



**Speech by the Executive Director, UN-Habitat, on the occasion of the  
Launch of the Flagship Programme on “People-focused smart cities”, Tenth  
Session of the World Urban Forum (WUF10)**

**Ladies and gentlemen**

**Assalamu alaikum!**

1.0 At UN-Habitat we always talk about how more than half of us lives in cities. But recently, another milestone was reached: more than 50% of the world’s population is now online. The world we live in is both urban and digital. And just as urbanization presents both challenges and opportunities, so does digitalization.

2.0 We can see all around us that data, artificial intelligence, connectivity and the new digital economy are shaping our societies. Digital technologies have the potential to serve people, improve public services and working conditions. But persistent digital divides remain, and the digital revolution must be directed and governed in a democratic and inclusive way.

3.0 We must not forget that in this digital world, there are still 3.6 billion people without affordable access to the internet. Among the world’s 47 least developed countries, more than 80 per cent of the population is still offline. And the gender gap in connectivity continues to widen. Only 2 per cent of women in Latin America and the Caribbean and in East Asia and the Pacific own a mobile phone with internet access. Connecting all the world’s people by 2030 should be a shared priority, not only for sustainable development, but for gender equality.

4.0 Digital technologies, depending on their use, can be a force that widens social gaps or reduces them. Considering the importance of this, the Secretary General has made one of his top five priorities for 2019 “reducing digital inequality, building digital capacity and ensuring that new technologies are a force for good”. He is pursuing the implementation of the recommendation of the High-Level Panel on Digital Cooperation on capacity-building and on the need to maximize digital public goods.

5.0 The UN Strategy on Sustainable Urban Development, which UN-Habitat leads, highlights digital transformation and new technologies as one of four frontier issues that require a special, coordinated response. The New Urban Agenda calls for the adoption of “a smart-city approach that makes use of opportunities from digitalization, clean energy and technologies”.



6.0 We have a collective responsibility to give direction to new technologies so that we maximize benefits and prevent unintended consequences. For instance, Artificial Intelligence and data can be used for the public good but can also be used to monitor and manipulate behavior, to manipulate voters, to track human rights defenders and to stifle expressions of dissent.

7.0 I'm therefore pleased to announce that UN-Habitat will take a strategic, thoughtful and considered approach to smart cities through our new Flagship Programme on People-focused Smart Cities. We want to make the ongoing urban digital transformation work for the benefits of all, driving sustainability, inclusivity and prosperity and the realization of human rights in cities and human settlements.

8.0 We will support national and local governments to build the skills and capabilities to develop, procure and effectively use digital technologies in an ethical and inclusive way to make sure that no one is left behind in the digital transition.

9.0 We will launch a global advocacy campaign, ensuring that voices from marginalized groups, including children, youth and older people, women in vulnerable situations and people with disabilities as well as cities with less resources are strongly heard in the global discussions about smart cities.

10.0 And we will work with partners to mobilize investment for urban innovation and smart cities projects that make a direct positive impact on the planet and on people's lives in cities, prioritizing the Global South and communities with less access to resources.

11.0 Ladies and Gentlemen, we are starting to see that the smart cities field is currently not delivering the outcomes that we need to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals. It's often too focused on top down application of shiny new technology and not sufficiently grounded in the real needs of cities and the people that live in them. All too often, cities are reacting to disruption rather than building the skills necessary to take control and steer digital transition towards commonly set goals. And the human rights concerns and negative environmental impacts of some smart city projects are becoming apparent.

12.0 But together we can turn this around. We want to work with all of you to build modern smart cities that are inclusive, people-centered, environmentally friendly and leave no one behind. Please join us in this Programme. Thank you.