



UN-HABITAT

Address by
Mrs. Anna Kajumulo Tibaijuka
Under-Secretary-General of the United Nations
and
Executive Director of UN-HABITAT

On the occasion of the Asia-Pacific Ministerial Conference on Housing and Urban
Development, Friday 15 December 2006

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Your Excellency President Abdul Kalam of India,
Honourable Kumari Selja, Minister of Housing and Urban Poverty Alleviation, India,
Honourable Ministers from Asia and the Pacific,
Excellencies,
Distinguished Guests,
Colleagues in the United Nations,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am deeply honoured to present this keynote address to such a distinguished forum. This is an auspicious time for us all because a new Secretary General, Mr Ban Ki-moon has just been sworn in. His appointment ushers in a new era for the peoples of the United Nations and especially for the people of this region. As you know he hails from South Korea, one of the fastest developing 'tiger' countries – a country with an excellent track record in development and poverty reduction. He takes office pledging to strengthen the three pillars of our United Nations – security, development and human rights – so that we can build a more peaceful, more prosperous and more just world for succeeding generations.

It is also auspicious because your gathering today marks the first time that key decision makers from the world's most populous region meet in quest of a new vision for sustainable cities by the year 2020.

So, first, I wish to thank His Excellency President Abdul Kalam, Honourable Ministers Selja and Reddy for hosting this conference and helping us steer it in the right direction. I also express my deep appreciation to the Honourable Ministers and representatives of countries across the region who have made it their business to be at these important deliberations.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

We are now at a very significant turning point in history: The year 2007 will be the year in which for the first time, half of humanity will be living in towns and cities. It marks the beginning of a new urban era.

It is projected that by 2030 that figure will rise to two-thirds. Make no mistake, we live at a time of unprecedented, rapid, irreversible urbanisation. The cities growing fastest are those of the developing world. And the fastest growing neighbourhoods are the slums.

Another and unacceptable feature of the new urban age is that 2007 will also be the year in which the global number of slum dwellers is forecast to reach the 1 billion mark. UN-HABITAT's latest research shows that this region is already home to half the world's slum population of 581 million.

Urban poverty is a severe, pervasive – and largely unacknowledged – feature of modern life. In this new urban era, it is unacceptable that today millions of people in cities across the Asia-Pacific do not have adequate shelter, that children are growing up undernourished, exposed to disease without hope of education or a future.

The outgoing Secretary General of the United Nations, Mr. Kofi Annan, warned us: “The locus of global poverty is moving to the cities, a process now recognised as the *urbanisation of poverty*.”

Remember too, that slums are the hub of rising crime and violence, that when it comes to climate change urban poverty is one of the biggest polluters. In this global village, someone else's poverty very soon becomes one's own problem: of lack of markets for one's products, illegal immigration, pollution, AIDS, other diseases, insecurity, crime, fanaticism, terrorism.

Honourable Ministers,

You know better than I that by 2020, Asia will be home to 12 of the world's largest cities with populations of over 20 million. Thanks to impressive growth in China and India, the region has made some headway in dealing with poverty. It is impressive too that both countries are looking elsewhere in the world to spread their expertise. The recent China-Africa conference being an example that immediately comes to mind.

However, in both these two countries and others in this region the gap between rich and poor is growing.

This is why the huge urban growth in this region is crying out for new methods of urban planning, management, financing and service delivery aimed at creating socially inclusive cities.

In this broader context, we need to develop a uniform mechanism for monitoring and reporting progress in the Asia-Pacific region on the Millennium Development Goals,

especially Target 10 on halving the number of people without access to clean water and sanitation by the year 2015, and Target 11 on improving lives of 100 million slum dwellers by the year 2020.

We cannot let our cities be places where the majority of people are poverty-stricken. We must not let down our young people. Already, and you are well aware of this too, youth up to the age of 24 are in the majority in this region. We have to invest in all of them, be they young or poor!

This conference must therefore seek to share experiences and learn from best practices in the implementation of pro-poor urban policies and enabling legislation.

Two similar regional conferences in Latin America (MINURVI) and in Africa (AMCHUD) have established permanent secretariats as part of a new regional collaboration to keep growing urban poverty high on the agenda, and hold governments to account. I have now doubt that such a similar process will emerge here.

To those who ask why we need a regional vision, the answer is simple: Over the past 10 years, intra-regional trade in Asia has become more significant than ever before, indicating the need to forge a common set of economic, social and environmental goals across the region.

There is another and very important reason we have to improve our towns and cities and reduce urban poverty: When it comes to earthquakes, tsunamis, floods, typhoons and disasters wrought by climate change, everywhere it is the urban poor who are most vulnerable. All too often, they live in places where no-one else would dare set foot – in places prone to flooding or landslides, polluted places or in shaky structures that would be destroyed the instant a hurricane hits causing untold loss in lives and destruction.

