



UN-HABITAT

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FOR A BETTER URBAN FUTURE

STATEMENT BY UN-HABITAT EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR MAIMUNAH MOHD SHARIF ON 16 JANUARY 2024

Valedictory talk at the Bartlett School of Planning, University College London: Looking back, looking forward

I am very honoured to be invited by the prestigious Bartlett School to deliver a valedictory speech to commemorate the completion of my tenure as Executive Director of the United Nations Human Settlements Programme. In fact, I am very touched to be able to address this august assembly as a fellow of the Royal Town Planning Institute. Yesterday, the Royal Town Planning Institute saw fit to confer upon me an honorary fellowship, which I regard very highly.

It is perhaps fitting that I am giving this lecture in the United Kingdom before carrying out my final duties as Under-Secretary-General at a meeting with the Member States of the Commonwealth of Nations. As the University asked to speak to the theme of “Looking Back, Looking Forward”, please allow to begin with all of you some key observations from my life’s journey.

In 1961, I was born into a largely rural world. Like most of my generation in Southeast Asia, I grew up subsisting on the planting and harvesting of rice paddy. By the time I arrived in Bournemouth to do my A-levels 19 years later, developing countries like Malaysia were able to narrow the gap in gross domestic production by moving away from primary industries to manufacturing. This was achieved at the expense of the environment, an externality for growth and development that we were told was worth the cost.

In the 1980s, I learned the rudiments of town planning at the University of Wales Institute of Science and Technology. We were exposed to the idea that well-planned, well-managed and integrated cities would help make economic growth more stable. The catchphrase then was how important it was to build a home-owning democracy. We had unleashed in our countries the genie of urbanization – the agglomeration of capital, talent and growth that would lift millions out of poverty. Little did we know that money is one of the few things that defy gravity and what trickled down was not wealth. You can imagine what it was that trickled down instead.

Upon my return to Malaysia, I met with the first signs that reality on the ground was very different from what we learned in the lecture hall. As the Malaysian economy transitioned from primary industries to manufacturing, the job that I was trained for disappeared. Instead of holding a guaranteed job in plantation estate management, I ended up unemployed. Not unlike what you see now in the United Kingdom today, we faced a cost of living crisis.

Nonetheless, I found myself a job as a junior planner in the Penang Island Municipal Council. My first assignment was to help develop Penang’s first state structure plan. I was also involved in the planning and development of Bayan Lepas, a new satellite town of service workers in the Penang free trade zone. As the West began to offshore its manufacturing to the Far East, the Malaysian economy did indeed benefit. In the next 25 years, the GDP of Penang grew by 15 per cent year on year. Many boats were floated just as the United Kingdom and other parts of the Global North began to deindustrialize.

I cannot complain too much. One of the German firms to spread its wings to Penang was the electronics giant Robert Bosch & Company. Some very talented Malaysians, educated in the West, returned to Malaysia to work as engineers. We were all busy transforming entire communities into an assembly line to turn out the gadgets that we are all so addicted to today. One of these smart young men asked me to marry him in the midst of Malaysia's van of progress.

I am very glad to say that I accepted his proposal. Our marriage was unusual for its time. We married across class, religious and ethnic lines. Last year, we celebrated 35 years of marriage, and we are proud grandparents of a healthy baby boy. We were able to get onto the property-owning ladder, a progressive and bright future felt real. I am glad to say that our children did indeed grow up in a world that was more stable. We even beat the depletion of the ozone layer. Everything was possible.

Wawasan 2020 or Vision 2020 was the slogan for most Malaysians. In fact, as one of the tiger economies of Southeast Asia, Malaysia was graduating from low-cost production to a service-based economy. We seemed to have left the bad days of racial strife behind us. What had been a novelty – the nuclear family and living dense high-rise buildings – felt like the height of modernity. Our family was no exception. The domestic economy got a boost from tourism, banking, and the provision of services. Singapore, Taiwan (a province of China), South Korea, and Malaysia formed the second line of progress with Japan in the lead; the communist bamboo curtain around coastal China was opening up and the socialist sari curtain in India was soon to follow. Indonesia, Viet Nam, the Philippines, were all in the same trajectory of progress. It was dubbed the Asian miracle best represented by shiny new Asian cities, urban sprawl creating megacities and compact vertical living.

