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**Message from Ms Irina Bokova,
Director-General of UNESCO**

on the occasion of International Day for Disaster Reduction

Living with Disability and Disasters

13 October 2013

We know that disasters are increasing in frequency, complexity, scope and destructive capacity. We know also that, while we cannot stop disasters, we can do more to prevent and mitigate their impact.

This means thinking over the long term. Early warning systems and humanitarian efforts remain essential – but we must focus also on underlying vulnerabilities and risks in order to deepen resilience. Disaster risk reduction should be integrated into development plans and intervention strategies, and greater attention should be paid to education and training, which can save and sustain lives during and after emergencies.

All our efforts must include persons with disabilities. Representing an estimated 10 percent of the world's population, some 650 million people, these women and men are too often overlooked throughout the disaster management cycle, especially the response phase, and too seldom considered important actors – even though they are often most exposed. In moving forward, we must remain guided by the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities*, which requires that persons with disabilities benefit from and participate in disaster relief, emergency response and disaster risk reduction strategies.

Disasters must be an opportunity to challenge prejudice and discrimination and to 'build back better,' by ensuring the inclusion of all women and men. Adults and children living with disabilities have an essential role to play in strengthening resilience before and after disasters.

This must include support to cultural heritage and expressions. UNESCO's experience in supporting the Carnival of Jacmel in Haiti after the earthquake shows the power of intangible cultural heritage as a source of strength in helping communities recover. Science, technology and engineering are also important, to mobilise the knowledge necessary to better protect persons with disabilities. The media is critical for facilitating the flow of information between persons with disabilities and humanitarian actors in disaster situations. In Kenya, UNESCO has organized a National Forum of Community Radios on the occasion of this International Day, to enable community media practitioners and community actors to share knowledge and experience.

Education must be a strategic priority. This is why UNESCO is advancing initiatives for inclusive disaster risk reduction in schools across the world. We have also set up a web portal to enable persons with disabilities to exercise their right to access the best possible knowledge to protect themselves. In Pakistan, for instance, UNESCO has developed province-specific school safety action plans covering the needs of people with disabilities, with new institutional arrangements to mainstream Disaster Risk Reduction in the education sector.

Societies cannot be resilient if they are not inclusive. On this *International Day of Disaster Risk Reduction*, I call on all Governments and relevant actors to join forces to integrate the concerns of persons with disabilities into all efforts to reduce the risks of disasters.

Irina Bokova