

Dr. José Luis Zeballos



Following the major earthquakes that devastated Peru and Guatemala in the early 1970s, the ministers of health of the Region of the Americas, assembled during the Directing Council of the Pan American Health Organization in 1976, agreed that decisive action was needed to improve disaster preparedness in the Region. Consequently, the ministers called on PAHO/WHO[1] to create a disaster preparedness and response unit to assist countries in responding to disasters and to establish a voluntary fund for health aid to countries facing major emergencies. The Emergency Preparedness and Disaster Relief Area (PED) was thus created in March 1977.

In the ensuing 35 years, the countries of the Region have come to appreciate the importance of adapting to new and growing health needs and changing scenarios, including pandemic events such as H1N1, devastating earthquakes—like the one that shook Haiti in 2010—, and climate change. Thanks to ongoing donor support, PED has worked shoulder to shoulder with the ministries of health as a steadfast partner throughout this process. Cooperation agencies in countries such as Canada and the United States, and in countries of the European Union, including the United Kingdom and Spain, have recognized the importance of these actions and continue to provide ongoing financial support.

It also bears mentioning that, at present, activities such as early rehabilitation, mitigation, and risk reduction are all part of the response to disasters, as indicated the initial mandate of the Governing Bodies, thus completing the full cycle of actions involved in the pre and post phases of disaster management. This new, more integrated approach by the countries' health sector has facilitated the involvement of other stakeholders, resulting in greater intersectoral and interdisciplinary cooperation.

During these years, the countries of the Region have been working in coordination with PED to develop new areas of activity, such as risk reduction in hospitals through the Safe Hospitals Initiative. The 2005 World Conference on Disaster Reduction, held in Kobe, Japan, assessed this effort and made health facility vulnerability reduction a priority on the agenda for the period 2005-2015. Many countries in all regions of the world tailored the Hospital Safety Index to their

particular contexts and also applying it to steadily boost the disaster response capacity of their hospitals. Another important development has been the shoring up of technical capacity in disciplines that play a major role in disaster management. New operational knowledge has enriched the fields of epidemiological surveillance and disease control, mental health, environmental health, disaster victim and temporary refugee management, and the administration of international humanitarian relief supplies. With respect to this last issue, the Logistics Support System/Humanitarian Supply Management System (LSS/SUMA) program is currently used internationally as a valuable tool for monitoring international humanitarian assistance in emergencies and disasters.

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The countries' success in this regard is indisputable and due in large measure to the fact that most of the Region's ministries of health already have offices or technical units responsible for emergency and disaster preparedness. Although the degree of organization, equipment, and financial resources available to these units varies, the simple fact that they exist is essential for achieving more sustainable and self-sufficient development over time. The personnel who work in these disaster units are highly trained specialists with a multidisciplinary vision of emergency management and are in constant contact with PED.

Moreover, PED has been making abundant technical resources available to the countries, not only as references but as training materials for governmental and nongovernmental agencies, universities, and the general public. In addition, a wide range of up-to-date information is available on the websites of the [Emergency Preparedness and Disaster Relief Area](#) and the [Regional Disaster Information Center \(CRID\)](#)

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[Knowledge Center on Public Health and Disasters](#)

was launched; this site offers the public access to information on disaster response-related topics, providing abundant material with links to valuable sources of high-quality information.

Despite considerable progress in the field of disaster preparedness, significant challenges persist. These include efforts to continue strengthening the operating capacity of the ministries of health to prepare for and respond to major disasters, to secure a greater level of commitment and investment to reduce risks at all health facilities, to strengthen mechanisms for regulating the construction and operation of safe hospitals, and to that disaster-preparedness measures are instituted at all educational facilities at every level.

PED's success to date would not have been possible without the support of the Region's health authorities or of the various directors of PAHO/WHO, and the enormous commitment and dedication of PED personnel at Headquarters and in the Representative Offices. We who have closely followed the work of PED and played some role its development congratulate it on its 35 years of successful operations and wish it every success in its future development for our countries.

(1) Through Resolution CD24.R10.