



**Building Back Better, China Planning Network (MIT, Harvard and Tsinghua)
Resilience Roundtable: Rebuilding and Restoration after the Sichuan Earthquake**

Keynote Statement

John Holmes

**United Nations Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs
To be delivered by Sálvano Briceño, UN/ISDR Director**

Dear scholars, ladies and gentlemen,

It is my pleasure to deliver the statement by Mr. John Holmes, UN Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs at this special forum, which will help greatly to increase the understanding of disaster risk reduction's importance to sustainable development.

As China recovers from the massive physical, economic and emotional shock of the Sichuan earthquake, there is no doubt that the country has the resources and the will to rebuild. The incredible speed and volume of this country's response and relief effort left a powerful impression on the world after the quake first hit. However, in reconstruction and recovery, the same approach that so galvanizes a nation is not always the best way. Now is the moment to appraise, with sober wisdom, how to avoid the mistakes of history, and to begin planning out steadily what to do. Despite this national tragedy, the recovery planning process is an opportunity to strengthen the development of this region in a sustainable way.

While less dramatic than relief efforts, disaster risk reduction is what will save the most lives and protect the most assets when a natural hazard strikes again. Risk reduction demands action before and beyond emergency relief. As recovery and reconstruction begins, this is the time to remind ourselves again of the basic principle that 'prevention is better than cure', and to seal that principle into every new brick and tile. We cannot stop natural phenomena like earthquakes and cyclones; but the scale of the disasters that follow is in the hands of governments, national and local, community organizations and citizens, and especially scholars, researchers and planners such as yourselves. With your knowledge and through your position and influence, you can contribute to real change.

The Wenchuan earthquake has cost China dearly in terms of human life and economic impact. The best tribute to those lost, is to learn from this national tragedy and prevent such a costly event from happening again. How must we do this? The key is to focus on reducing risk and vulnerability to provide genuine future protection to lives and livelihoods from disasters.

China, like every disaster-prone country with a rapidly emerging economy, must address disaster risk reduction together with socioeconomic development – the two simply cannot be done separately if China is to implement President Hu Jintao's philosophy of 'putting people first' (yi ren wei ben/以人为本). Adding up the damage from the earthquake, and the snowstorms at New Year - not even taking

into account the current flood and typhoon season - the costs to China from disasters this year may have already surpassed the direct costs of disasters suffered worldwide in 2006. You may well say: we cannot go on like this. If this is so, how can we reduce the costs of future natural hazards?

Disaster risk reduction must become a national priority. This has to be translated into political commitment at many levels, and be backed up by financial resources for reducing risk and vulnerabilities. Of utmost importance is protecting public facilities and critical infrastructure, such as schools, hospitals, power and water supply critical systems.

In China's earthquake recovery we should rebuild with the best knowledge of existing risks. It is very encouraging to see Decree 526 of the State Council, which sets out guidelines on China's post-earthquake reconstruction. It is a good start and an early start, in its directive to involve all relevant government departments, and to ensure comprehensive scientific and technical expertise.

What is vital is that this decree's guidelines and principles are rigorously translated into action, not lost to shortcuts or the need to show quick results. It is imperative that this process balances quality and efficiency, as the decree states in its key principles for action. And I note that efficiency is not the same thing as speed. If substandard buildings are quickly erected using the same methods, only to pose the same risks of collapse in the future, this is not efficient. Indeed, in the aftermath of every disaster, there are well-meaning patriots and organizations who would rush in and repeat past mistakes, recreating old risks instead of building back better.

Your role is crucial during all these stages of recovery. As authoritative voices of the academic and scientific community, I hope that you will be firm advocates of disaster risk reduction. The first step outlined by the decree, the post-disaster investigation, needs to be a multi-stakeholder process to ensure transparency and all due scientific rigour - for this will be the foundation of all that will come. The next step is about getting the reconstruction plan right. The full involvement of scientific experts is specified here by the decree; your contributions as a community of expertise are needed, in order to build disaster risk reduction into every part of the plan. Finally and most crucially, without which all previous efforts may well be in vain, there must be rigorous monitoring and assessment of the implementation. There must be enforcement of the plan, of the standards of rebuilding, of changes to codes or policies. Without this monitoring, the work and efforts of so many people could be wasted.

This forum is filled with those who have the potential to shape the world; the most influential professors and the best researchers and planners that society has to offer, who all have the power to make future socioeconomic development sustainable. Your role is not only critical to the practical design and implementation of this massive recovery effort, but also to the public advocacy that is needed, here and globally, to build a culture of disaster resilience.

The United Nations, through its International Strategy for Disaster Reduction, and following the guidance of the Hyogo Framework for Action, stands ready to support and assist this effort.

Thank you.