In this new urban age, many mega-cities in the Asia-Pacific with populations of 10 million or more loom as giant potential flood and disaster traps. Tokyo, Osaka-Kobe, Shanghai, Dhaka, Mumbai, Karachi, to name just some. The United Nations has calculated that one dollar invested in disaster reduction today, can save up to seven dollars tomorrow in relief and rehabilitation costs.

At UN-HABITAT we know only too well, as you do what the costs are. I have seen first hand the suffering after the Indian Ocean tsunami in Indonesia, Sri Lanka and the Maldives. I have also seen the aftermath of earthquakes in Pakistan and Japan. From our regional headquarters in Fukuoka, Japan, UN-HABITAT is working with the communities and the governments to help rebuild homes and lives across this region. I was thanked by communities able to rebuild their homes in dignity with the assistance of UN-HABITAT. UN-HABITAT is also doing considerable post-conflict work in Afghanistan, Iraq and Timor Leste. This work has gone a long way towards consolidating their security of tenure, and promoting the peace process in these countries.

In recalling some of the work we do in governance and city management in Papua New Guinea, the disaster vulnerability, environmental and urban problems of the small island developing countries must not be overlooked.

Your Excellency, Mr. President,

As India moves from IT to BT – information technology to bio-technology – ever striving for the convergence of technologies and excellence, it is setting us all a formidable example. The *Bharat Nirman* programme to ensure the integration of socio-economic

infrastructure from the national through the regional and down to the local level, I have no doubt will transform this country; not least the PURA drive for Providing Urban Amenities in Rural Areas. I think too of excellent progress of the National Slum Development Programme and the Jawaharlal Nehru National Urban Renewal Mission and the social investments in youth.

And today, Mr. President, I can inform you that UN-HABITAT will be pleased to support this important initiative. As we meet, senior officials are discussing how best to do this.

In 2003, UN-HABITAT established the Water and Sanitation Trust Fund as a direct response to the World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg, South Africa. The fund is now actively engaged in partnership with the Asian Development Bank. It is already committed to bring new investments of \$500 million dollars for water and sanitation to the urban poor. The fund is also supporting the efforts of the Government of India to improve water and sanitation in four cities in the State of Madhya Pradesh.

Other countries now benefiting from the UN-HABITAT trust fund include Cambodia, China's Yunan Province, Laos, Nepal, and Vietnam. It is with pride that I can say also that in the past three years, the Trust Fund has stimulated new investments worth \$300 million dollars in the Asia-Pacific region.

Distinguished delegates,

It is important to recall here UN-HABITAT's new Slum Upgrading Facility. Its aim is to help poor people find the money to invest in their own housing and utility services. The facility is there to help poor communities borrow small sums from the private sector. It will also help municipalities and housing groups with the start-up capital to establish housing loan guarantees. It will help and advise poor people unable to get commercial loans.

Muhammad Yunus, the Bangladeshi banker and Nobel laureate says: "Conventional banks look for the rich. We look for the absolutely poor." As he sees it, *credit is a human right*, enabling a person "to unwrap that gift of one's self and find out who he or she is." Yet the concept he pioneered has proved to be much more than kind-hearted charity: 99 percent of his Grameen borrowers repay their debts—despite the fact that they borrow without providing collateral—and the bank makes a modest profit.

Our own limited experience with the Slum Upgrading Facility pilot projects in Ghana, Indonesia, Sri Lanka and Tanzania tell us the same. We must exploit this opportunity to define clearly how governments can help and encourage the private sector to invest in the noble, worthwhile and most important cause of affordable housing for the urban poor.

Like Grameen Bank, we can assure you that small loans will not only be good returns on the investments made. But providing people with security of tenure, helping them own their homes, improve their neighbourhoods, makes for healthier and happier communities. The problems of crime, disease and unemployment are automatically reduced. It is a win-win situation.

A decade ago, when we in the United Nations system spoke of *sustainable development* as the key to the future, the Chinese Government, most notably at the Habitat II summit in Istanbul, insisted that the slogan should read, *sustainable economic development*. And look how much better Chinese cities are today. From Bangladesh and India, to China and beyond, there are plenty of examples to follow, from practice to policy.

And finally, distinguished delegates, in this new urban era it is imperative that we seek out new and sometimes radical solutions, that we even change the politics. The tiger cities of this region have shown the world what can be done.

It is my fervent hope that your deliberations will lead to a new regional mechanism that will help serve and guide the cause of urban renewal and urban poverty reduction.

I assure you that Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon is ready to offer the Asia-Pacific every support in this important endeavour.

Thank you.