



International Day for Disaster Reduction 2010

Statement by the Executive Coordinator of United Nations Volunteers, Flavia Pansieri

Today, on the International Day for Disaster Reduction we think about how we can all work together to diminish and where possible prevent human losses and economic devastation caused by natural hazards worldwide. The destruction as a result of earthquakes, tropical cyclones, floods, drought or other hazards typically has a disproportionate impact on the poorest and most vulnerable especially women, children, youth and the elderly.

Today, some 75% of the global population lives in areas that have been affected by these kinds of hazards at least once in the last 25 years. And the indications are that as a result of climate change, the frequency and severity of disasters is increasing.

Volunteers play a crucial role in coping with the aftermath of disasters, as they are often in the frontline to respond and mobilize communities to help each other. Volunteers increase the resilience of rural and urban communities to disasters through raising awareness of risk, better preparedness and identifying early warning mechanisms.

The United Nations General Assembly recognised volunteerism as an important component of any strategy aimed at disaster prevention and management as did the Hyogo Framework for Action. There is also, now, increased international acknowledgement that efforts to disaster risk reduction must be systematically mainstreamed into policies, plans and programmes for sustainable development and poverty reduction, as mutually reinforcing objectives.

The United Nations Volunteers (UNV) programme has a unique contribution to make to this comprehensive effort as the UN organization that contributes to peace and development through volunteerism worldwide. We in UNV, through our volunteers, projects and programmes are actively supporting the efforts of poor communities to reduce their vulnerability to disasters and enhance their community resilience and recovery. I would like to give you a few examples of our work in this area.

In **India** from 2001 to 2008 UNV and UNDP along with hundreds of UNV volunteers supported the work of the Government in its efforts to develop and roll-out disaster-management plans in over 78,000 villages. These plans were built on community knowledge and resources. Working with tens of thousands of predominantly illiterate people, the UNV volunteers facilitated the development of village-specific maps, evacuation plans and contingency strategies, and helped identify and develop the capacities of local authorities and volunteer taskforces.

In **China**, we have been collaborating with our colleagues in UNDP in the aftermath of the Sichuan earthquake to assist the Chinese Government and affected communities in meeting the unprecedented challenges of early recovery, reconstruction and disaster risk reduction.

In **Guatemala**, through a partnership with a local university, volunteer graduates applied the lessons learned from Hurricane Mitch to train poor communities on disaster preparedness. Community volunteers, in turn, shared vital information about early warning systems and the benefits of clean, free-flowing rivers to prevent flooding within their neighbourhoods.

In **Sri Lanka**, in the aftermath of the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami, some 40 national UNV volunteers were engaged with Disaster Management Centres to support communities in affected districts. They played a significant role in decentralizing disaster risk management. They conducted hazard, risk, vulnerability and capacity assessments and community mapping that contributed to local, district, and national disaster plans.

Based on our experience UNV strongly recommends that governments and organizations further explore the unique contribution of volunteerism to reducing risk and strengthening resilience to disasters by identifying and supporting its integration into strategic planning and monitoring processes.

Reducing vulnerability to risk from disasters is in everyone's interest, and needs everyone's participation. Volunteerism has demonstrated to be the most inclusive, far reaching and most sustainable way of contributing to **Making Cities Resilient**.