PEOPLE, POLITICS AND ECONOMICS

The topic of this session of the Scientific and Technical Symposium is a very broad one. It is also very important, because it addresses a vital element in ***all*** early warning systems: how to link scientific and technical knowledge and capabilities with organisational systems and structures, and with communities at risk.

The inter-linkage of the many different components of early warning systems at all levels – from the international, through the national level to the community – is essential. The effectiveness of institutionalised early warning systems can only be achieved by close co-operation between all the agencies involved in running the system, and between these agencies and vulnerable people.

The 11 presentations and the discussions in the People, Politics and Economics session reflected the broad scope of this topic. They helped to confirm the consensus (expressed at this conference and in the ISDR's Global Survey)[1] about the current state of knowledge, policy and practice in early warning systems. It is clear that early warning systems have made great progress in recent times in technical, organisational and social terms. There is general agreement on the principles and many of the elements of good practice (and increasing awareness of some of the gaps in our knowledge). In particular, it is accepted not only that early warning systems must be 'end-to-end' – that is, they must reach out to communities at risk – but they must be 'people-centred': their acknowledged primary purpose must be to support and empower those people in protecting themselves.

In order to 'go the last mile', an integrated approach to early warning systems has to be based on the needs, priorities, capacities and cultures of those at risk. The early warning system has to be 'user-friendly' in order to serve its purpose. People living at risk must be partners in the system, not controlled by it.

Presentations to this session demonstrated the effectiveness of people-centred early warning systems that utilise and develop community capacities, create genuine local ownership of the system, and are based on a shared understanding of needs and purpose. Such initiatives are sustainable, replicable – they can be scaled up – and, importantly, they are adaptable and resilient.

---

[1] *Global Survey of Early Warning Systems: An assessment of capacities, gaps and opportunities toward building a comprehensive global early warning system for all natural hazards* (UN ISDR, 2006, at www.ewc3.org). This report was prepared for the EWC III conference.

Trust and confidence are key elements in successful people-centred early warning systems. Warnings must be credible and reliable. This does not only refer to the scientific and technological components of the warning system, but to the emergency management structures and other agencies in the system. It is not just a question of believing the message: you have to trust the messenger, too.

Informed citizens will make their own, informed, choices. They

Finally, let us not forget the many powerful economic, social and political forces that make so many people in so much of the world vulnerable – in the broadest sense of the term – even in so-called 'normal' times. Effective early warning systems are just a small part of the contribution to overcoming those challenges.

John Twigg, Session Rapporteur
Allan Lavell, Session Chair
29 March 2006