

Speech by Mr. Steven Sabey to High-Level Symposium on Sustainable Cities and Sustainable Urbanization, 16 December 2013, Yangzhou

Distinguished delegates, ladies and gentlemen,

It is my honour today to represent the United Nations System in China at this high-level symposium. This meeting provides a valuable opportunity for participants from around the world to meet and address one of the most critical issues of our time: sustainable cities and urbanization. I would like to thank UN DESA and Yangzhou Municipal Government for their commendable hosting of this event.

In my remarks today I would like to highlight three points:

First, the context of urbanization in China today and the challenges and opportunities this presents;

Second, our understanding of the Chinese Government's thinking on urbanization at the present stage;

And third, some lessons we believe the world can learn from China, and some that China can learn from the world.

So, firstly, what is the context of urbanization in China today? In fact, in

December 2011, China passed a key urbanization milestone. The National Bureau of Statistics announced that at the national level, more than fifty per cent of the population of the country was now living in cities.

While the transition to a predominantly urban population is not at all unique to China, urbanization in China has two striking characteristics. The first is its speed, and the second is its scale.

According to China's national censuses, the country's urban population grew from only eleven percent in 1949 to thirty six percent in 2000 and now to over fifty percent. The speed of this urbanization is astounding - urbanization in Europe took 150 years to go from twelve per cent to 51 percent. Internal migration to cities in China has occurred on a massive scale and shows no sign of abating. The urban population is predicted to rise to 70 percent by 2030, resulting in an additional 310 million new city dwellers in the next two decades. By then, one billion Chinese will live in cities. Or, to put it another way, something similar to the entire population of the USA will move in to China's cities in the next 16 years. This speed and scale of migration is unprecedented in human history and places China at the forefront of the world's rapid urban transformation.

As urbanization continues, China will face pressures to ensure the

efficient use of natural and energy resources, and the further development of urban governance systems. It will need to ensure that there are employment, transportation, housing, access to basic social services, and security for its urban citizens, and to protect the livelihoods of migrant workers. There will also be challenges to China's development related to the ageing population, the structural transformation of the economy, and air and water pollution.

But continued large-scale urbanization will also bring great opportunities, such as the potential for further growth and development as more rural residents move into the modern economy. And perhaps the biggest opportunity of all is for China to build green, low carbon, sustainable cities from scratch for the influx of city residents to come, while much of the rest of the world struggles to retrofit existing structures and systems at considerably higher cost.

Moving to my second point, Chinese leaders have signalled that the country is committed to a successful urban transformation. They have taken a series of actions, introducing new policies, experimenting with innovative ideas, and beginning to compile national plans to guide urbanization. Urbanization has been placed high on the political agenda of the country's leadership, and it has also been made clear by Premier Li

Keqiang that the new type of urbanization has to be human-centered and must ensure people's prosperity. There is thus little debate about the importance of urbanization or the direction it should take; the big issue now is not what or why but how – and a large part of this is about sharing of evidence and experiences across cities, both in China and beyond.

This brings me to my third point, what positive experiences can China share with the world, and the world with China?

In terms of good experiences from China, apart from the good practices we have already heard about here in Yangzhou, allow me to cite a few by way of illustration:

In Zhejiang Province, the city of Ningbo has established an internet based community service platform, which is allowing city authorities to better understand and respond to demand for public services;

In Guangdong, the city of Shenzhen has been breaking new ground in the design and construction of energy saving buildings, and the use of urban solar power;

In Tianjin Municipality, the Tianjin Eco-City – a China – Singapore joint initiative – has seen the installation of an intelligent electricity network

and the achievement of 100% waste treatment;

And large cities across China also have good experience in providing social housing, successfully allocating areas of land specifically for development of affordable homes.

If we look, conversely, at the good experiences from which China can learn, it is perhaps invidious to single any country out, as every place has something to offer to this exchange of ideas. But from our own research and in-country partnerships, let me highlight two, again by way of illustration:

In Istanbul, the city government applied a series of actions, including demolishing and relocating nearly all industries, constructing a new waste disposal system, restoring the Golden Horn to its former status as a social and cultural locus, and reengaging citizens with the beauty and history of the area.

Meanwhile in Singapore, the Asian financial crisis of 1997 led the country to re-evaluate its growth strategies. Through boosting spending on R&D, Singapore has transformed itself into a more knowledge-intensive society.

In light of all these positive experiences, both from China and the rest of the world, we believe that there is great scope for both upscaled north-south and south-south cooperation around cities.

Within the UN System in China, UNDP China and the Institute for Urban and Environmental Studies of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences earlier this year launched a joint flagship publication: the China National Human Development Report 2013, entitled *Sustainable and Liveable Cities: toward Ecological Civilization*. Mr. Wang Dong from UNDP China will present some of the Report's key findings and recommendations this afternoon, so I will not say more about it now. But suffice to say that at a dissemination event in Beijing a month or so ago, a number of countries in the region already expressed interest in mutual learning on several concrete aspects of urbanization.

So, in closing, I would encourage all of you here over the next three days to take the same approach – to aim to leave with a shortlist of practical ideas from other countries from which you would like to learn, as well as to offer your own positive experiences – and your lessons learned – to others.

For our part, the UN System in China, and UNDP in particular, stand ready through our network of country offices and our Memorandum of

Understanding on South-South Cooperation with China, to facilitate and support such mutual learning wherever this would be of value.

With that, I wish everyone here a highly successful Symposium. Thank you.