

Speech of the UN-Habitat Executive Director at the Seventh Edition of European Investment Bank's October Days for Sustainable Development

Date: 21 October 2021

Thank you for inviting me to the seventh edition of the October Days for Sustainable Development – Rethinking Cities: from Smart into Human. It is an honour and pleasure for me to be here today to share some reflections on cities and human settlements in the post-pandemic world.

In a span of a few months, our world has been transformed in a manner that none of us anticipated. The novel coronavirus pandemic triggered the worst public health crisis in a century and we are now living through the worst economic recession since the Great Depression. With over 90 per cent of confirmed cases coming from urban areas, cities remain the epicentres of COVID-19. In our rapidly urbanising and globalised world, the virus has spread to virtually every corner of the globe; first, among globally connected cities, and now, through community transmission, from the city to the countryside. Above all, COVID-19 is reversing the gains made in poverty eradication and is pushing back the possibility of attaining the Sustainable Development Goals by at least a decade if not more.

COVID-19 has exposed and exacerbated underlying inequalities in cities. The poor are the most vulnerable and the most likely to die from the disease. Informal workers dependent on daily wages have been deprived of their livelihoods. Children without internet access have lost a year of formal education. Elderly persons, facing risk and stigmatisation, are confined to their homes with no opportunities for social interaction. Migrant workers return home after dangerous journeys to face a future of poverty. Others are confined to dormitories with high exposure to the disease. Minority groups have also been disproportionately affected. Women were forced to juggle childcare, education and work without access to schools and daycare services. Essential workers continue to toil tirelessly and at great personal risk to ensure that our urban services function uninterrupted.

At the same time, this unprecedented crisis has presented us with an unexpected opportunity. Allow me to quote the United Nations Secretary-General here, who said: “We cannot go back to business as usual. Cities and communities are demanding that those in authority take the opportunity to build back better. To emerge stronger, we need a sustainable, inclusive and green recovery for people and the planet. That means dealing with the existing challenges of how cities are planned, managed and financed, and ensuring their development is compatible with the goal of net zero emissions by 2050.”

Ladies and gentlemen,

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development was agreed by our Member States for people, planet and prosperity, in 2015. Today, progress is being made in many places on the

17 Sustainable Development Goals and their 169 targets, but, overall, action to meet the Goals is not yet advancing at the speed or scale required. In September 2019, the UN Secretary-General called on all sectors of society to mobilise for a **decade of action** calling for accelerating sustainable solutions to all the world’s biggest challenges — ranging from poverty and gender to climate change, inequality and closing the finance gap. This is taking place on three levels: **global action** to secure greater leadership, more resources and smarter solutions for the Sustainable Development Goals; **local action** embedding the needed transitions in the policies, budgets, institutions and regulatory frameworks of governments, cities and local authorities; and **people action**, including by youth, civil society, the media, the private sector, unions, academia and other stakeholders, to generate an unstoppable movement pushing for the required transformations. UN-Habitat has been tasked with UNDP to Co-Chair the Local 2030 Coalition, a flagship initiative of the Decade of Action. The Coalition seeks to harness urbanisation processes to assist Member States work more effectively at the local level to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals.

The COVID-19 pandemic and its impact on all 17 SDGs has shown that what began as a health crisis has quickly become a human and socio-economic crisis. While the crisis is setting us back, it also makes the achievement of the SDGs more urgent and necessary. A transformative recovery from COVID- 19 should be pursued, one that addresses the crisis, reduces risks from future potential crises and relaunched the implementation efforts to deliver the 2030 Agenda and SDGs during the Decade of Action.

The Paris Agreement - a legally binding international treaty on climate change – was also agreed by UN member states in 2015 and has now been ratified by all countries. It is a landmark in the multilateral climate change process because, for the first time, a binding agreement brings all nations into a common cause to undertake ambitious efforts to combat climate change and adapt to its effects.

Cities are an important part of the global effort on stronger climate action – both mitigation and adaptation. I will soon be attending COP26 in Glasgow, which had to be rescheduled because of the COVID crisis. The main goals of COP26 are to encourage parties to come forward with ambitious Nationally Determined Contributions that establish their emission reduction targets for 2030, discuss adaptation measures, increase climate finance and finalise the Paris Rulebook - the detailed rules that make the Paris Agreement operational. In another cross-section, Boris Johnson, the Prime Minister of UK stressed the four main goals being “coal, cars, cash and trees” and said that every country needs to do their part in achieving these goals.

