

1st Session of the Regional Platform for Disaster Reduction in the Americas

United Nations International Strategy for Disaster Reduction (UNISDR)
Global Platform for the implementation of the Hyogo Framework for Action (HFA)

Panama City, Panama

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Talking points for Ambassador Albert Ramdin

- The Americas is perhaps the global region that presents the most advanced positions adopted by member states in Disaster Reduction.

The Inter-American Strategic Plan for Policy on Vulnerability Reduction, Risk Management and Disaster Response – known as IASP, adopted at the Thirty Third General Assembly in 2003, represents a milestone in the Americas and a benchmark for the OAS as it moves away from a predominant focus on humanitarian assistance towards integrated, multi-lateral cooperation for addressing the underlying causes of natural disasters: poverty, environmental degradation, lack of risk assessments in public and private investments, and lack of integration of risk management into development policy and planning by each productive, economic and social sector.

- In the Americas today, we understand that vulnerability reduction and risk management are central to sustainable development.

Sustainable development will not be achieved unless risk management is well integrated across all sectors and all levels of governance. Risk management is not a sector, nor a stand alone theme in our development agendas. It is everybody's' responsibility: farmers, energy production and grid operators, highways administrations and concessionaires, water supply and sanitation system operators, tourism developers and operators, natural resource, park and reserves planners and managers, health providers, municipal planners and local governments. It is everybody's business.

- The Inter-American Committee on Natural Disaster Reduction (IACNDR), established on June 7th, 1999, through the OAS General Assembly resolution AG/Res.1682 (XXXIX-0/99), provides for a hemispheric forum on which the Regional Platform for Disaster Reduction can be built, as it convenes all Inter-American Sister Organizations, all relevant Regional Intergovernmental Organizations, namely SICA, CARICOM, ACS, and CAN, and all relevant UN System agencies. Development banks, International Financial Institutions (IFIs), and multi-lateral and bilateral cooperation agencies, who participate in the Committee by invitation, make up what can become the Regional Platform.

The OAS and Regional Inter-governmental Organizations adopt the UNISDR and OAS Regional Platform concept, as the annual reporting mechanism for HFA and IASP implementation; and jointly support the implementation of intersectoral National Platforms.

Political regional bodies, such as SICA, CARICOM, ACS and CAN, define regional development policies, which are further formulated and implemented through their specialized sector agencies, as well as NGOs, bilaterals and business associations.

Specialized regional sector agencies carry the means to most effectively address disaster risk reduction from its roots; the sectors that build risk, and are responsible for reducing vulnerability and mitigating the impacts of natural events in the infrastructure they build, operate and maintain.

Regional emergency response agencies, on the other hand, bear the unique position to raise awareness and political will for increasing investments in vulnerability reduction and risk assessments. While their main task must continue to be providing coordinated emergency response, they have also a unique opportunity –provided in and by each natural event, to assign accountability to those who own the risk.

- The Inter-American Network for Disaster Mitigation (INDM), established by AG/Res. 2314, in June of 2007, as per the recommendations of the first Inter-American Meeting of Ministers and High-level Authorities of Sustainable Development, in December 2006, in Santa Cruz de la Sierra, is expected to become the operational and executive hemispheric branch to support the decisions of the IACNDR and advance practical collaboration among OAS Member States in matters of disaster risk reduction.

The XXXVII General Assembly, convened in Panama, recognized INDM "...as the permanent hemispheric mechanism for strengthening practical cooperation among intergovernmental agencies in the area of disaster reduction, especially by sharing technical information and best practices." AG/Res. 2314 further recognizes the need to coordinate efforts with relevant agencies of the United Nations System in order to implement HFA adopted at the World Conference on Disaster Reduction, held in Kobe, Japan, in January, 2005.

INDM is the natural operational arm of the IACNDR and the Regional Platform, providing for the exchange of information, knowledge and experience. More particularly, it can support the building of functional and operational National Platforms.

- UNISDR National Platforms must not be limited to a reporting mechanism, but instead must be established as functional and organizational structures capable to integrate disaster risk reduction into the development agenda across all productive, economic and social sectors, all segments of the society – government, universities, religious groups, NGOs, private enterprises, and the civil society as whole, and all levels of government –from local to central.
- A clear division of responsibilities, functions and areas of action must be agreed among all the Inter-American and UN Systems agencies so as to optimize resources –not only from bilateral and multilateral cooperation, but mainly from national governments.

IDB, the World Bank, and regional banks –BCIE, CDB, CAF and FONPLATA, among others, must come together to provide the financial support required to execute the Regional Platform.

SG/OAS, PAHO, IICA, and other Inter-American sister organizations must work together to avoid duplications and a more effective and efficient cooperation.

Regional Intergovernmental Organizations, SICA, CARICOM, ACS and CAN, must work together their institutional agendas in harmony with SG/OAS so as to ensure a single message, and an optimal use of resources.

And National Governments must ensure tight coordination among their ministries, and they must communicate a single set of priorities throughout all their representations, Embassies, and Missions to the OAS, UN, and Regional Intergovernmental Organizations. In the end, the ability to optimize resources and coordinate international cooperation resides in themselves. It is little what we, the intergovernmental organizations and the international cooperation community, can do to coordinate among ourselves, if we all respond to mandates and directives that often follow different priorities, many times are competing, and at worst, they are contradictory.

- The Americas has come a long way since 1965, when the -American Emergency Aid Fund (FONDEM) was established at the Second Special Inter-American Conference of the OAS “to provide available social, humanitarian, material, technical, and financial aid to any member state of the Organization that is threatened by, has suffered from, or is in an emergency situation caused by natural disasters.”

The Inter-American Convention to Facilitate Disaster Assistance adopted, in 1991, by OAS member States is the only regional binding instrument in the World for disaster assistance. The Convention represents a breakthrough from soft law, recognizing the potential contribution of international law in the field of disasters, and it is applicable whenever a state party furnishes assistance in response to a request from another state party and provides a comprehensive framework to address key issues of disaster assistance –including mechanisms for national coordination; direction and control of assistance; transport of vehicles, equipment and supplies; access and transit routes; security; and claims and indemnity. It also regulates the participation of governmental and nongovernmental organizations, and defines the rules of procedure for all assistance personnel and the need for direct supervision from the assisted state. Some of the provisions in the Convention address the challenges and concerns currently faced by countries in disaster situations, such as the coordination of assistance, establishing the appointment of a National Coordinating Authority and the channels through which aid must be requested.

So, now it's the time to put all these mechanisms, instruments, and tools to work for the good of our most vulnerable communities; in the Americas, those located in international border areas, far from the capitals and even farther away from national development plans; our indigenous people, and those socially and economically marginalized groups.

- Finally, we hope that as a concrete outcome of this 1st Session of the Regional Platform, we can bring to our organizations a set of agreements that can be further translate into operative decisions at the next meeting of the Inter-American Committee on Natural Disaster Reduction (IACNDR).

We can make the commitment to convene the next meeting of IACCNDR before June 2009, so as to arrive to San Pedro Sula, at the XXXIX OAS General Assembly, and to Geneva, at the Second Session of the Global Platform, with a clear path towards the implementation of a functional and structured Regional Platform; provided that we come out from this meeting with concrete ideas and actions to take to our Secretary Generals and Heads of our Inter-American System sister organizations.

- In closing, on behalf of the OAS General Secretariat, I thank UNISDR and its partners, and all National Platforms represented in this event, for convening us all together, here in Panama, to move this agenda forward for a common purpose of democracy and prosperity in union of the Americas.

Thank you.