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منظمة الأمم المتحدة  
للتربية والعلم والثقافة

联合国教育、  
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**Address by Irina Bokova,**

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**on the occasion of UNESCO/UNU Symposium on The Great East  
Japan Tsunami on 11 March 2011 and Tsunami Warning Systems:  
Policy Perspectives**

*“Sharing knowledge to build informed solidarity”*

**Tokyo, 16 February 2012**

Your Imperial Highness,

Professor Konrad Osterwalder, Rector of the United Nations University,

Mr Hamada, Parliamentary Vice Minister,

Excellencies,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a special honour to make these opening remarks at this Symposium in the presence of your Imperial Highness.

Your presence testifies to the importance of this Symposium and also to your personal engagement with the management of water resources and the ocean.

Your engagement has been a major encouragement, Your Imperial Highness, in advancing international cooperation in these areas, most notably through your commitment to the work of the *World Water Forum*.

I am very grateful for all of your support.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

We meet to explore a question that goes to the heart of sustainable development today, in Japan and across the world.

This is the question of how can we better manage risk, how can we prepare better for the unpredictable.

I am especially moved to be here today, less than one year after the Great East Japan Tsunami and Earthquake.

On behalf of UNESCO, I wish to express my deepest condolences to all those who have suffered from the loss of loved ones and who have been affected by this devastating event.

Japan has suffered from a disaster on an extraordinary scale.

In response, it has shown an equally extraordinary resilience.

This reflects values embedded deeply in Japanese society.

They are the values of solidarity and responsibility,

Last Monday, I visited the Nakano Elementary School in Sendai City that is located 1.2 km from the coast.

This visit gave me a first-hand impression of the devastating consequences of the tsunami.

It showed how fragile are the buildings of any school and how vulnerable our societies are.

It was also a great lesson in courage and humanity.

I believe Japan's will to share its experience with the earthquake and tsunami provides also a lesson in courage and in generosity.

Immediately after last year's earthquake and tsunami, the *Japan Solidarity Project* was launched to facilitate the sharing of experiences between communities affected by disasters in the region through UNESCO's network of Associated Schools.

On Tuesday I visited Tohoku University.

It suffered damage to its research facilities, library infrastructure and utilities. But it has remained faithful to its motto "Research First".

It is setting up an International Research Institute of Disaster Science and will promote research based on lessons learned from the Great East Japan Earthquake and Tsunami.

This is another proof of Japan's sense of solidarity, resilience and innovation.

UNESCO will work with Tohoku and other universities to establish a network of such centres that will help our societies to better prepare for managing disasters.

Today more than ever, we know that Japan's great strength comes from the systems for risk reduction it has put in place -- but also, and as importantly, from its desire to share this experience for the benefit of all societies.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The Great East Japan Tsunami and Earthquake is one of those rare events that divides history into a '*before*' and an '*after*.'

Japan has been deeply affected, and so has the entire international community.

The world held its breath during the nuclear catastrophe in Fukushima.

This has led many countries to raise questions – about their approach to development, about their strategies for risk reduction.

We are all turning to Japan for ideas, to listen and to learn.

This Symposium provides a platform to share different perspectives, from both decision-makers and scientists.

I can imagine no better place to meet than here, at the United Nations University, a leading institution for policy research and debate.

Questions abound, ladies and gentlemen.

What exactly happened? What has been learned so far? Where do we need to learn more? What should be done now and in the future?

No single country can develop basin-wide tsunami detection systems.

Such systems depend on international collaboration, embodied in formal commitments, with the official support of governments.

This idea lies at the heart of the *Pacific Tsunami Warning System*, which UNESCO established nearly 50 years ago -- after a 9.5 magnitude earthquake, which occurred on 22 May 1960 off Chile, generated a tsunami that struck Hilo in Hawaii and the Sanriku coast of Japan.

Following the 26 December 2004 tsunami in the Indian Ocean, UNESCO's *Intergovernmental Oceanographic Commission* started to coordinate the development of similar warning systems for the Indian Ocean, the Caribbean and the North East Atlantic, the Mediterranean and connected seas.

Our efforts are producing results.

After six years of development, the Indian Ocean tsunami early warning system was launched on October 12, 2011.

I had the pleasure to participate in the launch and to visit the warning centre in Jakarta a few weeks later.

This year, two national centres in France and Turkey are expected to become operational and to offer tsunami watch provider services to countries in the Mediterranean.

In the Caribbean, steady efforts are under way to build up a tsunami warning service, which, we hope, will become fully operational in 2014-2015.

To be effective, these mechanisms must be combined with wider policies to build the capacity of States and to prepare societies.

This is why UNESCO develops and publishes training materials, manuals and guidelines.

This is why we design training courses in numerical modelling, in risk assessment, in Standard Operating Procedures for tsunami warning and emergency response.

On 23 March 2011, UNESCO organized the first full-scale simulated tsunami alert exercise in the Caribbean, with 33 countries involved.

All of this shows that solidarity – *KIZUNA* -- is not just a word.

It is a strategy to build on.

Japan has paved the way for all of this work, Ladies and Gentlemen.

UNESCO is proud to enjoy the expertise of a Japanese specialist, a former member of the Japanese Meteorological Agency.

This country established its national tsunami warning system in 1952.

This is the world's most advanced system.

It is a global standard setter.

On March 11 last year, the Japan Meteorological Agency issued a tsunami alert three minutes after the earthquake.

In total, some seventy tsunami alert messages were sent out to the countries under threat.

The Pacific Tsunami Warning System worked as it was designed.

Of course, it is inappropriate to speak of "success" in an event that has caused close to 20,000 deaths and extensive damage.

All major tsunamis have something in common.

I would refer here to recent events -- to South Java in 2006, to the Solomons and Chile in 2007, to Samoa/American Samoa/Tonga in 2009 and to Haiti, Chile and Mentawai (Indonesia) in 2010.

These were all local and rapid-onset events, where tsunami waves quickly arrived on shore -- in some places before warnings were issued or before people could evacuate to safety.

There have been cases also, unfortunately, where people did not take warnings seriously and did not evacuate.

All of this highlights the need to improve interdisciplinary knowledge and, above all, to transform this knowledge into improved tsunami warning systems and greater preparedness.

In Kamaishi city, children evacuated to higher ground, with middle school students leading elementary school students to safety.

Almost all students in this school survived.

In Karakuwa Elementary School, located on a hill in Kesenuma, the tsunami literally reached the doorsteps of the school but left the building intact.

Karakuwa School became an emergency evacuation centre and hosted the local community for a few months, until temporary housing became available for families who had lost their homes.

In this case, the school-community partnerships fostered through the Education for Sustainable Development programme proved essential for helping staff, students and the local community to share the limited space on the site and to join forces.

Here once again, Japan's leadership is visionary.

We see this inside the country, and we see it in Japan's commitment to promoting Education for Sustainable Development throughout the Asia-Pacific region, through important financial support to UNESCO's activities.

These stories underline the importance of teaching about earthquakes and tsunamis.

They tell a tale of unity and informed solidarity.

The spirit of Kizuna has always guided Japan's commitment to the United Nations System.

This symposium is another example of this commitment.

I am here with all our UNESCO friends and colleagues to listen and to learn – but also to tell you that UNESCO stands with Japan.

We stand with you, and we will do everything we can to support you.

Thank you for your attention.