In 2016, in Quito, Ecuador, Member States adopted the New Urban Agenda – which works as an accelerator of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 11 – to provide a comprehensive framework to guide and track urbanisation around the globe. UN-Habitat’s work centres on supporting Member States and all other stakeholders in implementing this Agenda.

Ladies and gentlemen

It is only fitting that we take this conversation forward during Urban October.

Urban October starts with World Habitat Day, celebrated on the first Monday of October each year, to World Cities Day which is always celebrated on October 31 – hence the whole urban month. This year, the World Habitat Day global celebration was held in Yaounde, Cameroon, and focused on the theme “Accelerating urban action for a carbon-free world.” World Cities Day will be celebrated globally but especially in Luxor, Egypt, with a focus on “Better City, Better Life: Adapting Cities for Climate Resilience.”

Urban October aims to raise awareness, promote participation, generate knowledge and engage the international community towards a New Urban Agenda, in 31 days of promoting a Better Urban Future. We encourage all partners, to plan and organise activities during the month.

Why did we choose to focus on climate for the Urban October 2021? As I already noted, the pandemic has set us back on our efforts to achieve the SDGs and the Paris Agreement. But it has provided us with a once-in-a-generation opportunity to shape our post-pandemic future which is not only healthy, but also green and just. Because putting people on the path to recovery after the pandemic is not different from accelerating the achievement of the SDGs or pushing ahead on climate change mitigation and adaptation. To twist the phrase - they are three sides of the same coin!

Earlier this year, we at UN-Habitat produced a Report on Cities and Pandemics: Towards a More Just, Green and Healthy Future. In this report, we present an analysis of the situation of the COVID-19 in cities and urban areas one year after the declaration of pandemic, and outline a range of bold measures that could deliver a lasting and sustainable recovery from the current crisis. These include:

FIRST: Rethinking the Form and Function of the City. Urban morphologies and systems should be reconfigured at different scales to not only enhance their resilience to the effects of the pandemic, but also make them more sustainable and productive through inclusive planning. Spanning a range of scales, from regions and territories to neighbourhoods and buildings, the promotion of compact design, accessible mobility and mixed land use can support the development of safer, more liveable urban environments.

SECOND: Addressing Systemic Poverty and Inequality in Cities. Targeted interventions should be designed to mitigate the disproportionate impacts of COVID-19 and related restrictions on poor and vulnerable groups through emergency assistance and service provision, at the same time taking steps to address the underlying causes of their exclusion. While overcrowding and the absence of basic services have raised the health risks of the

pandemic for poorer residents, lack of access to digital services and the decline in informal sector activities during lockdowns have left them in an even more precarious economic state.

THIRD: Rebuilding a ‘New Normal’ Urban Economy. A suite of tailored economic support and relief packages should be developed to help smaller businesses, informal workers and at-risk sectors to survive the crisis, with an emphasis on “building back better” by promoting the transition to greener, more equitable urban economies. Though cash-strapped local authorities may be tempted to respond to these pressures by scaling back their commitments, it is essential that they continue with the support of national governments to maintain services and financial assistance to help residents and businesses survive the crisis.

FOURTH: Clarifying Urban Legislation and Governance Arrangements. Authorities must recognize the need for more integrated, cooperative multi-level governance, with an emphasis on developing more flexible and innovative institutional and financial frameworks. Governments at national, subnational and local levels have been forced to respond creatively to the unfolding crisis in many different ways, whether through greater collaboration, increased autonomy or a recentralisation of certain responsibilities. While the outcomes have been uneven and frequently contested, they have also generated new approaches and learning that should not be forgotten once the pandemic has come to an end.

And we did not limit our engagement in helping our stakeholders to fight the COVID crisis to analysis and recommendations. In parallel, building on more than 40 years of urban experience, much of it in humanitarian situations, we focused on the city-level response to the crisis. We developed a COVID-19 response Plan for action, we launched an appeal and a campaign, and a range of immediate response and longer term recovery activities at the corporate, regional and country levels. From March to August 2020, early in the crisis, UN-Habitat supported the overall response to the pandemic in 64 countries and more than 250 cities, benefiting 6.8 million people, the majority being residents of slums and informal settlements. This work is still ongoing.

Ladies and gentlemen,

We at UN-Habitat are guided by our Strategic plan for 2020-2023, approved by the Member States, which is based on UN-Habitat’s new vision of “a better quality of life for all in an urbanising world”. This vision is encapsulated in the Plan’s 4 domains of change, namely:

- Reduced spatial inequality and poverty in communities across the urban - rural continuum;
- Enhanced shared prosperity of cities and regions;
- Strengthened climate action and improved urban environment; and
- Effective urban crisis prevention and response.

