

**National Conference on Disaster Risk Reduction  
“Assessing and Managing Risks in Lebanon”**

**Beirut, Lebanon, 17 October 2012**

**Address by Margareta Wahlström  
Special Representative of the United Nations Secretary-General  
for Disaster Risk Reduction**

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Your Excellency Najib Mikati, President of the Council of Ministers,

Dr Mouin Hamze, Secretary General of the National Council for Scientific Research,

Mr. Robert Watkins, UN Resident Coordinator in Lebanon,

Her Excellency, Ms Ruth Flint, Ambassador of Switzerland to Lebanon

Distinguished Representatives, Colleagues, Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am honoured to have been invited to address this excellent gathering of scientists, policy makers and disasters risk management practitioners, who are meeting here for the National Conference on Disaster Risk Reduction: “Assessing and Managing Risks in Lebanon”.

I would like to thank the National Council for Scientific Research (CNRS), UNDP and the Disaster Risk Management team at the Prime Ministers’ office for organizing this conference. This meeting offers us an interesting forum to explore in depth the profile of disaster risk in Lebanon and also to seek ways of addressing imminent threats from hazards that expose the Lebanese population and assets to potential losses.

In any given year, the lives of over 200 million people world-wide are disrupted by disaster events. And 2011 was a record year for all the wrong reasons. During that time, we witnessed 302 human impact disasters that killed nearly 30,000 people and affected 206 million. The reinsurance company MunichRe estimated global economic losses for 2011 to be more than US\$ 380 billion.

Mortality in disasters may be trending downwards over time, but economic losses are rising rapidly. The risk of economic losses is now growing faster than average GDP growth – in other words, faster than the ability of countries to create wealth. This is not a concern solely for the developing world; this is a concern for each and every country in the world. Never before has the need for collaborative action to reduce risk, vulnerability and the exposure of populations and assets been more keenly felt.

Five of the ten costliest disasters (in terms of money rather than lives) in history took place in the past four years. For example, the cost of the earthquake and tsunami in Japan was estimated to be US\$ 300+ billion in losses (forcing Japan back into recession). The cost of floods in Thailand were estimated to be US\$ 40 billion, which according to J.P. Morgan, has set back global industrial production by 2.5%. In fact, the costs of recovery for countries can be enormous, not least in high-tech, industrialised societies.

The budgetary allocation by the Government of Japan for recovery and reconstruction following the 2011 earthquake is approximately USD 260 billion, or around 25% of its GDP. Even when high-income countries may be able to absorb losses and recovery costs over the long term, middle and low-income countries can be severely incapacitated by disasters, and in the worst cases (Haiti for example), they may see decades of development investment undone.

Let me underline that major catastrophic events are not always the most damaging to a society. Approximately 50% of all disaster losses are estimated to come from recurrent, small-scale disaster events. The poor are disproportionately affected. Women, children, older and disabled people, and marginalized groups are often more exposed to risks. They usually have less capacity and fewer defences against the impact of a crisis.

A significant proportion of small-scale recurrent losses are not accounted for, and not paid for by governments. Instead, they are simply absorbed by low-income households and small businesses. These losses translate into a series of poverty outcomes (increasing breadth and depth of poverty; inequality; declines in nutrition and health etc.). Building resilience is therefore central to achieving the Millennium Development Goals.

It is almost eight years since the *Hyogo Framework for Action 2005-2015: Building the Resilience of Nations and Communities to Disasters* (HFA) was adopted by Governments at the World Conference on Disaster Reduction in Japan and then endorsed by the UN General Assembly that same year in 2005. The HFA provides a framework to reduce disaster impacts through five priorities for action. It calls on governments and their partners from the academic and scientific community, the NGOs and the private sector to join efforts for disaster prevention and risk reduction.

All governments are responsible for their stock of public assets. These include schools, health facilities, roads and infrastructure. Unfortunately, much public investment does not increase a country's stock of development assets rather it increases its stock of risks and liabilities – which is amplified by poorly managed urban growth and environmental degradation. The consequences of

failing to mitigate disaster risk in public and private investment are not measured only in lives lost or economic costs incurred, but also in political, and in the worst cases, social instability.

