

Press release

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ICSU hosts conference on hazards and disasters

How can science be used to prevent natural hazards from becoming major disasters?

KUALA LUMPUR, Malaysia. -- Building on an initiative launched last year, the International Council for Science (ICSU) today held its first conference on environmental hazards and disasters. The conference, which took place in conjunction with the official inauguration of ICSU's Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific, addressed how science could be used to prevent natural and human-induced hazards from becoming catastrophic events. UNESCO, through its Regional Office for Science in Jakarta, and the Academy of Sciences of Malaysia co-sponsored the conference.

The number of recorded natural disasters has increased dramatically in recent times, from about 100 per decade in 1940 to nearly 2800 per decade in the 1990s. Unfortunately, the Asia-Pacific region is no stranger to such events -- an example being the Indian Ocean tsunami, which happened at the end of 2004. Other examples of recent disasters include the hurricanes Katrina and Wilma, an earthquake in Kashmir and landslides in the Philippines. Such disasters kill, injure or displace millions of people a year and cause hundreds of billions of dollars worth of damage.

Today's conference ties in with the planning for a major new initiative on hazards that ICSU launched last year. This programme, which builds on work done by the international scientific community to date, plans to use science to prevent natural and man-made hazards from becoming catastrophic events. While we can't stop flooding and earthquakes, we should be able to prevent these events from becoming economic and human disasters. But to do this, scientists and policy makers need to work together more closely.

For instance, policy makers must take more notice of scientific evidence that can help prevent natural hazards from causing widespread devastation. In turn, scientists need to find new ways of communicating their research so that policy makers better understand how to integrate it into their decision-making processes. Moreover, new research to find out more about why disasters are increasing, and which human activities could worsen or lessen their effect, is urgently required. Finally, the public also needs to be kept informed of any imminent hazards as well as any decisions taken by policy makers.

"In ten years, the result should be that fewer people die, fewer are adversely impacted and wiser investments are made," said Gordon McBean, Chair in Policy for the Institute for Catastrophic Loss Reduction at the University of Western Ontario and Chair of the ICSU Scoping Group on Environmental Hazards and Disasters.

Speakers at today's conference focused on hazards like extreme weather events, earthquake prediction, landslides and land fires, tsunami early warning systems and the effects of the 2004 tsunami on livelihoods in the Indian Ocean area. "This conference is the first activity organised by ICSU's Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific," explained Mohd Nordin Hasan, Director of the Regional Office. "It also marks the beginning of greater involvement of scientists from developing countries in setting the agenda and eventually engaging in international research on environmental hazards and disasters"

Founded in 1931, the International Council for Science (ICSU) is a non-governmental organization representing a global membership that includes both national scientific bodies (107 members) and international scientific unions (29 members).

Through this international network, ICSU coordinates interdisciplinary research to address major issues of relevance to both science and society. In addition, the Council actively advocates for freedom in the conduct of science, promotes equitable access to scientific data and information, and facilitates science education and capacity building

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