

Lecture by the Executive Director, UN-Habitat, Ms. Maimunah Mohd Sharif

Topic: Promoting Inclusive and Sustainable Urbanization

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Thank you very much for the invitation to speak to you today at the Universiti Teknologi MARA. I am honoured to have the opportunity to discuss with you the important topic of “Promoting Sustainable and Inclusive Urbanization.” As a fellow Malaysian, I place great faith in you, the students and academics, to help cities in and beyond Malaysia to become drivers of inclusive prosperity and wellbeing; and I hope we can use today’s lecture to exchange on some of the best approaches for this together.

First, please allow me to introduce myself. I am the Executive Director of the United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-Habitat). Prior to this appointment, I was the Mayor of the City Council of Penang Island, Malaysia. In 2011, I became the first woman to be appointed President of the Municipal Council of Seberang Perai. As mayor of a local authority, I led the Municipal Council of Seberang Perai to achieve its vision of a “cleaner, greener, safer and healthier place to work, live, invest and play.” I began my career as a Town Planner at the Municipal Council of Penang Island in 1985. In 2003, I was promoted to Director of Planning and Development, a position I held until November 2009.

Not too long before all this, I was in a very similar position to you; I was a student. I received my Bachelor of Science in Town Planning Studies from the University of Wales Institute of Science and Technology, UK and a Master of Science in Planning Studies from the Malaysia Science University.

I would like to structure today's lecture in three parts:

1. **The Issue**, where I will highlight some of the most pressing Unsustainable Urbanization Trends;
2. **The Opportunity**, where we will be discussing the global standards of the Sustainable Development Goals and the New Urban Agenda; and
3. **The Tools**, where I will share some inspiring practices with you.

Let us begin with The Challenge: Unsustainable Urbanization Trends

Today over 55 percent of the world's population live in urban areas, and this number is predicted to increase to 68 percent by 2050. These figures may not be new to you but what is crucial, is to understand the issues that come with such rapid urban development.

One of the major challenges in our cities today is the lack of housing for all. Around 1.8 billion people, or more than 20 percent of the world's population, lack adequate housing.

There are 1 billion people living in informal settlements and slums and more than 100 million people are homeless. By 2030, the numbers of people in inadequate housing could increase to 3 billion.

A main challenge with housing is that affordable housing is often inadequate, while adequate housing is often unaffordable. The COVID-19 pandemic showed us how people living in inadequate housing conditions - in slums and informal settlements - are hit hardest during crises. The absence of basic services and the prevalence of stress and unhealthy living conditions contribute to poor health. In turn, poor health can have negative impacts on a person's ability to earn a living, or a child's ability to concentrate in school and when studying at home. In addition, a stressful home stay environment in small and crowded housing, can increase the risk of domestic violence. If planned, constructed and maintained well, housing can be an integral building block for urban development that promotes health, dignity, well-being, safety and inclusion.

A second major challenge in our cities is the lack of safe access to basic services for all. Over half of the world's population, 4.2 billion people, do not have access to adequate sanitation. They use sanitation services that leave human waste untreated, threatening human and environmental health. An estimated 673 million people have no toilets at all, and nearly 698 million children lack basic sanitation at their school.

The consequences of poor sanitation are devastating. Lack of safe sanitation causes illnesses and diseases such as cholera, that often affect the most vulnerable, such as children and persons with disabilities, the worst. According to UNICEF and the World Health Organisation, every year 830,000 people will die from preventable diseases, if nothing is being done. The environmental impacts are devastating too and impact entire communities.

By ensuring safe access to basic services, cities can contribute to better health, better environments, sustainable economies, inclusive and healthy societies.

The third challenge I would like to highlight today – climate action. Urban areas are major contributors to climate change. They account for 71 to 76 percent of CO2 emissions from global final energy use. Globally over 20 percent of greenhouse gas emissions are from the transport sector, with road emissions being the biggest subset. Unfortunately, Malaysia is part of the problem with over 93 percent of households owning a car. Economic growth in Malaysia will translate into higher mobility demand that requires new investment and management to avoid potential negative externalities. Travel demand across all modes of transport in Malaysia more than tripled from 13 million trips per day in 1991 to 40 million in 2010. The surge of car travel has caused congestion, pollution as well as an increase in road accidents.

Greenhouse gas emissions are a major contributor to climate change, which in turn has led to an increase in natural disasters. On average about 14 million people are made homeless as a result of sudden natural disasters, including floods and storms. South and Southeast Asia are affected disproportionately with eight out of ten countries with the highest levels of displacement and housing loss being located here.

