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Making disaster relief more effective

EACH year tens of thousands of people die as the result of large scale disasters such as earthquakes, famines, floods and so on. Some years disaster reaches dreadful proportions; no-one will ever know how many were killed in the Tangshan earthquake of 1976, but rumours of 700,000 have never been denied. And while the number of major disasters changes little from year to year, there is some evidence that the proportion of the population which die in these disasters has risen in recent years, even though research into the prediction, prevention and mitigation of disasters has gone on apace for many years and has had some substantial successes. Many deaths and much of the misery that attends on disasters is unavoidable in the foreseeable future, but very often a good relief and supportive operation after the disaster has struck could make a major contribution both to saving lives and alleviating distress. But is relief well enough done? The International Disasters Institute, just established in London, suspects it is not and hopes to stimulate research into how it can be done better.

The institute has emerged in an interesting way as the formalisation of links between groups of predominantly young research workers with interests ranging across many specialisations from architecture to nutrition. Until recently they had attachments, of varying degrees, to the London Technical Group, Bradford University's Disaster Research Unit and the Oxford Polytechnic's Disasters and Human Settlements Unit; the institute replaces these as a focus for their work. London is widely regarded as an excellent place for such an international institute to be established because so much of the expertise and information sources of an old colonial power is still available.

To a certain extent the institute is bound to find itself in conflict with the relief-giving agencies and governments' own disaster organisations; not because the institute will be in the business of relief itself, but because one of its most important functions, according to Dr Frances D'Souza, its director, will be in the evaluation of the effectiveness of their operations. Recent years have, of course, seen some spectacular and often-quoted blunders in relief, and it may be that public knowledge

of these has made it perceptibly more difficult for the agencies to raise money. But there have been other less spectacular ways in which apparently sensible and desirable relief operations have (as John Rivers reported in *Nature*, January 12, page 100) been aimed at the wrong targets. Massive inoculation campaigns and the shipping in of disaster shelters are two such activities which have come in for much criticism. It is undeniable that relief operations save many lives; the question the institute asks is whether a long cool look at them might not increase their effectiveness.

One of the prerequisites for doing this is that those involved in relief should neither see disasters as a means of changing the social system nor should they perpetrate the white-man-with-megaphone image. Relief workers should recognise that disasters as such are not a product of the modern age, even if the scale of fatalities might be unprecedented; similar occurrences must always have been a feature of life in some parts of the world. There is thus a lot of handed-down expertise and toughness to weather the aftermath of a disaster. Relief can only be truly effective if it is supportive of this local expertise and enterprise, not disruptive of it.

Will the institute flourish? It will frequently find itself unpopular, but popularity is, presumably, hardly a thing that those associated with it have actively courted for the past several years. The most formidable obstacle at present is money. The institute operates out of a London basement, where it keeps a library of books and reports. It employs a handful of staff and it needs £30,000 per year to keep going; this is core funding and does not cover the costs of projects the institute may try to stimulate, for which separate money will be sought. The problem is that raising money for the immediate needs of disaster-struck people has a definite attraction to it, whereas raising money to pay for the administration of an organisation that tries to evaluate such operations lacks a certain public appeal. All the more reason why companies, foundations and individual people (notably scientists) who recognise the unspectacular but desirable role of painstaking research should regard the International Disasters Institute as particularly worthy of their support. □