



PANAMERICAN HEALTH ORGANIZATION

WORLD HEALTH ORGANIZATION



XVIII PAN AMERICAN SANITARY CONFERENCE

XXII REGIONAL COMMITTEE MEETING

WASHINGTON, D.C., U.S.A.
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Provisional Agenda Item 30

CSP18/26 (Eng.)
3 September 1970
ORIGINAL: SPANISH

ASSISTANCE IN THE EVENT OF DISASTERS EXCEEDING THE OPERATING CAPACITY OF THE AFFECTED COUNTRY

(Item Proposed by the Government of Peru)

During the 64th Meeting of the Executive Committee, the Representative of the Government of Peru introduced Document CE64/16, which deals in a general way with the problems arising from the national emergency consequent upon the catastrophe of 31 May 1970. It also made special reference to the difficulties in using the aid offered and dispatched to Peru by other countries and by international agencies. The document also contains the following proposal:

To approve the inclusion in the provisional agenda prepared by the Director of the Pan American Sanitary Bureau for the XVIII Pan American Sanitary Conference, XXII Meeting of the Regional Committee of the World Health Organization for the Americas, of the proposal of the Government of Peru requesting that experts in catastrophes (earthquakes, mud-slides, etc.) designated by the Pan American Health Organization study and prepare a proposal for the establishment of an agency capable of dealing with human disasters, in which each country will participate and the contribution of each participating country will be coordinated.

The preamble of Resolution XXI, by which the Executive Committee decided to transmit Document CE64/16 to the XVIII Pan American Sanitary Conference, refers to the statement of the Representative of Peru and the report of the Director concerning the steps taken by the Bureau in the emergency.

Annexes

DOCUMENT CE64/16

ORGANIZATION OF REGIONAL ASSISTANCE IN THE EVENT OF DISASTERS
EXCEEDING THE OPERATING CAPACITY OF THE AFFECTED COUNTRY



*executive committee of
the directing council*

PAN AMERICAN
HEALTH
ORGANIZATION

*working party of
the regional committee*

WORLD
HEALTH
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64th Meeting
Washington, D.C.
June-July 1970

Agenda Item 20

CE64/16 (Eng.)
29 June 1970
ORIGINAL: SPANISH

ORGANIZATION OF REGIONAL ASSISTANCE IN THE EVENT OF DISASTERS EXCEEDING
THE OPERATING CAPACITY OF THE AFFECTED COUNTRY

(Submitted by the Government of Peru)

In view of the experience of the cataclysm that occurred on 31 May 1970 in an area of Peru in which an earthquake was followed by mud-slides, causing death and destruction:

The region affected is divided geographically into three areas: the coastal area, the Callejón de Huaylas, and the eastern slope of the Andes or the Callejón de Conchucos.

In the two last-mentioned areas the problem was aggravated by the destruction of all means of communication and transportation; however, it was possible to utilize a few amateur radio operators who served as liaison between the devastated regions and the remainder of the Republic.

Medical and other assistance efforts were initially held up because of lack of suitable transportation, the only service to the Callejón de Huaylas and Conchucos being by means of helicopters.

This was the situation for the first four days for the Callejón de Huaylas but not for the towns, villages and hamlets in the Andes, for which, because of their isolation and difficult topography, medical care supplied by air transport had to be authorized.

This situation gave rise to many medical care, housing, shelter, food, and transportation problems, which exceeded the capacity to provide emergency assistance of the Peruvian Government, which was faced with the urgent and imperative need to satisfy the requirements of more than 500,000 persons in the Andean region alone.

Aware of the misfortune, the countries of the Continent immediately provided generous technical and material assistance and thus helped Peru to bind up its wounds. This assistance, which is in every way invaluable, initially gave rise to an accumulation of medical personnel in the city of Lima. Unable to move to the affected areas, these persons, who had generously come to help, felt frustrated when they found that their assistance was not being used.

Therefore, it is proposed:

To approve the inclusion in the provisional agenda prepared by the Director of the Pan American Sanitary Bureau for the XVIII Pan American Sanitary Conference, XXII Meeting of the Regional Committee of the World Health Organization for the Americas, of the proposal of the Government of Peru requesting that experts in catastrophes (earthquakes, mud-slides, etc.) designated by the Pan American Health Organization study and prepare a proposal for the establishment of an agency capable of dealing with human disasters, in which each country will participate and the contribution of each participating country will be coordinated.

