

Remarks by the Executive Director, UN-Habitat
Virtual Forum on Digital Transformation of Cities and Communities
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Excellencies,

Distinguished guests,

Friends, colleagues, ladies and gentlemen,

A very good morning, afternoon and evening to all of you!

Today we come before you to announce, that we are further strengthening the partnership between our two important institutions.

UN-Habitat seeks to ensure that everybody has a roof over their heads, and the services necessary to a dignified life are delivered to that home. We also support governments at all levels in ensuring that, homes exist within healthy and safe environments, and support social and economic prosperity for all.

Technology has always been central to the shape and character of our cities and towns. It has also been central to the potential quality of life that we can offer to citizens.

Today, information and communication technologies are expanding our capacity to understand our world and our behaviours. They are also expanding our ability to deliver and target services to our citizens. Particularly to those facing the greatest challenges.

At UN-Habitat we often talk about an important milestone that was reached a few years ago: More than half the world's population now live in cities. And recently, the world also reached another milestone: More than half the world's population is connected to the internet.

Today's world is both urban and digital. With these two megatrends come great opportunities but also great challenges.

Cities create jobs, generate wealth and are cultural hotspots. They are the future and they hold the greatest potential to give people a fairer and higher standard of living.

Cities are also home to deprivation and inequality for millions. Their scale and complexity can make the challenges we face intimidating.

The digital revolution has opened up new opportunities to communicate, access services and do business.

Digital technologies and data are playing a major role in shaping cities. Big data, the internet of things and sensor networks, offer new ways for urban managers to make informed decisions and strategic choices.

Digital platforms and applications are facilitating dialogue between citizens and decision-makers.

Autonomous vehicles and drones will change the way that cities are planned and designed.

We know that transport operators can increase the efficiency of their systems, and give moment to moment information to their customers.

Water and energy operators can follow demand, spot faults in their networks, provide a wider diversity of services and improve the accuracy and convenience of billing.

The advantages are not only available to corporations and the middle class. Street hawkers and traders can manage supplies, prices and customers in a way that they never could before, all through a phone.

Personal safety can be improved in even the poorest and most impoverished neighbourhoods.

Market traders and farmers can connect to improve supply chains, lower costs and increase access in even the most marginalised communities.

Digital platforms also bring human rights and inclusion challenges. The COVID-pandemic has highlighted these challenges, and the fact that the digital divide exists all over the world and has widened in many places in recent years.

To ensure that the benefits of the digital revolution leaves no one behind, we need to build digital capacity and digital public infrastructure.

We must also focus on digital rights, inclusion and ethics.

A truly smart, sustainable city is centered around the needs of people and ensures that technology is truly aligned with the needs of local governments.

I am excited by this partnership between UN-Habitat and the International Telecommunication Union.

By bringing together the UN agency with the cities and human settlements mandate, with the one responsible for information and communications technology, we have the potential to build the real people-centered smart cities of the future.

Thank you.