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Panel Discussion: Risk Reduction in the Recovery Process

Statement by

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The Role of Civil Society in Promoting Risk Reduction during Recovery

Mr. Chair, Madam Moderator, Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

The International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies is very pleased to have the opportunity to speak on the role of civil society in promoting risk reduction during recovery at this informal ECOSOC panel on the transition from relief to development. The topic is one of great significance for the Federation and forms a significant component of our strategic directions over the next four years. It is also one on which we are learning from our experience in recent disasters from throughout the World.

The presentation will therefore make some general comments on the role of civil society; how the Federation perceives recovery and risk reduction and our experience particularly with livelihoods and shelter; and finally some challenges for the International Federation and the international community.

Our National Societies are established by national legislation pursuant to the Geneva Conventions and are hence not part of civil society as such. Their work at the community level is, however, so similar to the work of community-based civil society organisations that their experience in areas such as the protection of human dignity, health awareness, post-disaster recovery and risk reduction is directly relevant to the issues under discussion today.

Further, the auxiliary role of the National Society combined with their community role makes them a natural bridge between government and civil society.

Mr Chair,

The International Federation recognises the ISDR definition of recovery and sees it as an opportunity to encourage and facilitate disaster risk reduction and recognise the need for both **short term and immediate recovery** measures.

The IFRC recognises that recovery planning in the aftermath of a disaster offers an opportunity to fulfil one of the Federations core mandates – that of building the capacity of national societies to address and reduce vulnerability. Post disaster situations provide unique, though transient, opportunities to build back better and opportunities for change, but experience shows that there is still much too little attention given to this aspect of preparedness. We know that if communities and governments have good preparedness measures in place before disaster strikes, and if support can be provided to local level recovery processes in a timely manner after a crisis, then recovery can catalyse the transition to more sustainable development, as well as contributing to increasing community resilience and reducing vulnerability. But, progress in this area has been limited. Why?

The paper that has been distributed to this meeting provides details of our specific experiences and examples from the field and from throughout the World. From these we have identified the following shortcomings with incorporating effective risk reduction into recovery programming:

- risk reduction is given insufficient priority in relation to other recovery needs and as a consequence drops down or off the recovery and reconstruction agenda. Risk reduction priorities tends to be short term rather being recognised as a longer term vision for recovery;

- recovery approaches frequently focus resources and energy on technical solutions rather than on rebuilding or reinforcing community resilience, coping strategies and sustainability;
- the international community and governments tend to focus on the hazard most recently faced and on being responsive to the media and public rather than taking a multi-hazard approach to risk reduction and recovery;
- vulnerability and risk leading to a specific crisis are not effectively analysed and the international recovery response consequently focuses on immediate risk such as a physical hazard rather than looking at the vulnerability to these hazards;
- the slowness with which governments and the international community mobilise technical advice and support to build back better;
- governments and international organisations rapidly forget their past experiences and lessons learnt and consequently fail to invest sufficiently in disaster preparedness and risk reduction, including enacting or enforcing legislation such as building codes and especially in countries that are known to be disaster-prone; and
- there is a lack of understanding of what is specifically required for recovery programming and a tendency to make recovery a complex concept that is expressed in such a way that it is not understood by local communities.

The Federation's experience has also recognised the need for more effective community participation in the recovery process, and a need to change the tendency from top down approaches to those that start from the community up. Experience has shown that working through and with the involvement of our local branches, local NGOs and community-based organisations usually leads to better results for the disaster-affected population.

Mr Chair,

The Red Cross and Red Crescent's experience shows that one of the critical issues for most people in post disaster or emergency situations is the restoration of their ability to lead a life in safety and dignity, and to rebuild their life with long-term sustainability. This takes us beyond emergency and relief and requires new recovery strategies and approaches for the Federation and its national societies and by the wider humanitarian community. Whilst the Federation adapted and developed some tools to support our work in recovery, much more needs to be done. We are therefore currently aiming to strengthen our capacity through the development of appropriate recovery policy and guidelines and in particular, strengthening the shelter and recovery skills in the Federation.

Our experience to date has shown that shelter, along with the restoration of livelihoods, are the issues that usually most urgently need attention in recovery programmes and that these are linked. For shelter to be sustainable people must have adequate and ideally improved livelihoods. Providing this can be a significant challenge, particularly when most of the infrastructure has been damaged. It requires national and local government, the international community, as well as civil society and certainly the private sector to work together and put the long-term restoration of the livelihood of the affected population at the top of their agenda.

A strong focus on livelihoods approaches, including employment creation and asset replacement (among other things) is also important for risk reduction since it provides an effective way of giving people choices and the means to develop their own risk reduction strategies. It is a core element of reducing vulnerability and strengthening economic coping strategies.

Risk reduction, above all else, requires that we do more to build local human capacity for disaster risk management and sustainable recovery. This is why we place so much emphasis on the importance of building the capacity of volunteers to undertake this work rather than rely on international search and rescue teams. It is a matter of deep regret that now, five years after the International Year of Volunteers, this is still a subject on which we have to advocate at every opportunity.

Capacity development for the Federation also means working with national societies to build local partnerships, between civil society and the national society and between civil society and the local authorities, and for more interaction with civil society at international as well as national levels. The Federation has strong links to vulnerable communities, it is able to participate in the full range of UN fora, including the national level UN Disaster Management Teams, and has close links with national governments. We recognise that we cannot address these issues alone but by building our national and international partnerships we may achieve much.

The IFRC prides itself on its rapid response and speed of delivery following a disaster. It is common knowledge that Red Cross or Red Crescent volunteers are first on the scene following most disasters. In the immediate rescue operation and in the saving of lives this is essential. We also recognise that it is easy to seek rapid and visible solutions to challenges because they are visible on television sets around the world, and that as a consequence this may frequently be at the cost of more sustainable and durable solutions that might address root causes.

To be effective in promoting a process of sustainable recovery the international community must learn to balance the need for speed with the need for sustainability. This is further made more difficult by some of our donors who focus on time-frames of one year or less, while sustainable recovery requires a much longer term. A good example of the way this challenge has been met is in our post tsunami recovery planning, now focussed on time-frames of five years and more.

The challenge for the Federation and the international community is to find ways to build on existing examples of capacity and resilience. The humanitarian community, including governments, needs to ensure that top-down thinking does not try to replace what works well in communities with their own experience of disaster management. It is hardly surprising that systems introduced from abroad frequently fail.

The Federation recognises the need to rethink and develop strategies that aim to provide relief in a way that addresses needs, builds on and strengthens local capacities, and leads to sustainable recovery. For the Federation this may mean:

- focusing on recovery planning and risk reduction, particularly at the community level, from the beginning;
- supporting community, branch and national society efforts rather than being operational itself;
- supporting local community activities as well as Branch activities;
- maximising the use of local workers and volunteers rather than sending in expatriates; and
- avoiding the temptation to rush in with high visibility to respond to media pressure.
- Building partnerships and alliances with other organisations.

The IFRC looks forward to continuing involvement on this important subject, and to helping take outcomes to the national and local level and to civil society through its National Society membership.