CSP18/26 (Eng.)
ANNEX II

NATIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL EMERGENCY RELIEF

NATIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL EMERGENCY RELIEF

As a result of experience with natural disasters and their consequences - the destruction of property and loss of life, mutilation, disease, and human suffering - national and international agencies specifically designed to cope with these circumstances have been established. Although they often entail great destruction of property, natural catastrophes take on the character of extreme emergency largely because of harm to human beings, which must be immediately dealt with. In some instances this harm is direct: deaths, injuries, helplessness, or other forms of immediate physical damage; in others the harm is indirect and primarily the consequence of the interruption of basic community services, but takes on the same emergency character.

The nature of the emergency depends not only on the magnitude of the disaster but also in large measure on pre-disaster preparedness and planning. An appropriate use of previous experience, good organization and pre-disaster planning, a clear definition of objectives, priorities, and responsibilities will help to mitigate the consequences of disasters, reduce the initial confusion, moderate their material and psychological impact, and, in general, ensure that relief operations are conducted rationally and economically.

National Organization

To ascertain the situation throughout the world, the International Committee of the Red Cross sent a questionnaire to 136 countries asking whether they had a national pre-disaster aid plan. Up to February 1970, 96 countries had replied, 95 of which stated that they had a national plan for emergency relief or were preparing one. In other words, a number of countries do not yet have such a plan or are in the very early stages of preparing one.

The existence of these national emergency relief plans depends on easily identifiable factors:

1. The priority attached to these problems is a prime consideration. In countries situated in areas prone to frequent natural disasters, some of which are virtually expected events each year in a specified season, emergency relief is an obligatory part of the government program.

2. Other important factors are the degree of progress achieved, the economic and social development of the country, and the natural development of technico-administrative agencies which are incorporating precautions for more or less frequent problems and even for problems which are expected to be infrequent.

¹ Assistance in Cases of Natural Disaster. Interim Report of the Secretary-General. 49th Session of the U.N. Economic and Social Council. Document E/4853 of 12 May 1970.

3. A final factor of considerable importance is the disaster experience of certain countries in which, because they did not have a properly prepared national organization, it was not possible to make maximum use of the possibilities of the country itself and those afforded by the arrival of aid from other countries or international mechanisms. Mention may also be made of the experience of having to make a great effort to solve problems relating to the shipment to the country of unnecessary articles of all kinds, instead of essential articles.

This last-mentioned aspect may be even more important than that which is undoubtedly assigned to it by those who have had experience with disasters of some magnitude, especially because of the frustrations resulting from the accumulation of material and human resources that are the result of a generous effort of solidarity and which do not fulfill a sufficiently useful function for various reasons. Indeed material resources of all kinds are frequently duplicated, resulting in the accumulation of some items which are not always the most necessary or the most critically needed and the lack of some which are exceedingly necessary. There may also be a difference of opinion about what the priorities should be. It is necessary to take into account the fact that an emergency consequent upon disaster is by its very nature an extremely dynamic phenomenon in which every hour has its problem and its possible solution under penalty of transferring and multiplying the problem of the next hour, and the most critical moments are in the early hours and days before all the details are known. The mobilization of strongly motivated local and national resources requires a time period which will be increasingly shorter and less significant in proportion to how the country is prepared for emergencies and has plans which can be put into effect immediately. External assistance when necessary requires more time to be put into effect, and it is here that the evidence of the advantages of previous planning is really overwhelming. When there is a good national plan, the human and material resources available are known and request for aid can be very specific, and prevent the squandering of the fraternal effort that comes from abroad by any mode of transport in elements of which there is already a sufficient supply or which are not needed or which have a very low priority. The same applies to human resources. It is possible and sometimes happens that the transfer of technical personnel, particularly in the health sector (physicians, nurses) is very generous but without the actual needs having first been ascertained. Furthermore, a good preparation would make it possible to request very specific aid in well-defined fields, thus preventing the unplanned mobilization of health personnel and making possible a more flexible administration of accommodation, transportation, and services supporting such health teams as might arrive from abroad.

The countries face the problem of emergency situations caused by natural disasters with very varying mechanisms. Their establishment is influenced by geographical extent, characteristics of the political division of the country, the density and concentration of population, the degree of economic and

social development, and the greater or lesser frequency of natural phenomena; these factors, in turn, condition more or less experience in solving the consequences of them. Usually, however, in most countries, the health agencies, national defense agencies, the army, the police, interministerial groups and committees for emergency relief, and even government organizations specifically intended for dealing with emergencies have an outstanding part to play in emergency aid. In general, these activities are supported by a variety of semiprivate or private organizations, which support the action of the government. These consist of civil defense committees, associations for the solution of emergency situations, and other community agencies interested in the problem. A traditional nongovernmental organization which is present in all countries is the Red Cross, which, in addition to its national resources can, when circumstances so require, call on the League of Red Cross Societies coordinated by the International Committee of the Red Cross. All these agencies are specifically devoted to action in emergencies, and in some countries the conduct of these activities has reached a very high level.

