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National Perspective on Disaster Management

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Good governance is recognised as a pre-requisite for effective disaster management and, more broadly, for sustainable development. Although significant advances have been made in setting up national institutional and legislative systems for disaster management, there are a significant number of challenges that need to be addressed.

National systems for disaster management involves the active participation of a wide range of stakeholders including government, civil society, the private sector, media, the scientific community, development sectors and the community, to name a few. All these entities, at various levels, need to be actively involved in the process as each has a unique role to play.

Building national and legislative systems for disaster reduction is not a linear process. Rather it is a series of actions to reduce vulnerability, protect development assets and investments and reduce disaster loss. Often the trigger for change is a disaster event. For instance, it was after the June 1994 floods on the Cape flats, that Cabinet resolved that South Africa's ability to deal with risk reduction and disaster management be assessed. This disaster resulted in the review of disaster management structures and approaches in government.

Some of the key factors and conditions for success include

- the need for a stable political environment,

- the presence of an explicit national disaster strategy,
- the adoption of multi-hazard approaches,
- multi-stakeholder engagement,
- private sector involvement,
- risk assessment data as the basis for stakeholder engagement dialogue,
- decentralised approaches,
- participatory monitoring,
- integration of risk into development,
- financial instruments for disaster risk management,
- media involvement,
- sustained commitment on the part of policy makers, and
- a long-term perspective.

Taking advantage of the window of opportunity, often created by a disaster, to make investments in prevention also contributes to the advancement of a more comprehensive approach to and generating a demand for disaster risk management measures.

One of the major challenges that national government encountered during the process of establishing effective legislative, institutional frameworks and systems for risk reduction, was how to make disaster risk reduction a major policy issue.

It is always difficult to engage policy makers in a dialogue on reducing disasters and the social and economic benefits of investing in this when the benefits are not always obvious or immediate.

To this day the focus is still heavily weighted to disaster response and not on prevention and risk reduction.

Reaching those most at risk is also difficult since they are often more focused on meeting the challenges of daily chronic risk, not disaster risk or sustainable development, and this perspective is difficult to modify.

There has been an increase in the number of natural disasters over the past years, and with it, increasing losses on account of urbanisation and population growth, as a result the impact of natural disasters is now felt to a larger extent. The approximate financial impact of natural disasters during the period 1999 – 2003 was more than R8,7 billion. This amount has increased drastically due to the current drought in the country.

Policy changes as far as disaster management is concerned have however, changed dramatically over the past seven (7) years in an attempt to break the downward spiral of impoverishment. We are one of the first countries in the world to embark on an all inclusive consultative process of addressing disaster management –

- The **Green Paper** on Disaster Management was officially launched in 1998.
- The **White Paper** on Disaster Management was launched in 2000.
- The **Disaster Management Act, 2002** (Act No. 57 of 2002) was **promulgated on 15 January 2003** and commenced on **1 April 2004** as far as the **national and provincial** governments are concerned and **1 July 2004** in respect of the **local government** sphere.
- The **National Disaster Management Framework** was published on 29 April 2005.
- The **Inter-governmental Committee on Disaster Management (ICDM)** was established by the President on 27 June 2005.

The dynamics of disaster management at the local, provincial and national levels should be built through strong advocacy design and supported by continuous management and distribution of information.

A national government has the sovereign right and responsibility to issue timely warnings when it is determined, through scientific and other expert means that segments of its population are at risk. It is when no authoritative source of information exists that persons may act on incorrect or misleading information that can lead to confusion and loss of life and livelihood.

In reviewing the function of early warning systems and gathering of information it is recognised that this is a process and not a single activity, and that participants in the process must include a broad, cross-section of society. Although the diversity of this participation should be considered positive, frequently national and local coordination of these processes is not always adequate. The prediction and monitoring of hazards require access to infrastructure and expertise that is not universally shared or accessible to all communities that may be vulnerable.

From a national perspective it is clear that we have made tremendous progress in establishing a policy or code of conduct that manages the involvement and performance of all stakeholders in terms of disaster management.

Two-day workshops were held in every province from 6 June to 8 July 2005 to discuss the National Disaster Management Framework and implementation strategy. These workshops proved to be very successful and provided a great opportunity to clear up any remaining uncertainties regarding our respective roles in disaster management.

A National Workshop was held on 19 and 20 July 2005 to which all national government departments and relevant government entities were invited. The purpose of this workshop was once again to ensure that all stakeholders were made aware of their roles and functions in respect of disaster management as provided for in the Disaster Management Act.

From a national perspective therefore, I am satisfied that we are succeeding in creating a paradigm shift from a response oriented culture to one of prevention and mitigation.

The remaining challenge is related to sustaining participation and benefits once they have been created.

Thank you.