepared individuals and communities are those who are aware of their vulnerability and have taken coherent steps to reduce it.

Contribution of IABSE to the Programme

IABSE members are concerned about National Disaster Reduction, not only as an ordinary individual, but also as professors and educators, structural engineers, public servants, designers, contractors, operators of structures and systems.

Natural disaster include earthquakes, windstorms, tsunamis, floods, landslides, volcanic eruptions, wildfires.

One should also not forget the increasing «industrial disasters», of human origin.

Our activities should be carried out, having constantly in mind four concerns:

- assessment
- predictron
- prevention, and
- mitigation of natural disasters.

To sensibilize IABSE membership and readership, a feature will appear regularly in the IABSE BULLETIN: contributions will come from you, from other members, from UN and other agencies involved in the Decade. Further technical articles will be welcome in the other IABSE series: SURVEY, JOURNAL, PROCEEDINGS.

The Scientific Committee of the 14th Congress of IABSE in New Delhi, March 1 – 6, 1992, has decided to devote a good portion of the Congress to the «Decade» Programme, with one Plenary Session on «Structural Contribution to Natural Disaster Reduction» and one Seminar on «Structures to Withstand Natural Disasters-Experiences and Applications».

A number of activities of the Decade will develop at national levels. Members will get more information by writing to:

- their National Group of IABSE
- to the IABSE representative at the United Nations and to the IDNDR Programme:

Mr Robert Silman
President, R. Silman Assoc.
88 University Place
New York, NY 10003, USA

- to the IDNDR Secretariat in Geneva:

Mr. Filippo Alèssi
Chief, IDNDR Secretariat
UNDRO
Palais des Nations
CH-1211 Geneva 10, Switzerland

- or to the IABSE Secretariat.

(Alain Golay, Exec. Dir., IABSE)