

**INTERNATIONAL TELECOMMUNICATION
UNION**

Telecommunication Development Bureau



**KEYNOTE SPEECH TO THE WORKSHOP ON
TELECOMMUNICATIONS FOR DISASTER RELIEF**

BY

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---THE DISASTER – DEVELOPMENT CONUNDRUM---

Good morning ladies and gentlemen,

I am glad to be here to talk about what I think is one of the biggest and most elusive challenges of our times – the discourse of telecommunications for disaster relief within the context of development. I come from the development sector and I strongly believe that mitigating natural disasters and providing relief are fundamental matters of development. Two reasons: **First**, within its specific sphere of competence, the Telecommunication Development Sector is mandated to implement projects under the United Nations development system or other funding arrangements so as to facilitate and enhance telecommunications development by offering, organizing and coordinating technical cooperation and assistance activities. **Second**, the impact of disasters is rapidly increasing at a world level and shortening the isthmus, with the least developed and developing countries suffering an undue amount of the burden in terms of loss of investment, cost of rebuilding, loss in unearned income and disruption to economic activity. To put the magnitude of disaster related losses into perspective let me share the following staggering figures with you. Disasters such as Kobe involved losses of up to 150 billion dollars, Andrew, 29 billions, Mitch in Central America, 7 billions and George in the Caribbean over 10 billions.

Distinguished colleagues,

Ladies and gentlemen,

Traditionally, the emphasis of many actors – local, national, bilateral and multilateral involved in disaster relief and mitigation has been on providing humanitarian relief and reconstruction. Although this is critical, it is not enough! We must realize that the stereotype sequence of events of reconstruction following disasters is a model of the past. Post-disaster activity and assistance, on its own, is just too late! We must shift gears and begin to look at the root causes of these disasters and avoid the temptation of simply concentrating on symptoms. Droughts, famines, fires, floods, earthquakes, hurricanes, typhoons and other disasters have a life history ranging from the “before”, “during”, to “post disaster” phases. Guided by this line of reasoning, I think we must establish strong partnerships; partnerships between institutions such as ours, governments, private sector and the rest of the stakeholders. In these partnerships, the specter of disaster must be taken into account in the design of new investment projects such as infrastructure and network development, introducing more stringent safety criteria that guarantees risk, hazard and social vulnerability reduction. We must put emphasis on improved early warning, preparedness and evacuation procedures as a way of reducing loss to human life and damage to the expensive telecommunications equipment and infrastructure. This should now be easier to achieve than it was in the past few decades thanks to advances in science and

technology in communications, satellite imagery, construction techniques and increased understanding of ecology.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Distinguished Colleagues,

From a telecommunications development perspective, I believe that to be successful, disaster mitigation must be built into existing and ongoing development programmes at every stage, that is, project design, development of options, feasibility, and implementation because if we fail to take appropriate preventive measures at all these stages we will ourselves be creating a real **DISASTER!** The absence of adequate and appropriate disaster planning, in the form of the adoption and integration of effective mitigation strategies can result in disastrous or even catastrophic outcomes. It is for this reason that I call on all actors involved in development programmes such as governments, legislators, engineers, surveyors and architects to cooperate and incorporate in their work preventive measures that can neutralize and mitigate the effects of various forms of disasters. This oneness is essential because, as often said, *'Only together may we be strong!'*

Having said all that, I am quite aware that the old adage, *Prevention is better than cure*, does not always appeal to many planners since incorporating disaster planning into development programmes costs money resulting in this being placed low on the value-chain. But, do

we ever pause to ask ourselves what the economic, social and political costs will be in the event of a disaster?

Ladies and gentlemen,

I think I have challenged you enough. Let me now wish all of you plenty of success in your deliberations in the next three days and assure you that in the development sector, we are committed to solve, together with all other stakeholders what I deliberately chose to call the *Disaster –Development Conundrum* by effectively managing changes in functional capacities such as physical coordination, learning capacity, and the ability to adapt to changing circumstances. The sheer size of the disaster problem and its frequency should not discourage us or even anesthetize our sensibilities. We shall not allow frustration to overcome us – we shall never give up! As you can see from this panel, ITU is duly represented by all its bureaus – this is how serious we treat this issue because our motto in the house is: *Only together may we be strong!*

I thank you.