But within our capitalist dreams lay the seeds of its own destruction. In 1998, Asia was consumed by a financial crisis that we had not seen before. The era of boom and bust had arrived. By this time, we had liberalized our economy. The Malaysian economy was among the 12th largest export-based markets in the world. Houses were no longer homes but commodities for investment. Private debt had piled up higher than both the twin towers combined as the de-regulated banking industry led to lowering of the bar to personal debt accumulation. We had gone shopping for the very first time buying cars, houses and running up debt using the Diner's card, Amex and, ultimately, the personal credit card.

Both the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank prescribed more liberal doses of austerity. The fault, they said, lay with weak democratic principles. What had been a recipe for success - a strong state, five-year plans and integrated national physical plans - were to blame. True capitalism was the answer, and the markets were correcting the mistakes of the interventions of the strong Asian states. Asian values were no replacement for liberal exceptionalism.

In the 2000s as we all entered a new millennium the world began to face the era of boom and bust more frequently. If it was 100 years between the Tulip bust and the Great Depression; the dot.com bust came in less than a decade on the heels of the Asian financial crisis. Then, in 2012, the entire Western banking system collapsed into itself. Capital controls were imposed. Too big to fail replaced creative destruction. Just as the Asian tigers turned into tame pussy cats, the gods of the capitalist system were found to have feet of clay.

By this time, I had progressed in my career having become Director of the Planning Department in 2000; General Manager of the George Town UNESCO World Heritage Site in 2009; and the first woman President of the Seberang Prai Municipal Council – the largest local government – in 2011. For seven years, I was the Mayor of a city before being head-hunted by the United Nations to helm UN-Habitat in December 2017. In one periodical, they called me Mayor of the World. Indeed, in the past six years since

I helmed UN-Habitat, 290 million people have moved from rural areas into towns and cities. In November last year, the global human population crossed the 8 billion mark and 4.52 billion of us live in cities.

Having undertaken more than 2000 bilateral meetings, having gone on 69 missions in all the regions of the world and having visited some 55 countries, I realize that the urbanization process that I experienced in Malaysia was not as evenly experienced globally although the trajectory was basically the same. The exception being the pace of urbanization that is now very rapid. In many parts of the world, cities are overwhelmed by the sheer numbers of rural to urban migration. In these places, a person of my background and economic origins, would stand almost no chance to get a roof over her head. Education, in such circumstances, is not a solution. As a young boy in Kibera – the world’s largest slum in Kenya once said to me – “how can I study or go to school without adequate shelter?”

Looking Forward

Let us now look forward. **By the year 2030, three billion people** – about **40 per cent** of the world's population – **will need adequate housing**. It isn't just a figure; it's an alarming fact that needs our quick attention and coordinated response. This is why at the High-Level Political Forum in New York in July last year, I said that just as we need a Paris moment for climate, we need our own Paris Agreement for housing!

If we are experiencing a cost of living crisis, it is because most of our disposal incomes go towards putting a roof over our heads. In the developing world, the housing deficit **translates into a demand for 96,000 new affordable and accessible housing units every day**. People living in slums pay up to 8 times more for access to shelter, basic services like water and, in most cases, breathe in air that is 10 times more polluted. They are also living in their own waste, as less than 50 per cent of municipal waste is not properly managed.

In case we have forgotten, during the Covid-19 pandemic, we asked people to stay at home. Without adequate housing, the virus spread more rapidly in communities faced with unequal access to basic services. Housing and basic services must now be provided, not just for housing needs but also as a first line of defence against the many issues facing the world today, especially the imminent threat of climate change. More than just a place to call "**home**," housing is a basis that maintains our dignity, health, livelihood, well-being and impacts our environment.

