

Asian Conference on Disaster Reduction 2007

INTRODUCTION TO THE SESSION ON EDUCATION

Tuesday 26 June 2007

Education and knowledge have the power to save lives. This is one of the most important lessons learnt from devastating disasters that took place over the past decade worldwide. In the wake of the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami, one of the most tragic trans-border natural events the world ever experienced, the conclusions of assessment missions is indeed appalling: a better education and awareness of local communities on natural hazards and their devastating impact could have contributed to reduce and mitigate the tragic human losses caused by the tsunami. All of you indeed remember the story of the British girl Tilly Smith who, thanks to basic notions of tsunami and natural disasters that were taught too herin her geography class in England, recognized the signals of the tsunami on one of the beaches in Phuket in South Thailand –she warned the security guards and had the beach evacuated thereby saving the lives of a hundred people. There might not be better illustration of the power of education and the urgent need to integrate DRR into school curricula. From a different perspective, the Gujarat earthquake, one of the most devastating earthquakes in India's history, directly affected an estimated three million school children, thousands of which were killed in schools that were unable to withstand the force of the quake. In the hardest hit districts, 55 per cent of all schools were destroyed, leaving 317,000 without access to education. Similar patterns have been observed in a number of equally devastating and smaller-size earthquakes occurred in numerous countries in recent years, including the Bam earthquake in 2003.

In a recent study commissioned by ISDR's Thematic Platform on Knowledge and Education - Let Our Children Teach Us! - it was estimated that roughly one billion children aged 1-14 live in countries with high seismic risk, which puts several hundred million children at risk while they are attending schools. And this is only in the event of an earthquake. Schools are equally vulnerable to damage or destruction during other natural hazards such as strong winds, tsunamis, landslides and floods. As informal community centres and evacuation areas at the time of disasters, it is a moral imperative for Government, local authorities and local community leaders to ensure the safety of school environments as well as school children and teachers by building disaster resistant schools and education infrastructures so that the school buildings themselves do not represent additional threats to school children and teachers' life.

On 3 January 2005, Koichiro Matsuura, Director General of UNESCO highlighted that "anticipating, educating and informing are the keys to reducing the deadly effect of such natural disasters" but regretted that such activities were not given priority. When adopting the "Hyogo Framework for Action: Building the Resilience of Communities and Nations to Disasters, 2005-2015" of which we have debated in detail yesterday, as the international blueprint to guide the implementation of disaster risk reduction over the next 10 years, the 168 Member States committed to implement the five priorities recommended by HFA as top priority actions to facilitate an effective implementation of disaster risk reduction.

Among them, education and knowledge for disaster risk reduction appear as the third priority fostering the **“Use of knowledge, innovation and education to build a culture of safety and resilience at all levels”**, the overall target being to contribute to a drastic shift in mentalities and perceptions as well as a behavioural change towards a more proactive preventative approach to disasters. Children, as “tomorrow’s leaders” and key agents for change, are recognized as the primary targets of these efforts. The 2006-2007 World Campaign on Disaster Reduction led by UN/ISDR was developed around the theme “Disaster risk reduction begins at school” to engage and mobilize key stakeholders at the local, national, regional and international levels in promoting the integration of disaster risk reduction as part of school curricula and in facilitating the development of disaster-resilient schools and retrofitting of school building to withstand natural hazards through school safety programmes at all levels. Education for disaster risk reduction also contributes to world efforts in achieving Target 2 of the Millennium Development Goals on “Achieving Universal Primary Education” as well as the goals of the UN Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (2005-2014) led by UNESCO which aims at the development of the concept of “Education for Natural Disaster Preparedness” (ENDP) and the overall integration of ENDP into sustainable development strategies.

The state of development and advancement in integrating disaster risk reduction within school curricula and in constructing safe schools of course varies according to the level of development, capacities and political commitment granted by Governments to the issue of education. The wealth of activities, programmes and educational material for disaster risk reduction is huge though in Asia and many lessons learned can be drawn from each country’s experience in this area. This will be the purpose of the session this morning, to recognize key initiatives and successes developed in the region in the area of education for DRR.

Education is a basic human right and therefore should be accessible to all, in particular to vulnerable communities and groups with special needs like children, senior persons and disabled people / school children among others, whose survival from a disaster situation might sometime depend of one single piece of information or an effective dissemination of warning. Education and training contribute to capacity-building and to empowering the communities to build their own resilience to disasters. In that context, it is important to work hand to hand with the scientific and social science community to make sure that the scientific information or technology relating to disaster risk reduction is delivered to the concerned communities in an easy language, translated into their own dialect and build on their traditional knowledge and practices. The role of media in educating people as well as conveying warnings at time of disasters is being widely recognized and media partners are being involved as part of the new ISDR system to assist in changing gradually mentalities and perceptions and in encouraging the adoption and replication of good practices in disaster risk reduction.

There is an urgent need today to document all lessons learned and good practices identified throughout Asian countries on DRR as well as get a good sense of the wealth of existing documentation and materials on DRR, which is huge even just at the regional level. The

International Conference on School Safety organized by the Government of India and SEEDS in January 2007 and the subsequent adoption of the Ahmadabad Action Agenda for School Safety set the stage on the status of school safety initiatives and listed out a set of responsibilities and actions for each stakeholder to become a “school safety champion”. It has become a reference when addressing this issue. Other existing mechanisms and networks at the regional level to assess the progress made in DRR Education include the annual ACDR meetings and Regional Consultative Committee (RCC) meetings which contribute to facilitate the mainstreaming of DRR into school curricula and came up in 2005 with specific guidelines on education for DRR.

The latter will be elaborated further and presented on the occasion of a Regional Workshop on Education for Disaster Risk Reduction that will be held from 8 to 10 October 2007 in Bangkok, coinciding with the International Day for Disaster Reduction on Wednesday 10 October. The workshop is co-organized by ISDR, UNESCO and UNICEF with the support from IFRC and ADPC who are the current members of a Task Force on Education and aims at obtaining political commitment towards the integration of DRR into school curricula. A first announcement is available on display outside the room and my colleague from UNESCO will elaborate further on this initiative. I wish to take the opportunity to invite all of you to the Regional Workshop on Education for DRR in October in BKK and would like to seek your support in securing the participation of your Minister of Education to the event. The conclusions of the regional workshop for Asia and the Pacific will feed into the International Conference on Education for Disaster Risk Reduction that will be organized in November 2008 by the UN/ISDR system Thematic Cluster /Platform on Knowledge and Education¹, thereby reflecting the wealth of experience and expertise of the Asia and Pacific region as well as its concerns and challenges in integrating disaster risk reduction as part of school curricula. The Second Asian Ministerial Conference on Disaster Risk Reduction that will be held on 7-8 November 2007 at the kind invitation of the Indian Government, will be another opportunity to receive a briefing from countries on the progress made in advancing the education agenda.

We look forward to hearing and learning from our distinguished speakers today on their and your respective experiences on this subject and wish you an enjoyable session.

Many thanks for your attention.

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¹ Composed of a core group of representatives from UN, international organizations, regional entities, countries, NGOs and networks dealing with education and school safety. For more information, please contact UN/ISDR in Geneva (email: albritto@un.org)