

Speech at the  
2<sup>nd</sup> United Nations  
Special Thematic Session on Water and Disasters

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Your Imperial Highness Crown Prince Naruhito, Honorary President of the  
UNSGAB

Your Excellency Mr. Mogens Lykketoft, President of the 70th session of the United  
Nations General Assembly,

Your Excellency Mr. Ban Ki-moon, Secretary-General of the United Nations,

Your Excellencies, distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen,

It brings me great pleasure to welcome you to the Second United Nations Special Thematic Session on Water and Disasters held at the UN Headquarters, the world's leading forum for international norm-setting and policymaking. I would like to sincerely thank H.E. Mr. Ban Ki-moon, the Secretary-General of the United Nations for hosting this event under his auspices, and the High-Level Experts and Leaders Panel on Water and Disasters for helping organize the event in the context of the UN High-level Water and Sanitation Days 2015.

I am very pleased to be here at this crucial juncture, and honored to be in the presence of such a distinguished gathering of leaders and experts. I believe this is testament to the importance of the issue at hand today. And before I continue, I would like to express my sincere appreciation for the insightful remarks given to us by His Imperial Highness Crown Prince Naruhito, and His Excellency Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, our keynote speakers, who have chosen so generously to share their time and knowledge with us today. As you all know, 2015 is an extraordinary year. I am well aware of the competing demands on their precious time, so we are very fortunate to have them both address our audience today.

Furthermore, I wish to acknowledge with great respect the leadership of His Majesty King Willem-Alexander of the Netherlands, former Chair of the UN Secretary-General's Advisory Board on Water and Sanitation (UNSGAB), who chaired the Board until 2013 with his seemingly infinite wisdom and experience on these topics. Although he was unable to join us for this meeting due to other engagements, his

leadership in elevating the increasingly urgent and critical issue of water and disasters to the highest level is highly appreciated and should be duly recognized.

Last but not least, I wish to join in on warmly welcoming His Excellency Mr. Mogens Lykketoft, the President of the 70th session of the United Nations General Assembly for supporting and joining us in this watershed event.

Excellencies,

Distinguished guests,

Ladies and gentlemen,

The United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development (Rio+20), held September 2012, agreed on a forward-looking outcome document, “The future we want”. The Rio+20 called for disaster risk reduction and resilience building of to be addressed with a renewed sense of urgency in the context of sustainable development and poverty eradication at all levels. The Conference also reaffirmed all the principles of the Rio Declaration on Environment and Development.

You will remember that two years ago in March 2013, the first UN Special Thematic Session on Water and Disasters was convened as an initiative of UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon here at the UN Headquarters. It was the first event in the UN history to have a dedicated discussion on the subject of water and disasters.

The Thematic Session underscored “water and disasters” as one of the most important and pressing issues the international community should urgently address at the highest levels. Furthermore, the Special Meeting of the High Level Experts Panel on Water and Disaster (HLEP/UNSGAB) held in conjunction with the Special Thematic Session proposed to strengthen HLEP/UNSGAB by inviting more political leaders and government representatives into the panel members and renaming the panel from HLEP/UNSGAB to “High-level Experts and Leaders Panel on Water and Disasters (HELP).”

Now, three years since the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development and two years from the first UN Special Thematic Session on Water and Disasters, we have ventured far into the much anticipated year 2015, a crucial and transformative year for the UN with many critical milestones – not least the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the establishment of the organization.

In terms of disaster risk reduction, we see the convergence of three global policy frameworks in 2015: the post-2015 Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction (March 2015: Sendai Conference), The Sustainable Development Goals (September 2015; UN Conference on Sustainable Development) and the upcoming Climate Change Deal (December 2015; COP21). These major global policy instruments are all parts of the same puzzle – dovetailing each other towards an integrated global roadmap to guide us for future generations.

During the Sendai Conference in March 2015, 193 UN Member States agreed on the post-2015 disaster risk reduction framework, outlining seven targets and four priorities for action. The Sendai Framework puts a strong emphasis on disaster risk management as opposed to disaster management and post-disaster reconstruction+.

UN Member States have also agreed on 17 Sustainable Development Goals and 169 targets at the UN Sustainable Development Summit in September with an outcome document entitled “Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development”. These goals and targets will stimulate action over the next 15 years in areas of critical importance for five “P”s: People, the Planet, Prosperity, Peace and Partnerships.

In fact, it is both strength and weakness of the SDGs that we do not have a dedicated disaster risk reduction goal. A dedicated goal would have been preferable to raise awareness and put this issue squarely at the heart of the development agenda.

However, it is also true that disasters and risk awareness appear as cross cutting themes within other goals and targets. The distinct advantage of this approach is that it transforms other goals and makes them “disaster-savvy”.

The successful outcomes of the Sendai Conference and the UN Sustainable Development Summit, along with the Financing for Development Conference and other processes, gives important positive momentum to the last stretch of negotiations on the post-2015 development agenda, and will culminate in next months' Climate Summit in Paris.

