

Address by Mr. Timothy Wilcox, Head of UNISDR Pacific at the International Day for Disaster Reduction 2013 launch, Suva

Theme: LIVING WITH DISABILITY AND DISASTERS

Bula and Nameste

Minister for Women, Social Welfare and Poverty Alleviation, Organizing Committee,
guests and friends

Welcome to the commencement of this year's International Day for Disaster Reduction activities.

This year, United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction (UNISDR) turns its focus for the International Day for Disaster Reduction (13 October) on the one billion people around the world who live with some form of disability. This represents roughly one-sixth of the world's population, a substantial group of people that need to be included when making plans to prepare for a disaster, yet often we find such planning does not exist even in developed and wealthy countries. For example: during the Northridge Earthquake in Southern California in 1994, there were reports of a man who was turned away from an evacuation shelter because the staff could not understand sign language.

People living with disabilities are often more vulnerable to disasters; because they are more likely to be poor with limited access to education, health care, shelter, food and financial resources to recover from a disaster. Emergency planners often compound these vulnerabilities by failing to consider their needs. For example: How does someone confined to a wheelchair make their way to the nearest school to be evacuated by a government provided bus or pick up their ration pack?

But people living with disabilities have unique contributions, often overlooked, to help reduce the risk of disasters and build resilient societies and communities. We need to change our mindset and see them as equal and positive contributors to society.

The global flagship for disaster reduction, the Hyogo Framework for Action (HFA) will conclude in 2015. Unfortunately it speaks less about disability but more on vulnerability and risk. The lack of inclusion and participation in disaster risk reduction processes means the needs and possible contributions of persons living with disabilities are often overlooked. This needs to change and the anticipated replacement HFA2 is expected to address this issue. Along this line, UNISDR is also hosting a Media Training from 8 - 9 October to appraise media personnel with the right approach towards disability and disaster reduction issues.

Many countries are now ratifying the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities; embracing the need for active participation of people with disability within all development efforts. We need to encourage this as many would prefer to be seen in their ability rather than disability. We need to think global and act local! I look forward to a fruitful week of recognizing the abilities of those with a disability, recognizing their efforts, and hope that more doors will open to share equally and inclusively with them in all facets of life.

I look forward to a successful International Disaster Reduction Day 2013, and thank the Organizing Committee for arranging the week of activities.

Vinaka vakalevu