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Consolidated Workshop Proceedings Report

Regional Workshop on Urban Risk Reduction

Damascus, Syria, November 4. – 5. 2009

UNISDR, the Global Facility for Disaster Reduction and Recovery (GFDRR) of the World Bank, UNDP Syria and the Syrian Ministry for Local Administration convened a regional workshop on urban risk reduction in Damascus, 4-5 November 2009. More than forty participants representing local authorities, researchers, academic experts, international and regional organizations was gathered to discuss regional priorities and challenges with respect to urban risk reduction as well as key actions to be undertaken regionally, nationally and locally to build safer cities and increase resilience to disasters.

During the workshop, several experiences and initiatives on urban risk reduction were discussed with particular focus on progress, challenges and gaps in undertaking risk assessments. Tools for risk assessment were presented and participants shared experiences on disaster risk reduction and building cities resilience in the context of a changing climate, rapidly growing population and absence of integrated urban risk reduction approaches at regional, national and local levels.

The biannual World Campaign for Disaster Risk Reduction 2010 - 2011 “Building Resilient Cities” was presented in the workshop aiming at engaging local governments and technical experts from the region in the global campaign and highlighting good practices and models from the region in enhancing cities’ resilience. Safety and resilience of critical infrastructure, particularly health facilities and schools was also discussed during the workshop.

Several issues emerged as key priorities for consideration in future actions and the workshop participants agreed on a set of recommendations including establishing a regional task force for urban risk reduction and undertaking an inventory on existing initiatives to reduce urban risk.

Background and Context

Since the adoption of the Hyogo Framework for Action in 2005, greater awareness of the importance of reducing disaster risk has emerged among different stakeholders. Overall, in the Arab region, there has been some progress on national level on political commitment to risk reduction, developing of institutional mechanisms and strategies, enhancing early warning systems and building preparedness and response capacities. However, the commitment often does not translate to operational capacities



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or commitment of resources to effectively implement the strategies or integrate risk reduction in development plans. There is weak progress on education and public awareness as well as on collection, availability and accessibility of data and information risk and vulnerabilities, tools and methodologies for disaster risk reduction and multi-risk and multi-hazard approaches.

Globally, there has been a broad consensus on the essential role local governments can play to bridge the above gap. It is in fact at the local level that development planning is expected to first take place, and the integration between disaster risk reduction and development is supposed to be realized. Emphasis on disaster risk reduction at the local level is also becoming stronger as cities of all sizes are subjected to rapid population growth, environmental degradation and overall increased conditions of vulnerability. However, while cities and urban areas currently attract more attention due to their high concentration of risk, local and regional authorities have an equally important role to play in medium and small-scale cities, towns, and local rural areas.

This Regional Workshop on Urban Risk Reduction was the first in a series of regional workshops on urban risk reduction aiming at improving the resilience of Arab cities to disasters. There have been different experiences and wide spectrum of activities already in the region with focus on urban risk reduction, seismic risk reduction, flood mitigation, etc. However, there seems to be still a major gap in integrating risk reduction in city planning and in standardized approaches to risk assessment that is coupled with practical tools to reduce risk and vulnerability and make critical infrastructure in a city resilient to disasters.

Objectives of the Workshop

The regional workshop aimed at facilitate sharing of knowledge and experiences on urban risk reduction practices, and identify challenges and gaps, addressing first and foremost officials and experts working on the technical and planning level of urban development in order to establish a substantial platform of knowledge and tools to approach and engage local decision makers at a later stage. Through the workshop, a network was established of committed stakeholders engaged in urban risk reduction. This network will be more formalized with its own web space and will support regional activities on urban risk reduction and can feed into and support global urban risk reduction activities; to observe the Global Campaign on disaster risk reduction and to establish a Regional Alliance of Local Governments that will connect to the Global Local Alliance Network. (Arab Region Urban Risk Reduction Task Force vs Arab Region Alliance of Local Governments)

The main objective of the workshop was to discuss and develop a consolidated and regional assessment tool of urban risks and vulnerabilities. The idea was that the assessment tool would not only provide



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indicators to measure risks and vulnerabilities, but also a tool to develop sustainable solutions in a participatory manner. UNISDR and the World Bank developed in 2009 an assessment tool for Asia, the City Primer that has been piloted in five cities in the Arab region. Findings from the pilot study, other existing assessment tools and inputs and experiences from the participants framed the discussions of a comprehensive assessment tool relevant for the region. Central issues were how to incorporate climate change adaptation and safe schools and hospitals.

In general the workshop aimed at stimulating constructive debates on priority areas of common concern, but also at commitment for future efforts for urban risk reduction in the Arab States region.