I am encouraged by the increasing commitment and progressive efforts that are being undertaken by the Lebanese government and its partners to adopt a comprehensive disaster risk reduction agenda. This must be attributed to the strong political will, multi-stakeholder engagement and the effective partnership with the international community.

I am particularly impressed to see that steady progress has been made since the establishment of a dedicated Disaster Risk Management Unit under the leadership of the Prime Minister's office. This progress is illustrated by the establishment of a national committee on the implementation of, and reporting on the Hyogo Framework for Action, the development of a national disaster response plan, the completion of the first national disaster loss database in Lebanon, and the draft law on establishing a disaster risk reduction national agency. These, along with a number of advocacy and public awareness actions, are examples of the concrete steps taken by Lebanon.

A remarkable statement of commitment at local level and an acknowledgement of the role played by local authorities in advancing risk reduction and boosting resilience is manifested by the fact that 257 Lebanese municipalities and 7 municipal unions have joined the *Making Cities Resilient: 'My City is getting ready!'* campaign. This is a quarter of the total number of cities in the global Campaign today. With almost 80% of the Lebanese population living in urbanized areas, the integration of risk reduction in urban planning, land use management and local communities' preparedness is critical.

Lebanon is subject to a range of natural hazards with the largest, single natural disaster threat being that of a severe earthquake and/or an associated tsunami. In addition to this ever-present threat, typical smaller-scale disasters include floods, forest fires, land-slides and drought. Being one of the most urbanized countries in the world, these disaster risk realities call upon all of us to boost capacities nationally and locally for effective disaster mitigation and preparedness.

Today we have a clearer understanding of trends that show how the impact of disasters caused by natural hazards and vulnerability will continue to intensify, thus presenting an increasingly significant challenge to development. Disaster risk reduction and resilience therefore requires more central consideration in the global development agenda as illustrated in the world commitments to sustainable development highlighted in the Rio+20 outcome document. In it, risk reduction is identified as one of the key global priorities.

The need for disaster risk reduction (and particularly risk assessment, loss accounting and risk management) to be an integral component of development plans and poverty eradication programmes is now well accepted among experts. For countries to reduce their vulnerabilities and exposure to risk, a much bolder approach is required. The approach needs to incorporate development mechanisms (such as national public investment planning systems, social protection, and national and local infrastructure investments) to reduce risks and strengthen resilience.

Disaster risk reduction cuts across the different facets of sustainable development. Factoring disaster risk reduction into public and private investment decisions and development plans directly addresses critical risk drivers and

prevents (or reduces) potential disaster-related losses and costs. This ensures the quality and sustainability of both private and public investment spending.

With governments in countries at risk – like Lebanon – leading the way, aided by the *Hyogo Framework for Action 2005-2015*, the management of disaster risk and strengthening nations' resilience are now considered a fundamental part of the 21<sup>st</sup> century drive for effective sustainable development and economic growth.

Today disaster trends continue to show a negative trend with significant economic impact. As a result, we have now started work on shaping an international disaster risk management framework for 2015 and beyond. To move forward, we will build on experiences and needs of all countries that are working to improve their management of disaster risk. This is a major opportunity for cooperation and to ensure continued commitment to reduce the impact of losses from disasters. Now is the time to think about and discuss what we would like the post-2015 framework for disaster risk reduction to look like.

All stakeholders have been called on to participate in a broad consultation process towards 2015, including through national meetings such as this one. Governments' self-reflection on the implementation of the current HFA will be an important part of these consultations. All the reflections and results of the post-2015 framework consultations will be presented at the next Global Platform for disaster risk reduction that will take place in May 2013 in Geneva. I hope you will be all attending this important event.

## *Conclusion*

A preventive approach to disasters is not contested. We all agree that disaster risk is an imminent threat to our communities, to our heritage and to our future. Investing in building a culture of safety and enhancing resilience is not a luxury.

I trust that Lebanon's Conference on Disaster Risk Reduction will mark a valuable step in this direction and I look forward to the ensuing discussions to help shape a focused agenda for a resilient Lebanon.

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