

Resilient Cities: Disaster Risk Reduction in an Urbanizing World

New York, 13 July 2010

HIGHLIGHTS IN A NUTSHELL

- Cities are engines for development, prosperity, innovation and hope, and therefore they will soon be home to two thirds of the global population. But they are also home to one billion poor people living in informal settlements and slums, often at high risk of exposure to natural hazards.
- Recent earthquakes in Haiti, Chile and China have been stark reminders of the increasing disaster risk faced by urban settlements around the world. Climate change will magnify this challenge, putting many cities at risk to multiple hazards. Urban risk reduction is a crucial component of wider development plans and will also help achieve the Millennium Development Goals.
- Eminent speakers from Haiti, Mexico and Nepal shared their experiences in reducing risk in an urban context as well as challenges related to recovery and reconstruction. Each of them emphasized the importance of incorporating disaster risk reduction in the urban planning and development through measures such as risk assessments, adequate building standards and construction regulations as well as community preparedness.
- Communication, education, public awareness and social mobilization were also highlighted as crucial for successful disaster risk reduction in the urban context and ensuring a sustainable and resilient urban growth.
- The side event was organized jointly by UNISDR, UN-HABITAT and IFRC and was attended by over 120 participants including representatives from the Governments, UN agencies, academia, NGOs and private sector. The event was co-sponsored by the Permanent Missions of Japan and Indonesia.

Summary of the Event

The joint UNISDR, UN-HABITAT and IFRC side event on “Resilient Cities: Disaster Risk Reduction in an Urbanizing World” was held on the occasion of the 2010 ECOSOC Humanitarian segment on July 13, 2010 from 1:15 pm to 2:45 pm. The event was co-sponsored by the Permanent Missions of Japan and Indonesia and facilitated by Ms. Margareta Wahlström, Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Disaster Reduction. Over 120 participants attended the event from Governments, UN agencies, NGOs, academia and private sector.

The event discussed current initiatives related to urban risk reduction, in particular in Port-of-Prince, Tijuana and Kathmandu. Eminent speakers from Haiti, Mexico and Nepal highlighted the importance of reducing risk in the urban context. Rapid urban growth poses many challenges to city authorities and if not well managed, cities can become generators of new vulnerabilities increasing the disaster risk.

In his opening remarks, H.E. Mr. **Norihiro Okuda**, Deputy Permanent Representative of Japan said that the recent earthquakes in Haiti, Chile and China were stark reminders of the increased risk of human and economic loss that urban centers face as population rise. He highlighted the importance of taking measures against likely seismic activity, for example, by ensuring that building standards are adequate and that they are enforced, especially since many of the world's biggest and fastest-growing cities were located on or in a close proximity to earthquake fault lines. As one of the most disaster-prone countries in the world, Japan has experienced every type of natural calamity, and has centuries of experience in addressing them. Japan was also actively involved in the formulation of the Hyogo Framework for Action. Mr. Okuda reminded that reducing disaster risk is a long-term effort, and he encouraged participants to reflect on how we can strengthen this agenda for the next 5 years and beyond. The Hyogo Framework is a time-bound framework and it is important to develop a vision of what should be addressed after the year 2015.

Mr. **Ade Petranto**, Charge d'Affaires, Permanent Mission of the Republic of Indonesia, said that given that Indonesia was situated on one of the most active and disaster prone regions of the world, the country had gained some insight in this area. One of the lessons from the Indian Ocean tsunami is that recovery is very costly and therefore it was important to invest more for prevention. For developing countries, disaster risk reduction is a major undertaking due to lack of capacity. He reminded that when building technical capacity, it was important to preserve also the local indigenous knowledge and community participation as important ways of developing disaster risk reduction. He also stressed that cities cannot grow in a sustainable manner unless proper disaster risk reduction ensures that they are resilient to natural hazards. None of the Millennium Development Goals can be achieved or sustained unless we incorporate disaster risk reduction into long term development planning and policies, in all sectors of development.

Ms. **Margareta Wahlström**, Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Disaster Risk Reduction thanked the co-hosts for their remarks which gave an excellent introduction to the topic of the event. She said that a number of actors were now actively engaged in urban risk reduction. UNHABITAT and IFRC are implementing the Risk identification and Risk Mapping project in Cities and UNISDR has just recently launched the global campaign on Resilient Cities, which is mobilizing both local and international actors to increase resilience of cities around the world. Currently 57 cities had signed up and another 70 are in the process of doing so.

