Statement Remarks of the Executive Director, Caribbean Disaster Emergency Management Agency, on the occasion of the International Day for Disaster Reduction (IDDR), October 13, 2011

The Caribbean Disaster Emergency Management Agency joins the rest of the world in celebrating International Day for Disaster Reduction. This year the call is made to “Step up – for Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR)” and to have children and youth more involved as partners in DRR. International statistics estimate that 66.5 million children are affected annually, and the special vulnerability of children in disasters is well recognized. With over two thirds of the population in the Caribbean under the age of 30, this clearly places youth at being most at risk to be affected by disasters. Young people need to take a more active role in contributing to dialogue, decisions and actions to reduce the impacts of natural hazards. This is why CDEMA fully supports focus and theme of the 2011 IDDR.

As the main driver of Comprehensive Disaster Management (CDM) in the region, CDEMA seeks to foster the development of partnerships with all stakeholders to achieve a greater awareness among the region’s peoples of natural hazards and what we can do to reduce our vulnerability and minimize our losses from disasters. CDEMA sees children and young people as key partners in this effort.

Over the last two years, the Agency has been intensifying its efforts to target children and young people as change agents in the region with respect to disaster risk reduction (DRR).

Since 2009, Caribbean Youth have been given a voice at a specially incorporated session at the annual Conference on Comprehensive Disaster Management (CDM), which is coordinated by CDEMA. The Conference is the Caribbean region’s premier forum on disaster risk management for sharing information on good practice, research and charting the way forward for the advancement of CDM. This year’s CDM Conference to be held in December will be no different.

The youth sessions emerged from recognition of the need for increased knowledge and participation in disaster mitigation and management by the next generation. They seek to provide an opportunity for the youth from across CDEMA’s eighteen Participating States to share their views through various activities on how they can be involved in DRR efforts.

Information and Education are key factors in building awareness and increasing knowledge on DRR and CDEMA has provided a portal to facilitate this among the youth. In collaboration with the European Union, the United States Agency for International Development, the Austrian Development Corporation and the University of the West Indies, the Agency has developed the “weready” Web Portal providing information on major hazards affecting the region, such as hurricanes, earthquakes and tsunamis, and what persons can do to protect themselves. The Web Portal includes a special section targeting children which provides a wealth of age-appropriate information on reducing vulnerabilities to disasters. This initiative also provided several printed resources which have been distributed across the region, and which play an important part in the efforts of the Participating States to engage children and young people in disaster risk reduction.

With the support of the Government of Brazil, CDEMA Participating States have begun to implement an initiative to develop model ‘Living Schools’ based on a concept practiced in Brazil. The concept views the role of schools as critical disaster risk management facilities within communities and seeks to ensure that they are endowed with the capacities and capabilities to serve as spaces of personal as well as
livelihood security during emergencies. The initiative also involves the development of a Model Knowledge Management Toolkit to prepare teachers, school-aged children (5-15 years old) and local communities with basic notions of DRM and enhance disaster preparedness through awareness promotion. CDEMA is also working to further advance efforts to foster greater involvement of this target group in ‘Safe Schools’ and ‘Safe Cities’ activities.

It is hoped that these efforts and others to be developed will serve to further educate and build greater awareness among children and young people and to increase their participation in disaster risk reduction actions. This is critical, as we now see that climate change will affect underlying disaster risk factors in the region and generate new and unfamiliar threats. The upcoming generation must get a head start on becoming adequately equipped to deal with these challenges.

To further engage children and young people, more effort must be made by national disaster management organizations and other related agencies to reach this demographic through emerging Information and Communication Technologies and social networks.

“Making Youth Partners for Disaster Reduction” has to be fully embraced by all DRR actors. The CDEMA Coordinating Unit (CU) takes this opportunity to congratulate its Participating States on the diversity of initiatives to celebrate this year’s IDDR. Participating States are encouraged to sustain their efforts to empower the next generation to take ownership for building the resilience of their communities to hazards.

Jeremy Collymore
Executive Director
Caribbean Disaster Emergency Management Agency
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