

Special Remarks by Mr Kingsley Fernando, Secretary of Minister of Disaster Management, Government of Sri Lanka

Good Morning ladies and gentlemen, chairperson, distinguished guests and national and international participants!

At the outset let me thank the organizers. Special thanks to Prof. Terrence Fernando for inviting me to this conference and giving me an opportunity to express my views on importance of Disaster Risk Reduction in Sri Lanka.

First of all, I should say that this is a timely event as far as Sri Lanka is concerned. Many other countries in the Asian region also face an equal risk of disasters of unprecedented proportions. Despite the gaps in the existing mechanisms, Sri Lanka was able to achieve several milestones through a holistic approach to disaster risk management over last decade. Sri Lanka's economy transitioned from a previously predominantly rural-based agriculture economy towards a more urbanized economy driven by services.

In the current context, disasters are no longer viewed as natural events which are extraneous to human society. These should be viewed as events that have been converted to disastrous events by our own decisions in social and economic development. We also believe that sustainable development can never be possible unless we take proactive measures to correct our own decisions and actions.

Like any other developing country in the world, Sri Lanka is making every endeavour to reach possible highest development level. During this process, the country undergoes many structural changes in urban areas and townships. Infrastructure development, town and country planning, construction of bridges and culverts, have become an integral part of this development process we may call urbanisation. Rapid urbanisation has been widely recognised as one of the important indicators of development. The social transformation which takes place with new technological changes and growth of industrial and service sectors will be a noticeable character in development.

According to the National Physical Plan more than 50% of the country's population will move to urban areas to settle down there by 2030. Under these circumstances if urbanization work is not duly planned and due diligence is not exercised it will leave room for increased disaster risk. What I want to bring home is the fact that non-compliance with approved standards for town and country planning, ad-hoc storm water disposal system, poor landscaping will no doubt aggravate disaster risk. The well-known phenomenon is that most of our planners, builders, technical officers in this field pay scant heed to safety standards when carrying out construction work. This wretched situation is the result of malpractices that are prevalent in this particular field. The observed tendency is that the majority of urban population will concentrate in coastal cities and disaster prone hilly areas. These coastal cities and hilly areas are highly vulnerable to disasters and climate change impacts including rise of sea level, storms, surges, floods, malaria and dengue etc. Therefore, integrating disaster risk reduction measures into the urban development process is essential and of paramount importance.

National, regional and local level mainstreaming of DRR into the housing sector is an identified area for improvement. The present awareness of DRR is very poor in terms of disaster risk and development of settlements in fragile areas. Most of the time awareness is very limited even at the highest level in the country. Therefore, this is a critical situation and necessary remedial action has to be taken early to address this issue. In Sri Lanka DRR is an approach being adapted by many parties involved in this process but measures should be taken to integrate and mainstream this more widely.

Incorporating local authorities in disaster management is another area that our attention should be paid to, when we talk about DRR. Active involvement of the island-wide network of nearly 350 local authorities in disaster management, whether locally or nationally designated disasters, the role that could be played by these local authorities is very crucial and they are in a better position to handle such situations due to the fact that the officials of local authorities are adequately conversant with the geography of the area under their administration. But it has been observed that these local authorities are lacking in the active participation expected of them, therefore there is still room for improvement in key areas. The reason for this has been generally attributed to weaknesses in terms of financial reserves and other resources. On the other hand, they are legally empowered by written laws; regulations govern their activities and sometimes limit their mandate to some specific areas of activity.

Climate change is another factor that has a greater bearing on the occurrence of disaster situations. As we are living very close to the Bay of Bengal any volatile situation arising in this region has a greater impact on our climatic conditions. New developments that take place in the Bay of Bengal area creates storms, cyclones, and severe rain in the island leading to very adverse climatic condition. Major floods are the final results of such a situation. This situation poses a severe threat to agriculture by destroying paddy cultivation and many other crops of farmers. This has a severe devastating effect on Sri Lanka's economy. We can take Bangladesh as a good example on challenges faced due to changing climatic conditions in the region. Bangladesh faces a real challenge in managing and reducing risk in the face of changing dynamics of climatic change and ensuring effective and quality preparedness and response to slow onset, rapid and recurrent disasters. Sri Lanka's position could not be considered as better.

The next National Disaster Management Plan (2018-2022) is in the development guided by the Disaster Management Policy of the country and in line with the Sendai Framework. We are currently implementing a five-year national programme titled "Sri Lanka Comprehensive Disaster Management Programme", which is also meant to mainstream disaster risk reduction into the sectoral development plans of various other Ministries and agencies. Demonstrating the government's commitment to disaster risk reduction, the Government has already approved and financed over Rs. 10 Billion worth of projects under the Comprehensive Disaster Management Programme.

Having these thoughts in the back mind, the Ministry and the Centre recently have developed a broader framework on Community Resilience together with stakeholder agencies, underpinning risk reduction into development from National level to grass roots. This is further enriched with a comprehensive guideline for development practitioners. It is

paramount that, we as the development group, must adhere and promote the framework in every endeavour focusing on building resiliency.

The Ministry of Disaster Management with the institutions such as; Meteorological Department Disaster Management Center, National Building Research Organization, National Disaster Relief Service Centre is with you all as partners in all these aspects, namely by supporting national, districts and local actions for prevention, building capacity for preparedness for disasters, as well as the provision of humanitarian aid. The new development policy of the country, called the vision 2025 was published late last year and highlights the importance of disaster risk reduction and climate change adaptation and it calls upon the sectors to do more, better, and differently, to reduce the impact of environmental and economic shocks, natural and man-made disasters.

The Government of Sri Lanka has developed a disaster risk informed approach following the Sendai Framework. Since 2016 we are working on the basis of a National Action Plan on Sendai that supports efforts:

- To build disaster risk knowledge;
- To engage with all of society;
- To promote disaster risk informed investments;
- And to develop strategies to prepare for disaster response and Build Back Better for rehabilitation and recovery.

We firmly believe that actions at national and local levels are crucial for supporting the design and implementation of disaster risk reduction strategies. The Ministry of Disaster Management is making every endeavour to achieve the above objectives with the support of all stakeholders. I wish this programme every success.

Mr Kingsley Fernando
Secretary
Minster of Disaster Management
Government of Sri Lanka
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