

**Keynote Speech by Ms. Maimunah Mohd Sharif, United Nations Under-Secretary
General and Executive Director, UN-Habitat**

**University College London (UCL) Youth Action Event hosted by UCL Climate
Action Society (CAS)**

Monday 9 September 2019 at UCL Foster Court, London

**Salutations,
Ladies and Gentlemen,**

It gives me great pleasure to be with you today at the University College London, a premier seat of learning in the world. More importantly this event, which is on top of my official visit to the United Kingdom, is organised and managed by UCL's Climate Action students. It is good that young people are taking up the mantle of leading climate action.

Ladies and gentlemen, this forum could not have come at a more important moment in human history. Many decision makers and young climate leaders from around the world will be gathering later this month in New York, during the United Nations Secretary Generals Climate Action Summit. As I said in the recently concluded Oslo Pax Conference, forums such as this one will allow for your voices to be counted as part of the recommendations proposed to the Secretary General.

As we speak, the urgency of decisive climate actions has never been clearer. ***Every half degree of global warming matters.*** *Cities* are one of the cornerstones in this quest to limit global warming to 1.5°C, a critical threshold to ensure we leave to future generations the better world they deserve. To that end, we must reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 40 - 50% before 2030 from 2010 levels. This will require bold and ambitious efforts and changes in **the way we plan, design, build and manage cities.**

At UN-Habitat, we believe that young people will be key actors to pioneer a world that is more sustainable. We will work tirelessly with member states to ensure that we implement low carbon pathways to help combat devastating global warming. We need to act now and we need to achieve this low carbon lifestyle within the next decade while, at the same time, build less vulnerable and more resilient cities.

When I see all the young faces before me, I am reminded of my own experience as a young student of planning at the University of Cardiff. The world was a very different place then and as they say the past is a foreign country. Looking back, there were clear indicators that the way we live and develop our economies was unsustainable. Unfortunately, we were in the grip of a Cold War and climate change science was still very nascent. As planners, the world was a blank

canvass. At a stroke of a pen, we could alter lives. The focus then was to improve living standards through economic development.

Today, we can see the negative environmental impact of the worldview of the 1980s. Concepts like planned built-in obsolescence, deliberately planning or designing a product with an artificially limited useful life, so that it becomes obsolete (i.e., unfashionable, or no longer functional) after a certain period of time have filled out oceans and landfills with hazardous waste.

Ladies and gentlemen, **we cannot expect different outcomes from the past if we continue with these obsolete ideas. The best way to usher in a new way of thinking is to include the voices of young people in the planning, building and managing of our cities.**

Planning differently implies designing compact, connected, integrated cities and human settlements that optimize land, resource and energy use. We know that urban form and structure significantly affect greenhouse gas emissions and that they are strongly linked to the type of materials and energy used in a city, as well as the waste that it generates. It is important to recognize the value of our ecosystems, and how they positively contribute to the wellbeing, health and safety of the urban residents all over the world.

Building differently implies using robust low-carbon yet affordable technologies that can withstand the impact of extreme weather as well as other challenges. We also need to focus on key sectors that contribute to (un-) sustainable consumption and production patterns in cities, including housing and buildings, energy, waste and transport, among others. Harnessing opportunities in these sectors means finding alternative solutions to traditional value chains that advance the circular economy at the city level.

I would like to add here and in the best tradition of Jeremy Bentham that as we evolve a new way of living and retrofit our cities, we need to think of the most vulnerable amongst us. Therefore, in addition to integrated and low carbon approaches to urban planning and development, a fundamental pro-poor approach to climate action is needed because, if not adequately addressed, **climate change is a poverty multiplier**. Climate events will trap the poor further unless we adopt a **pro-poor approach to planning, building and managing cities** and we prepare the most vulnerable communities and make them **resilient** to upcoming risks.

We know that without action on climate change, attainment of the Sustainable Development Goals will become impossible. We also know that cities can play a fundamental role in the attainment of the goals. In addition, the **New Urban Agenda** commits countries and cities to integrate climate change adaptation and mitigation considerations into urban and territorial development and planning processes by 2036, and to build environmentally sustainable cities embedded in ecosystem protection and conservation principles.

As we speak, countries and cities are increasingly stretched in the multiple needs they face and the hard challenges of climate change. But urgent climate action needs to take place to change current emissions trajectories. Through the Urban-Low Emission Development Strategies (Urban-LEDS) project, being implemented in Bangladesh, Colombia, Lao PDR, Rwanda, Brazil, India, Indonesia and South Africa in partnership with ICLEI (Local Governments for Sustainability), UN-Habitat helps cities and countries to make their fair contribution towards limiting global warming to 1.5 degrees, while preparing them for the impacts of 2, 3 or even 4 degrees.

Cities need to develop robust pro-poor adaptation and resilience frameworks. UN-Habitat supports the assessment of climate change vulnerability and city-level resilience in cities around the world such as Ouagadougou (Burkina Faso), Bamenda, (Cameroon), Lami Town (Fiji), Honiara (Solomon Islands), and Montego Bay (Jamaica), to bring concrete risk-reducing infrastructure and services to communities. UN-Habitat has also supported the Government of Belize to update the master plan for its capital, Belmopan, to adopt a blue-green network approach for ecosystem-based adaptation and mitigation.

Ladies and gentlemen

Beyond being a poverty multiplier, climate change is a **threat multiplier**, interacting with multiple pressures: social conflict, inequalities, large-scale migration, and competition for resources, increasing the likelihood of instability or violent conflict.

Climate change will directly affect the availability, quality, and access to water, food and ecosystem services in cities, as well as the competition for land, unsustainable land use patterns, energy and infrastructure, leading to increased fragmentation of the rich and poor neighbourhoods, stretching the capacities of societies and governments. The most vulnerable groups, including **children, women, youth, older persons, persons with disabilities, refugees and Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs), and indigenous populations**, will be hit the hardest and will take the longest to recover.

At the heart of this lies the direct engagement with young people and communities. Governments – both national and local – play an important role in changing behaviour and increasing awareness on the importance of protecting our environment, and living more sustainable lifestyles. **It is leaders, such as yourselves who are here today who can lead the transformation towards low-carbon, climate-resilient, and smart cities of the future.**



Cities are at high risk of climate change related insecurity, and robust preparedness and resilience frameworks that build resilience in a multi-stakeholder and multi-hazard approach, considering complexities of urban systems, are needed urgently. City-level adaptation and preparedness to climate risk is essential to address **peace and security** within national and regional contexts.

I am deeply convinced that cities can help deliver 40% of the Paris Target to limit CO2 emissions and to achieve the 1.5 degrees long-term goal. For UN-Habitat, **strengthened climate action and improved urban environment** and **effective urban crisis prevention and response** constitute two of our four strategic focus areas for the next four years, and perhaps beyond. Working with all levels of governments, **young people**, civil society and the business community is essential in our global quest for a low carbon and climate resilient future.

Moving towards the implementation of our new Strategic Plan 2020-2023, I would like to take the opportunity to reiterate our commitment to work with all of you, and to reaffirm the critical role that **young people**, play in tackling the global environmental challenges together.

It's time for action so, let's join hands to implement decisive climate actions in cities now.