

OPENING STATEMENT OF SENATOR LOREN LEGARDA

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“Challenging development norms for disaster risk reduction”

Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen,

Two years ago in this august hall of the United Nations, the Global Platform for Disaster Risk Reduction came to life through the participation of the same delegates convened here today, to address the heightened scale of disaster vulnerability and climate risks in many parts of the world. Under-secretary General John Holmes posed then the challenge to advance a global agenda for reducing disaster risks in order to save human lives and to preserve human development gains.

Yet, the interlude year of 2008 proved most demonstrative of the enormity and persistence of the global disaster risk problem and the urgency of action at all levels and in all fronts: Disasters killed about a quarter of a million people and affected more than 200 million lives. The total economic cost was a stunning 180 billion US dollars, which is twice the average annual economic losses of the past seven years. And the region of the Asia and the Pacific, which I humbly represent, bore much of the brunt, accounting for more than 80 percent of the global loss of life.

What drives the disaster risks and poverty in the context of climate change, the Global Assessment Report on Disaster Risk Reduction has recently found with empirical evidence --- poor urban governance, vulnerable rural livelihoods, and ecosystems decline.

In the Philippines, my country, disaster and destruction, in grand or small scale, are a common visitor. Located on the fringe of the Pacific Ocean and right within the Ring of Fire, the archipelago is exposed to typhoons about 20 times each passing year and to strong earthquakes and powerful volcanic eruptions. As a country and people at risk, we need to rethink our approach to pursuing and protecting our development from the regressive impacts of disasters along the priorities of the Hyogo Framework for Action and the recommendations of the Global Assessment Report.

Beyond our respective countries, the world must act more swiftly, more wisely, and more decisively to seize and reduce disaster risks more effectively.

Fortunately today, concerned with the unrelenting losses, the grim prospects of climate change impacts, and the herculean tasks to arrest them, we have all gathered here for the second time, in greater number, to sustain this global forum and to bring hope for the future with renewed commitment and greater resolve to confront the greatest human development challenge of our time.

Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen,

The challenge of the 21st century to world leaders has never been more pronounced and more compelling than in the present.

The challenge in politics and governance is persuasively clear.

Fundamentally, we must all understand that our socio-economic vulnerability depends much on the choices we make and the actions we take -- as leaders and decision makers, as planners and builders, and as members of a society and a community. Truth to tell, disasters are not inevitable; they can be averted. Our lack of political will, poor understanding of risk, disregard for prevention and mitigation, ineffectual preparedness for response, our failure to take action, and our apathy and complacency --- all these transform natural hazards and climate change to a disaster.

We must therefore realize that we have actually shaped the disaster risks in our midst -- by the way we change our environment and the way we choose to live in it. If only we recognize the risks our actions could bring and take decisive actions to reduce them, we could mitigate if not prevent disasters from happening and protect way ahead human lives and livelihoods from the harmful forces of nature.

There is no more fitting time to say that reducing disaster risk has become a moral imperative for governments and a social responsibility for all than now --- when having less in life means losing life.

The present task of reducing disaster risks in the context of poverty, social inequality, gender imbalance, and climate change has now become synonymous with preserving humanity and securing

the future of our children and our grandchildren today. It is therefore a task no one can afford to ignore.

To us leaders and lawmakers of nations and societies, the task at hand calls for a new brand of politics --- the kind of politics that has genuine regard for human development and a forceful vision for the future of humanity; the kind of politics that ushers proactive laws and policies and reforms our conventional way of thinking and doing.

The task at hand also calls for a new brand of governance --- the kind of governance that ensures risk reduction laws and regulations are passed and implemented and creates the necessary enabling environment to translate sustainable development strategies into practical and measurable gains; the kind of governance that translates political commitment into real actions and results for the people at national and local levels.

So much remains to be done to usher our desired change and to make an enduring difference in building the resilience of nations and communities.

The predominance of risks in our societies calls for urgent policy reforms. We need new policies that build local capacity beyond disaster response capability; new policies that link disaster risk reduction and climate change adaptation and mainstream them into development action and formal education; new policies that reduce and not worsen existing vulnerabilities and risks; new policies that make reducing risk a prerequisite for development funding; new policies that ensure the resilience of our development investments; new policies that are backed by scientific studies and empirical proofs; new policies that are sensitive to indigenous knowledge systems; new policies that promote gender sensitivity and equality; new policies that uphold fairness and equity especially for the poor and disadvantaged.

There is no more appropriate time to show political will, good governance, and exemplary leadership than these trying times. Indeed, these times call for a new breed of leaders – leaders of integrity and responsibility, leaders of wisdom and compassion, leaders of conscience and conviction, leaders who are truly committed to eradicating poverty and uplifting humanity.

Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen,

The challenge in development is undeniably clear.

Through the centuries since the industrial revolution, Mother Earth has been at the mercy of human's insatiable desires for material wealth and economic progress. Yet our ways of thinking and pursuing development have depleted our social, cultural and natural wealth. Sadly, we must admit, our so-called development has made the poor more vulnerable, has placed some cultures at risk of extinction, and has pushed ecosystems services like fisheries beyond repair.

Contemporary development practices have been irresponsible since they have allowed disaster risks to grow, to spread, and to prevail until today. Urban poverty, weak governance, ecosystems decline, vulnerable rural livelihoods, turbo-charged by climate change have altogether created enormous risks in our cities and communities and have put the poor in greater peril. These risks will constantly challenge our human capacity to cope, imperil all development gains, and keep the Millennium Development Goals elusive.

The "slumdog millionaire" reality that has bedeviled many developing countries is a wakeup call for all. We are in a vicious cycle of economic boom and bust, with the peoples and environment at the receiving end of a failing model of economic development. This has entrapped the poor and the vulnerable, and has corrupted societies. We cannot continue using Mother Earth as collateral in our economic games of chance.

Today's state of socio-economic affairs should not be business-as-usual. It is high time for the world to slow down this contemporary development practices.

We come to ask ourselves: What is the true meaning of a nation's wealth? How then can we develop our societies without compromising our environment and the welfare of generations to come? How can we advance our socio-economic standards without putting the poor at greater risk? How can we realize our shared goals on poverty reduction and sustainable development for the millennium with greater certainty of success?

The real answer lies deep within us.

It is high time to re-think development --- and for a more holistic development philosophy to emerge and to prevail.

- the kind of development that transcends economic capital measures such as GDP;
- the kind of development that has regard for social, cultural and natural capital of countries;
- the kind of development that is not only sustainable but also adaptable;
- the kind of development that fosters equity not just efficiency;
- the kind of development that does not create new risks and promotes resilient investments;
- the kind of development that is founded on sustainable and equitable socio-economic development, ecosystems protection, cultural resilience, and good governance.

Now is the time for all of us to unite on all these challenges, and to transcend territorial boundaries, political persuasions, and institutional affiliations.

If only we keep an open mind, an open heart, and a genuine passion for good governance, I believe we can make an important difference for our people especially the poor, for our society, and for the world.

The time to make that difference is now.

Humanity's future depends upon us.

Let us be the change we seek.

Thank you and Mabuhay!