

Opening remarks to International Research for Disaster Risk 2021 International Conference, Beijing

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Mr Chairman,

I am delighted to speak at this opening ceremony as President-Elect of the International Science Council.

The last 18 months have elevated discussion of risk to the front pages of virtually every paper and every TV broadcast in every country around the world. But we have to be honest – the nature of the discussions has been very mixed. There is much evidence that the risks of the pandemic were underplayed in some quarters, that health risks have been traded off against economic risks in some countries, and that vaccine hesitancy has been driven by individual and manipulated understanding of risk. And rich countries have been slow to recognise that until everyone has access to effective vaccines, the progress towards economic, environmental and social development is impeded.

Yet in the same period countries have had to confront major weather events, earthquakes, volcanos, building collapses, technological failures and cyberattacks, and at the same time progress towards stopping the planet overheating has been disappointing.

In this context, this meeting is occurring at a critical time. A decade ago, a partnership between the UN Office for Disaster Risk Reduction and the International Science Council (ISC) led to the establishment of Integrated Research on Disaster Risk (IRDR); this programme was hosted by the Aerospace Information Research Institute of the Chinese Academy of Sciences, and supported by the China Association for Science and Technology. This initiative has made much progress in formalising and progressing research on disaster risk reduction, and much of that work is summarised in an outstanding summary document being released at this meeting.

But all of us would agree that we are a long way from effective global, national and local disaster risk reduction systems. Certainly the natural sciences of climate, weather, geology and so forth have made major progress. But there is always more to know, and the development of a standardised hazard taxonomy will help enormously. Identifying hazards and making an analytical estimate of the likelihood and severity of a single event is one thing, but so many events are complex and therefore a focus on resilience becomes so important. Covid-19 has highlighted and changed perceptions of resilience planning.

In all these cases, while the analysis of the risk is possible it is the response to the science that matters. For Covid-19, many experts and indeed formal national assessments had long identified the high inevitability of a zoonotic viral pandemic, but this was not well reflected either in national preemptive measures or, certainly in many cases especially outside the eastern hemisphere, in rapid and effective decision making. We need to learn lessons from this and recognise that it is the lack of formal institutions of risk assessment in many countries and the perceptions of risk by policy makers that are often the biggest barriers to effective disaster reduction. In this regard, I am pleased to see the move towards much greater transdisciplinarity in the proposed agenda of the IRDR moving ahead.

The ISC itself will be giving greater focus to the infrastructures and processes of evidence entering policy making and the barriers that need to be overcome at both the national and global level. Our draft action plan for the period 2022-2024 will be released for consultation soon.

The IRDR has already reached out to other members of the ISC family in its work with Co-Data on disaster data. The International Network for Government Science Advice, another member of the ISC family, is undertaking joint work with the ISC through its Committee on Freedom and Responsibility in Science to develop guidelines for scientific advice in emergencies. It is also extensively engaged in the issues of evidentiary uptake by policy makers.

The ISC itself is a young body – now only 3 years old – formed by the merger of the ICSU and ISSC to be the global voice of science. As the past year has shown, it is this marriage between all the knowledge disciplines that is essential for societies to progress. Never has robust knowledge been more important as we face a rising frequency of disasters and challenges that create real threats to lives, and to social, economic and environmental health.

The ISC and UN Office for Disaster Risk Reduction are renewing their partnership, and as sponsors of the IRDR look forward to the results of this meeting and your deliberations. I congratulate the International Programme Office of the IRDR for bringing this timely meeting together and thank CAST and the Chinese Academy of Sciences for their ongoing support.