The panellists included:

1. Ambassador **Leslie Voltaire**, Haiti's Special Envoy to the Secretary-General of the United Nations
2. Mr. **Antonio Rosquillas**, Civil Protection Office, Director, City of Tijuana, Mexico
3. Mr. **Umesh Dhakal**, Executive Director, Nepal Red Cross Society, Nepal

Mr. **Leslie Voltaire** began by reminding about the magnitude and devastation of the Haiti earthquake which killed over 300,000 people on January 12, 2010. Today, 6 months later, 1,6 million people were still living in tents or temporary shelter, and of the total of 20 million cubic meters of rubble, only 2 % had been evacuated. Together with the UN, the Government had prepared the PDNA. However, only 1% of the pledges of a total of 10 billion USD had been received. He mentioned that one of the challenges was to keep the population informed on the progress made and plans in place in order to keep their expectations realistic. He emphasized the following recommendations drawn from the lessons learned by Haiti: 1) be patient – progress will happen but it will take some time 2) prepare the population to incorporate risk reduction in their daily life 3) ensure that you have capacity to quickly evaluate disaster impacts 4) organize a system to deal with coordination (food, water, shelter, etc.) 5) communicate - everything that the Government does – to the population 6) establish an agreement with WFP, so that they can use locally produced food 7) organize agreement with neighbouring countries to collaborate in case of a disaster 8) have a vision for future and ensure that disaster risk reduction is included in all aspects and phases of recovery and reconstruction.

Mr. **Antonio Rosquillas** shared his experiences from Tijuana, where he had been working in the area of risk reduction and preparedness for more than 15 years. Placed on young soil with little consolidation and very rough terrain, Tijuana is very vulnerable to hydro-meteorological and geological risks. These characteristics had obligated the city government to approach various international organizations, including UN-HABITAT, UNISDR, UNDP, IFRC and GeoHazards, to address the urban risk issue. In addition, the city has managed to mobilise a number of local service organizations, such as the telephone, local water management, electricity and gas company, among others to take action to reduce risk within their companies. In terms of future urban planning, Tijuana will continue generating studies in order to education construction regulations, policies and techniques, with the objective of planning the city in advance to avoid the establishment of new settlements in inadequate zones. Mr. Rosquillas said that one of the major challenges was the rapid growth of the city and the prices of land which in turn promoted the development of urban centers without taking into account disaster prevention aspects. Another challenge, according to Mr. Rosquillas, was that some elected officials put their personal interests first and sometimes ignored the concept of disaster prevention. He concluded by saying that after 12 years of working together with organizations such as the UN and CICESE, Tijuana was well on its way to become a resilient city.

Mr. **Umesh Dhakal**, first gave an introduction on Nepal's risk profile. He said that Nepal ranked as the 11th most high risk country in the world in terms of relative vulnerability to earthquake and 30th with respect to flood. The country remains as one of the global hot-spots for disaster risk. The rapid urbanization, fast growing population, hap-hazard housing and settlement patterns as well as lack of enforcement of building codes make the Kathmandu valley even more vulnerable to possible earthquakes. Mr. Dhakal gave a very comprehensive summary of different disaster risk reduction measures taken by the National Red Cross Society, ranging from community preparedness to strengthening urban sanitation system. Some the main achievements include for example the following: the development of an earthquake contingency plan to ensure rapid, appropriate and effective response to a major earthquake centered in the Kathmandu Valley, as

well as carrying out community-based preparedness initiatives and training in disaster management, and participation in various national and regional disaster management and risk reduction bodies. Mr. Dhakal also highlighted the disaster risk management strategy, recently adopted by the Government of Nepal, as well as the interim national development plan (2008-2010) of the government which is in line with the Hyogo Framework for Action. Most recently, an international consortium of ADB, IFRC, UNOCHA, UNISDR and the World Bank was formed to support government to develop a long term disaster risk reduction action plan.

During the question and answer session the following issues were raised and highlighted: 1) promoting women's groups as information managers can be effective in recovery and enables long term engagement between civil society organizations and the government 2) the need to capitalize on the youth and universities, 3) potential of technology as an enabler for citizen engagement, and 4) gaps and difficulties in disaster risk reduction have to be addressed in all three pillars: political, economic and social.

Ms. Wahlström concluded the session by reiterating some of the main points that had been highlighted during the discussion. These included: the importance of understanding the power of social groups, especially women and youth, the potential of technology which can be used as an enabler but needs to be affordable and helpful, the importance of constant communication with those affected or concerned, and finally, the power of social mobilization and education, which are key in addressing disaster risk reduction.