We must acknowledge that this housing crisis presents an opportunity to address climate-related issues more successfully. Currently, the buildings and construction sector accounts for 39 per cent of energy and process-related carbon dioxide (CO₂), 11 per cent of which resulted from manufacturing building materials and products such as steel, cement and glass.

This state of the matter must change. And in fact, re-shaping the housing sector may be a very effective strategy for reducing carbon emissions in all its forms, through energy-efficient housing solutions, low-carbon materials, and zero-waste practices. These actions are not just necessary but also crucial for reducing the housing sector's ecological footprint around the world. I would like to recall that Member States approved a resolution in June 2023 at the second UN-Habitat Assembly calling for the realization of adequate housing for all. Governments have expressed the need to ramp-up action to address the rising crisis. This is why I recently launched our global campaign Housing Matters at the sideline of COP28 in the American University in Dubai in December 2023.

Ladies and gentlemen,

It would be remiss of me not to address the biggest elephant in the room. Just as the UN Secretary-General has called for a more just economic system, we need to campaign for a just transition when addressing climate change. The housing crisis is manifestation of an unfair economic system resulting in slums in developing countries and homelessness in developed economies.

Cities are also at the forefront of man-made disasters. Here I must stress the word man-made for the major wars and conflicts around the world are indeed led, fought, and perpetrated by men. There is something fundamentally wrong with the current multilateral system when women and children are bombed, killed, raped, and maimed daily without recourse to justice. In such situations, UN-Habitat is there to provide whatever little support we can do with very limited resources. To date, the United Nations has lost more than 150 colleagues and their families in Gaza. The biggest loss of lives for the United Nations in our 79th year.

Indeed, the United Nations was not set up to bring about heaven on earth but to prevent hell on earth. I am not sure that we are permitted to do so when the blue flag no longer provides us with the shelter and protection, we need to carry out our duties. In our urbanizing world that is facing the 4Cs - including the combined crises of conflicts, climate-related disasters, covid-induced economic inequalities and the crisis of capital; we need a strong and effective United Nations. Indeed, in the ministerial declaration of the second United Nations Habitat Assembly in June 2023, and again at COP28, stronger multilateral action means working better together as nations; better multi-level cooperation within nations and more empowered civil society involvement in translating policy into practice through an all of society approach of getting things done.

Ladies and gentlemen,

I am an eternal optimist. You cannot blame me for being so as urbanization has served me and my country well. My one key message today is to call upon all of us, as individuals, as leaders in our own right, to harness our God given talents to take action now to make sure we leave this world a better place than we found it. I am glad to say that with the support of my team, we have contributed positively to the 600 cities and 800 million people that UN-Habitat serves during my term in office. Not only is the programme stronger financially and in terms of governance, but the voices of our stakeholders are also heard at the G7, G20, G77 and China, the United Nations General Assembly and at the World Economic Forum at Davos. My only plea to all of you is not to give up, to double our efforts to get women and girls at the centre, to ensure we have more women-led cities and not to repeat the mistakes made by my generation.

You will have a chance to do so and to record your declared actions at the twelfth session of the World Urban Forum that will take place in Cairo, Egypt from 4 to 8 November this year. Aptly, the theme of WUF12 is "It all starts at Home: Local Actions for Sustainable Cities and Communities." It also gives me great pleasure to acknowledge the support of the Sustainable Cities and Communities Foundation and the University College London for organizing today's event here at the Bartlett School. Again, it is a demonstration of the power of small, demonstrating what we can achieve as individuals and as communities and nations. Indeed, we need to look back to look ahead to ensure we do not repeat the mistakes of the past. As we embark on building smart and digitally integrated lives; we must make sure it is people-centred and not vendor-driven.

Students, never forget to think out of the box. Indeed, throughout my career, I have asked my team and friends to think without the box. Only then can one truly get the best ideas and stay ahead of the curve.

Let me end with a simple call to action that I believe gives meaning to life: *Always aspire to inspire before you expire.*

I thank you.