

## **On the occasion of the International Day for Disaster Reduction (13<sup>th</sup> October)**

When that powerful earthquake rocked eastern Japan in March of this year, a child in a nearby school quickly opened the window to help evacuate his classmates. After the earth stopped shaking, the children ran to higher ground and to safety. Five minutes later their school was swept away by the resulting Tsunami. The students knew what needed to be done.

Taking into account the important role of children and young people in disaster preparedness and reduction, the United Nations celebrates the International Day for Disaster Reduction (IDDR) on 13 October. This year's international day targets children and youth. Its slogan is 'Step up for disaster risk reduction'.

Disaster reduction focuses on what can and should be done before a disaster strikes. Disaster reduction practitioners' main focus is on reducing the potential risk emanating from natural hazards. The concept of disaster risk reduction rests on the premise that there is no such thing as "a natural" disaster. For example, when an earthquake occurs in an unpopulated desert, it does not constitute a disaster. However, if it strikes a populated area and results in collapsed buildings, swept homes or flooded communities, then it becomes a disaster. While we cannot control earthquakes, tsunamis or storms, we can prepare communities for disasters. We can help them through establishing early warning systems and by building better to make sure that losses in lives and property resulting from such hazards are limited.

Arab countries are not immune to disasters. In fact, this region is exposed to a number of hazards, ranging from droughts, floods, cyclones, landslides and earthquakes as well as vulnerability to climate change related risks such as storm surges and sea level rise. Since 1980 more than 37 million Arab people were affected by disasters and some 20 billion dollars in economic losses were recorded. Rapid urbanization, environmental degradation, water scarcity, changing demography and migration trends are further amplifying levels of vulnerability in the Arab region.

Therefore, as we consider this year's IDDR slogan, targeting the young and the children we have to also consider the special meaning it has for the Arab region. Population in the Arab region has tripled since 1970 from 128 million to 359 million. Importantly, the majority of this population, 56 percent, is under the age of 25. Thus, by asking youth and children to "step up for disaster risk reduction" we are targeting the leaders, the engineers, the planners and the masses of tomorrow to protect our future.

Let us learn from the Japanese example, young people in the Arab world also have the right to access information on disaster threats so they can protect themselves and their communities when a disaster strikes. But they do need the support and experience of their elders. Leaders and decision makers must empower them by helping to change perceptions and behavior towards hazards. They also need to invest in better information on the risks they face and share this information openly. This is an important way to raise awareness of disaster reduction, not only as a means of saving lives but by enhancing resilience and coping capacity which is an important aspect of development.

Mr. Amjad Abbashar

Head of the United Nations International Strategy for Disaster Reduction (UNISDR)  
Regional Office for Arab States