In the coming decades, hundreds of millions of people in urban areas are likely to be affected by rising sea levels, increased precipitation, inland floods, more frequent and stronger cyclones and storms, and periods of more extreme heat and cold. Cities are particularly vulnerable to climate change impacts because they represent high concentrations of infrastructure and human assets and activities. It is therefore imperative for climate action to start in urban areas.

But not everything is just a challenge. There is an urgency to act and there are opportunities to ensure sustainable development in cities, as I would like to present to you now. So let us discuss

The Opportunity: SDGs and the New Urban Agenda

The Sustainable Development Goals, or short SDGs, are a set of 17 goals that the Members of the United Nations adopted in 2015. With the SDGs, countries across the world set a new agenda for development that will end all forms of poverty, fight inequalities, tackle climate change and ensure that no one is left behind.

Many of the issues we just saw are directly covered by the SDGs. Housing falls under SDG 11 on Sustainable Cities and Communities. Basic services are part of SDG 6 on Clean Water and Sanitation. And Climate Action is SDG 13.

Human settlements and cities are highly relevant to the SDGs. The Agenda 2030 for Sustainable Development endorses this vision, which opens a new stage in the history of urbanization and international development. For the first time, urbanization is considered a tool for development and consolidates our vision of urbanization as a source of economic wealth, social prosperity and environmental sustainability.

Sustainable urban development is linked to a number of SDGs, such as SDG 5 on gender equality, which relates to urban safety; SDG 8 on job creation, decent work and youth engagement; and SDG 12 on responsible consumption, which includes urban waste management.

SDG 11 most explicitly affirms the importance of on Cities and Communities for attainment of sustainable and inclusive development. It includes targets on housing, transport, inclusion, cultural and natural heritage, natural disasters, the environment, public space, development planning, resource efficiency and resilience. The recent COVID-19 pandemic has reaffirmed the importance of delivering on all targets of SDG 11. It brought to light the shocking reality about air pollution, the lack of access to open public spaces in many cities and the increased vulnerability of the urban poor to shocks and stresses.

Diving deeper into the level of monitoring the SDGs, there are a total of 169 targets with 231 unique indicators that are part of the Global Monitoring Framework. 80 or around one third of the unique indicators have an urban component and can be measured at the local level. These indicators have a direct connection to urban policies and clear impact on cities and human settlements. Over half of them are explicitly relevant to local governments. In fact, as much as 65 percent of the SDGs may not be fully achieved without the involvement of urban and local actors.

The New Urban Agenda plays an equally critical role in the achievement of sustainable and inclusive urban development. It accelerates the achievement of the SDGs by promoting and tracking the development of socially and environmentally sustainable towns and cities. Endorsed in 2016, it will guide urbanization until 2030.

The New Urban Agenda is centred around the five Ps – it protects People and Planet, promotes Prosperity and Peace, and does this through multi-sectoral, multi-stakeholder Partnerships. It is an action-oriented document which sets global standards of achievement in sustainable urban development. It readdresses the way cities are planned, designed, financed, developed, governed and managed; and it builds cooperation with committed partners, relevant stakeholders and urban actors at all levels of government as well as the private sector to support the implementation of the 2030 Agenda.

The vision of the New Urban Agenda is to ensure the “right to the city”, which means equal use and enjoyment of cities and human settlements, seeking to promote inclusivity and ensure that all inhabitants, of present and future generations, without discrimination, of any kind, are able to inhabit and produce just, safe, healthy, accessible, affordable, resilient, and sustainable cities and human settlements, to foster prosperity and quality of life for all.

To achieve this vision, the countries adopting the New Urban Agenda made three Transformative Commitments. The first one is about social inclusion and ending poverty. The second aims to ensure urban prosperity and opportunities for all; and the third one promotes environmental sustainability and resilience.

More concretely, there are five pillars outlined in the Action Framework for the Implementation of the New Urban Agenda. One, National Urban Policies, which for example includes comprehensive land use planning. Two, Rules and Regulations, which touches on the legal status or urban plans, public space legislation and guarantees to basic services. Three, Urban Planning and Design, which for example picks up the issue of housing, we previously discussed. Four, Financing Urbanization, which is about tax policies and economic development. And finally, the fifth pillar is Local Implementation, for example through community-driven development.

