

Global Platform for Disaster Risk Reduction

Keynote Speech by John Holmes Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs, Emergency Relief Coordinator, and Chair of the ISDR system

June 5, 2007

Esteemed Ministers, distinguished delegates, ladies and gentlemen.

We are here today to offer our leadership and expertise to one of the increasingly urgent — but eminently solvable — challenges we face in the 21st century: namely, reducing the death and destruction wrought by natural hazards, and helping save lives and livelihoods in some of the poorest and most vulnerable parts of the globe.

Over the past 30 years, the number of disasters - storms, floods and droughts - has increased threefold. Five times more people are now affected than just a generation ago. Today, eight out of the world's ten most populous cities are prone to earthquakes, and six of them are on or near the coast. A billion people live in unstable, overcrowded slums. By 2020, that one billion figure may well double. The combination of decaying infrastructure, land erosion, crowded conditions, and a lack of rescue services could lead to catastrophes of an unprecedented scale.

Global warming makes our task still more urgent, and our responsibility, ever more grave.

So the challenge before us is formidable. But the way forward is well signposted, with the Hyogo Framework for Action as our roadmap. Created two years ago by 168 governments and numerous expert organisations, the Hyogo Framework sets clear priorities for actions to strengthen the resilience of nations and communities to disasters.

Today's Global Platform builds upon its predecessor, the Inter-Agency Task Force on Disaster Reduction. But it also contains important innovations. Significantly, the Global Platform formalizes the participation of Governments as members, alongside other members from the United Nations system, regional organizations and civil society.

I am therefore particularly pleased to welcome representatives from the more than 100 Governments who are with us today. You bring valuable technical expertise, as well as critically important experience in matching high hopes with limited resources.

I also welcome the many representatives – both veterans and newcomers -- from UN organizations, financial and academic institutions, NGOs, and civil society. Each of your perspectives is needed. All of your contributions are welcome and necessary.

Let me also say that I believe this newly-created, consultative gathering will become the main international forum on disaster risk reduction -- the primary vehicle for supporting all efforts to implement the Hyogo Framework for Action.

And my first clear message to you today is this: we need to move forward together, united by a sense of purpose and urgency. We have the right tool: the Hyogo Framework for Action – with the key word being that last one. Action. We have the proper international mechanism: the ISDR system.

And we have the requisite knowledge and experience to reduce disaster risks from Teheran to Toronto, Lima to Lagos. What we need is precisely concerted action to make these elements count together.

As I've already said, climate change is the driver of the increased urgency of risk reduction efforts.

There is no longer any serious scientific doubt about what is happening. The recent report by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change makes clear that global warming will put hundreds of millions of people at increased risk from climate-related hazards. Increased flooding, droughts, heat waves, more intensive storms, and rising sea levels await us. Some 200 million people now living in coastal flood zones are at risk from stronger storms and rising seas.

As always in the calculus of disasters, the poorer a community, the greater will be its vulnerability to nature's hazards -- and the more difficult its recovery. But those of us living in rich countries will not be spared either, as underlined by recent heat waves in Europe which claimed thousands of lives.

So "business as usual" is simply not good enough. Disaster risk reduction is fundamental to helping countries adapt to our changing climate.

What does this mean in practice? It means national action plans for adaptation. It means strengthening public infrastructure, coastal facilities, and homes to withstand more extreme weather, flooding and rising waters. Better drought management. Better early warning systems and evacuation plans. It means stronger building codes. Improved land and water management policies. Expanded disaster education programmes for local communities. All of this backed by stronger institutions and proper funding.

So this is my second message: disaster risk reduction is our front-line defence in adapting to the impacts of climate change and preventing future loss of life and property from extreme natural hazards.

Those of you sitting here today already know this. What we need is the arguments and success-stories to sway the uninitiated or unconvinced.

Above all we need to convince those who control our governments' purse strings, who write legislation, enforce zoning restrictions, construct our buildings, staff our hospitals, broadcast across our airways and teach our children. We need to convince them that by acting today, we can save both lives and prosperity tomorrow. Disaster risk reduction needs to become a top priority for Governments, municipalities, civic leaders, businesses, and local communities.

Last year, 134 million people suffered from natural hazards that cost \$35 billion in damage, including devastating droughts in China and Africa and massive flooding across Asia and Africa. As I have already suggested, developed countries are by no means immune – their economic losses have risen rapidly over the last few decades, sparking problems for the insurance industry and raising insurance premiums globally.

One of the most potent arguments for risk reduction is also the simplest: 'an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure'. A recent expert study in the United States showed that one dollar invested today in disaster risk reduction saved four dollars in the future cost of relief and rehabilitation - a bargain by any standard.

That is therefore my third message: we need to do more to publicize our arguments and to make a more convincing case for risk reduction. Disaster risk reduction is an essential insurance policy for the more disaster-prone world we expect.

I propose to commission a definitive, high-level study of the costs and benefits of risk reduction policies, along the lines of the recent report on climate change by Sir Nicholas Stern. Armed with well-documented, carefully-analysed evidence, we can put forward our case with renewed vigour, using the study as a potent advocacy tool with policymakers, the media and the general public. I am pleased to announce that Nobel Laureate Professor Amartya Sen has offered to help us with his advice on this study.

But to be genuinely convincing, we also need to know precisely what we can and must do in practice.

First, we must prioritize those countries and areas at greatest risk for earthquakes, floods and other natural hazards. We must build ‘smarter and safer’ where populations are most vulnerable, including in schools, hospitals and crowded urban areas.

Second, we must act to protect the world’s investment in development. Disasters can destroy decades of development gains literally overnight. In 1998, Hurricane Mitch caused losses equal to 41% of Honduras’s gross domestic product (GDP). In the Maldives, the equivalent of 66% of its GDP was wiped out by the 2004 tsunami. We can reduce these huge losses by weaving risk reduction policies into the overall fabric of international lending and development policies. The United Nations has a leading role to play here.

Third, we must invest more money in disaster risk reduction. No investment means no return – and no action. The World Bank’s Global Facility for Disaster Reduction and Recovery is a timely and important step in the right direction, but much more needs to be done. The United Nations Trust Fund for Disaster Reduction needs more resources to support country-level initiatives.

Finally, we must continue to strengthen the institutional pillars that support disaster risk reduction, through reinforcing our partnerships – amongst ISDR members, between government and non-governmental organisations, and between the public and private sectors. The ISDR system has a key role to play here in helping build more durable institutions and in supporting the changes needed to make our nations and communities disaster-resilient.

Let me end by stressing one final, key point: Natural hazards need not lead automatically to human catastrophe. By taking simple, cost effective steps today, we can reduce risks and save lives tomorrow. Disaster risk reduction is an idea whose time has come. That is why we must combine our efforts and support investment to reduce our vulnerability.

So, let us use our ISDR system and this Global Platform to make a real difference on the ground for millions of people. The time is right; the need is urgent; you, the key players, are here. What we must do is act decisively and boldly to meet the challenge.

Thank you.