As has been said many times, it is not possible to prevent natural disasters, but it is possible to prevent a very considerable part of their consequences by the means of proper preparation and previous planning. This applies in particular to disasters connected with hurricanes, cyclones, and floods, and even in large measure to the consequences of earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, droughts, and the effects of some agricultural and livestock pests. In the countries that are the most advanced in this sector, there are very developed organizations which concern themselves with the investigation of means of promoting and implementing preventive and protective measures, conducting educational campaigns so that the public is prepared for these circumstances and organizing mechanisms capable of detecting the early manifestations of disasters. Modern technology makes it possible to use extraordinary resources such as aviation, satellites designed to register meteorological phenomena, high altitude photography, and meteorological networks.

International Organizations

Nongovernmental Organizations

The nongovernmental organization with the longest history is the League of Red Cross Societies. Despite the fact that the Red Cross has always been primarily interested in armed conflicts and their consequences, that is to say, disasters caused by man, since 1951 it has redefined its functions and formalized its responsibility in emergencies caused by natural disasters. Despite a relatively recent formalization of this responsibility, the Red Cross Societies in all countries have a praiseworthy history of participation whenever one of these circumstances has arisen. The League has given special attention to preparing for disasters and to stimulating the preparation of national plans for dealing with these emergencies. Together with all the international mechanisms which take part in these questions, the League is also interested in conducting various types of coordination to make action more effective when the circumstances so require it.

Intergovernmental Organizations

In this field in our Continent, the most important action has been taken by the Organization of American States, through the establishment of the Inter-American Emergency Aid Fund. This Fund was established by the Second Special Conference at Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, in November 1965. In Article II of its Statutes it is stated that "the Fund is intended to supply, without considerations of a political nature, aid, which shall be exclusively social in character, in the form of food, medical equipment, and medicines and other types of material, technical, and financial assistance, both in kind and in services, to the Member State of the Organization that is threatened by, or has suffered from, or is in an emergency situation, whatever its origin."

On 28 May 1968, the Council of the Organization of American States approved the Statutes of the Fund. They provide for the establishment of a committee that will operate the Fund, consisting of the Secretary General of the OAS, the Chairman of the Inter-American Committee on the Alliance for Progress, and the Director of the Pan American Sanitary Bureau. The Fund began operations on 22 July 1969. Among its powers and duties is that of receiving applications for assistance from Member States, deciding whether they are in conformity with the purposes of the Fund, deciding upon the manner of granting such assistance, and adopting pertinent measures and the concluding agreements to expedite the efficient and rapid mobilization of available goods, resources, and services. In all matters relating to health, the Fund uses the Pan American Sanitary Bureau as its agent.

During the emergency caused by the earthquake in Peru, the work of the Fund was of considerable importance, especially in the health sector, where it made it possible to use funds for the purchase of medicines and medical equipment in the amount of about US\$100,000.

Bilateral Aid Arrangements

Perhaps the oldest form of disaster assistance has been, and still is, bilateral aid of one country to another. The progress in communications, air transportation facilities, and development of sea and land routes has made this emergency aid possible, not only as in the past from the nearest countries, but also from the most distant parts of the world. In terms of volume of aid and money, this assistance is of major importance for the emergency itself. While the most prosperous countries, the most developed and best organized, have traditionally provided invaluable disaster assistance, the less prosperous and less economically developed countries, by making considerable efforts, have made a substantial contribution to the alleviation of the consequences of disasters in other countries. Many forms of aid from individual initiative and private groups of various types which are organized in countries as a result of a feeling of solidarity towards other human beings in distress and which express their interest through contributions in kind or in cash, sometimes in considerable amounts, make a substantial contribution to the government action.

United Nations - The United Nations Specialized Agencies

United Nations emergency aid must be considered from several standpoints. One of these is immediate aid under the authority of the Secretary-General, who is authorized to use in any year up to US\$150,000, with a ceiling of US\$20,000 per country, whenever he considers it necessary. These funds are handled by the United Nations Resident Representative in each country. The Secretary-General also has the responsibility for the general coordination of activities of the United Nations and, in this sense, may call on existing agencies.

A very important part of the work of the United Nations is carried out through the specialized agencies, programs, and funds. For example, an important sector of the activities of the World Food Program is devoted to emergency food assistance.

The United Nations Childrens Fund undertakes very considerable assistance activities in disaster areas and has made special arrangements for doing so. In accordance with its Statutes, its assistance is primarily directed at mothers and children, and it always endeavors to coordinate its work with that of other sources of aid.

The United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), in addition to its participation in the World Food Program, undertakes activities related to disaster planning and preparedness, including those to avert a lack of food which may occur in various regions of the world as a consequence, inter alia, of natural disasters.