Expected outcomes

The workshop expected to contribute to the following:

- Common understanding achieved of existing knowledge, practices and challenges on urban risk reduction, including cities' resilience to climate change and resilience of critical infrastructure including safe schools and hospitals measures.
- Substantive and consolidated basis developed for a regional risk assessment tool (including information shared on existing tools), which will then be applied in a selected number of cities.
- Regional elements for the strategy of the World Disaster Reduction Campaign 2010-2011 are discussed and agreed upon.

General urban risk reduction Issues discussed at the workshop

1. Urban Risk Reduction at all administrative levels:

- On the global level general guidance is offered.
- Regionalization offers a general outlook of risk profile and analysis in the region.
- Nationalization offer valuable facts for decision and policy makers.
- Localization is the application on the ground to reduce risks/vulnerabilities.

2. Regional status on urban risk reduction:

- Weak linkages between scientific knowledge with applied action and plans.
- Some progress on risk identification (sectoral) and hazard mapping.
- Lots to be done on comprehensive vulnerability assessments by sector, by target group, by city etc.
- Lack of data accuracy and data accessibility is a big challenge.
- Centralized planning and "local action" to urban risk challenges is limited.

3. Key issues identified:

- Good governance is key
- Public awareness and community ownership



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- Legislations and the role of parliamentarians
- Risk and poverty linkages
- Climate change context; climate change impact, multiplicity of actors, how to use DRR in CCA, resources for adaptation plans needs to be addressed.
- Assessment and safety of critical infrastructure “health facilities and schools” is key for urban risk reduction.
- Children “new generation” at the heart of the matter... not only as vulnerable group but also as key player in the future.
- Private sector, community participants, volunteers, universities are the arms to implement in addition to Gov. and specialized technical organizations.
- Role of insurance schemes, building codes and regulations, laws, etc.

Recommendations

1. On regional city assessment tools:
 - Assessment exercises are means but not goals by themselves. Has only value if institutionalized as ongoing processes that feed into city planning.
 - The methodology of risk assessment tools has to be tailored for different purposes such as general profile, investments, public awareness, decision making. (I would also say that for city development plans the assessments need to be as comprehensive as possible and incorporate most aspects of city development such as social factors, economic factors, environmental factors etc. Human, social and economic dimensions in addition to structural)
 - Data accuracy is key. Disaggregated data necessary to illuminate different layers of the city; gender issues, income distribution, poverty etc.
 - Global assessment tools need to be regionalized, nationalized, localized.
 - Risk assessment exercises should be fully owned by national governments and local authorities, otherwise it has no value.
 - “Nutrition Guide” vs. “Cooking Book”: UNISDR provides “Nutrition Guides” which means guidelines and frameworks on which elements is necessary to assess urban risks and to develop resilient cities. However the recipes, how to proceed in undertaking the assessments, how to incorporate the assessments in city planning and how to implement the plans to make resilient cities, need to be developed by the national and local stakeholders.
 - It turned out that the need for a consolidated regional assessment tool is not necessary; the best is if local authorities develop their own assessments. However, it is important to provide guidelines, exchange of knowledge and experiences, and training:
2. Undertake urban risk reduction inventory of initiatives in the Arab region (regional material for the campaign)
 - To document good practices



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- To identify challenges and gaps
 - To identify training needs in the region
3. Establish an urban risk reduction task force (Regional Local Government Alliance).
 - Advancing urban risk reduction in the region can start through a “Regional URR Task Force”
 - A Task Force needs strong commitment/facilitation/coordination
 - Definition of status of the TF; informal, vibrant, knowledge sharing forum, actionable activities
 - Definition of Tasks; developing tools & methodologies, advocacy for political awareness and commitment, capacity development and training
 - Time frame for deliverables
 4. Incorporate URR in DRR
 - Empower HFA focal points in the countries to be the facilitator and entry point for national engagement.
 - Need for national coordination mechanisms (platforms/committees, etc..) for DRR
 - Mainstream DRR in currently used tools (?)
 5. Increase cooperation with system partners on URR
 - Use currently tailored methodologies to advance URR such as Geocities, CDS, Urban Observatories, Extensive Risk Analysis, etc..
 - Integrate the assessment and improvement of health facilities safety in urban risk reduction plans.
 - Engage stakeholders from the region and (LAS, ECAT, AUDI, ATO, national academic institutions, researchers, NGOs, RC societies)
 6. 2010-2011 World Campaign “Building Resilient Cities”
 - Regionalize/tailor the global criteria for safe and resilient cities (UNISDR will share the criteria)
 - ECAT has network of 420 cities and will reach-out to them to raise awareness on the campaign
 - Use of mass media “communication messages, communication means, etc..”
 - Know your risk... field visits, checking role models, checking infrastructure issues
 - Documenting good practices/examples from the region for global products and cross-regional sharing



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