

## **Q&A: How can disaster risk reduction help save lives?**

The Haïti earthquake in January 2010 caused widespread damage in the Haitian capital, Port-au-Prince, and exacerbated an already-precarious health situation. Before the disaster, 46% of Haitians did not have access to health care. One month after the disaster, more than 300 000 people had suffered from injuries and around one million lived in temporary settlements or host families after losing their homes. The cholera outbreak, which began in October 2010, was worsened by the already fragile healthcare situation in Haiti.

In Syria, following the civil unrest which began there in January 2011, many hospitals and health centers have been badly damaged, and those that are operating are overwhelmed with patients. Monitoring of the vaccination programme has been interrupted due to the displacement of families with children. Access to safe water and sanitation has been disrupted, increasing the risk of waterborne diseases.

Emergencies can befall any country, any time. Yet, when disaster strikes, it seriously disrupts the functioning of a community. Every day, hundreds of millions of people face threats to health and livelihoods because local and national support systems are overwhelmed or too weak to withstand the event. In this case, the people then depend on help from outside the affected community or area.

Disasters, both natural and technological, have a significant impact on public health, health infrastructure and the delivery of health care. In the past decade, more than 1.1 million people have died in more than 4000 natural disasters. But this is not the full picture, as numerous other emergencies, including epidemics, chemical and radiological incidents, major transport crashes and conflicts also affect people's health.

To reduce future risks and human and material losses, WHO helps countries build resilience in health emergency and disaster risk management which includes measures that range from prevention to preparedness to response and recovery. A few examples:

- putting supportive policies, strategies and allocated resources in place to manage event risks;
- strengthening access to quality primary health care before disaster strikes;
- training and equipping the community health workforce (health workers, volunteers, NGOs, actors from related key sectors such as water and agriculture) and including them in the planning for all types of emergencies;
- assessing risks, identifying hazards, vulnerabilities, high-risk groups, capacities;
- providing risk awareness and health education (e.g. sanitation and hygiene);
- providing early warning to health providers and communities;
- improving community health security, e.g. through flood mitigation and appropriate land use.

Countries with well-developed health systems and a well-trained, well-equipped health workforce in the communities are often much better prepared for disasters. When the community is well-prepared, many lives can be saved in the first hours after an emergency, before external help arrives. The people in the community know local risks and their own needs best.

On 13 October 2012, the international community commemorates the International Day for Disaster Reduction. This year's theme is the Women and Girls: the Visible Force for Resilience. For further details, please refer to: [http://www.who.int/hac/events/iddr\\_2012/en/index.html](http://www.who.int/hac/events/iddr_2012/en/index.html)

WHO and partners have released *Integrating sexual and reproductive health into health emergency and disaster risk management*, a policy brief which aims to integrate sexual and reproductive health into health emergency risk management. The policy incorporates immediate needs, such as saving lives of mothers and babies during childbirth and preventing disease, along with long term efforts to provide sustainable and resilient services for women, girls, men and boys. For further details and to read the full policy brief, please refer to: [http://www.who.int/hac/techguidance/preparedness/SRH\\_policybrief/en](http://www.who.int/hac/techguidance/preparedness/SRH_policybrief/en)

#### **Related links**

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#### **Definitions**

##### ***Disaster***

A serious disruption of the functioning of a community or a society causing widespread human, material, economic or environmental losses that exceed the ability of the affected community or society to cope using its own resources.

##### ***Emergency***

A sudden occurrence demanding immediate action that may be due to epidemics, to natural, to technological catastrophes, to strife or to other man-made causes.