Crisis came in many forms, to many people throughout 2003—the war in Iraq, internal conflict in Liberia, the devastating earthquake in Iran, and the long and deadly hostilities in Colombia and Sudan. Sadly, these are just a few examples. By some estimates, a quarter of the world’s population lives in the midst of some form of upheaval. Development cannot take root when people are fleeing to a refugee camp, or fearing that a trip to the market might mean death from a landmine or the blast of a car bomb.

And yet these are precisely the situations where development is needed most, and where there is an undeniable incentive to move forward on the MDGs. Stable, equitable societies where people have a real voice in the decisions that shape their lives are less likely to collapse into chaos. In the case of natural disasters, they are more likely to recover rapidly and suffer fewer losses of life. When not enough has been done to ease vast social, economic and political disparities, and a conflict or disaster does erupt, it saps the strength of whatever development has taken place, setting back countries, in some cases, by decades.

In recent years, UNDP has seen more than half our programme countries request support related to preventing or dealing with crisis. Providing this assistance has become one of our most demanded services, whether in the form of mobilizing international resources and partnerships, or working with national governments to carry out on-the-ground development initiatives that connect people to the prospect of a better life.

Within the UN system for coordinating development and disaster assistance, we play a pivotal role in the transition between relief and development, both under our own organizational mandate, and as head of the UNDG and coordinator of UN Country Teams. Particularly in the case of countries emerging from conflict, transition is a fragile time, and a relapse into fighting can happen in a flash. Starting as soon as conditions permit, we draw upon our experience and relationships with a broad spectrum of partners to put in place viable, concrete alternatives to renewed warfare. In many countries, we already have a long-established presence, and are ideally positioned for the task of integrating development within the earliest stages of recovery and beyond.

We place special emphasis on supporting national capacities to manage crisis situations, while helping governments and civil society address factors that could fuel future incidents. Our country offices take the lead, backed by our Bureau for Crisis Prevention and Recovery. The bureau also oversees our crisis prevention and recovery practice area, which facilitates a global exchange of knowledge on strategies with a proven track record. There are strong connections as well to our other practices, especially democratic governance and poverty reduction, and integral links to the broader agenda of the MDGs.
UNDP concentrates on several aspects of crisis prevention and recovery, while retaining the flexibility to respond to individual situations. During the post-conflict period, a major area of our expertise, we look for ways to help not only defuse tensions by filling immediate gaps, but also to help countries rebuild functioning institutions that can ensure stability. Our Afghanistan programme has assisted the Afghan Ministry of Interior in training a civilian police service, and we have been integrally involved in supporting Afghanistan’s slow but judiciously constructed approach to national elections. Now we are working closely with the government and the UN Country Team on a platform for development over the longer term. Tailored around the MDGs, and drawing upon Afghanistan’s first MDG Report, *Opening Doors to Opportunity*, it will extend Afghanistan’s ability to serve its citizens on every level, from the rehabilitation of courtrooms to the care of the disabled.

In Iraq, we were prepared for a full-scale reconstruction operation. Despite the interruption caused by the attack on the UN’s Baghdad offices, we have continued with major projects such as supporting the emergency rehabilitation of electrical systems, dredging the access channels to the Umm Qasr port, and running a programme to employ poor residents of Baghdad and Basra in removing rubble from the streets. In early 2004, 19 countries committed over $1 billion to the International Reconstruction Fund Facility for Iraq, which is jointly administered by UNDP (on behalf of the UNDG) and the World Bank.

Another UNDP priority is conflict prevention and peace-building, where we help bolster institutions that can prevent conflicts and address underlying causes. Kyrgyzstan’s three provinces in the Ferghana Valley, among its poorest and most remote, struggled with the disruption of traditional economic and political
patterns after the Soviet Union collapsed. When eth-
nic tensions began to escalate, the government con-
sulted UNDP about a programme for preventive
development. Beyond strengthening the foundation
of participatory local government, a pilot project
included an early warning information system.
Community organizations, many with multi-ethnic
members, were trained to work with local government
on managing conflict. Micro capital grants brought
communities together around development planning,
with tensions defusing as people collectively con-
structed irrigation systems and schools. The pro-
gramme as a whole has now expanded across all three
provinces, and involves cross-border activities with
Tajikistan and Uzbekistan.

