

**Opening Statement by Margareta Wahlström,
Special Representative
of the UN Secretary General for Disaster Risk Reduction
Second Arab Conference on Disaster Risk Reduction
Sharm El-Sheikh, Egypt
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Towards the post-2015 framework for disaster risk reduction and beyond

- Check against delivery -

Your Excellency Prime Minister Ibrahim Mahlab,
Your Excellency Deputy Secretary-General Ahmed Ben Helli,
Your Excellency Governor of South Sinai, General Khalid Fouda,
Your Excellency Minoru Kiuchi State Minister for Foreign Affairs of Japan.
Excellencies, dear colleagues,

I am pleased to be here today for the opening of the Second Arab Conference on Disaster Risk Reduction, a very important event as we move forward to the Third UN World Conference on Disaster Risk Reduction that will be held on 14-18 March 2015 in Sendai City, Japan. I wish to sincerely thank the Government of Egypt, through you Mr. Prime Minister, for hosting this conference.

The Conference comes at a vital time as the world prepares to forge three major international frameworks that are set to redefine the way we think about development and the way we create wealth and promote economic growth. 2015 will be a turning point with a new agreement on climate change, a new sustainable development agenda and a new framework for disaster risk reduction. It represents a unique opportunity for the world to commit to a different way of doing things: a way that sees public and private investment which anticipates and prevents disaster and climate risk. The world can seize the moment and commit to a new way of doing business that ensures development that is truly sustainable.

The UN General Assembly stressed the importance of regional consultations involving all stakeholders, the results of which will inform the new post 2015 disaster risk reduction framework. The UN General Assembly also welcomed the holding of the Second Arab Conference on Disaster Risk Reduction in Egypt. To contribute to a new post 2015 disaster risk reduction framework agreement to replace the Hyogo Framework for Action 2005-2015, I am pleased to note that Arab States, since 2012, managed to hold some nine consultations at the regional, national and local levels.

It is clear from those consultations that Arab States support the need to ensure that clear linkages are made between the post 2015 DRR framework and the sustainable development goals and climate change agreement being discussed. The results of the consultations in this region and elsewhere have also re-affirmed the developmental nature of disaster risk reduction.

The Arab region often experiences disasters such as floods, droughts, storms, sandstorms and earthquakes. Climate change induced sea level rise also poses a threat to many important urban centers in the Arab region. During the past 30 years the Arab region was affected by more than 330 disasters resulting in more than 160,000 deaths and affecting approximately 60 million people. Disaster risks are more pronounced in urban areas where over 55% percent of the Arab population resides. In some countries the population in urban areas is as high as 80%.

Since the inception of the HFA in 2005, Arab States have increasingly recognized the importance of disaster risk reduction. I am pleased to note that 15 Arab states (out of the 22 LAS members) have so far reported on the progress they are making to comply with the Hyogo framework. Ten countries have also established disaster loss databases, which will enable them to strengthen their understanding of historical disaster losses and thereby take risks and hazards into consideration when carrying out their development plans. I must also praise local governments in Arab countries: today some 300 cities and municipalities are parties to the Global “Making Cities Resilient Campaign”, thus signifying increased awareness of the need to manage disasters while underlining the important role of local governments and communities as the first line of defense against disasters.

Each Arab country has its unique risk profile. But there are commonalities as well and cooperation across the region, supported by the League of Arab States, can support national efforts to reduce disaster risk. In this regard, I must also praise the development of the Arab Strategy for Disaster Risk Reduction and its Plan of Action that was developed under the auspices of the League of Arab States. This is an important strategic document that I believe can act as a useful guide to Arab states and communities.

Since its inception in 2005, the HFA has been decisive in strengthening and guiding international cooperation efforts, in generating the political momentum necessary to ensure that disaster risk reduction is used as a foundation for sound national and international development agendas.

However, the reality is that disaster risk and economic, social, environmental, and cultural losses are increasing. Economic losses now regularly exceed USD 1 billion annually and are projected to double by 2030. Over the last 30 years, the risk of economic losses due to floods has increased by over 160 per cent. In the Arab states drought, water scarcity and climate change are a concern that adversely affects food security in the region. Studies warn that drought in the Arab region is increasing and that the region is suffering from the negative effects of water scarcity and food security. Some studies show that agricultural production in the Arab region could decrease by 21 per cent by 2080. This... in a region that already imports 70 per cent of its food requirements.

The Second Arab Conference for Disaster Risk Reduction is an opportunity for Arab countries to review disaster risk challenges and explore ways to address them. Also importantly, the outcome of your deliberations should outline the Arab vision for a post 2015 Hyogo framework for action, which will in turn be used to inform the international consultations being held during the remainder of this year.

As you deliberate to reach an outcome for this conference, I invite you to note that while the HFA provided critical guidance to reduce risk and strengthen cooperation among all stakeholders; its implementation also highlighted gaps in efforts to achieve its goals and priorities. Consultations in the Arab region, rightly underlined that many HFA elements should remain valid in any post 2015 framework. But we also must fill the gaps (or address the weaknesses) identified in the current HFA.

Keeping this in mind, we must consider formulating new goals that would take us forward while also maintaining the valid elements of the HFA. In this regard, the co-chairs of the WCDRR preparatory committee have circulated a “pre-zero” draft for a post 2015 framework for DRR, which will be discussed during the conference. This draft recognizes that despite the progress made in preparedness and response to disasters, more people and assets are being exposed to disasters. Simply put, we continue to generate new risk through faulty development which leads to increasing disaster losses, all of which have significant socio-economic impact on our communities. We therefore must ensure that the post-2015 framework should prevent the creation of new risk, reduce existing risk and also strengthen the resilience of communities and countries to absorb losses and minimize damages from disasters. This can only be done through a strong partnership among all stakeholders - not only governments, but also communities, civil society, the private sector and all marginalized groups.

In this second Arab Conference, let us consider the areas where this region can take the lead, not only by addressing hazards such as drought, water scarcity, urbanization and others, but also by making sure that we address disaster risk in an inclusive manner that is supported by strong leadership as well as by empowered institutions that are able to mainstream disaster risk reduction into all sectors.

I wish you a successful event.