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UNITED NATIONS EDUCATIONAL,  
SCIENTIFIC AND CULTURAL ORGANIZATION

Address by  
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on the occasion of the High Level Roundtable:  
“Learning to Live with Risk”  
at the World Conference on Disaster Reduction

Kobe, Japan, Tuesday, 18 January 2005

Mrs Alma de Leon,  
Excellencies,  
Distinguished Participants,  
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a great honour and pleasure to join you here for the World Conference on Disaster Reduction. I would especially like to thank the Government of Japan and the people of Kobe, Hyogo, for hosting this important event. As we all know, yesterday marked the tenth anniversary of the Great Hanshin Awaji Earthquake which devastated Kobe. I would like to commend the people of this city, who showed outstanding courage in the face of large-scale destruction and who have displayed remarkable resilience by rebuilding their community. I also greet my colleagues in other bodies within the United Nations system, in particular the Inter-Agency Secretariat of the International Strategy for Disaster Reduction for servicing the Conference.

I am especially happy to be taking part in this particular Round Table, entitled "Learning to Live with Risk". Learning is the keystone to human development. While we tend to associate the word "learning" with youth and formal education, I firmly believe that learning should be a never-ending process and can be enriched by all forms of experience. Learning throughout life is essential if people are to retain mastery of their own destinies.

And this is most relevant when it comes to coping with natural hazards, where learning to live with risk can make the difference between a prepared and resilient community and an unprepared and helpless one. The terrible death-toll in countries bordering the Indian Ocean as a result of the 26 December tsunami points to the high price of lack of preparedness and insufficient public awareness.

With regard to natural disasters, there are three interconnected realms that need to be addressed:

- First, the scientific and technological realm. We must continue to promote a better understanding of natural disasters: where they might occur, when they might occur and their intensity. We must improve early warning systems and utilize telecommunications more effectively for the dissemination of alerts about impending disasters.
- Second: the environmental realm. We must be ever more vigilant about the protection of land and natural resources. We must enforce sound engineering and construction principles throughout the world. Only through sensitive and commonsensical approaches to development can we reduce the risk of devastation in the wake of natural disasters.
- And, finally, the educational realm. When it comes to living with risk, we must embrace education in all its forms, from classroom drills involving disaster simulations at the primary and secondary school levels, to the integration of disaster risk

reduction into educational curricula and the strengthening of advanced studies at the university and post-graduate levels. We must also capitalize on traditional local knowledge about natural hazards. And we must acknowledge that there can be no sustainable development without education in natural disaster reduction.

The international community has clearly recognized the importance of learning for achieving sustainable development by bringing the issue to the attention of the United Nations General Assembly. Today, we stand at the dawn of a ten-year endeavour which was proclaimed by the General Assembly to promote education worldwide, namely, the United Nations Decade of Education for Sustainable Development. I am proud that UNESCO has been designated as lead agency for the promotion of the Decade. We must work to make the transmission of knowledge and training in disaster reduction an inextricable part of education for sustainable development. I believe that this is one of the key lessons of the Indian Ocean tsunami disaster.

I would submit that our approach towards integrating disaster reduction into sustainable development approaches should follow three crucial stages underlying the process of learning to live with risk:

- First: learning to recognize hazards.

- Second: learning to mitigate the threats posed by hazards.
- And third: learning to transmit and pass on this knowledge to future generations.

Despite the enormity of the challenges we face, I am optimistic about the future. In this age of rapidly evolving forms of communication, I want to emphasize the role of two critical groups: women and children. We must never underestimate the role that women have played over the millennia in formulating and transmitting knowledge and know-how. As for children, it is no exaggeration to say that today they have greater access to more knowledge than ever before. Through their education and awareness-raising, the concept of vulnerability and risk management can be made operational and diffused throughout society.

I truly believe that by working together and by tackling the issues of natural disaster reduction in the scientific and technological as well as the environmental and educational realms, we can protect communities from the ravages of nature and the recklessness of many human offences against nature. The young people who are learning to live with risk today will help to diminish - perhaps, in some cases, even to abolish - the risks of tomorrow. This is what education for sustainable development is all about.

Thank you.