

**Panel discussion on the Transition from Relief to Development
following Natural Disasters**

Speaking Notes for the President of the Economic and Social Council

28 February 2005

Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

I wish to welcome you to this panel discussion of the Economic and Social Council on the transition from relief to development following natural disasters. This topic has become a key issue on the international agenda, especially after the recent tragedy caused by the Tsunami in Asia. The costs of this event are enormous. In human terms, more than 270,000 people have been killed and a further 5 million have been made homeless, one third of them children, while in financial terms the costs are running into billions of US dollars. The only comfort is that the world has demonstrated solidarity, through enormous relief efforts which encompass donations, military assistance, the distribution of aid and debt relief for the affected countries. These early responses have assisted in rebuilding shattered lives and livelihoods of ordinary men, women and children.

Although the Tsunami has mobilized the international community to act on natural hazards, we should not forget other natural disasters that get less or no media attention. These include the locust plague in Africa, the hurricanes and flood that devastate Small Island Developing States (SIDS) and Least Developed Countries, such as Haiti, on a regular basis and the devastating effect of earthquakes in various regions, most recently in Iran. It is important not to forget these crises and to provide assistance when needed.

Over the last ten years, disasters have claimed the lives of close to 600,000 people and cost more than \$ 670 billion in material damage. Furthermore, the majority of these losses are concentrated in the developing countries and 85 percent of the people exposed to earthquakes, tropical cyclones, floods and droughts live in countries having either medium or low human development.

Let me also recall that it is the poor who often bear the greatest cost in terms of lives, livelihoods and rebuilding their shattered communities and it is these people that are the most vulnerable to natural hazards. Therefore, disasters undermine development by contributing to vulnerability and persistent poverty. As the Secretary-General noted, in the context of the Tsunami, *“long-term development challenges are considerable. We know from experience that the poor always suffer the most enduring damage from such natural disasters, as their assets are often completely wiped out. So we need to focus on longer-term recovery and reconstruction, and ensure that from now on, there are no gaps in the future funding efforts”*.

The transition from relief to development refers to the need to enlarge the boundaries of humanitarian assistance in order to contribute to longer-term rehabilitation of communities. For example, in the case of the Tsunami, the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) estimates that Asian fisheries and aquaculture lost more than \$ 500 million. International assistance in this economic sector is therefore crucial for the recovery of the countries concerned.

In addition, at the time of reconstruction, every effort should be made to strengthen countries' capacities to prevent as much as possible the damaging effects of disasters. A global reflection is needed on capacity-building to reduce risks, and appropriate action should be taken and followed-up. I welcome, in this regard, the holding of the World Conference on Disaster Reduction in Kobe (Japan) in January 2005. The Hyogo Framework for Action adopted at this conference will no doubt guide work in the field of risk reduction, which is essential for the transition from relief to development. I look forward to hearing more about it during this discussion.

All these *problématiques* are at the heart of the work of the UN in the economic and social fields and of this very Council. To deepen this reflection, I am glad to be surrounded by a number of distinguished panellists that I will introduce to you. I wish to thank them all for answering to our invitation and being at ECOSOC in New York today.

- Ms. Margareta Walstrohm, who is Assistant Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Deputy Emergency Relief Coordinator. Ms. Walstrohm was appointed the Special Coordinator for humanitarian assistance to Tsunami affected communities a few days after the Tsunami and came back from Asia two weeks ago.

- Ms. Margaret Arnold, who is a Program Manager at the Hazard Management Unit of the World Bank. Ms. Arnold has assisted countries and communities affected by natural disasters for many years at the World Bank in Washington. Thank you for being with us, Madam.

- Mr. Praveen Pardeshi, who is a Senior Adviser at the International Strategy for Disaster Reduction of the United Nations, an inter-agency mechanism set up to ensure a coherent UN approach in this field. Mr. Pardeshi has also been working for UNDP. He was involved in the preparation and servicing of the World Conference on Natural Disaster in Kobe, Japan, in January 2005.

- Mr. Iain Logan, Adviser at the International Federation of the Red Cross (IFRC). Mr. Logan comes from IFRC Headquarters in Geneva.

After the presentations by each of our panellists, I will open the floor for comments and questions.