



THE PRESIDENT
OF THE
GENERAL ASSEMBLY

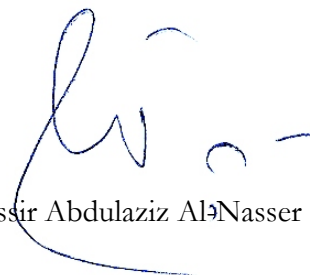
13 June 2012

Excellency,

In order to support and advance dialogue already underway on how best to integrate the disaster risk reduction approach into the Conference on Sustainable Development (Rio+20) outcome, I convened a thematic debate on Disaster Risk Reduction on 12 April 2012.

I am pleased to share with you the summary of the Thematic Debate for your reference. The summary will help support growing awareness and commitment to address the world's increasing vulnerability and exposure to disaster risk.

Please accept, Excellency, the assurances of my highest consideration.



Nassir Abdulaziz Al-Nasser

All Permanent Representatives and
Permanent Observers to the United Nations
New York

**THEMATIC DEBATE OF THE 66TH SESSION OF THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY ON
DISASTER RISK REDUCTION**

New York, 12 April 2012

PRESIDENT'S SUMMARY

The President of the 66th Session of the General Assembly convened an informal thematic debate on disaster risk reduction to support and advance the dialogue already underway on how best to integrate the disaster risk reduction approach within the Rio+20 outcome. There was general consensus from participants that disaster risk reduction must feature strongly in any future framework on sustainable development arising from the UN Conference on Sustainable Development (Rio+20) in order to build on the implementation to date of the Hyogo Framework for Action 2005-2015: Building the Resilience of Nations and Communities to Disasters.

The debate arose from a growing desire among Member States to increase dialogue on innovative solutions to address the challenges of disaster risk and to capitalise on the emergence of 'disaster risk reduction and resilience', as a key issue in the context of the Rio+20 negotiations on an outcome text.

Given this context, the informal debate held two interactive panel discussions on (1) addressing urban risk through public investment, and (2) increasing resilience to disasters through climate adaptation and risk reduction, as well as a side event on comprehensive action to sustainably reduce vulnerabilities.

INTERACTIVE PANEL DISCUSSIONS I: ADDRESSING URBAN RISK THROUGH PUBLIC INVESTMENT

Panellists and presenters agreed from the outset that no country was immune to disaster risk, regardless of their level of social-economic development, and that it was not possible to eliminate risk entirely. Panellists further noted that with growing urbanisation, now at over 50 per cent of the world's population, that the concentration of risk within cities posed a major and growing threat to development.

Panellists called for the setting of clear priorities, in the context of urban risk reduction, as an effective measure to mobilise awareness and cross-community support for concrete reduction measures. Taking proactive measures, including assessing the vulnerability of essential infrastructure, undertaking risk mapping, and systematic awareness raising, all contributed to understanding risk, a critical prerequisite to effectively addressing it.

There was broad agreement by panellists on the need for dedicated efforts to be made in translating risk knowledge into action. A number of examples were given in the context of Quito, Ecuador; Istanbul, Turkey; and the Tohoku region in Japan where authorities had instituted risk reduction measures following risk assessments and modelling. However, the limitations of structural interventions, and the need for cost-benefit analysis, were also noted.

A number of panellists and participants discussed the importance of empowering local governments and communities, including supporting decentralisation, as proven accelerators of local-level risk reduction. Taking a proactive approach to urban planning,

and seeing it as a process where genuine community participation can be harnessed, was underscored.

All panellists noted that there is a wealth of knowledge and best practice, however, more needs to be done to make this more widely available, both in terms of cross-border exchanges and between local communities.

In reference to the private sector, the question of who is not 'sitting at the table' is a critical question, given the challenges in integrating perspectives which are not represented and are therefore overlooked. The importance of taking a multi-stakeholder, multi-institutional approach to development was reinforced.

Panellists further stated that cities should not be seen as centres of risk but rather as key drivers of development, economic growth and socio-economic transformation when well-planned and well-run.

INTERACTIVE PANEL DISCUSSIONS II: INCREASING RESILIENCE TO DISASTERS THROUGH CLIMATE ADAPTATION AND RISK REDUCTION

A number of panellists urged Member States to see disasters as the result of a process, rather than isolated events. In addition there was a call for greater attention to be paid to the 'vicious' cycle of disasters, where a country's lack of development creates vulnerability to disasters which in turn results in development losses and increasing indebtedness. The example of Grenada, following Hurricane Ivan in 2004 where 200 per cent of gross domestic product (GDP) was lost, was presented to highlight the unique vulnerability and challenges which small island developing States face in addressing disaster risk.

In respect of Small Island Developing States (SIDS), the opportunities oceans present was explored, as many island States have large Exclusive Economic Zones which are not being fully harnessed economically, particularly in relation to fisheries. Further, 'blue economy' opportunities more broadly were under threat due to overfishing, pollution and ocean acidification.

