

# “Christchurch Communiqué” for Looking Beyond Disaster

12 December 2011

## **INTRODUCTION**

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We, the participants of the UNESCO Looking Beyond Disaster Youth Forum (“the Forum”), made up of 100 delegates from disaster affected areas, across 19 countries predominantly from the Asia Pacific Region, convened in Christchurch to make the following recommendations:

From floods in Asia and the Middle East, earthquakes in South America and devastating droughts in Africa, natural disasters strike at the very heart of the way we live and think about our place in the world. They devastate our communities, destroy the natural environment and cause pain and suffering that is often beyond the scope of human imagination.

We are guided by the scientific evidence that environmental degradation caused by human actions is increasing the frequency and impact of natural disasters. We urge local, national and international governments to acknowledge this fact, and take action through implementation of effective policy.

We are also guided by fundamental principles of justice, inclusion, accountability, transparency and respect for human rights in the way we respond to natural disasters.

We recognise that in a disaster, the challenges we face are great. We can be divided by how to best respond. However, we know that the impacts will be reduced if we start to develop strong plans now.

We understand that we must do more than draw up a list of issues, and we acknowledge that more needs to be done—and the sooner we begin, the better off we will be.

The issues we identified and discussed fell under five main themes. They are: PREVENTION + PREPARATION, EDUCATION, THE MEDIA, RESPONSE and RECOVERY. We would like to share these with you.

## **PLANNING AND PREPARATION**

It is a responsibility of governments to have coordinated action plans that allow integrated and efficient use of all human, economic, social and technological

resources in planning for disasters.

We recommend that governments establish a clear demarcation of the extent of government involvement, to allow NGOs and civil society to maximise their contributions.

We recommend the implementation of existing protocols and establishment of international standards for the roles and responsibilities of national governments and international bodies in disaster situations.

We recommend central Government develop National Standards and policies to address disaster preparation and response, which are accessible to the international community. An example may be a UNESCO supported database of links to relevant national, laws, documents and implementation policies.

We recommend the development of a standardised online 'Disaster Maps' platform, available to the international community. This works as an online platform for international bodies and local bodies working in response to disasters in a particular country, to collaborate and share information and resources. One of the underlying principles of these disaster maps is creating infrastructure that effectively builds transparency into our policies from the beginning.

There are no official guidelines as to what those with accessibility needs should do during a natural disaster. It is impossible for a wheelchair user to follow the official advice of 'drop, cover and hold', in an earthquake.

We recommend that established disability focused institutions develop guidelines inclusive of these access needs, and We suggest that youth led organisations be used to roll out the implementation of these guidelines.

## **EDUCATION**

We believe that education has a very important part to play in planning, responding and recovering from disasters. All sectors of society must take an active role in education and in the dissemination of information. We should utilise the skills of professionals, with their special knowledge and training.

We believe in learning from past experiences and sharing information as an international community whenever possible. An example of this is learning from the Japanese concepts of Gensai, the idea of accepting disaster to some degree, and Mensai, the idea of rejecting disaster; an action which is impossible. We must incorporate disasters into our lives in order to face adversity and be resilient in our respective communities.

We recommend that communities be educated and trained to respond appropriately to early warning signals. This is to avoid situations such as what occurred in Sri Lanka in 2004 where local people walked into the receding ocean.

At a state level, we recommend the creation of fun and stimulating programs to be built into each country's state or national education curriculum. Specific examples

include role-play programs, evacuation training and techniques to cope with the psychological impacts of disasters. We call upon UNESCO to share best practices.

We recommend that local communities learn the skills to create central points of information where disaster prevention or disaster skills can be taught or the resources found. An example, maybe a local library or community hall where this information can be provided in hard copy, or on a communications network.

## **ETHICAL STANDARDS FOR THE MEDIA**

Mass media messages are one of the most efficient ways we can communicate in a disaster situation, to warn people and help to mitigate against further harm. The media has a huge responsibility during a disaster to enhance their transparency and link communities, authorities and action groups.

The media should contribute to the planning process and be engaged in education campaigns to aid preparation. Following natural events the media must alert everyone to possible future risks, help facilitate efforts to co-ordinate relief, and foster international cooperation. The media should avoid exploiting people's suffering to gain ratings.

