5 September 2017

Deputy Secretary-General's remarks at High Level Meeting on the New Urban Agenda and UN-HABITAT [as delivered]

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Excellencies,
Ladies and gentlemen,
Distinguished guests,

First of all, I would like to thank the President of the General Assembly for convening this meeting.

I also want to especially recognize the Member States in New York and Nairobi for their participation in this meeting and their strong role in ensuring that a future UN-Habitat will be robust and able to carry out the 2030 Agenda and SDG implementation.

Last but not least, I would like to thank the Executive Director and Deputy Executive Director of UN-Habitat and the agency’s staff for its diligent work towards reform and for being with us today.

I am pleased to open this two-day High Level session and welcome such prominent leaders and experts to this meeting. We are all well aware of the importance and key role of cities and urbanization for sustainable development, peace and security.

Today, the majority of people, an estimated 4 billion, live in urban areas. By 2050, it could be 6 billion.

Cities are hubs of promise, jobs, technology and economic development. When built with low-emission development in mind, they are the most environmentally sustainable habitats possible — showcasing the safest and most efficient public transport systems and energy conserving buildings and homes in the world.

Over 80 per cent of the global GDP is generated in urban areas, and they are where most new ideas, innovations, inventions and collaborations are taking place, especially with our young people.

But, as well as being centres of promise and innovation, cities are also the epicentre of many of the challenges of sustainability.

They are responsible for the majority of greenhouse gas emissions and energy consumption.

They are home to the majority of the world’s refugees, where disasters strike hardest, and often flashpoints of social unrest and conflict.

It is clear that it is in cities where the battle for sustainability will be won or lost.

Cities are the organizing mechanisms of the twenty-first century. They are where young people in all parts of the world flock to develop new skills, attain new jobs, and find opportunities in which to innovate and create their futures.

They are the hotbeds of diversity, attracting new talent and migration, in an ever-constant mix of culture,
knowledge, ideas that require a new way of working and collaborating to explore new opportunities and solutions to the many problems.

Cities encourage their residents to be always working toward increased respect, tolerance, vibrant and generous coexistence.

This is what will lay the foundation that will make the goals of 2030 Agenda a reality.

Sadly, to date, the global response to the promise of urbanization has been inadequate.

Urban programmes and policies often neglect the important linkages between city centres, peri-urban settlements and rural livelihoods.

Meanwhile, urban inequalities are growing in both the global south and north.

The urban share of global poverty is rising, and many cities are struggling to provide the most basic of services as their populations surge.

Even though many of the challenges like proper urban planning, inadequate climate early warning and resilience measures, are being felt most acutely in the rapidly growing cities of the developing world, sustainable urbanization is a growing and global challenge.

The recent tragic climate related events in Houston, Freetown, Karachi and Mumbai are some of the cases in point.

It is important that the UN system becomes better equipped to support Member States to develop a new paradigm for sustainable urbanization.

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development is the most ambitious agenda ever set forth for humanity. It requires a UN system and staff equipped with nimbleness, capacities and skills to carry forward its ambitions.

The Secretary-General is working with member states on the reform of the UN system and see the reform of UN-Habitat as an important litmus test for ambition.

This meeting is a chance to advance a bold, new course for addressing urbanization globally and ensuring that UN-Habitat and the UN system are fit for purpose -- equipped with the requisite skills and resources needed to promote the equitable, environmentally sustainable and innovative cities of the future.

This work began with the successful outcome of Habitat 3 and the creation of a New Urban Agenda. I once again congratulate UN-Habitat and Member States for steering that process.

I thank the Secretary-General’s High Level Independent Panel to Assess UN-Habitat for developing substantive recommendations toward a reformed UN-Habitat and UN system.

I am grateful for UN-Habitat’s substantive support to the Panel, and the support provided by Member States.

The Panel worked within a very challenging time frame to deliver a report that makes a compelling case for the reform of the global development system to place cities at its centre, and particularly those living furthest behind in informal settlements.

The Panel responded to the Secretary-General’s request that it present bold recommendations for the reform of UN-Habitat and the effective implementation of the New Urban Agenda and the 2030 Agenda.
The Secretary-General has taken note of these recommendations and will be developing a concrete strategy to ensure that UN-Habitat is fit for purpose and that the reform of the development system, the peacekeeping system and the management of the United Nations incorporates a new approach to urban areas.

We believe UN-Habitat must play a leading role in ensuring that urban expertise is strong across all UN agencies.

Currently, too much of the urban work in the UN system is fragmented and delivering insufficient results. This must change and UN-Habitat’s reform should go hand-in-hand with ensuring that there is greater coherence and collaboration across all the UN system urban work.

This may come in the form of an UN-Urban coordinating mechanism that brings cross-sectoral capacities together and bolsters operational urban work. We believe UN-Habitat is the right vehicle to coordinate such a mechanism.

The Panel also recommends that UN-Habitat’s regional offices achieve greater alignment with the Regional Economic Commissions, which we encourage.

This will enable the Secretary-General’s vision for a coherent policy voice at the regional level to prioritize urbanization.

We would also like to see a new generation of UN Country Team drawing on UN expertise to work in cities and with local authorities, to support Member States to implement the New Urban Agenda and all the Sustainable Development Goals in urban areas.

The proposal for a sustainable urbanization fund is also worthy of consideration.

Lastly, I applaud the Panel’s strong call that a future UN-Habitat must focus on both leaving no one behind and a territorial approach, which strengthens the connection between rural and urban environments, to urbanization and urban programmes.

Excellencies,
Ladies and gentlemen,

The United Nations Development System began much of its important work in urban areas.

After the end of the Second World War, the UN worked with Member States to assist refugees living in cities to obtain life-ensuring food and basic services.

Multiple UN agencies over the past 70 years have developed innovative urban programmes, including provisioning water and sanitation services in slums, developing surveys to capture the furthest behind living in cities, and responding to and preventing urban conflicts.

The commitment of the UN to urban areas continued with the creation of UN-Habitat approximately three decades ago.

Today, we acknowledge that the UN is not delivering sufficiently in our cities.

And, through our common effort, we will rectify this.

Over the next two days and throughout this fall, as Member States determine how the New Urban Agenda will be implemented, I count on a renewed commitment of the UN to lead in urban areas.
The proud history of urban work at the UN must be harnessed at this vital time, and the UN must be seen again as the lead convener and catalyser for partners, funders, academics, private sector and civil society organisations to scale up their work in urban areas. UN-Habitat can be the lead and arrowhead for this urban reinvigoration of the United Nations.

I look forward to learning about the outcomes of this meeting, and expect that it will lead to concrete recommendations, ideas and consensus on a future that will lead the transition to a more sustainable urban world.

Thank you.

Source: https://www.un.org/sg/en/content/dsg/statement/2017-09-05/deputy-secretary-generals-remarks-high-level-meeting-new-urban