Disaster: it strikes anytime, anywhere. It takes many forms – a hurricane, an earthquake, a tornado, a flood, a fire or a hazardous spill, an act of nature or an act of terrorism. It builds up over days or weeks, or hits suddenly, without warning. Every year, millions of people face disaster, and its terrifying consequences (Federal Emergency Management Agency FEMA website).

It is believed that the number of natural disasters is increasing worldwide because of climatic changes. Still, disasters fascinate people. They induce feelings of amazement and fear, and provide examples of courage, folly, and tragedy — in a sense, all the aspects of a great drama. Disasters are media events and frequently inspire Hollywood as most recently evidenced by the movies *Twister*, *Dante’s Peak*, and *Volcano* (Musser, 1997). But until you have experienced a disaster, it is hard to imagine the sense of shock and helplessness they generate. It almost goes without saying that we need to minimise the damage caused by various types of disasters. Any folly, and tragedy — in a sense, all the aspects of a great drama. Disasters are media events and frequently inspire Hollywood as most recently evidenced by the movies *Twister*, *Dante’s Peak*, and *Volcano* (Musser, 1997). But until you have experienced a disaster, it is hard to imagine the sense of shock and helplessness they generate. It almost goes without saying that we need to minimise the damage caused by various types of disasters. Any archive should be prepared for the worst, be it located in the west, east, north or south. A disaster, or emergency, encompasses everything from a forgotten open window during a rainstorm to a major earthquake, and everything in between that puts the holdings in jeopardy (Trinkaus-Randall, 1995).

Disasters strike worldwide. This becomes very clear when reading the tragic UNESCO report on the lost memory of the world (Hoeven et al., 1996). In the course of time every country is confronted with damage to their cultural heritage as a result of either wilful or accidental destruction. Local authorities and communities, especially those in tight economic circumstances, do not understand the benefits to be gained of reducing losses today for an unknown tomorrow (Gavidia, 2001). Not surprisingly developing countries are hit harder by disasters than countries with economic wealth. For the more wealthy countries it is of course much easier to invest in the prevention of potential risks.

Disasters need to be managed in order to control them or at least to mitigate the effects. According to the Caribbean Disaster Emergency Response Agency (CDERA) the Disaster Management Cycle should address issues relevant to all phases of the disaster cycle: preparedness, response, recovery, rebuilding, prevention, mitigation. Reading about similar experiences of other institutions cannot only help to avoid making the same mistake but can give an idea of what to expect after a disaster.

Yet, it should be realised that each collection, each building, each situation is unique and that every institution has to prepare for disasters with its own unique plan.

By and large, knowing how to react to a disaster is everyone’s responsibility, but especially for those with public responsibility. Consequently, it should be the prime concern of any archivist to develop a way of preventing disaster and carry it out; even if it is not perfect, it can reduce the damage to his precious collections. Besides, thought and preparation will eliminate panic and ensure that proper decisions will be made and carried out step-by-step. This is very important with objects made of paper whether they are framed or unframed works of art, documents, records, photographs or books. Nevertheless, the safety of the employees must come first before proceeding to salvage any objects (Bishop Museum website). The *Memory of the World Programme* gives the following general advice (Brandt-Grau, 2000):

- be prepared for any type of disaster; contact and consult other institutions to share information and experience, and with a view to regional cooperation;
- take advantage of educational sessions, particularly disaster planning workshops and preparedness exercises;
- seek expert advice and help from the preservation offices of national institutions, members of standing committees, centres of professional organisations and their technical committees.

Searching for literature on disaster amounts to an overload of all kinds of publications, from a serious discourse to a bedside novel. It is best to be very critical and discriminating. Many institutions safeguarding their cultural heritage design and publish their own disaster preparedness plan. In most western countries plans are intended to prevent fire and water calamities. In addition, many regional and object-specific disaster plans appear. However, roughly all plans relate to situations in non-tropical countries. Again, many books are available on natural disasters. Not much has appeared in print on the effects of natural disasters, apart from floods, on archives, libraries or museums. Another omission is the literature on neglect. True, many books deal with issues of theft as it affects institutions guarding cultural heritage, but very few dare to publish anything on neglect as nobody wants to wash their dirty linen in public.

Good, comprehensive, timely tools to answer disaster questions are few to non-existent. The internet, an endless source of information, has become one of the best reference tools available for questions relating to disasters and the authors give an extensive list of relevant websites (Musser et al., 1997). However, it should be
noted that the addresses on the internet change very often and are thus quickly outdated.

Several bibliographies and databases are available on the internet, like the ones at the South-eastern Library Network (SOLINET) website, the International Strategy for Disaster Reduction (ISDR) website, the World Bank-DMF website, and the Natural Disaster Reference Database (NDRD) on the NASA-LTP website. According to Musser and Recupero (1997) disasters are also popular topics at the reference desk; check the websites of FEMA, US Geological Survey. The Natural Hazard Center in particular gives many more links. The Virginia Cooperative Extension publishes an ‘After a Disaster’ Series on their website on Safety, Food and Water, Coping with Stress, Cleaning, Insurance and Contracts, Landscape and Agriculture, Roof Repairs. Also check the websites of CoOL and Museum Security Network, a Dutch initiative from Ton Cremers.

For older literature on disasters see the bibliography in Buchanan, 1988, for more recent literature see the bibliographies by Murray, 1994 and Henry, 1997. An early general title on disaster preparedness for archives is Barton et al., 1985. Although written for North American conditions, it is an efficient and effective planning manual for disasters – covering the many and varied aspects of contingency planning, and is clearly set out with lots of checklists for action.

For disaster preparedness in general see Hughes, 1999; Kahn, 1998; McIntyre, 1996; Ogden, 1999. For guidelines on disaster preparedness see Murray, 1991; Fröjd et al., 1997; Thomas, 1987. For handbooks or manuals see Balloffet et al., 1992; Fortson, 1992; Huskamp Peterson, 1993; Morris, 1986; Trinkaus-Randall, 1995. For other literature on disasters and disaster preparedness see Banerjee, 1997; Ezennia, 1995; Kumekpor et al., 1994; Mathieson, 1986.

Several aspects of disasters that are of interest to the archival world will be discussed below. Fire and water cause the most recurrent damage to an archival building. Some of the measures to prevent such catastrophes will be reviewed. Disaster planning is a fundamental precaution no archive can do without. Such a programme should consist of prevention, preparedness, response and recovery. Commonly disasters are divided into natural disasters and man-made disasters. The following disasters are looked upon as natural disasters: tropical cyclones, forest fires, earthquakes, volcanoes, floods, and landslides. Some of these can also be caused by human behaviour e.g. forest fires or floodings due to deforestation. War, theft, neglect and vandalism are considered the major man-made disasters. To predict, to prevent and to prepare for all these calamities that can affect archives, libraries and museums it is imperative that work is undertaken on a global scale. Some of the programmes in international cooperation are mentioned in the last chapter.