*[Speaking of Paris, please allow me to digress briefly from my remarks as I would like to take a moment here to condemn the recent atrocities in Paris in the strongest terms possible, and offer my condolences for the memory of those who are fallen in these cowardly attacks. I am confident that the French authorities will swiftly resolve the matter and bring the perpetrators to justice. In doing so, they can rest assured that they will have the support of the international community – and all of us here.]*

Excellencies,

Distinguished guests,

Ladies and gentlemen,

During the past decade, water-related disasters have not only struck more frequently but have also been more severe, hampering sustainable development by causing political, social, and economic upheaval in many countries. Water-related disasters, such as floods, droughts, storm surges and tsunamis, account for 90% of all disasters in terms of number of people affected.

The World Economic Forum Global Risk Report has identified water as one of the biggest societal and economic risk for the next ten years. The various threats to the planet's supply of fresh water rank third – behind debt crises in key economies, and persistent unemployment.

Further, according to the Sendai Report of 2012, low income countries have accounted for only 9% of the disaster events but 48% of the fatalities since 1980.

Disasters affect the poor and vulnerable disproportionately, especially women, children, the elderly, and those recovering from the impact of conflicts. This puts at risk all of our hard fought gains in human development and Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and will hamper the efforts in implementing and carrying out the SDGs.

According to The United Nations Global Assessment Report<sup>1</sup> released in 2015, economic losses from disasters such as earthquakes, tsunamis, cyclones and flooding are now reaching an average of US\$250 billion to US\$300 billion each year.

Disaster-prone developing countries, in particular the Least Developed Countries (LDCs), Small Island Developing States (SIDS), Landlocked Developing Countries (LLDCs) and African countries, as well as middle-income countries facing specific challenges, warrant particular attention in view of their higher vulnerability and risk levels, which often greatly exceed their capacity to respond to and recover from disasters. As we have seen time and again, it is much costlier to build back after disasters than to invest in risk reduction and preparedness in advance. I will say a few more words on this later.

In this context, it is worth highlighting the financing gap that countries face to build buffers against infrequent but severe disaster losses. The limited ability of LDCs, SIDS and LLDCs to recover quickly may compound indirect disaster losses significantly.

We must also not forget that developed countries are also not immune to water-related disaster risks. For instance, as of September 2015, during the regions driest May-to-July on record in the United States, sixteen large wildfires burned across central and eastern Washington, covering more than 2300 square kilometers (that is 920 square miles)<sup>2</sup>. Also, in California, more than 12 million trees were destroyed during the fourth year of record-breaking drought. The situation is expected to worsen as the drought situation continues and becomes ever more long term<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> [http://www.preventionweb.net/english/hyogo/gar/2015/en/gar-pdf/GAR2015\\_EN.pdf](http://www.preventionweb.net/english/hyogo/gar/2015/en/gar-pdf/GAR2015_EN.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2015/aug/23/washington-wildfire-complex-okanogan-county>

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.washingtonpost.com/news/morning-mix/wp/2015/05/07/more-than-12-million-trees-killed-by->

This grim reality forces us to confront the magnitude of the challenge that we face, which we must understand accurately to move forward. Water-related natural disasters have emerged as a major obstacle hindering our common aspirations for eradicating poverty, promoting inclusive economic growth, preserving the environment, and ultimately, moving towards sustainability.

Excellencies,

Distinguished guests,

Ladies and gentlemen,

As I have repeatedly mentioned in all my engagements, it is costlier to build back after the disaster has struck. Since our resources are scarce by definition, we cannot afford not to address this issue ex-ante in our development work. It is already too late once the disaster has struck.

An annual global investment of \$6 billion in disaster risk management strategies would generate total benefits in terms of risk reduction of \$360 billion. This is equivalent to a 20 percent reduction of new and additional annual economic losses.

Such an annual investment in disaster risk reduction represents only 0.1 per cent of the US\$6 trillion per year that will have to be invested in infrastructure over the next 15 years. But for many countries, that small additional investment could make a crucial difference in achieving the national and international goals of ending poverty, improving health and education, and ensuring sustainable and equitable growth for all.<sup>4</sup>

In this regard, along with continued and increased investment, and meeting of commitments, as pointed out in the Sendai Framework and the SDGs, managing risk, rather than managing the aftermath of disasters, must now become inherent to

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[california-drought/](#)

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.preventionweb.net/english/hyogo/gar/2015/en/home/media.html>

the art and science of development. Rather than an add-on to development, disaster risk management should become a set of practices embedded in its very DNA.

These practices must be underpinned first and foremost by an improved understanding of disaster risk in all its dimensions, such as exposure, vulnerability and hazard characteristics. This should be followed by strengthening of the disaster risk governance, ensuring accountability for disaster risk management, and strengthening international cooperation and global partnership at all levels.

Excellencies,

Distinguished guests,

Ladies and gentlemen,

Disaster risk reduction can be achieved. Decades of experience in managing disasters and reducing climate and disaster risks has produced a wealth of knowledge and best practices which can be applied within social and productive sectors and which makes excellent financial and economic sense.

In this watershed event, at a year marking the beginning of another decade and half of sustainable development, I invite you all to contribute to this effort through your discussions today. I also encourage you to think about innovative approaches through which policy-making for disaster risk management can be further integrated into mainstream policy-making for sustainable development.

I thank you in advance for your valuable contribution.