Panel IV – additional measures to increase awareness and understanding of the complexity of the interrelationship between the wide range of humanitarian consequences that would result from any nuclear detonation

Over the last few years, and not least through the discussions resulting from the humanitarian impacts conferences, more attention has been focused on the sheer complexity of—and interrelationship between—the wide range of humanitarian consequences resulting from any nuclear detonation in a populated area. Whatever the probability of such an event, something that I understand was discussed on Monday in Dr Lewis’s presentation on risk, the consequences of a nuclear weapon detonation event in populated areas would be severe. Combine that with the fact that the international community’s capacity to respond has been shown to be highly inadequate, and it should give us all pause for thought.

My fellow panellist Dr Helfand has already presented a wide ranging picture of the potential consequences of nuclear detonations in certain scenarios. In my remarks, I would like to make a few remarks and expand onto the potential consequences for, and interrelationship with, the wide range of other current humanitarian and development work by the broader United Nations system and its Member States, not least in the context of other recent and ongoing processes.

Conflict and humanitarian assistance

Currently 125 million people require humanitarian assistance and displacement has reached record levels – many of them affected by violent conflict. Between 2002 and 2013, 86 percent of resources requested through United Nations humanitarian appeals were destined to humanitarian action in conflict situations. Such complex humanitarian emergencies have been intractable and protracted with an average length of displacement now reaching as much as 17 years. Moreover, the funding requirements of inter-agency humanitarian appeals to cover existing needs have increased six-fold from $3.4 billion in 2004 to $19.5 billion in 2015. This is not sustainable.

The international community has in recent years been in a state of crisis management, reacting to events more than the long-term capacities and institutions that are required for sustainable peace and development. Several recent reports, agreements and resolutions1 have emphasized the need to focus on the prevention of crises and the root causes to reduce human suffering. Prevention and peacebuilding is generally underfunded, initiated too late, not fully understood, not prioritized, or not sufficiently sustained.

My point here is that the humanitarian and post-conflict development situation is already highly strained, and nuclear weapon detonation events would add hugely to the difficulty and complexity of response.

1 See, for example, Report of the Secretary-General for the World Humanitarian Summit, One Humanity: Shared Responsibility (A/70/709); the report of the High-level Independent Panel on Peace Operations (A/70/95-S/2015/446, 17 June 2015); the reaction of the Secretary-General to the Panel’s report, i.e. The future of United Nations peace operations: implementation of the recommendations of the High-level Independent Panel on Peace Operations (A/70/357-S/2015/682, 2 September 2015); the review of the peacebuilding architecture, which include a General Assembly resolution (A/70/L.43) and a Security Council resolution (S/RES/2282 (2016)), adopted on 27 April 2016, and a report of the Advisory Group of Experts on the Review of the Peacebuilding Architecture (A/69/968-S/2015/490, 30 June 2015); the Global Study on the implementation of the Security Council Resolution 1325 (2000) on Women, Peace and Security; and the Secretary-General’s report on the issue (S/2015/716, 16 September 2015); and a Declaration of Commitment by the Chief Executives Board for Coordination on Bringing the UN system together to support conflict prevention and peacebuilding within the broader 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, adopted on 27 April 2016.
Natural disasters and humanitarian assistance

Indeed, the Special Representative of the UN Secretary General for Disaster Risk Reduction, Mr. Robert Glasser recently said that “with a world already “falling short” in its response to humanitarian emergencies, things would only get worse as climate change adds to the pressure”. With the knock-on effects with respect to food security and conflict one realise that the only way we are going to be able to deal with these trends is by getting out ahead of them and address risk for disasters in the first place.

Failure to plan properly results in a rise in the vulnerability of those people already most exposed, just as we recently collectively promised not to leave anyone behind. And although Ira just now discussed the consequences of nuclear detonations on climate change, triggering nuclear famines, we should keep in mind that protracted drought is already causing local and regional food insecurity and associated instability that, in turn, have sparked massive migration of people from rural areas to cities and from affected regions to areas, countries and neighbouring regions with the hope of finding more promising lands. Speaking ahead of next month’s inaugural World Humanitarian Summit in Istanbul, Mr. Glasser has said that international disaster risk reduction efforts remain woefully underfunded and that according to UN figures, in 2014 just 0.4 percent of the global aid budget of $135.2 billion – roughly $540 million – was spent on disaster risk reduction.

So, why am I mentioning this?

Nuclear disasters and humanitarian assistance

The ultimate collective outcome of the upcoming World Humanitarian Summit is without doubt to reduce the number of people in need of humanitarian assistance. The international community not only has a responsibility to provide humanitarian assistance to those in need, it also should reduce the needs. This includes investing more in disaster risk reduction and in addressing the root causes of violent conflict, peacebuilding and strengthening resilience...... and this without what a recent Chatham House report distributed earlier this week referred to as “the missing link in multilateralism” – in the event of (a) nuclear detonation(s) and associated disastrous consequences.

Reconnecting with development and the consequences of nuclear catastrophes I would like to briefly go back to a presentation from the early humanitarian discussions in which the focus of UNDPs presentation was on the social and economic impacts of a nuclear detonation, and on the challenges posed to efforts to restore lives and livelihoods in and around affected areas.

