A STATEMENT BY DR JOAN CLOS
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HIGH LEVEL MEETING ON THE NEW URBAN AGENDA AND UN-HABITAT

NEW YORK, USA, 5-6 SEPTEMBER 2017

President of the General Assembly (Peter Thomson);

Your Excellencies;

Representatives of Local Governments

Representatives of Major Groups and other Stakeholders;

UN Colleagues;

Distinguished Delegates;

Ladies and Gentlemen:

I am honored to make a statement at the Opening of the High-Level Meeting on the New Urban Agenda and UN-Habitat.

I would like to appreciate the Secretary-General and congratulate him on his efforts to improve the functions and capacities of the UN in order to ‘ensure a future better for all’.

I would also like to thank the members of the High-Level Panel for their hard work, and the President of the General Assembly for hosting this important event.

UN-HabitatWe welcomes the Report of the High-Level Independent Assessment Panel and trust that the outcome of this exercise will lead to a revitalized UN-Habitat that is able to more effectively support Member States and other stakeholders in implementing the New Urban Agenda and 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

This is a defining moment for UN-Habitat as the first agency to be assessed during the Repositioning of the UN Development System. I congratulate the Secretary-General’s efforts to improve the functions and capacities of the UN in order to ‘ensure a future better for all’.

I would also like to thank the members of the High-Level Panel for their hard work, and the President of the General Assembly for hosting this important event.
As many of you are aware, UN-Habitat has, in fact, been undergoing a reform for some time. In the face of considerable global challenges and reduced core resources, we have made hard choices to ensure that UN-Habitat is fit-for-purpose.

In addition to structural reforms, UN-Habitat also made a substantive transition to become a knowledge-based organization that is defined by our expertise and technical skills. As a result, there is growing demand for UN-Habitat’s services meeting the needs of countries in crisis, through transition to development.

The greatest acknowledgement of our reform efforts was Member States’ adoption of the New Urban Agenda in Quito, which re-affirmed UN-Habitat’s leadership role in sustainable urban development. We appreciate the inputs of local authorities and civil society groups in creating this agenda and look forward to working closely with them in implementing it.

The New Urban Agenda also echoed the SDGs’ recognition of the role of sustainable urbanization as a tool for development. It further validated the need for a specialized agency that can competently support the UN system and Member States in meeting the pace and scale of urban growth.

When I was appointed Executive Director of UN-Habitat, nearly 7 years ago, the Agency was primarily known for its work on housing and slums, water and sanitation. Today, these areas remain a core part of our mandate. But a lot has changed in 7 years.

In response to the adoption of the New Urban Agenda, UN-Habitat’s programme of work is strategically and fully in line with the main pillars of the New Urban Agenda and its responsibility as a focal point in UN system on sustainable urbanization. The five core principles of guiding our work (National Urban Policies; urban planning; governance, rules and regulations; municipal finance; and local implementation) adhere fully to the ‘drivers of change’ recognized by all Member States in their adoption of the New Urban Agenda.

This expanded scope of UN-Habitat’s work is critical to meeting the challenge of rapid global, mostly unplanned, urbanization.

During my tenure, the world’s urban population has grown by exponentially. By the sunset of the SDGs in 2030, 60% of the global population will live in cities.

As urban populations grow, so too does the number of development and humanitarian challenges facing people living in cities.
Of the estimated 1 billion people residing in countries with the least capacity to achieve sustainable development, over 30% live in urban areas and with rapid urban growth which, unfortunately, is unplanned.

Some 60% of the total 14.4 million refugees and 80% of the 38 million IDPs are thought to live in urban areas as a result of conflict and other drivers.

If current trends continue, by 2030, the cost of humanitarian assistance to those displaced by war and disasters will have risen to US$50 billion per year.

Climate change will only intensify these risks. The 650 million urban dwellers expected to be living in delta and coastal areas by 2050 face serious risks from floods, water scarcity, and ecological and economic damage.

These threats are no longer limited to Least Developed Countries. Today, poverty, exclusion, and other barriers to peace and security affect all nations.

One bold example of this today is the fact that three-quarters of the world’s poor live in Middle-Income Countries.

In this regard, UN-Habitat fully endorses the focus on prevention underpinning the UN Reform.

If we don’t put in place now the right policies, plans, finance, governance structures, and partnerships, it will be impossible to achieve the SDGs and New Urban Agenda. We need an integrated approach to achieve transformation.

None of these areas alone will be sufficient to address the scale of work needed.

The time-bound and universal nature of the SDGs and New Urban Agenda demands integrated solutions, adapted to local contexts.

In this way, the Panel Report’s suggestion that UN-Habitat focus on certain aspects of its portfolio, could weaken the UN’s ability to respond to the needs of billions of current and future urban dwellers.

Similarly, although we appreciate the intent behind creating a new body (UN Urban) is to improve UN System coordination, and deepen interaction with local governments and other stakeholders, it is our belief that the UN has already adopted the issue of Sustainable Urbanization as a driver for development. The UN System and all Member States clearly proved their commitment to sustainable urbanization by endorsing the New Urban Agenda and SDG-11.

What is needed now is to strengthen and more systematically support the integration of sustainable urbanization principles, already agreed in the NUA, into UN Agency strategies and programmes. This can
be achieved with the existing expertise and strengthened coordination capacity of UN-Habitat to match the requirements of the agency’s role in the NUA.

Distinguished delegates, I welcome the Report’s recommendation to strengthen UN-Habitat’s normative work. This is very critical to the agency’s ability to work with other UN agencies, Bretton Woods Institutions and partners in responding effectively to the needs of countries. If, however, the services of the UN Development System are to be nimble, effective and efficient as the current reform process suggests, then we must ensure that we do not disassociate policy from field operations and technical assistance. In our 40 years experience and with the growing demand for UN-Habitat’s services from countries, governments and cities often request policy advice, followed by support to implementation both at the country and human settlement level. It is important here that the expertise of UN-Habitat continues to inform the implementation of sustainable urban development initiatives and investments led by governments and other partners including other UN agencies.

I must note also, that coordination is a critical aspect of normative work, the effectiveness of which is made evident in the field. Divorcing global coordination, policy, norms and standards from local implementation represents a step backwards for the entire UN system.

Most important in moving forward is to acknowledge and recognize the Member States’ endorsement of the New Urban Agenda as an accelerator for Sustainable Development as well as the coordination and convening role of UN-Habitat within the UN System and among local governments in supporting its implementation.

While the Report’s findings are a humbling reminder of the improvements UN-Habitat must -- and will -- pursue, I urge Member States to carefully consider the impacts on the people we serve.

I trust UN-Habitat will emerge from this assessment as an effective, accountable, transparent, and well-governed Agency ready to face 21st Century rapid urbanization and human settlements development.

Thank you.