TRAINING WORKSHOP ON EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION TECHNIQUES AND IMPROVED MEDIA RELATIONS

San Jose, Costa Rica, 6 - 14 May 1996

The Training Workshop on Effective Communication Techniques and Improved Media Relations was held in San José, Costa Rica from 6 to 14 May 1996 for participants from Regions III and IV and consisted of two parts. The first part of the workshop (6-10 May) was largely dedicated to learning skills in working with the television camera. The second part (11-14 May) concentrated on issues related to provision of public weather services. **This report concerns the second part of the workshop**. The overall objective was that at the end of the second week of the workshop, the participants would have learned techniques that could be used to strengthen the capabilities of NMSs to provide comprehensive weather information for the benefit of the public.

The workshop concentrated mainly on coordination between meteorologists, disaster coordinators and civil defense authorities, and the mass media. At the outset, the participants were requested to give presentations of the national practices of coordination between their respective NMSs and both the disaster coordinators and the media. From the presentations it emerged that while in some countries such coordination exists and works well, in others there is a serious gap in coordination and communication between the providers and the users of public weather services and products.

A detailed presentation was made to the workshop on the Public Weather Services Programme, with special emphasis on such topics as the importance and scope of PWS, management framework for the development of PWS, application of PWS to sensitive economic sectors, presentation and dissemination techniques, and exchange and coordination of information on hazardous weather conditions. The importance of verification of forecasts and warnings and the overall evaluation of the services provided to the public was highlighted.

The present situation as regards coordination between NMSs, disaster coordinators and the media, was evaluated and the difficulties and shortcomings existing in each of the mentioned sectors were analyzed. As regards the NMSs the problems include data sparsity, lack of critical data due to lack of equipment, and proper dissemination of warnings and forecasts. In the case of disaster coordination managements, lack of proper procedures for dissemination of warnings and forecasts, lack of a proper plan of action at times of crises with the involvement of meteorologists in such plans, adequate education and training of disaster coordinators to recognize the importance of the influence of weather on their work, and finally the reduced staffing during

weekends and holidays when disasters strike were a prominent problem areas. For the media, limited emphasis on weather for public consumption except during highly publicized weather events such as hurricanes and river flooding, limited meteorological background of on camera or radio personalities, media outlets staffing problems during night time hours, weekends and holidays, and lack of media sensitivity to low population areas and limited coverage in such areas were cited as major difficulties. Several case studies were presented which clearly demonstrated the disastrous consequences of the above shortcomings.

The necessity for coordination was addressed next. On the one hand the replacement costs of private and public property and infrastructures are ever increasing. On the other hand, the citizens are better educated and have a greater understanding of complex concepts such as meteorology, and therefore have higher and stronger demand for services. These two factors are decisive in defining the need to better coordinate the services provided to the public by NMSs, disaster coordinating authorities and the media.

The importance of improving the techniques of interpretation of products for dissemination to the media, disaster managers and the public was debated at length following a presentation under that title. The preliminary requirement for such improvement is to establish the needs of the public, media and disaster coordinators and then to tailor the NMS products and services to satisfy that need. The most crucial step in improvement involves extensive education of the public, media and disaster coordinators. In the case of the public most of the education should begin in schools to instill the message of weather safety in the community from a young age. Children television programming should also be included on such education agenda. Both the media and the disaster coordinators can benefit from basic meteorological training leading to necessary interpretative skills level. Enhancing public response to severe weather through routine issuing of watches, warnings, and hazardous weather outlooks to sensitize the public was given special attention by the workshop. In the long term, establishing public education programmes sponsored by NMSs and disaster coordination community are the most effective ways to raise public awareness.

Concerning the international broadcast media and their interaction with NMSs, the workshop agreed that international media enjoy wide appeal and are often perceived to be more credible than the national or local Meteorological Service. In order to ensure that warnings of severe weather are relayed to the international broadcast media in a timely manner, channels of communication should be established between them and the NMSs either directly or via a national media coordinator desk. In the latter case, the international media should assume responsibility to contact national media coordinators in cases of severe weather to obtain the latest information, and then to use that information to update or amend their forecasts or warnings. Throughout the workshop the importance of proper recognition and acknowledgement of the role of the NMSs and the World Weather Watch in safety of life and property of the public was emphasized. This was relevant especially as regards the international media and the private sector.

A presentation was given by the Costa Rica Meteorological Institute of its work in public education. This trend is relatively new in that the limited variations in the weather and climate pattern in the country did not in the past encourage much attention to be given to meteorology. The Meteorological Institute initiated a programme of public education at primary and secondary school levels relatively recently and since 1988 an optional course in meteorology has been offered to university students. The overall objective of the education programme of Costa Rica is to make meteorology accessible to the public.

A panel comprising the Director of the National Emergency Committee of Costa Rica, the Press Director of the Costa Rica Red Cross, the Chief of Information from Radio Monumental, the Deputy Director, and the Commercialization and Communication Coordinator of the National Meteorological Institute was invited to address the participants during the last day of the workshop. A detailed discussion following the presentations by panel members, allowed the exchange of views and experiences by both the providers and users of public weather services.

A number of recommendations were formulated by the workshop as the overall outcome of its work as follows:

- Educating the public in meteorology, especially children and young people should be a high priority for all NMSs;
- Staff of NMSs should be trained on a regular basis in their dealings with the disaster management authorities, the media and other users of their services;
- NMSs should advise the media and the disaster coordinators of the anticipated hazardous weather conditions with sufficient lead time especially when those conditions are expected to coincide with weekends or holiday periods (minimum holiday staffing has proved disastrous as case studies have shown);
- NMSs should be involved in the planning as well as the implementation phases of civil defense weather-related activities, especially if operational exercises are planned to test the warnings and evacuation systems;
- Meteorological training by the NMSs for the disaster management community should be established or expanded. Liaison with the disaster manager community should be strengthened to include for example, belonging to their professional association(s);
- Liaison with the media should be strengthened to ensure cooperation especially during severe weather events. It should include training to sensitize on-camera or radio personalities to hazardous weather and the urgency to disseminate NMS statements and warnings in as near real time as possible. Media participation in data collection and reporting of listener severe weather reports to the NMSs in near real time for inclusion in warnings should be encouraged;
- Better relationship with the private sector should be established to benefit from the latest technology, for example in dissemination. The private sector should be approached to sponsor programmes for public education and disaster managers training.

- WMO should maintain closer contact with NMSs to assist them in resolving the problems addressed in this workshop.