

Statement by the Executive Director of the United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-Habitat), Ms. Anna Tibaijuka, on the occasion of World Habitat Day – Monday, 6 October 2008.

Today we mark World Habitat Day at a time when the majority of the world's people are living in towns and cities. The process is accelerating and this transformation has a direct bearing on the strategies that we must adopt to attain the Millennium Development Goals.

The other historic turning point is that the number of urban slum-dwellers worldwide has broken the 1 billion mark, making it clear that the urbanization of poverty is arguably one of the biggest challenges facing development today.

This is why we chose the theme “**Harmonious cities**” for World Habitat Day 2008. We need to raise awareness of the problems of rapid urbanization, their impact on the environment and the consequences and challenges of spiralling urban poverty.

No longer can we turn a blind eye to the plight of slum-dwellers living in life-threatening conditions. Nor can we hide from the fact that urban poverty and urban inequalities are on the rise around the world, in developed and developing countries alike. We have both a moral and an ethical responsibility to make our cities more harmonious by making them more inclusive. It is a societal imperative that we fight urban poverty and squalor if we are to secure urban safety and security.

Our experience working with Governments, local authorities, communities and the private sector around the world gives us good insights into tackling these challenges. Even if we do not have all the answers it enables us to ask some of the right questions.

It is also no coincidence that climate change is now coming to the forefront of international debate at the same time, and at virtually the same pace, as the world becomes urbanized. Cities consume upwards of 75 per cent of all energy and contribute to an equally substantial amount of greenhouse gas emissions. Cities must therefore be an integral part of any mitigation efforts.

Reducing cities' contribution to climate change and vulnerability to the effects thereof must be viewed as a historical opportunity to improve the living conditions of all men and women, including the most vulnerable sectors of our urban populations. Both adaptation and mitigation efforts require improved land-use planning, more robust infrastructure and smarter construction. I can think of no better initiative than to combine these efforts to make our cities and towns greener, safer and more equitable. My message to you today is that the challenges of climate change and urban poverty are inextricably linked and both depend on making our cities more harmonious.