

THEMATIC DEBATE OF THE 65TH SESSION OF THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY ON DISASTER RISK REDUCTION

New York, 9 February 2011

President's Summary

The informal Thematic Debate on Disaster Risk Reduction was convened as a follow-up to the High-level Plenary Meeting on the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) in September 2010, which acknowledged that disaster risk reduction and increasing resilience to all types of natural hazards can “have multiplier effects and accelerate achievement of the MDGs”. It aimed to strengthen the understanding on how effective investment policies and practices and sustainable urban management can reduce risk and exposure to disasters.

The panelists and participants discussed how to develop more strategic ways to reduce disaster risk and strengthen coping capabilities through investments. Noting that disasters, such as floods, droughts, earthquakes or climate change-driven weather anomalies, are becoming more frequent and intense, they focused on ways to preempt disasters – how to prepare and prevent and where to invest for disaster risk reduction.

Interactive Panel Debate 1: Invest Today for a Safer Tomorrow

Panelists and participants noted that once a disaster occurs, mounting an adequate response poses a serious challenge, especially for developing countries and the most vulnerable communities. Disasters can also wipe out important development gains and that is why investing in disaster risk reduction is so crucial.

They shared the view that disaster risk reduction is about ensuring that development investments are risk sensitive so that natural hazards do not turn into major disasters; any infrastructure development must account for risk reduction. Experiences have shown that one dollar invested in prevention can save several dollars in post-disaster rebuilding and reconstruction costs. While adequate financial resources are necessary, effective investment encompasses changing the reactive mindsets of governments and peoples to proactive actions. It also means mainstreaming disaster risk reduction into sustainable development policies, planning and programmes at local and national levels.

Panelists and participants reiterated their strong support for disaster risk reduction and its importance in protecting the gains made toward the MDGs and realizing sustainable development. Many countries shared their experiences on how investments towards the creation of more resilient communities are already paying off.

Many panelists agreed that without putting disaster risk reduction plans in place, it would be very difficult for poor countries to achieve the MDGs. Developing countries are generally less prepared for natural hazards than developed countries, as demonstrated in Haiti, where more than

222,000 people died as opposed to earthquakes of similar magnitude in more developed countries which killed far less people. In particular, attention was drawn to the fact that the least developed countries (LDCs) require technical and financial support to implement disaster risk reduction.

To address this gap in coping capabilities, participants from both developed and developing countries underscored the need for better coordination and more information-sharing among international agencies and disaster-prone countries. They also stressed the need to raise awareness about the vital necessity of risk preparedness. Since even the slightest delay in post-disaster response can turn a relatively small crisis into a complex emergency, a country needs to be well prepared and ready to respond in order to avert unnecessary loss of lives and livelihoods.

Several Member States stressed the need for the international community to focus beyond emergency relief and concentrate on implementing long-term programmes related to poverty eradication, sustainable development and disaster risk reduction. Strengthening disaster risk reduction and climate change adaptation was also stressed as essential as well as the need to improve risk assessments and to make better use of risk management expertise held by the insurance and re-insurance sectors.

Interactive Panel Debate 2: Cities at Risk – Addressing the Challenges of Disaster Risk in Urban Settings

Poorly planned urban environments, weak urban governance, lack of infrastructure and basic services and rapid population growth have increased disaster risk in urban areas. With more than 50 per cent of the world's population now living in urban areas and with urban disaster victims now outnumbering their rural counterparts, panelists and participants stressed that concrete measures must be taken to boost the resilience of cities.

How to rehabilitate existing settlement areas and how to plan new settlements are the two questions that must be considered in light of urban risk. Participants highlighted that cities need to share their disaster risk reduction experiences and best practices and that local level participation is crucial for successful disaster risk reduction. They also underscored the importance of cooperation among local and national governments as well as the private sector, civil society and other key stakeholders.

UN-Habitat outlined five urban “commandments” necessary for a resilient city, namely: never build on a slope with a gradient over 10 per cent; never build in river basins, even if they have been dry for decades; never build in low lands without proper drainage; never build an urban space without allocating at least 30 per cent of the land for streets; and never build streets less than 25 metres wide.

Panelists stressed that local authorities should act as a counterweight to national authorities by having their own capacity on the ground, including instruments allowing not only response but also risk mitigation, developed through lessons learned from actual disasters.

Several participants also drew attention to the *Making Cities Resilient – My City is Getting Ready* campaign, which encourages local government leaders worldwide to invest more in disaster risk reduction activities such as: improving urban planning, infrastructure and building safety; reinforcing drainage systems to reduce flood, storm and health threats; installing early warning systems; conducting public preparedness drills; and taking measures to adapt to the increasing impacts of climate change. As of February 2011, close to 600 cities have signed on to the campaign.

Conclusion

The informal Thematic Debate emphasized that the effective strengthening of communities' resilience requires new and innovative forms of public-private partnerships in the political, economic, financial, and research fields. Several calls were heard during the event, including the need to elaborate principles for monitoring achievements in disaster risk reduction, the need for internationally accepted standards for disaster risk reduction initiatives to ensure transparency and accountability as well as the need for enhanced data collection.

In addition, participants called for the scaling-up of investments in disaster risk reduction activities, including for education and safer schools, better urban planning, sharing of information and technology, and raising of awareness, especially to ensure that specific disasters and needs of the victims remained high on the international agenda long after they had dropped from the news headlines.

In sum, panelists and participants repeated the three core notions:

The first is *awareness*- awareness from experience and the lessons learned from the past.
The second is to *prioritize*- to respect the five commandments and not blaming the nature.
The third is *prevention*- although prevention through investment is mostly not spectacular because when it is effective, nobody can see it and nothing happens. But at the end of the day, “nothing happens” is everyone's shared objective.

The discussions of the Thematic Debate will contribute to the upcoming Third Session of the Global Platform for Disaster Risk Reduction, which will convene from 8-13 May 2011 in Geneva as well as the UN Conference on Sustainable Development (Rio+20) in 2012 in Rio de Janeiro.