

Opening Remarks by Ms. Maimunah Mohd Sharif, United Nations Under-Secretary-General and Executive Director, UN-Habitat

Business Assembly at the Seventh Asia-Pacific Urban Forum

Monday 14 October 2019 at SETIA Spice Convention Centre, Penang

**Distinguished delegates,
Colleagues,
Ladies and gentlemen,**

On behalf of UN-Habitat, I am delighted to welcome you to the Business Assembly of the Seventh Asia-Pacific Urban Forum. I would like to thank our partners, UNESCAP, and the amazing city leadership for hosting us here today in this incredible venue. We are very pleased to bring together business representatives from all over the region, including local CEOs, thought leaders and sustainable finance specialists.

During my time as Mayor of this city, I worked closely with businesses of all types—not merely as investors in my city, but as partners. By collaborating with businesses and building projects around shared and mutual interest, we were a part of a unique transformation—one that defined how the city functions today.

By listening and sharing ideas, we were able to understand how to make the city attractive to businesses that wanted to invest in making it a better place for all. More importantly, we understood what investments the city needed to prioritize in order to catalyse bankable projects, and the systems, laws and frameworks needed to make it easier for investors de-risk their investments.

During the past year at UN-Habitat, we have held a number of highly successful business engagement activities with a similar vision. Starting with the Global Strategic Dialogue in Mannheim, Germany in March; moving to UN Headquarters in New York for the UN Roundtable on Sustainable Floating Cities in April; and culminating in the Business Leaders Dialogue at the First Session of the UN-Habitat Assembly in May.

Today's Business Assembly is meant to take these engagements one step closer in the run up to the Tenth Session of the World Urban Forum taking place in Abu Dhabi in February 2020—a chance for cities and investors to engage.

This consultative process has also resulted in the drafting of a comprehensive Agency-wide business engagement strategy, where joint advocacy, incubation of norms and standards, investment and co-creation are central pillars.

Today, UN-Habitat and the UN system as a whole is shifting towards recognising the importance of holistic outcomes in sustainable urban development. This includes social and environmental impact that is measurable and returns that are credible for investors.

This way we can work with various financial actors including market intermediaries, private equity and others realise the transformation that we need to see in cities. At the same time, the UN system is shifting from funding projects to long-term financing of integrated sustainable initiatives.

There are three takeaways which I hope you will get from this Assembly:

One, improved opportunities for engagement with governments and other like-minded financiers.

Two, common ‘Declare-Actions’ that as the business and finance community, you will have the opportunity to present to the wider Forum.

And Three, ideas for concrete project collaborations with UN-Habitat and its partner cities.

As the UN-Agency mandated with achieving sustainable urbanization worldwide, UN-Habitat’s integrated approach to urban development requires all actors to contribute to this process. By building up our capacity to understand the needs of member states, together with partner cities and investors such as yourselves, we are emerging on a new pathway, one which aims to close the 2.5 trillion-dollar urban infrastructure financing gap. This will help us to gain traction towards achieving the SDGs, in particular 11 and 17.

By building internal capacity in urban capital markets, UN-Habitat is starting to speak the language of finance. Improved project preparation is a cornerstone of this new approach. UN-Habitat is committed to delivering improved capacity development to cities including provision of the skills and tools necessary to build projects that not only address all aspects of our mandate, but that are also attractive to investors.

During the coming days, we hope to be able to facilitate the incubation of new collaborations that will benefit all actors in urban development. For those businesses here today, who have never interacted with us, we would like to encourage you to see the Asia Pacific Forum as a very initial step in a longer-term collaboration with UN-Habitat. As we move towards improved capacity in the area of private and commercial finance, your feedback on concrete project proposals will be a key factor in how we shift to better align with the global finance community.

In view of this, UN-Habitat would like to extend an invitation to all of you to join us at the Cities Investment Platform during WUF10. This will be a key moment to inspire change in ‘business as usual’ financial markets and shift towards realising a return on investment linked both to monetary value and public good. Through this, we hope to build investor confidence in emerging market cities, by both examining holistic risk and helping build stronger tools for packaging project indicators for Environmental, Social and Governance factors.

I wish you all well in your deliberations and look forward to handing the microphone over to business and finance leaders so we can learn from you too. Only through including and involving all stakeholders in the urbanization process, can we effectively inspire the transformative pathways necessary for achieving the 2030 Agenda for all.

Thank you.