As pronounced by the UN-Habitat Committee of Permanent Representatives, Our Strategic Plan continues to be relevant and robust during this unprecedented crisis. It is clear that

sustainable urbanisation, and the work and mandate of UN-Habitat, is more important than ever before.

Let me offer some glimpse of that the milestone conversations to come in the near future that focus on this agenda:

In April 2022, a High-Level Meeting on the Implementation of the New Urban Agenda, will take place in New York. This is a mandated meeting of the UN General Assembly on Implementation of the outcomes of the Habitat III Conference. The planning of this meeting is at an early stage and Member States will decide which shape it takes and what outcomes it will produce, but I can safely say that many different stakeholders will be included in the process of preparation and conclusions. We hope that the European Union, including European Investment Bank will be active stakeholders in this process.

Between 26-to 30 of June, in Katowice, Poland, the 11th edition of the World Urban Forum will take place focusing on Transforming our Cities for a Better Urban Future. The World Urban Forum is the premier global conference on sustainable urbanisation, convened by UN-Habitat. It always attracts tens of thousands of stakeholders. We expect the European Union and the European Investment Bank to join this prime global forum on urbanisation and share their achievements with the global audience. May I use this opportunity to invite all those present today to join us in Katowice!

Before I conclude, let me turn to the understanding of collaboration we have been building with the European Investment Bank in the past couple of years. This collaboration will be extremely important to the joint efforts to build back better.

I met Mr. Werner Hoyer, President of the EIB in Dakar in February 2020, when we together organised EIB and UN-Habitat Africa day. We have achieved good mutual understanding, and agreed to give special focus to Energy Efficiency and Climate Action standards in urban development and in housing to reach our shared objectives in supporting the climate objectives.

We concluded that our common efforts show that access to finance alone will not help improve sustainable urbanisation in the developing countries unless it serves the goals of well-planned urban development, framed by strategies on all levels of governance: national, regional and local.

As contribution to the Decade of Action to deliver the Sustainable Development Goals and in response to the call of the Secretary General of the United Nations for accelerating sustainable solutions to all the world's biggest challenges — ranging from poverty and gender to climate change, inequality and closing the finance gap, we now endeavour to achieve closer cooperation in supporting and preparing bankable projects, where sustainable urban development is a key factor for successful investment. We aim to exchange

experience and, where required, support each other's work, through technical level cooperation sharing standards and concepts, UN Habitat focusing on public policies of sustainable urban development and adequate housing, and the EIB focusing on project financing on this respect and, where required, mobilising other partners to contribute to our joint efforts.

We are now also exploring how we could work together in several countries in Sub-Saharan Africa. It looks very promising!

Ladies and gentlemen,

The recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic is an opportunity for the world's cities, to put climate action on top of their agenda.

Cities are indeed the incubators of innovation and new technology. We must harness this strength for better climate change solutions.

This is a chance to change how we generate our power, construct our buildings, heat, cool and light up our offices and homes, and travel around from home to work.

We need clean, resource efficient energy, to replace fossil fuels. We need energy efficient infrastructure to encourage walking and cycling.

And we need well planned and well managed compact cities, that allow for non-motorised transport, to reduce energy consumption from cooling and heating, so the natural and built environment come together in greater harmony.

Climate action will differ from city to city, but we must make sure the green transition benefits everyone, especially the most vulnerable, and creates new jobs. The only way forward is for everyone to work together to ensure that our climate goals are met. Through implementation of the New Urban Agenda to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals.

Let me also stress the importance of greater multilevel coordination between international, national and local governments, especially when investing in and implementing stimulus programmes, so that we can truly build back better, greener and fairer while also protecting our communities.

Please allow me to conclude with a reminder that while we need to leave no-one behind and ensure environmental and climate neutrality dimensions, we must also remember the economic realities.

When we call for smart, human, and climate-neutral cities, we must always seek that investment in urban development responds to its the dual purpose: to increase quality of life of all people by investing in sustainable urban development, but we also must make sure that this investment increases economic productivity which gives all people more opportunities for higher income and reduces inequalities so that everyone can afford the benefits of improved standards of life quality.

It is why we agreed with the European Investment Bank to promote well-planned and managed urban development, in the context of rapid urbanisation, to create the potential for increased economic productivity and thus enabling achievement of the top-tier goals: such as equitable productivity increases coupled with job creation, a greener and climate-smart economy, as well as poverty reduction and improvements in the quality of life for all citizens. Our common objective is to position urban development as a driver of sustainable development and a vehicle to achieve these top-tier goals.

Thank you.