In its approach to peace-building, UNDP also
emphasizes the reduction of small arms—a staple of
modern warfare—along with overall disarmament and
demobilization. Soon after the signing of the Marcoussis
Peace Agreement in Côte d’Ivoire, we began working
with the Government of National Reconciliation on a
disarmament, demobilization and reintegration strat-
go, a process that fostered negotiations between bel-
ligerent forces. Our quick intervention and initial seed
funding of $500,000 later attracted support from
bilateral donors, who have since contributed nearly
$10 million towards a series of major demobilization
projects. Globally in 2003, through our Thematic
Trust Fund for Crisis Prevention and Recovery alone,
UNDP aided the collection and destruction of
123,730 weapons and 170 tons of ammunition,
including one million small arms cartridges.

We work on mine action as well, both as an inter-
national advocate for including it in development pro-
gramming, and within individual countries. In Angola,
we have helped the government build its capacity to
cope with the deadly devices that litter its countryside.
New national and provincial mine action authorities
allow the government to clearly identify priorities and
link mine action programmes to development. It is
also pressing forward on such issues as the need to
return farmers to their fields.

The devastating 2003 earthquake in the historic city
of Bam, Iran was only one in a series of natural disas-
ters in recent years that has taken a tremendous toll
on human life and development. UNDP came for-
ward immediately to coordinate an inter-agency assess-
ment of relief and recovery needs, and then organized
an international appeal for over $30 million to pro-
vide shelter and jobs. More generally, UNDP works
to ensure that development programmes factor in
potential disaster risks, and assess ways to contend with
them. A major contribution was the 2004 launch of
the global report Reducing Disaster Risk: A Challenge

COUNTRIES FACING CRISIS
In 2003, 78 nations requested UNDP expertise to help
them prevent or recover from conflicts or natural disasters.
for Development. It chronicles how many natural disasters stem from poorly planned development. The pioneering Disaster Risk Index measures different vulnerabilities, identifies development factors that contribute to risk, and quantifies the relationship between disaster and policy choices.

INTERVENTION THAT TURNS THE TIDE
UNDP is now pursuing more regional strategies on crisis, given that turmoil in one country so often spills over into its neighbours. We are also beginning to lead, through the UNDG, the integration of conflict prevention across country-level UN development programmes.

For post-conflict interventions to really turn the tide of hostilities, they must be rapid, strategic and big enough to make an impact. A lack of international resources often stands in the way, while much more could be done to share analysis and examples of what works. UNDP is advocating for the global community as a whole to put the systems and funds in place to intervene effectively. We can no longer sit on the sidelines of despair. It is time to move forward.

ARGENTINA: EASING THE IMPACTS OF INSTABILITY

In 2001, Argentina’s economy collapsed. With the largest national default on foreign debt ever recorded, poverty swept into the lives of 55 percent of Argentines. Millions of people lost their jobs. A quarter of the population—many of them children and adolescents—could not afford enough food to eat. The humanitarian emergency only started to ease in 2003, when the economy began a slow climb to recovery.

UNDP once again has a full spectrum of development programmes in place in Argentina, many geared to the MDGs. However, recognizing that when people openly debate their nation’s problems they are far more likely to buy into collective solutions, we also introduced our Democratic Dialogue Project. A regional initiative based in Guatemala, it provides innovative tools for managing civic dialogue and conflict resolution in some of the most troubled states.

With the Argentinean Episcopate and the national government, UNDP has helped organize a series of high-profile conversations between politicians, business leaders, trade unions, religious leaders, journalists, civil society—even the Scouts de Argentina. Over the past two years, the participants have sat down at regular intervals to consider what can be done to soften some of the worst hardships, especially through state policies.

Their voices have been heard. Based on the dialogues, the government has already set up an employment programme that has reached over two million of the most impoverished households with a monthly subsidy, and has developed a plan for giving free generic drugs and basic medicines to nearly 15 million people. The newest round of the dialogue has now taken up a sensitive but crucial concern, calling upon civil society, the Ministry of the Interior and the Head Office of the Cabinet of Ministers to discuss political reform.

Today, Argentines know that there is a viable alternative to the violence spawned by similar situations of crisis. When democracy has room for a myriad of perspectives, it offers the best way out.