

13 October 2021



UN Volunteer Reika Horio, serving with UNICEF in Nepal, during a monitoring programme mission for improved comprehensive school safety in the earthquake affected schools in Bhaktapur, Nepal.

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My personal pledge to disability-inclusive disaster risk reduction

UN Volunteer Reika Horio (Japan) joined the UN Children's Fund (UNICEF) in Nepal as a Programme Officer in Disaster Risk Reduction in April 2019. She developed and managed the Improved Comprehensive School Safety programme for 7,132 schools in districts affected by the 2015 April Earthquake. Reika's assignment was initially fully-funded by the Government of Japan. She was then extended by UNICEF as an Education Officer. Reika shares her personal connection to disaster risk reduction and preparedness and her experience on the ground.

The Comprehensive School Safety (CSS) programme is an extension of the Government of Nepal's School Sector Development Plan, and as such, provides a detailed roadmap on how to ensure a child's right to access quality education in safe learning environments. My key duties in the capacity of a DRR Programme Officer were to monitor programme progress and provide technical support in a timely manner.

The programme covered a lot of ground. UNICEF distributed CSS tools and material to 7,132 schools and 131 local governments. The CSS standards were also disseminated in 14 earthquake-affected districts through various events and information, education and communication materials, while a media campaign ensured nation-wide sensitization. Some 201 schools were able to improve their school safety based on the CSS Minimum Package.

In addition to this, UNICEF also supported the construction of 250 Transitional Learning Centres in 173 schools in nine earthquake-affected districts with funding from USAID. Being with UNICEF in the midst of these exciting innovations to re-establish education for the hardest-to-reach children in the country, and contribute to their resilient recovery, was very rewarding and a great learning experience.

“ My connection to disaster risk reduction goes back to my childhood. My father had a visual impairment. When coping with natural disasters while growing up in Japan, I was always trying to think of how I would help my father to safety in case of an emergency. That led me to research disability-inclusive disaster risk reduction for my dissertation during my post-graduate studies.

Then, in 2015, as an intern at UNICEF Philippines I further conducted a situation analysis on people with disabilities when the region was hit by Typhoon Haiyan in 2013. Unfortunately, after the disaster, the aid did not reach many of the most disadvantaged people, and they were desperate for help. During an interview, a person with disability told me, "I am just happy to share what I went through at the time, even though I haven't gotten any assistance until now."

It was voices like these from the ground that stirred in me the desire to help create more inclusive programmes at UNICEF that would work both in development and emergency contexts and to enhance equity for children. This was the moment when I became determined to devote my life to realizing the Sustainable Development Goals and leaving no one behind.

Even though disasters are all around us, I still sometimes find it difficult to convey to people the importance of disaster risk reduction. There is a sense among people that "this will not affect me." For example, when the Great East Japan Earthquake and tsunami hit my country, there were some people who did not evacuate because they thought they would be fine, and the tsunami would not reach their homes. As a result, they lost their lives.

“ Disaster risk reduction is a matter of concern for everyone, not just those living in disaster-prone countries. It is my strong hope that everyone makes DRR their responsibility and take whatever steps they can to prepare and minimize the effects of future disasters.

On the International Day of Disaster Risk Reduction, I stress the importance of understanding the potential risks of disasters and creating awareness in order to prepare for disasters and save every possible life.

Reika served through the Global Human Resource Development Programme for Peacebuilding and Development (HRD) of the Government of Japan.

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