

H. Introduction

Natural and manmade hazards know no political boundaries. Disaster strikes poor and rich nations alike and is a universal threat to all people, at all times, in all places.

This study distinguishes hazards, which are the dangerous circumstances found everywhere, from disasters, which are events in which hazards have undesirable effects on people or their works. Hazards may exist side-by-side with man or be contained by man for long periods.

When hazards impact on human systems, the unintended effects constitute disaster. The most common definitions of disaster, therefore, focus on the impact of unplanned events on the social structure of communities. One of the most quoted definitions reads:

An event, concentrated in time and space, in which a society, or a relatively self-sufficient subdivision of a society, undergoes severe danger and incurs such losses to its members and physical appurtenances that the social structure is disrupted and the fulfillment of all or some of the essential functions of the society is prevented.¹

This definition is substantially the same as the one used by the U.S. Agency for International Development (AID), Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance (OFDA) in its International Disaster Preparedness Seminar, held in 1977.²

The capacity to prepare for and respond to disasters varies with the internal social, political, and economic capabilities of nations. Disasters in the developing countries, therefore, reflect not only societal differences between them and industrialized countries but also wide differences among developing countries. The term developing countries, itself, includes a spectrum extending from

the very poor and the largely rural to the more urban, more industrialized, and more developed.

The varied levels of development influence the capacity of the nations to prepare for and respond to disasters. As the internal capabilities of a society develop, there is less need to resort to outside appeals for aid following disaster. As a result, most of the recipients of U.S. disaster assistance have been—except for a very few major disasters, for instance, earthquakes in Italy and Romania—nations that are among the world's least developed. In the past decade, the United States has given disaster assistance to 26 of the 41 countries that the United Nations has identified as least developed or most severely affected by recent economic conditions.

Indeed, this emphasis has been reaffirmed as recently as an August 1977 joint cable from the Acting Secretary of State and the AID Administrator to all U.S. field missions. The Chiefs of Mission were instructed to “do their utmost to ensure that the needs of disaster victims be met— particularly in those instances where the Government of the disaster-affected country does not respond sufficiently to the needs of the disaster victims.”

The purpose of this report is to identify lessons of U.S. disaster assistance to less developed countries that may be applicable to U.S. domestic disaster programs. Lessons of advanced countries, such as snow and cold programs of northern Europe and Canada and earthquake programs in Japan, are not examined. Further, the lessons focus on the least developed countries, rather than the more industrialized of the developing countries, because U.S. aid is largely directed to the poorest nations.

The next three chapters lead into a discussion of several program areas where developing country disasters may suggest alternative approaches or incremental improvements for U.S. domestic programs. This background covers:

¹Charles E. Fritz, “Disaster,” *Contemporary Social Problems* (ed.) Robert K. Merton and Robert A. Nisbet (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World, 1961), p. 655.

²International Disaster Preparedness Seminar, Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance, U.S. Agency for International Development, June-July 1977.

³U.S. Foreign Disaster Assistance (Washington, D. C.: U.S. Agency for International Development, Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance, January 1978), p. 3.

- the occurrence and impact of disasters in the developing countries;
- the similarities and differences between less developed countries and urban, industrialized

countries in disaster preparation and response; and
Ž the United States program of disaster assistance to the less developed countries.