



UN-HABITAT

Remarks by Mrs. Anna Tibajuka,
Under-Secretary-General of the United Nations,
Executive Director UN-HABITAT,
At the first meeting of the Advisory Council of the UN-HABITAT Warsaw Office on
25 February 2007.

Honourable Andrzej Aumiller, Minister of Construction of Poland,
Your Worship, Hanna Gronkiewicz-Waltz, Mayor of Warsaw,
Honourable Ministers,
Excellencies,
Distinguished Guests,
Colleagues in the United Nations system,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It gives me great pleasure to address this gathering of Honourable Ministers, distinguished bankers, local authorities and so many other important people playing key roles in shaping a brighter future for this region. I wish to open my remarks with special words of thanks: Firstly, thank you, Honourable Minister Aumiller, for hosting this event and for giving us your valuable time to serve as Chair of this first Advisory Council.

Indeed, this is an auspicious occasion because the Warsaw Office established as a centre for UN-HABITAT's work in the Central, Eastern and Southern European States, is our newest regional office. And so I also particularly wish to acknowledge our appreciation for the way the Government of Poland inspired the creation of this Habitat centre and for so generously providing the financial support necessary to ensure that the region's urban problems remain high on every agenda.

This is crucial at the dawn of the new urban age.

It is important that I acknowledge the generous support of the Polish government as a donor to our Water and Sanitation Trust Fund. It is changing the lives of some of the poorest people in towns and cities in Africa and Asia. And finally, Your Worship Mayor Gronkiewicz-Waltz, thank you too for your valuable support.

Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen,

In my role as Under-Secretary-General of the United Nations and Executive Director of UN-HABITAT, I wish to apprise you of the following:

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

UN-HABITAT research projects 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 of course in this region.

It takes the breath away to see how strongly market forces have established a firm footing in these former command economies. Most of the so-called "transition" countries are booming, with bank lending a big factor in current economic growth rates. According to the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, these growth rates range from over 6 percent in Russia and Serbia, to 5.7 percent in Ukraine and 5.5 percent here in Poland.

But 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. Under European Union standards, it is estimated that roughly 5 percent of the urban populations in this region live in slum conditions. Though different to Africa, Asia or Latin America, here we find *vertical slums* in the form of deteriorating, poorly serviced high-rise housing estates, many of them shooting up unplanned.

Urban poverty is a severe, pervasive – and largely unacknowledged – feature of modern life. In this new urban era, it is unacceptable that even those 5 percent live in such poverty, exposed to disease without hope of education or a future.

Remember too, that urban poverty is the source of rising crime and violence, that when it comes to climate change urban poverty is one of the biggest polluters.

In the countries to the east of the European Union, urban energy efficiency must improve, and greenhouse gas emissions must be brought down. Energy use in this region tends to be heavily polluting and massively inefficient. European figures show that it takes twice as much energy to produce the same output in Hungary or the Czech Republic than in France or Spain. Romania, Estonia and Poland emit 25-100 percent more carbon per unit of energy consumed than their Western EU neighbours.

At the dawn of the urban age, we need to focus at the community, town and city level to adapt to climate change and to stop our cities polluting the region and the planet.

We now know that many of the consequences of rapid transition were not properly taken into account, let alone planned. Some societies have stratified, and nearly a generation since the change, large populations still earn low incomes. Rapid decentralisation overtook capacity building. Local authorities lacked the skills, and had no time to learn how to manage towns and cities under new market conditions. Their new responsibilities were not adequately supported by new financial systems.

As the main agency in the UN system working closely with local authorities around the world, it is patently clear to us that they always need better central political and financial support to cope with the myriad local problems.

Urban housing is one of the biggest challenges in this region. Rapid privatisation brought in new property owners unaware that the right to own comes hand in hand with

proper maintenance and services. Thus followed a general degradation in many countries. While I hail some of the wonderful exceptions here – the social housing provision in Kazan, Russia, for example which I have seen for myself – in this part of the world too many countries still face the unique problems of poor home owners. We have no social housing, no rental housing, no real choice ... It is time to invest in the urban poor – they usually repay their debts, and banks can help here with micro-credit loans that are granted without collateral. We are testing this system in several poor countries and the dividends are huge, politically, socially and economically.

Ten countries of the region are now members of the European Union. They strove hard to qualify. At UN-HABITAT we believe that countries of the region through joint activities can help tackle the most challenging problems of sustainable urban development and affordable housing.

Through our new Warsaw office we hope to work more with your countries and your cities. Indeed, our Warsaw centre will help develop national and local capacities to systematically address urban poverty and shelter shortfalls. It will also facilitate the promotion of the Habitat Agenda and of the global campaigns for good governance and secure tenure. Moreover, it will seek to improve the flow of human settlements information and boost policy making, planning and management in the urban and housing sector.

We have already drafted a regional programme which is submitted to you for discussion. It is my fervent hope that it will enable you to work more closely on priority areas in housing, urban governance, strategic urban and territorial planning and disseminate your experiences. I hope it will help bring best practices from the region to public attention for replication. It also covers institutional weaknesses and capacity building, sustainable urban development and better service delivery. There are ideas on how to use the expertise of specialists in the region to help promote more productive, inclusive and environmentally friendly cities.

UN-HABITAT helped inspire the creation of three regional bodies in Latin America, Africa, and Asia that 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 through peer pressure. I have no doubt that this gathering could be the catalyst of a similar process here with regular ministerial meetings.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

We must always follow a rights-based approach in all reforms and new systems. We must pay a special attention to the rights of people, women and the most vulnerable especially in matters of land, secure tenure and inheritance. But far be it for me to lecture anyone – I am only too keenly aware of the personal sacrifices made by so many of you in this audience to achieve the democratic changes you enjoy today.

In conclusion, I wish to reassure you most firmly that the new Secretary General of the United Nations, Mr. Ban ki-Moon, stands squarely alongside us in the quest for sustainable urbanisation and better, safer, healthier and inclusive cities.

The UN-HABITAT Governing Council, at which governments review our work, takes place in Nairobi in the week of 16 to 20 April 2007. I hope many of you will be able to join us at that important occasion.

Thank you.