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'A TRANSATLANTIC VIEW'

(A note on the work of the Disaster Research Unit at the University of Bradford and comment on the US National Natural Hazards Conference at the University of Colorado.)

The Disaster Research Unit was formed a year and a half ago at the University of Bradford with the principle of formulating a methodology of predisaster planning with emphasis on less developed countries in a global context. It was a product of a social environment acutely aware of world social problems and intensely involved in voluntary relief activity but it was realised particularly as a result of cataclysmic world disaster events in 1970 that more must be done before disaster events occur in order to reduce losses. Predisaster planning had been spoken of for a few years in international circles but no definition had been given to the idea - and certainly not to the processes involved. It was seen at the outset that recognition of such a state of affairs could not be taken for granted and that the need to illustrate the necessity for predisaster planning in quantifiable terms was equally important. Research into predisaster planning became a multi-disciplinary project before it had begun.

Examination has proceeded not only into a definition of predisaster planning processes and illustration of the necessity for predisaster planning, but of the context and environment into which disasters occur. It has been made apparent that unless proneness to the impact of disaster is reduced, potential losses will continue unabated and savings achieved by predisaster planning in any micro scale will be relatively easily achieved. A preferred situation will be when savings from micro predisaster planning become more difficult to achieve due to proneness to losses having

been reduced. To achieve this, predisaster planning has to be macro scale and achieve the effective participation of the processes within development as they take place. Furthermore, the processes of predisaster planning have to be contained within (an enlightened) development planning framework.

But the achievement of reduction in losses is the essential aim of predisaster planning and of the Unit's application and considerable assistance in the formulation of a definition of the processes involved has been given by the opportunity to undertake a Study in Predisaster Planning for the League of Red Cross Societies. The Bahama Islands were given as a location and the resulting report, 'A Study in Predisaster Planning', Occasional Paper No. 10, DRU,) analyses disaster risks and defines activities and roles for government and non-government administration to adopt in order to organise a comprehensive programme of predisaster planning. As a result of this exercise, another is being undertaken in the Windward Islands to examine in depth the effect of hurricanes on an economy and negotiations are now taking place for another assignment in the South West Pacific. The need, recognised at the outset, has been quick to manifest itself in terms of opportunity for the application of the results of the Unit's work and the relationship between research and application is already remarkably interdependent.

Since the Unit's inception the benefit of the output of the Natural Hazards Research Group at the University of Colorado and of the Disaster Research Center at the State University of Ohio has been considerable and each have provided a continuing source of valuable reference, particularly from within the principal disciplines involved in these research

programmes - sociology, psychology, geography and economics. Coupled with the considerable attention given by DRU to the many aspects of Federal Government response to disaster occurrences within the United States, it was with some awe and excitement that an invitation to attend the Second National Invitational Conference on Natural Hazards at Boulder was promptly accepted. Heightened anticipation was rewarded by being amongst many people met on previous occasions, some spoken to by telephone and not previously met, many known by signature but now by face and many others to be met and known for the first time. A magnificent mix of representatives of many and various aspects of disaster related activity - a total of one hundred and ten or so - all but five from within the USA. The attentively conceived conference programme enabled considerable fusion of elements (if not always of idea) without that imposition of format experienced in other less sympathetic conference situations. Each and every one was able to 'do his thing' and contribute thereby. It was a valuable and enjoyable four days.

But whilst the conference itself was a success, it demonstrated in bringing together the many activities, roles and points of view regarding disaster events within USA just how these many parts are, in fact, so separate and at what a very elementary stage is any form of comprehensive predisaster planning. Whilst there is considerable awareness of role and responsibility in each separate activity such as legislation, insurance, building codes and construction and sociological and psychological research there is little or no relationship that a casual observer might expect between, for instance, the science of warning systems and dissemination of warnings or the achievement of a desired response; the science of earth-

quake prediction and procedures for evacuation or land use zoning and building design or building construction codes. In essence, some contact between, but little or no fusion of, technology and sociology, the gulf between them not unrecognised either by the conveners of the conference or research programmes or, on the other hand, by resort to drastic action such as the bulldozing of a dyke around a community without previous appropriate legislation - serving only to widen the gulf by ignoring individual and community response. A similar device portraying technological power blind to social response is the DIDS (Decision Information Distribution System) warning method which may be a technological triumph but is a sociological catastrophe. The confrontation between authoritarian control and democratic choice is rampant and this in a society founded on the principles of liberty and freedom; and the battle between individual rights and the common values of society is unfortunately not synonymous but yet another area of conflict. It was not until there was time on the plane ride home that the motto of the Rocky Mountain News declared itself as epitomising so much of the basic argument of the Conference discussions:

'Give light and the people will find their own way'

It has been said that life losses due to natural disaster events over a twentyfive year period in the 25 least developed countries were fourteen times greater than those experienced in the twentyfive most developed countries over the same period. It is true, nevertheless, that the USA is a major part of a continent that experiences its own on-going series of disaster events and that in terms of dollar loss it is natural to expect its per capita losses as a highly developed nation to be the highest in the world.

It is also reasonable to expect therefore that natural disaster research should be nationally based. On the other side of the Atlantic, the United Kingdom, or even Europe, is by comparison disaster inactive, and the research environment for the Disaster Research Unit is quite differently orientated to an outward looking interest aligned with perhaps what is nationally a lingering colonial responsibility to parts of the world now known as less-developed. The research environment of our two countries in this respect is very dissimilar. What lessons can be learnt by developing nations from what has taken place in the developed countries? In the context of disaster preparedness it is surely to avoid the prolonged disassociation of disaster preparedness within the processes of development. Development procedures must be more enlightened towards disaster-power both for their own sake and because of their powerfully dangerous potential for causing, or exacerbating, disaster events. If the gulf between disaster awareness and development is yet to be filled in the USA and other developed and disaster prone countries, in developing situations it must not be allowed to happen. Furthermore, if the gulf between research and application is to be avoided, one way of doing this will be for research to join forces with consultancy - which is the DRU creed.

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