We recommend additional funding for a consultation process for the development of Media Standards and training in Natural Disasters. These standards should be developed as a priority in particular to respond to the deaf community, understanding their vulnerability in the times of a disaster.

We believe that the media should clearly acknowledge that children need a different response to adults, and we need a response that is specific to and caters to these needs.

## **RESPONSE**

We recognise that responding to disasters is a shared responsibility. All governments, businesses, not for profit organisations and individuals have human rights obligations. We must build lasting partnerships. By working in partnership with a spirit of volunteerism, building on our current strengths and capabilities, we can better face the challenges of rebuilding and recovering.

Our immediate actions following a disaster must, wherever possible, incorporate long term views leading to long term solutions. In our response transparency and accountability must underlie our policies. Emergency situations cannot be an excuse for any form of an abuse of power.

Authorities must give space and encourage a role for civil society to be included in the response to natural disasters. We recommend that governments, NGO's and private sector institutions support the establishment and expansion of successful youth disaster responses into more global youth led efforts.

We recognise that connecting with one another after a disaster is important for victims to share their stories and experiences in the immediate aftermath. We

believe that youth are well placed to initiate such actions. An example is where social networking platforms are used to facilitate peer to peer counseling.

We encourage and call upon youth to mobilise and coordinate responses in the event of a disaster. These may be derived from models that already exist, such as the Canterbury Student Volunteer Army.

## **RECOVERY**

For us, recovery is a process. It includes not only the physical rebuild, but also emotional and longer term psychological recovery of our communities. We want to emphasise the importance of a holistic approach to reconstruction of a community, inclusive of the social, environmental and economic impacts of every decision that is made. We acknowledge the important role of our indigenous communities in this process, and their contributions to the rebuild.

Affected communities must be directly involved in decision making and execution of interventions for recovery, because achievements will depend on their own capacities.

We call upon NGOs, government and international organisations to establish programs to empower individual's capacity to respond practically to address their own needs.

Showing immediate results is important to maintain hope and generate motivation in the affected community, but any level of intervention must take special care to create realistic expectations: hastiness of a response should be balanced against its long term sustainability.

Local capacity is the most important asset for recovery processes, which means that recovery actions must build communities and connect neighbours, local governments, grass roots organisations, small entrepreneurs, national authorities, and international bodies.

Funding for recovery programs must avoid assistance that implies dependency. We need to invest resources in a way that they will be transformed into social and material capital for the affected communities' own action.

Investment and resources provided for in the reconstruction process must promote local industry, and prioritise the participation of small and medium business.

We recommend the use and sharing of local knowledge and practices in the response to disaster, in order to encourage participation and ownership of recovery efforts.

We encourage those communities hit by disasters to engage all their people, without discrimination, in all processes so that they feel included.

We need to provide channels for people to receive the appropriate emotional support that is suited to their needs. Sometimes telling people to 'be strong' isn't

enough. It is part of our ongoing responsibility as individuals to support the people around us.

We need to recognise that the memories of victims of natural disasters become part of them – they may fade but they will never go away. In response to this we recommend the establishment of an International Day to Commemorate Victims and Survivors of natural disasters – this is part of our promise to remember, and put in place the lessons learnt.

Our response must be fast, cohesive, and efficient – but above all, it we must show compassion. For ultimately, what unites us is our common and shared humanity.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

We thank, and applaud UNESCO for bringing us together, and we commit ourselves to implementing our action plans.

We would like to stress that the outcomes of this forum are just the beginning. We ask that UNESCO continue to support these crucial Youth Forums. They provide a unique platform for us to reflect on our own experiences, network and share ideas with people from around the world.

This is a living document. We would like the opportunity to develop our recommendations, hand in hand in a truly international forum, to expand above and beyond the Asia Pacific Region. This would take the form of incorporating best practice guidelines, in a Youth Declaration on Preparing, Responding and Recovering from Disasters.

It has taken many natural disasters to bring us all together, but now that we are all here, let's go forward together.

Thank you!

Note: Agreed by all participants at the First UNESCO Youth Forum: Looking Beyond Disasters was held in Christchurch from 9 – 12 December 2011, supported by the New Zealand National Commission for UNESCO, UNESCO Bangkok, UNESCO Apia, University of Canterbury, JCI, Rotary International and Eubios Ethics Institute.

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