Thankfully, UNDP has not yet had to deal with the consequences of a nuclear weapons detonation, be it deliberate or accidental. Indeed, as a 2014 study that UNIDIR produced in collaboration with UNDP and UNOCHA showed, the United Nations-led humanitarian system could not respond adequately to assist the victims across a range of scenarios—with the implication that likely nor could States.2 UNDP does, however, have experience of addressing the human consequences of nuclear contamination caused by nuclear accidents, in particular the Chernobyl nuclear power plant disaster. Thirty years later, Chernobyl remains a poignant reminder of the protracted nature of nuclear disasters in terms of their human costs. Although a civil nuclear disaster, and not involving something as severe as nuclear detonations, it should serve to inform further deliberations and the need for progress in nuclear disarmament talks.

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The human consequences from the Chernobyl disaster had not only immediate and devastating effects for those working and living close to the plant in the first days after the accident, but had long term and profound consequences on human development for people living in all the affected areas.

Indeed, UNDP’s work with many partners, in assisting states and communities affected by radioactive contamination has demonstrated the extent to which nuclear radiation presents long-term obstacles to the restoration of lives and livelihoods, and ultimately human development. It also provides us with some important lessons in addressing the humanitarian dimensions of future nuclear disasters, including nuclear detonations. These lessons have been presented during earlier discussions on the humanitarian consequences of nuclear detonations and I will therefore not go into details of these.

I would, however, like to draw your attention to other processes that are occurring in parallel to today’s discussions, but which have not yet been joined up to the OEWG’s considerations. I refer specifically to the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015-2030, the Addis Ababa financing for development framework, the COP 21 and the forthcoming World Humanitarian Summit – all with a rationale underpinned by the imperative of humanitarianism and inclusive and sustainable development, leaving no one behind.

The linkages between Peace & Security and Development are apparent most starkly when either of them is weak or non-existent, and it thus becomes more difficult to achieve progress on the other. But, it has not always been easy to make this point in the international policy discourse and multilateral security forums. The Sustainable Development Goals, agreed by Member States in September 2015, and in particular reference in Goal 16 to the explicit promotion of peaceful and just societies, may help. The Summit declaration moreover noted that Sustainable development cannot be realized without peace and security; and peace and security will be at risk without sustainable development.

The social goals of the earlier MDGs are embedded in the new Agenda which goes further with a range of additional goals that speaks to the preservation and promotion of Peace, People, the Planet, Prosperity and Partnerships, essential elements of an agenda for sustainable human development that allows us to grow, protect and develop with respect to the boundaries and the beauty of our planet. Such imperatives could help shift the discourse on nuclear weapons from strategic, security and military considerations to humanitarian, moral and ethical ones.

The prospects for the implementation of the 2030 Agenda will be a challenge and although official development assistance will remain critically important for, in particular least developed and low income countries, we also need to recognize that official development assistance will not be enough. UNCTAD estimates that achieving the SDGs will require between $3.3 and $4.5 trillion dollars yearly – vastly more than the current $135 billion available in official development assistance. Massive private sector investments are required, but, the sort that is aligned to social and environmental objectives. These estimates do not assume addressing the additional consequences of a potential nuclear devastation, which would be huge.

In terms of the human impact, scientists estimate that a single small nuclear detonation in an urban centre, a likely scenario in today’s increasingly urbanised world, could lead to fatalities in the hundreds of thousands, and at least double the number of casualties, because of the blast, heat and fragmentation effects created by the detonation. They also suggest that large urban centres exposed to atmospheric fallout of long-lived radionuclides and facing significant infrastructural damage could likely be abandoned for decades, just like we have seen in Chernobyl.

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In terms of wider impacts, development efforts would be severely constrained by the longer term health effects for people exposed to radiation, destruction of infrastructure and communications networks, by the interruption to the supply of food and petroleum, and by the disruption to the global supply of goods, as well as by the resulting forced or voluntary migration, something that some already refer to as an unprecedented crisis today, even without a nuclear disaster to blame.

Further to this and of great concern from a developmental perspective, is (as we have heard) the estimated impact on global food supplies. Recent studies predict that, even a relatively limited nuclear exchange could lead to a decline in the production of key staple crops by about 20 percent for five years, and by 10 percent for a decade. Resulting increases in food prices would make food inaccessible to hundreds of millions of the world’s poorest people. This is also why UNDP is particularly concerned and strives to support inclusive political processes and a representational participation of low income and developing states at events such as these and I want to take the opportunity to thank partners who have supported the sponsorship programme for this OEWG that UNDP administers.

The consequences of potential use would be likely to disproportionally affect low-income states. This is partly due to their more limited capacity to respond and partly due to the vulnerability of the poor. To make things worse, significant agricultural shortfalls and disruption to global food supplies of this nature could also increase the risk of conflict between communities as people compete over food and water.4

In conclusion, the overall scope of current humanitarian action and the costs to secure a sustainable and irreversible implementation of the 2030 Agenda, that leaves no one behind is already challenging the international establishment to the brink of its ability. The likely impact of a nuclear weapons detonation - even a relatively limited regional exchange - has the potential to cause massive human fatalities, major economic disruption, and global food shortages through environmental effects and infrastructural destruction.

So while there may be some uncertainties among scientists in their predictions on the scale and nature of the effects, we know that the consequences will be severe, that it risks derail multilateral commitments already made to humanity and that our ability to address these consequences will be completely inadequate.

We also know that the probability factor of a nuclear detonation will remain higher than zero as long as such arsenals persist, be that through accidental detonations or intended use. Eliminating this risk, once and for all, would therefore not only spare us from such disasters, but would also help bring alignment to the commitments made by Member States to sustainable development and decreasing humanitarian needs.

I thank you for your attention,

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