Both the SDGs and the New Urban Agenda signify are global commitments, but to achieve them, local implementation is imperative. They require effective multiscalar and multisectoral collaboration. Many countries have developed their unique action plans for achieving the SDGs and implementing the New Urban Agenda. Malaysia has made significant contributions by hosting the ninth session of the World Urban Forum in Kuala Lumpur in 2018, which brought together over 23,000 city leaders and urban enthusiasts. In 2019, the seventh Asia-Pacific Urban Forum took place. Finally, earlier this year, in September, the Malaysia Urban Forum provided a platform for knowledge building, awareness raising and innovation to support the local implementation of the SDGs and the New Urban Agenda.

UN-Habitat's Strategic Plan 2020-2023 goes hand-in-hand with the SDGs and NUA, with four main domains of change focusing on: 1) spatial inequality and poverty, 2) shared prosperity of cities and regions, 3) climate action and improved urban environment, and 4) urban crisis prevention and response. This Strategic Plan safeguards our normative and operative works, ensures that they are forward-looking and could run smoothly in alignment with major development agenda.

On the note of local implementation, I would now like to move on to the third and final part of this lecture to discuss some of **The Tools and Inspiring Practices** for sustainable and inclusive urban development. To do so, I will draw on examples of the work that UN-Habitat is carrying out around the world.

As you might know, UN-Habitat, the organisation, which I am proud to be the Executive Director of, is the United Nations Human Settlements Programme. Our objective is to promote socially and environmentally sustainable human settlement development and to achieve adequate shelter for all. As the custodian of SDG 11 Sustainable Cities and Communities, UN-Habitat facilitates environmentally, economically, and socially sustainable, gender sensitive and inclusive urban development policies on national, regional and local level. By improving the standard of living of the urban poor and enhancing participation in the socio-economic life of the city, UN-Habitat seeks to ensure “a better quality of life for all in an urbanizing world”.

To steer the achievement of the SDGs and the implementation of the New Urban Agenda, UN-Habitat carries out operational as well as normative work. With the term operational work, we refer primarily to the practical delivery of projects on the ground. Normative work on the other hand refers to the research we do in order to set global norms and standards for urban development. Engaging a wide range of stakeholders, including students and academia like yourselves, is essential for both elements of our work.

Our operational work is as diverse as the challenges and opportunities in our cities.

- In relation to housing, one of the issues we previously discussed, UN-Habitat has for example generated a city-wide profile of informal settlements in Muntinlupa City in the Philippines. The project included the profiling of 186 community associations, comprising over 33,000 families and a population of more than 130,000 people. Based on the profile, community upgrading strategies can be implemented to improve the living standards of all those living in informal settlements.
- Another project, I would like to highlight is about basic services, the second issue we discussed.

With EU support, UN-Habitat implemented a large-scale basic service project in Malawi. Through the project, we increased water supply for 21,000 people and ensured access to improved sanitation for 51,000 persons across schools and settlements in Malawi.

- Following the earthquake in Nepal in 2015, UN-Habitat mobilized volunteers to rehabilitate damaged toilets and carry out hygiene awareness programmes. In total, we supported 1.5 million people to live in defecation free environments.

- On climate action, UN-Habitat is working with two cities in Malaysia, Iskandar and Melaka, to improve sustainable mobility. As part of the wider Global Future Cities Programme, funded by the UK, the Iskandar will benefit from a smart mobility management system and Melaka from an integrated mobility plan for the heritage area. The programme will help both cities reduce their carbon footprint, improve air quality and achieve more sustainable mobility trends.
- We also deliver improvements to the urban environment through the development of green and public spaces. Working in over 20 countries, including Indonesia and Malaysia, UN-Habitat's Global Public Spaces Programme supports participatory community consultations to design public city spaces.
- Last but not least, I would like to highlight a project we are currently carrying out in Shah Alam. To accelerate the implementation of the ASEAN Sustainable Urbanization Strategy and thereby also the SDGs and the New Urban Agenda, UN-Habitat is working on improving urban safety and basic service delivery in Shah Alam through as Smart and Safe City Programme.

All operational work goes hand-in-hand with normative work or in other words research in order to set new norms and standards. Through normative work, UN-Habitat builds capacity in the planning sector across the world. There is a critical lack of urban and town planners in a number of countries, many of which are rapidly urbanizing and home to some of the most vulnerable populations.

Bangladesh, for example, has one planner for every 600,000 people and an annual urban population growth of 3.1 percent. East African countries like Tanzania and Uganda, which are among the most rapidly urbanizing in Africa with annual urban population growth of 5.1 percent, have one planner for approximately every 450,000 people. In Malaysia, where urban population growth is at 2.1 percent, the ratio is one planner for every 90,000 people.

