



UNITED NATIONS HUMAN SETTLEMENTS PROGRAMME
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FOR A BETTER URBAN FUTURE

OPENING SPEECH OF THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF UN-HABITAT AT THE 2023 THIRD SESSION OF THE EXECUTIVE BOARD OF UN-HABITAT

28 November 2023, Nairobi, Kenya

Excellency Mr Silvio Albuquerque, Ambassador of Brazil and Permanent Representative to UN-Habitat, also the Chair of our Executive Board,

Honourable Ms Alice Wahome, Cabinet Secretary for Lands, Public Works, Housing and Urban Development of Kenya, our Host,

Members of the Executive Board and beyond,

Ms Zaineb Hawa Bangura, Director-General of UNON

Mr Michal Mlyner, Deputy Executive Director,

*Your Excellencies, Ambassadors, High Commissioners and Permanent Representatives
Honorable Mayors*

Dear Stakeholders and partners

My esteemed colleagues at the United Nations and at UN-Habitat

Colleagues, Friends, Ladies and gentlemen,

Good morning, good afternoon and good evening!

This is my last Executive Board meeting as Executive Director. If you will allow me, Excellency Chair, I would like to offer some personal reflections, which I believe will be most relevant to open our deliberations today.

I reported for duty on 19 January 2018, nearly six years ago and in my second meeting with the Committee of Permanent Representatives, I reported that all was not well with UN-Habitat's finances. I made a promise to Member States that I would do my level best to regain your trust and to reverse the financial deficit. Little did I know what I was promising to do!

Distinguished delegates,

In my final Chief Executive Board meeting in New York, I explained to the Secretary-General and my peers that I found UN-Habitat facing the 5Ds. Our deficit was not only financial, but we were also suffering deficits in trust, morale, mandate, and governance. We were barely able to meet the monthly salary of the staff. As one governmental donor said to me: “Maimunah, you are in the gutter, UN-Habitat is down the drain! Some of you even asked: If you knew, would you have assumed the post? I am already here, I said, so let me work with my team to get us out from the drain.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank Member States for your criticism, constant vigilance, increased interest in UN-Habitat’s mandate and for elevating the United Nations Habitat Assembly into the world’s premier legislative platform for housing and sustainable urbanization. Special thanks to all the deputy permanent representatives whose dedication, involvement and support was critical to helping us flip the script, turning the 5Ds into 5Ss - Surplus in finance, trust, goodwill, mandate and governance!

Honorable Alice Wahome,
Ambassador Jean Kimani,

I will forever be grateful to the Government of Kenya and the people of this wonderful country for your amazing hospitality and support. I now live by the wise saying: “if you want to go fast, go alone but if you want to go far, go together”. Throughout it all - austerity, Covid-19, climate emergency, natural disasters and conflicts - we have kept the team together. The principle of heart-count over headcount has served us well. To my team, we have emerged from the long day’s journey out of night with most of us still together. Thank you for yet another surplus year for UN-Habitat!

In 2018, I was also told that as I am not a mayor, I must act and talk differently. I am not shy to say once a mayor always a mayor. So, my appreciation to the local & regional governments, members of the Stakeholder Advisory Group Enterprise (SAGE), the Global Task Force, the United Cities & Local Government, C40, ICLEI and other local government networks, the AGGI, Hairou Commission, the UN-Habitat professionals group, and the media - for helping to elevate the mandate of UN-Habitat as reflected in the 9th, 10th and 11th sessions of the World Urban Forum; and also at Urban October, book-ended by World Habitat Day and World Cities Day, the last of which saw the participation of 7 First Ladies in Üsküdar, Istanbul, Türkiye.

Dear Ms Zainab Hawa Bangura, thank you for your support throughout our time together in Kenya. With respect, let me also acknowledge the full support from colleagues at UNON during my 18 months as Acting Director-General of UNON. We went through the 2019 Dusit D2 Complex Attack and also the crash of Ethiopian airline flight 302. A big thank you to the staff of UNON and especially UNDS for keeping us safe. Conference services for their support during the first and second United Nations Habitat Assembly. The translators for your continued support at our governing council meetings. JMS throughout the Covid-19 pandemic. Brighter days are ahead of us at UNON - the capital investment project - which was initiated during my time as Acting DG - should see Nairobi become a better venue for effective multilateralism bridging the divide between global north and south.

Distinguished delegates,

As we look to the future, please recall that the mandate of UN-Habitat remains a critical and exciting one. I am leaving at a moment in time when sustainable urbanization is at the table of the G7, G20, G77+China, and next week, at the COP28. We can only contribute effectively with your consistent support. So, I hope you will continue to contribute generously to UN-Habitat in the coming years.

As we deliberate and actively engage with the Agenda Items of this third Executive Board meeting, I ask for one favor and that is I call on all of you, Member States, to support the incoming Executive Director and the UN-Habitat team. You can do this by ensuring that the Executive Board and all the governing bodies fulfil your mandated oversight functions. Please ensure that the Programme continues to make the best use of the surpluses in finance, goodwill, and trust to ensure SDG11, the Habitat agenda and the New Urban Agenda actively spur new hope for effective multilateralism for people, planet and future generations.

Thank you, Asante sana!