

First UN-Habitat Assembly, 27 – 31 May 2019

**Remarks by Madam Maimunah Mohd Sharif, United Nations
Under-Secretary-General and Executive Director, UN-Habitat**

*Introductory Statement of the Executive Director on the Opening of the
First Session of the UN-Habitat Assembly*

Monday 27 May 2019 at approx. 11am, Conference Room 2

Salutations

- Your Excellency, Honorable Uhuru Kenyatta, President of the Republic of Kenya
- Honourable Martha Delgado, President of the First Session of the UN-Habitat Assembly,
- Ms. Joyce Msuya, Acting Executive Director of the United Nations Environment Programme,
- Heads of delegations,
- Your Excellencies Parliamentarians, Ambassadors, Permanent Representatives and Members of the Diplomatic Corps,
- Representatives of UN-Habitat Partners, the Private Sector and Civil Society organizations,
- Distinguished Delegates, Members of the Press,
- My United Nations colleagues, Ladies and Gentlemen,

1. I warmly welcome you to the United Nations Office at Nairobi, and as they say here: Karibuni sana Nairobi!
2. This is a very significant and historic moment for all of us. It is the first-ever session of the UN-Habitat Assembly! Thanks to your persistence and commitment to multilateralism in general and to sustainable urban development, in par-

ticular. In December 2018, the United Nations General Assembly adopted a resolution establishing a new governance structure for UN-Habitat after 14 long years of discussions.

3. I would like to congratulate and thank you for this achievement, and your support to UN-Habitat. Thank you!
4. The aim of this first Assembly is to frame current and emerging challenges of urbanization in the context of an increasingly urbanising world and propose innovative solutions, including best practices, to make the best of the opportunities of sustainable urban development so as to leave no one and no place behind.
5. It is my sincere hope that you will find the agenda of the Assembly an inspiring one.

Excellencies, Distinguished Delegates,

6. As we start our deliberations, I would like to point to three very important opportunities that we should rightly take full advantage of and I would like to also make three appeals.
7. **First, the world will benefit from well-planned and well-managed cities.** I would like to invite all of us to pause for a moment and fully take into account the fact that 70 per cent of the world population is projected to live in urban areas by 2050.
8. What does this mean for our world?
9. It means that persistent and new development problems, including extreme poverty, socioeconomic inequalities, slums, social exclusion and marginalization, gender-based discrimination, humanitarian crises, conflicts, air pollution, climate change, and high unemployment, will be increasingly concentrated in urban areas.

10. It means that we collectively need to get the urban growth process and our cities right to solve or mitigate these problems. This is important as some of these challenges do not recognise national or regional boundaries. Some are planetary in nature and their negative consequences affects not only us today but all future generations.
11. What this means is that we need sustainable urbanization to ensure successful and long-term development. Therefore, understanding the key trends in urbanization and how it will likely unfold is crucial to the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. It will also help reduce poverty and inequalities in cities and communities.
12. As the world continues to urbanize, sustainable development depends increasingly on the successful management of urban growth, especially in low-income and lower-middle-income countries where the pace of urbanization is projected to be the fastest. Many countries will face challenges in meeting the needs of their growing urban populations, including for housing, transportation, energy systems and other infrastructure, as well as for employment and basic services, education and health care.
13. For this reason **I am appealing to you** to strongly position sustainable urbanization at the center of your development priorities through deliberate efforts to implement the New Urban Agenda, strengthening the urban governance structure and institutions, and by adopting integrated sustainable urban development policies and plans, implementing impact-based projects and programmes, while strengthening the linkages between urban and rural areas, building on their existing economic, social and environmental ties.
14. **Second, the world needs to leverage innovations to improve living conditions in cities.** Our work must be transformational and groundbreaking. This is why the theme of this first Assembly is about innovation: “Innovation for a Better Quality of Life in Cities and Communities” with a sub-theme on “Accelerated Implementation of the New Urban Agenda towards achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals”.