In Penang, where I was mayor, we are working with the State Government to implement the City Prosperity Initiative to help the state achieve its Vision 2030, which is aligned to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). It is about localizing the SDGs informing state policy and ensuring community participation, attracting the right kind of investors and ensuring that Penang remains competitive to ensure jobs for the next generation.

To strengthen the global planning capacity and to operate effectively, we take an evidence-based approach. We draw lessons from our ongoing and previous projects, analyse the findings and use these to set new norms.

Achievement of SDG 11 and the implementation of the New Urban Agenda will require cities to actively address the key dimensions of sustainable development – the economy, the society and the environment. Some of the themes that we have identified as being relevant to inclusive and sustainable urban development include urbanization and migration, lack of urban planning, informal settlements, formal and informal urban economies, disaster risk reduction and emergency planning, safety and security, demographic ageing and urban sprawl.

Let us dive into three of these themes a little deeper.

How to manage migration with dignity and fairness is one of the most pressing questions we must address as urban planners and enthusiasts. Cities are multi-ethnic, multi-cultural melting pots, attracting internal and external migration flows. Economic, social and environmental reasons drive people into cities of all sizes, especially secondary cities. But how can cities support migrants while recognizing that there is no one-size-fits-all approach? Language, housing, livelihoods, support for children and the elderly all require contextually sensitive approaches. A human rights-based approach can improve the economic and social benefits of migration, building resilient and prosperous urban populations. The norm we should therefore uphold is that all migrants, whether forced or unforced, are entitled to the respect, protection, and full enjoyment of their human rights. One of UN-Habitat's flagship programmes supports local and national authorities in achieving this norm. By promoting human rights, cities can create inclusive and non-discriminatory urban environments for all, strengthen social cohesion and increase the inclusive access to housing, basic services and livelihoods for host and migrant communities.

Disaster risk reduction and emergency planning is another area of focus for inclusive and sustainable urban development. Migration crises, natural and other disasters and most recently the COVID-19 pandemic, make it ever more pertinent for us to understand the important role urban planning plays in risk reduction and holistic crisis response. Cities hold the key to the global recovery from the COVID-19 health crisis and the worst recession for decades.

In response to cities' need to better plan for emergencies, UN-Habitat has published various guidance documents such as the guidelines for Urban Planning Response in Crisis Contexts, a report on how to best respond to the Beirut Port Explosion, as well as multiple publications on the COVID-19 pandemic.

The third area of normative work, which I would like to highlight is demographic ageing. Cities are home to an increasingly ageing population due to increasing life expectancy and low fertility rates. At present, there are more than 1 billion people aged 60 years or older, with most living in low- and middle-income countries. Many do not have access to even the basic resources necessary for a life of meaning and of dignity. Many others confront multiple barriers that prevent their full participation in society.

So how can cities accommodate this growing elderly population? As of this year, we have entered the United Nations Decade of Healthy Ageing (2021-2030), which is an opportunity to bring together governments, civil society, professionals, academia, and the private sector for ten years of concerted, catalytic and collaborative action to improve the lives of older people, their families, and the communities in which they live. Urban practitioners can facilitate active ageing by ensuring that public spaces, transport and buildings are accessible for people with limited mobility.

To make best use of the operational and normative knowledge that our organisation has developed together with a diverse range of partners, we place emphasis on knowledge sharing. Some of the upcoming events and campaigns through which we try to encourage an interactive exchange on the topic of sustainable and inclusive urban development, are:

- International Youth Day on 12 August, which raises the awareness of the international community about youth issues and celebrates the potential of youth as partners in today's global society.
- This year's Malaysia Urban Forum, which will take place from the 28 till 30 September;
- World Habitat Day on 4 October, which marks the beginning of Urban October and aims to remind us all that we are responsible for the habitat of future generations; and lastly,
- World Cities Day on 31 October, which drives cooperation among countries in meeting opportunities and addressing challenges of urbanization.

Finally, I would like to end with a message to you all that effective action towards inclusive and sustainable urban development will only be possible if we build committed partnerships. You as students, professors and the academia, play a major role in driving research that can inform operational projects and global norms. The access to quality education that you enjoy provides you not only with the tools but also with the responsibility to be agents of change.

If you would like to find out more about the work that is being done globally on sustainable and inclusive urbanization, please get in touch and engage with us.

Conclusion: Integrated approach and people centred process are key to achieving sustainable urbanisation.

Thank you.