A culture of prevention

Australia's industrialisation has brought many benefits, as well as many risks, to our communities. We are vulnerable to hazards associated with industrial production, hazardous materials transportation, storage, disposal and spillage, explosive factory fires as well as air, land and water contamination. This year disruptions to electricity supply in Queensland, water contamination in Sydney and the gas crisis in Victoria provided brutal proof of the community's vital dependency on technology and infrastructure. The cost to the community of these events has run into billions of dollars.

On top of the technological disasters, half a million people in Australia are affected every year by natural disasters. The average annual bill is $1.25 billion in damages alone. In the wake of the disasters, insurance premiums rise, agricultural production falls, businesses fold, jobs are lost and the local economy takes years to recover.

Although it is difficult to measure, the biggest cost of disasters is the human toll with lives being lost, shattered and changed. For the survivors, their traumatic experience may last a lifetime.

And all these losses are mostly avoidable; or at least could have been reduced if we had implemented an active national strategy to promote and support disaster mitigation; if more Australians recognised the importance and benefits of mitigation; and if we had a Culture of Prevention.

The issue of disaster mitigation is a dominant theme of the 1990's International Decade for Natural Disaster Reduction. One of the original goals for the Decade is to improve the capacity of each country to mitigate the effects of natural disasters.

As a result of a 1994 mid-term review of the International Decade, the United Nations endorsed a number of principles which have particular relevance to a Culture of Prevention:

- Risk assessment is a required step for the adoption of adequate and successful disaster reduction policies and measures.
- Disaster prevention and preparedness are of primary importance in reducing the need for disaster relief.
- Disaster prevention and preparedness should be considered integral aspects of development policy and planning at national, regional, bilateral, multilateral and international levels.
- The development and strengthening of capacities to prevent, reduce and mitigate disasters is a top priority area to be addressed during the Decade so as to provide a strong basis for follow-up activities to the Decade.
- Preventive measures are most effective when they involve participation at all levels, from the local community through the national government to the regional and international level.
- Vulnerability can be reduced by the application of proper design and pattern of development focused on target groups, by appropriate education and training of the whole community.

We can be very proud of our well-developed disaster planning, response and recovery arrangements. Tackling prevention, however, has been much more difficult because of the widespread and uncoordinated involvement of governments at all levels, industries, peak bodies and communities. Accordingly, since 1996, the National Emergency Management Committee, our peak national body for emergency management matters, has been developing a National Framework for Mitigation. The Framework aims to facilitate and support implementation of disaster mitigation encompassing all sectors, community groups and individuals.

The Framework will connect all the organisations who can play a role in advancing the cause of mitigation. It is a means to promote mitigation and exchange information on directions and programs. It will act as a catalyst for action and support for the development of strategies. It is both a national focus for mitigation and a framework for partnerships.

While there is still a long way to go, I am very heartened by the very strong signs from all around the country that disaster mitigation is being given its appropriate priority within the framework of a risk-management approach, and that we are adopting a Culture of Prevention.

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