WHO has an important function because of the very nature of its activities. Its work is primarily aimed at providing assistance and advice in such areas as the health infrastructure, communicable diseases center, emergency restoration of health services (primarily community water supplies), and all activities relating to environmental changes that might affect health. It always works in close relation with the health authorities of the countries affected and coordinates its actions in this field with those of other agencies of the United Nations, such as UNICEF and FAO, and with nongovernmental organizations such as the League of Red Cross Societies and its International Committee. The Organization has considerable experience since it is practically the rule that it participates in emergency activities which involve harm to human beings. This experience bears out the difficulties in establishing uniform procedures for dealing with emergency situations and the need for pre-disaster planning at the national level in order to reduce their effects to a minimum. It has prepared a Guide to Sanitation in Natural Disasters which will be published in 1970 and will be extremely valuable since the destruction of, or damage to, sanitation services, water supplies, and sewage disposal are almost obligatory phenomena in this situation. It is the policy of the Organization to advise activities to make countries prepared for emergencies.

WHO may also make use of its Emergency Fund and has at its disposal an extremely valuable asset, namely its technical personnel working in the countries, which may be immediately mobilized if it is on the spot, or may be rapidly moved to provide service in the affected country.

In the American Continent, the program of the World Health Organization forms part of a single program with the activities of the Pan American Health Organization. Through the inter-American system, the Pan American Sanitary Bureau has access to the activities of the Inter-American Emergency Aid Fund and participates directly as far as health is concerned. Because of its structure and the characteristics of its operation, PASB can give technical assistance without delay. In the recent emergency in Peru this was clearly exemplified since it had, in the country, Zone IV personnel, physicians, nurses, and public health engineers, and in addition, the personnel of the Center of Environmental Engineering and Sciences, which also has its headquarters in Lima. This technical personnel was supplemented by the transfer of an epidemiologist specializing in health campaigns from Buenos Aires to Lima to provide services in the area affected.

SUMMARY

National and international experience is available in dealing with emergency problems which it is necessary to cope with as a consequence of natural disasters. Preparation for disasters has been the motive of many varied efforts which have taken the form of national programs and international activities.

National organizations devoted to preventing disasters vary in accordance with the characteristics of each country and range from detailed, planned structures which operate at a high level of efficiency, to very tentative activities for the planning of future structures.

National governmental organization is supplemented by private and semi-private activities.

Since natural disasters frequently exceed for one or another reason the capacity of the country and of its structures to cope with the emergency, use has been made of a series of mechanisms, and some international institutions designed to cope with these circumstances by providing or channeling assistance to afflicted countries have been established.

Foremost among nongovernmental organizations by reason of its long tradition is the League of Red Cross Societies.

Among the intergovernmental organizations in our Continent, mention must be made of the Inter-American Emergency Aid Fund which began operations in May 1968.

Another important aspect is bilateral aid from country to country, which in some cases has achieved very considerable characteristics and volumes.

The international mechanism with the widest coverage is that corresponding to the United Nations and its specialized agencies. This action is conducted in large measure through specialized agencies or other structures such as the World Food Program or the United Nations Childrens Fund (UNICEF).

All the above-mentioned mechanisms reach their maximum effective utilization when there is an appropriately prepared national structure to cope with the circumstances, either with its own resources or by orienting, channeling, and handling in the most practical manner possible the resources which may be obtained from sources outside the country through any of the above-mentioned mechanisms.

The foregoing shows that there are international, intergovernmental, and bilateral agencies designed to cope with the problems arising from emergencies caused by natural disasters. These agencies have already shown their ability to act in many circumstances and to improve their methods of work in the light of their accumulated experience. All these external assistance agencies operate best when there is a national structure to absorb this assistance and provide the infrastructure enabling the best possible use of it to be made. Although it is clear that any approach to the control of emergencies must be, by its very nature, multidisciplinary, the health sector, insofar as it involves the most urgent aspects for the protection of human beings, takes on in emergencies a predominant role and dominates most of the activities in the early hours. This extreme urgency in the health sector makes it very necessary for there to be proper prior planning.

Two well-defined lines of action arise from the foregoing. One is that, in respect to external assistance, there are already in existence agencies for providing it, and it is the responsibility of all to improve them and make them ever more suited to their function. And a second line, which at this moment has a high priority, is the continuing improvement of organization and planning at the national level to cope with emergencies.

In our opinion, it is obvious that the whole system revolves, and must continue to revolve, around a well-planned, well-organized, satisfactorily equipped structure with definite plans. The improvement of these national structures, or the creation of them if they do not exist, is the immediate task before the Governments, and the Pan American Sanitary Bureau has a definite role to play in cooperating with them in that respect.