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UN-HABITAT

FOR A BETTER URBAN FUTURE

Opening Remarks by Ms. Anacláudia Rossbach, Executive Director of UN-Habitat
Global observance of World Habitat Day, Opening Ceremony, 5 October 2026

Your Excellency Khalfan Said Al Shu'aili, Minister of Housing and Urban Planning of Oman,

Your Excellencies,

Distinguished guests, colleagues and friends,

It is a great pleasure to welcome you here today for World Habitat Day 2026. I would like to begin by thanking the Government and the people of the Sultanate of Oman for hosting this year's World Habitat Day. This day formally starts our global Urban October celebrations, a whole month dedicated to advocating for adequate and affordable housing and sustainable urban development. This year, Urban October will conclude on the 31st of October, with the World Cities Day in Fuzhou, China.

Today, here in Muscat, we are talking about something very simple, yet fundamental to everyone's life: Adequate housing.

However, this fundamental right remains out of reach for billions of people and communities around the world.

Today, more than 1.1 billion people still live in informal settlements and slums, and more than 300 million people experience homelessness.

Up to 3.4 billion people around the world lack access to secure, safe and adequate housing.

Under the UN human rights framework, housing is considered adequate when it meets seven criteria: security of tenure; availability of services; habitability; affordability; location and accessibility and, importantly, cultural adequacy.

Adequate housing means much more than a physical structure with four walls and a roof. It gives people the opportunity to live with dignity.

The figures involved are vast, and it can be difficult to grasp what they mean - what 3.4 billion people means.

Here in Oman, the population is around 5.4 million. The number of people globally affected by housing inadequacy is equivalent to more than 600 times the entire population of Oman.

That gives us some sense of the scale.

But numbers alone do not explain the housing crisis.

A family may have a roof and still spend so much on rent that there is little left for food, education or healthcare.

A home may be affordable but located far from jobs, schools or transport.

A woman may have lived in the same neighbourhood for decades and still have no security of tenure.

And increasingly, a home can disappear overnight because of conflict, flooding, storms or other crises.

In 2024 alone, 45 million internal displacements were triggered by weather related disasters.

This is why building more houses - important as that is - will not by itself solve the housing crisis.

We need housing that people can afford.

We need housing connected to transport, jobs and services.

We need housing systems that work for people across different incomes and stages of life.

We also need to pay particular attention to the places where the scale of the challenge is most visible: informal settlements.

Transforming informal settlements cannot mean simply replacing what exists or evicting communities. It means working with residents to improve housing, basic services, tenure, policies, public space and economic opportunity.

This year is particularly important for UN-Habitat.

As the global review of SDG 11 and the midterm review of the New Urban Agenda at the UN General Assembly earlier this year showed, housing has become a global concern, affecting countries both in the Global North and South.

Recognizing this, UN-Habitat's Strategic Plan 2026–2029 places housing, land and basic services at the centre of our work.

And we are opening Urban October here in Muscat with a very practical question: how do we move from recognising adequate housing as a right to making it a reality at the scale required?

That is a question for all of us here today, because each of us has a role to play in turning that ambition into action.

The challenge is how we bring those pieces together and turn them into adequate housing that reaches people.

I hope we use this day not simply to describe the scale of the problem, but also to look closely at what is working, what is not working, and what each of us can do differently.

3.4 billion is an enormous number. But it is also not an abstract number. It represents people, families and communities. And is the number of lives our collective action can change.

Thank you, and welcome to World Habitat Day 2026.