15. Cities are the incubators of innovation, industry, technology, entrepreneurship and creativity. They drive national economies by creating prosperity, enhancing social development and providing employment.
16. The attainment of the SDGs will have to go through cities, and cities will have to continue to drive innovation in cutting-edge ways to achieve a lasting impact in communities and to ensure that no one is left behind, as envisaged in the 2030 Agenda.
17. I am appealing to you to adopt policy solutions that carefully promote science, technology and innovation in fulfilling the promises of the 2030 Agenda. We need to embrace new technologies including using artificial intelligence to support decisions-making processes and to efficiently and inclusively deliver basic and social services that transform lives in cities. Technological innovations should support not only the rise of smart cities but also the emergence of livable cities. I am also calling for the development and sharing of environmentally sound technologies to developing countries.
18. **Third, the world needs a resourceful and impact-driven UN-Habitat.**
19. While urbanization is moving the global economy forward, rising inequality and exclusion within cities can derail development progress. Despite wide recognition and commitment, building inclusive cities remains a challenge. Today, one out of three urban residents in the developing world still lives in slums with inadequate services.
20. To make sure that tomorrow's cities provide opportunities and better living conditions for all, it is essential to understand that the concept of inclusive cities involves a complex web of multiple spatial, social and economic factors, which requires multidimensional and integrated solutions. We work with you in planning, implementing and monitoring these solutions.

21. As you are repositioning sustainable urban development at the center of your national strategies, in UN-Habitat, we are committed to work with you as we have done for the past 40 years.

Excellencies, Distinguished Delegates,

22. Allow me to highlight a few figures that illustrate the impact of UN-Habitat's work. As a result of our efforts between 2014-2019:

- More than 2 million people are benefiting from improved access to water and sanitation;
- 4 million slum dwellers have been positively impacted by participatory slum upgrading interventions;
- More than 539 cities in 14 countries are now implementing the City Prosperity Index, as a monitoring and policy formulation tool;
- 375 local governments and 25 national governments are using UN-Habitat flagship publications and best practice data bases in policy formulation;
- More than 53 cities in 30 countries have benefited from state-of-the-art planning and design solutions; and
- Over 500,000 people in 9 countries have been impacted by work in humanitarian response and reconstruction sector, including through the participatory "people's process".

23. In spite of these achievements, we would like to do more in partnering with you as you implement the New Urban Agenda in view of achieving the Sustainable Development Goals.

24. For this reason, we have formulated our new Strategic Plan 2020-2025, which strongly emphasises UN-Habitat's contribution to the implementation of global

agendas by focusing on a set of impact-oriented goals on poverty and inequality, prosperity of cities and regions; climate action and urban environment; and urban crisis prevention and response. This plan, your plan, our plan has been submitted to you for adoption. **I am appealing to you** to continue working hand in hand with us and to propose ways of achieving greater impact in cities and communities.

25. We have identified five flagship programmes, which we will enable us to implement the Strategic Plan 2020-2025 in a more focused, coherent and impact-oriented manner. Please join us and work with us in making a difference in cities and communities. Join us in this brand-new UN-Habitat! We hope to continue to count on your support.

26. Before I conclude, I wish to acknowledge the considerable support and wise counsel we have received over many weeks and months from members of the Committee of Permanent Representatives under the able guidance of His Excellency, Ambassador Fernando Coimbra of Brazil.

27. Excellencies, Ambassador Coimbra, on behalf of the UN-Habitat family, thank you very much.

28. In our deliberations, our discussions and negotiations, keep one thing in mind. Think of our children and also the future generations that we will never meet. Our decisions today will have an impact on the future greater than any other previous generations. Life on earth is at stake. We have the ability and the means to make life better in the smallest village to the biggest city. It is my genuine hope that our efforts this week will contribute to long-term cooperation and decisive actions. Let us find the will to do what is right.

I thank you.