

UNITED NATIONS



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FOREWORD

In recent years the world has witnessed an interminable succession of disasters -- floods, storms, earthquakes, landslides, volcanic eruptions and wildfires that have claimed many thousands of lives, caused material losses in the tens of billions of dollars, and inflicted a terrible toll on developing countries in particular, where disasters divert attention and resources needed desperately to escape poverty.

Communities will always face natural hazards, but today's disasters are often generated by, or at least exacerbated by, human activities. At the most dramatic level, human activities are changing the natural balance of the earth, interfering as never before with the atmosphere, the oceans, the polar ice caps, the forest cover and the natural pillars that make our world a livable home. But we are also putting ourselves in harm's way in less visible ways. At no time in human history have so many people lived in cities clustered around seismically active areas. Destitution and demographic pressure have led more people than ever before to live in flood plains or in areas prone to landslides. Poor land-use planning; environmental mismanagement; and a lack of regulatory mechanisms both increase the risk and exacerbate the effects of disasters.

Living with risk: a global review of disaster reduction is the first comprehensive effort by the United Nations system to take stock of disaster reduction initiatives throughout the world. Coordinated by the secretariat of the International Strategy for Disaster Reduction (ISDR), the report discusses current disaster trends, assesses policies aimed at mitigating the impact of disasters, and offers examples of successful initiatives. It also recommends that risk reduction be integrated into sustainable development at all levels - global, national and local.

Most of all, Living with risk shows that we are far from helpless in the face of natural hazards. Early warning and risk reduction measures have been important factors in helping to reduce significantly the number of people who lose their lives to disasters. New planning and forecasting tools are helping to mitigate the devastation regularly wrought by floods. We can and must build a world of resilient communities and nations. I hope that this publication reaches the widest possible readership and rouses the international community to do its utmost to better equip people everywhere for life in our hazard-filled planet.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'K. Annan'.

Kofi A. Annan
Secretary-General
July, 2002