

Opening speech by Ms. Maimunah Mohd Sharif, United Nations Under-Secretary-General and Executive Director, UN-Habitat

UN-Habitat and Moscow Urban Forum 2019: Quality of Life. Projects for a Better City.

Opening of the Plenary Session: A City for Life. Quality of the Environment as a Priority of Development.

Thursday, 4 July 2019

**H.E. Sergei Sobyenin, Mayor of Moscow
Excellencies,
Distinguished Delegates,
Ladies and Gentlemen,**

I am delighted to be with you today and would like to thank the distinguished Mayor of Moscow for inviting me to this Opening Plenary. Congratulations to the city of Moscow for recognising that sustainable urbanization is the way forward for our collective national and global transformative agenda.

Ladies and gentlemen, UN-Habitat is helping nations ensure a high quality of life for its citizens in cities and communities. This is UN-Habitat's mandate as the designated United Nations Agency helping countries make cities more liveable and sustainable globally.

I would like to congratulate the Moscow Urban Forum on this excellent gathering in the mega-city of Moscow—a city whose experience has many benefits to share. UN-Habitat is proud to be a Global Partner with the Forum, and to support the critical global discourse required to advance the progress of our cities.

From the UN perspective, the priorities of urban development is framed by the Sustainable Development Goals and the New Urban Agenda, endorsed by Governments at Habitat III, 3 years ago:

Urbanisation is one of the most important issues of our time and a central component of sustainable development. The UN family has formally recognized urbanisation as a “mega

trend” and I am pleased that the urban theme has now been elevated and integrated throughout the UN by our Secretary-General. If we are to achieve the seventeen Sustainable Development Goals and, end extreme poverty, protect the planet and ensure peace and prosperity for everyone, we must strengthen collective efforts to get urbanisation right.

Many of the Sustainable Development Goals and targets have a direct connection to urbanisation. For example: Goal 6 on water and sanitation; Goal 7 on affordable and sustainable energy; and Goal 12 on sustainable consumption and production patterns. For these Goals and others – living conditions in cities are key to meeting their related targets.

In a nutshell: If we get urbanisation right, we will be able to positively address some of the world’s most critical challenges. UN-Habitat is working with governments at all levels to ensure that urbanisation is inclusive and sustainable. No one and no place should be left behind.

In terms of priorities for major global mega-cities in this context:

My main message is that: All cities can be massive agents of positive change, if they are well planned, well-built and well governed. They can be catalysts for inclusion and set trends for equitable economic growth. Cities and their communities link economy, energy, environment, science, technology and social and economic outcomes.

Mega-cities have a specific distinctive role here. They have their own gravity, pulling resources, talent and capital together. They set the pace and define global trends for urbanisation itself. Moscow’s future growth depends on whether it can meet the challenges of climate change, its social cohesion is dependent on how it generates and shares its wealth. As it discovers new ways of developing sustainably, it sets national and global trends for this part of the world. I am confident that mega-cities, if they are to survive in the next hundred years, must set the trend for better integration with their hinterland. Only when its growth is not at the expense of the environment and that it becomes more integrated with the economies that make up its orbit of influence will a new kind of mega-city emerge. Innovation, which is the power and dynamism underlying the emergence of mega-cities, will once again determine if they can grow sustainably in the future.

We observe that there a trend globally, towards urban concentration and agglomeration into super-cities, i.e. clusters of thriving cities in close proximity to one another, such as the metropolitan regions from Boston to Washington. At the same time, there is a countervailing trend towards shrinking cities within less successful and more remote regions. These cities are losing population due to outmigration of the young and/or highly qualified.

Another significant trend is that in many countries, the spatial inequality within and among the cities is growing, making high quality urban areas affordable only to the most affluent. This is a result of demographic and economic processes and their territorial and spatial manifestations, such as urban sprawl, concentration and shrinkage. We see that the demographic ageing and the recent wave of migration have made worse the complexity of the growing inequalities.

There is a general tendency towards urban sprawl, not only in cities experiencing population growth, that poses problems for social dynamics and environmental sustainability through high levels of car dependency, soil sealing, and expenditure for sustaining oversized infrastructure.

From a governance perspective, stronger interrelations across different sectors are important to enhance policy coherence to achieve sustainable development. This is a key area that UN-Habitat addresses in our work, for example in promoting Urban Forums for cross-sectoral dialogue (such as MUF where we are today), and development of National Urban Policies.

The development of urban policies must be done in a participatory and inclusive manner. Only then will the national urban policy become an effective tool to implement Sustainable Development Goal 11 and the New Urban Agenda.

Urban planning must be practiced holistically. This means engaging with all residents, including the most marginalized, ensuring they have a representative voice in governance, planning and budgeting processes. By doing so, we will develop happier, healthier and greener cities, responding to the needs of its inhabitants.

Let me highlight here that prosperity is not an accident. Governments and municipalities with effective monitoring frameworks, that set evidence-based policies and define goals based on a long-term vision, are invariably the most prosperous cities.

UN-Habitat strongly encourages cities to prepare Voluntary SDG Reports – that we have seen for example by New York in July last year. We would be happy to see a global discourse between mega-cities on such reports. We would in this regard welcome the city of Moscow to play a leadership role in sharing its experience.

UN-Habitat has been supporting governments in promoting a better quality of life in cities for over 40 years. UN-Habitat's commitment to a sustainable and resilient urban future, is based on our mantra: **Think, Do, Partner and Share**. With the support from Russia, we have a new Strategic Plan endorsed at the first UN-Habitat Assembly in Nairobi on 30 May recently. We encourage global and innovative solutions and best practices adapted to local context, while also working with city authorities, sub-national and national governments and all partners to ensure that the right policies and plans are in place. I welcome Moscow's and Russia's participation at the next World Urban Forum in Abu Dhabi on 8-13 February 2020.

I would like to close by highlighting the importance of this moment for us all. We need to look carefully at the challenges and opportunities of urbanisation and ensure that cities and human settlements, including our mega-cities that play such a leadership role in this regard-- are safe, inclusive, resilient, and sustainable.

Thank you.