Panellists spoke at length of the advantages SIDS, LDCs and African States could realise through applying ecosystem-based approaches for disaster risk reduction and climate change adaptation. Examples included establishing or enhancing existing natural barriers, community management of natural resources and strengthening marine resource management. Panellists underscored that investments in the natural environment derives multiple benefits, particularly in reducing risk and supporting livelihoods and green growth, but need to be applied in a coherent approach to maximise the full potential they offered. In addition, ecosystem services need to be valued properly, particularly given the rise of 'debt for nature' and 'debt for adaptation' swaps. The role of comprehensive planning with clear targets, particularly in relation to drought risk, was also highlighted.

The role of science in planning for risk reduction was extensively discussed. Panellists were in agreement that science-based tools provided decision-makers with the evidence and, in many cases, the legitimacy to take potentially difficult decisions to reduce risk. There was an acknowledgement that there is a trust gap between the science community, policy makers and the general public. To address this, more needs to be done to foster a culture of research and collaboration between groups, and regions.

While it was accepted that there are limits to what technology and adaptation can provide, much more needs to be done to integrate science into policy making at all levels of government. This requires investment in research. In addition, some panellists called for more to be done in understanding indigenous knowledge as a means of managing risk, as this could be adopted with considerable benefits.

The role of enabling frameworks was highlighted by panellists as an essential part of systematically reducing risk. While the important role legislation and regulations play was noted, panellists also underscored the importance of strong leadership, at all levels of government, particularly in the absence of formal instruments or legal frameworks. A key enabler of building resilience and reducing risk is through a 'whole-of-government' approach, given the multi-dimensional aspects.

A number of panellists and participants underlined the importance of integrating disaster risk and risk perspectives into the sustainable development framework, in Rio and beyond. While many noted that there was a plethora of frameworks, there needs to be a stronger commitment to taking concrete action to reduce risk across all development activity.

SIDE-EVENT: COMPREHENSIVE ACTION TO SUSTAINABLY REDUCE VULNERABILITIES

Panellists called for greater integration of humanitarian and development approaches to strengthen local resilience and mitigate the risk of disasters. An overview of food security trends and the effects and causes of the crisis in the Sahel were given, as was an account of national efforts and community level initiatives aimed at increasing resilience. Highlighted were many successful examples of working with local communities, on a long-term basis, to increase their capacity and resilience in the face of more unpredictable weather conditions.

Everyone agreed on the need for more funding of preparedness activities. Certain participants and panellists noted that there had been an increase in political commitment to disaster risk reduction and preparedness but that this had not translated into more funding. The increasing frequency and intensity of some hazards was exacerbating the vulnerability of the poorest causing immense human suffering and holding back development.

Panellists specified that funding disaster risk reduction and resilience projects was not about finding new sources but about reallocating funds. On the donor side this required an evolution in thinking away from a linear approach -where humanitarian assistance was followed by early recovery and then development- which was no longer relevant. However, concern was voiced regarding how to measure the progress and impact of disaster risk reduction efforts.

In keeping with the notion that reducing disaster risk should not be seen as an additional expenditure, but rather as an investment for a safer and more resilient world, the Special Advisor to the President of the General Assembly on Humanitarian and Public Health launched a new book that considers disasters in an era of diminishing resources.

Participants and panellists discussed what 'joint intervention' between humanitarian and development actors would mean in practice. Major changes on the ground would include providing better support to governments and communities to help them deal with shocks

themselves. It was agreed that strengthening national capacity should be a priority and that there was huge potential in South-South cooperation.

Several other challenges were also highlighted. This included that disaster risk reduction was not an issue that got media coverage, that there was an absence of equal partnerships between local community-based organizations and other aid organisations. Working with weak government structures was also a challenge.

It was stressed that more needed to be done to harmonize humanitarian work and development, for example through joint planning and simultaneous programming. Long-term perspectives were needed even during emergency response, i.e. by addressing how people's livelihoods could be supported by emergency response efforts. A proactive risk management approach based on forecasts and risk analyses could also improve early response and building the capacity of the national institutions should be a priority.

CONCLUSION

The informal Thematic Debate reinforced the current international momentum to reduce disaster risk as Rio+20 approaches. There was a clear call for Rio+20 to strategically place disaster risk reduction within an action-oriented sustainable development framework.

Panellists and participants noted that disaster does not discriminate between rich and poor, north and south. It was agreed that addressing disaster risk comprehensively requires engagement with all stakeholders, including the private sector and civil society.

A strong theme throughout the sessions was the role of local level leaders and communities. Local communities have the greatest stake in reducing risk, therefore decentralisation and the empowerment of local governments and community groups was seen as central to reducing risk in an era of rapid urbanization.

In summary, panellists and participants underscored the need to accelerate action to reduce risk, primarily through empowering decision-makers, at all levels, through decentralisation, evidence-based tools, effective management of ecosystems and enabling frameworks in the context of Rio+20.