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FOR A BETTER URBAN FUTURE

SPEECH

Speech by the Executive Director of UN- Habitat at the World Cities Day 2026 in Fuzhou, China

31 October2026

Salutation of dignitaries in accordance with protocol

Excellencies, Honourable Ministers,
Mayors,
Colleagues,
Ladies and gentlemen,

It is my great pleasure to welcome you to Fuzhou for the global observance of World Cities Day 2026.

This Day is a culmination of our Urban October celebrations, a month-long campaign dedicated to advancing adequate and affordable housing and sustainable urban development.

I have just arrived from Mexico City, where I announced the date for the fourteenth session of the World Urban Forum. WUF14 will take place from 31 July to 4 August 2028.

I want to start by expressing my gratitude to the Government of the People's Republic of China, the Fujian Provincial Government and the Municipality of Fuzhou for hosting this important gathering.

This year's theme is "Regenerating the City: Adequate Housing for All."

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Let’s think about it for a moment. Today, more than half of humanity lives in cities and towns, and by 2050 nearly 70 per cent of the world's population is projected to live in urban areas. Urbanization remains one of the most defining forces of our century, creating opportunities for innovation, prosperity and sustainable development. At the same time, it is also exposing deep inequalities and vulnerabilities.

Across the world, cities are experiencing growing housing challenges. Up to 3.4 billion people globally lack adequate housing, including more 1 billion people who still live in informal settlements and slums. The numbers are on the rise due to climate disasters, conflicts and growing inequality.

These might be numbers. Big numbers. However, let’s remember that these numbers are people whose health, access to education, economic opportunities and sense of belonging are affected by the global housing crisis.

Adequate housing is fundamental to human dignity. This is why the focus on urban regeneration is so timely. Regeneration is not only about renewing buildings, upgrading infrastructure or revitalizing neighbourhoods.

It is about creating opportunities for people, restoring the vitality of communities and ensuring that cities respond effectively to changing global, economic and environmental realities.

It enables us to make better use of existing urban assets while expanding access to adequate housing, improving public spaces, strengthening resilience and supporting local economic development.

The theme also reflects a broader shift in how we think about sustainable urbanization. The challenge is no longer simply how to accommodate urban growth and house people. Increasingly, it is how we improve the quality of urban life and improve inclusiveness and resilience of the urban areas.

Regeneration offers exactly that, helping cities become more connected, more sustainable, better prepared for future challenges and more focused on people and their needs.

This vision lies at the heart of the New Urban Agenda and directly contributes to the achievement of Sustainable Development Goal 11, which commits us to making cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable.

More importantly, it contributes to progress across the wider 2030 Agenda and all the Sustainable Development Goals by linking housing, climate action, economic opportunity and social inclusion through integrated urban solutions.

This vision is also fully aligned with UN-Habitat's Strategic Plan 2026-2029, which places housing, land and basic services at the centre of sustainable urban transformation. Through its focus on reducing inequalities, promoting shared prosperity, advancing climate action and strengthening resilience, the Strategic Plan recognizes that housing is both a fundamental need and a catalyst for broader development outcomes.

Across regions, cities and communities are demonstrating how inclusive regeneration can improve living conditions, strengthen local economies, restore public spaces and create more sustainable urban environments. We must move these approaches beyond individual projects and reach the scale needed to address the global housing crisis.

To do this, we need sustainable and strong political leadership, effective urban planning, adequate financing and partnerships across all levels of government, the private sector, civil society and communities themselves.

World Cities Day brings to a close Urban October, which we at World Habitat Day in Muscat, Oman, on 5 October.

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Throughout the month, cities and communities around the world have engaged in events and activities to exchange experiences, share solutions and advance the global dialogue on adequate housing and sustainable urban development. We held more than 215 events across 53 countries and 133 cities.

Today, the World Cities Day returns again to its birthplace – China. The Fourth cycle of the Shanghai Award Ceremony is being hosted here in Fuzhou, one of the first winners of the Shanghai Award. World Cities Day and the Shanghai Award are unique platforms to learn from one another, strengthen partnerships and advance collective action. The conversations that take place today should help us move beyond identifying challenges and toward implementing solutions capable of delivering meaningful and lasting change.

Let us reaffirm our shared commitment to place people and adequate housing at the centre of sustainable development.

Let’s ensure our cities become places of opportunity, resilience and dignity for all.

Thank you. Xie Xie.