

Speech at the Commemorative symposium on the occasion of the 25th anniversary of UN-Habitat's Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific

Date: 26 July 2022

Dear honourable guests,

Ladies and gentlemen,

I am really delighted that I can speak to you today in person, here in Fukuoka. For two and a half years, the pandemic prevented us to meet. Local governments have been in the frontline of responding to COVID-19. I keep in mind the heavy toll on people, households and local businesses and wish to pay my respect to the health and social departments in the prefecture and the city, and all people and institutions that work hard to move forward.

I am humbled and deeply grateful that at this time, Fukuoka Prefecture, Fukuoka City and the partners remain committed to support us to improve lives of people in developing countries in the region.

I also wish to pay respect to Japan's commitment to international cooperation and human security for all. Japan has built unparalleled quality of life for people. Cities are clean, safe and prosperous, supported by dedicated government bodies and leaders. I also want to pay due respect to the memory of one of your most dedicated leaders, former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe and sincerely renew my condolences hereby.

Nonetheless, today we mark 25 years of dedication. Dedication to support people in need. Dedication to reach out to people in other countries. Dedication of collaborating with the United Nations through UN-Habitat.

I wish to sincerely thank Fukuoka Prefecture, Fukuoka City, the collaborating partners and people of Fukuoka and Kyushu for their continuing support. This has been a unique and innovative partnership, allowing us to improve the lives of the most vulnerable.

One of the original intents of the collaboration was the sharing of experience and technical expertise in urban environmental management. I am told that, when the Regional Office for Asia and Pacific was established, Fukuoka Prefecture had overcome challenges of pollution, flooding and water shortages and had been turning itself into a regenerated and increasingly prosperous city and region.

The environmental challenges of our world have not become smaller. Cities in the developing world are in the frontline of these challenges, including Climate Action. The battle for sustainable developing will be won or lost in cities. To make tangible progress on SDG11, to make cities inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable, cities and countries need vast progress on climate action.

I call hereby for continued and more diverse collaboration between UN-Habitat and our Fukuoka partners in support of improved urban environments and more climate action. Our joint dissemination of the Fukuoka Method to build and improve sustainable and affordable landfills and waste management systems is a great example of the North-South collaboration making best use of the knowledge of local specialists and the ability of the United Nations to reach out to local governments in developing countries to transfer knowhow and build capacity.

We are excited that the Japanese assistance already now encompasses green building and reducing plastic litter in cities. We hope this collaboration will strongly increase.

I refer to other areas of collaboration and exchange, in relation to sustainable and affordable rain water storage approaches, water treatment solutions, heat insulation applications and other interventions. There are untapped potentials, for example, Japan's and Fukuoka's policy experience on preventing cities to overheat, avoiding the worst impact of a changing climate on elderly people and people with vulnerabilities. Air pollution controls, green mobility, energy-saving solutions and disaster risk reduction in the face not only of earthquake risk but also flooding. There is so much to share from Fukuoka, Kyushu and Japan. I appeal for your continued support.

Over many decades, Japan has invested in liveability, in making cities and communities sustainable. UN-Habitat's mission is for a better quality of life in an urbanizing world. We want to do it through people-centered approaches, putting human rights and people first and making sure that our tools recommend participation and collaboration. The common agenda, and mantra, of the United Nations is "leaving no one behind". Cities across Asia and the Pacific have much to learn from Japan's experience is making cities child-friendly and accessible for aging people. The safety of streets and neighbourhoods in Japan is an inspiration for many and Fukuoka always scored high in liveability. I hope that your collaboration with UN-Habitat and our partners will continue for many years to come.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I want to give credit to the Governor of Fukuoka Prefecture and Mayor of Fukuoka City, and their respective staff for their continued support. And I am grateful that the extension of the memorandum that supports our collaboration was signed swiftly, for five more years.

UN-Habitat's responsibility and resolve to deliver in our partner countries and cities in the region is even stronger. I will personally see to that. This week, I am commencing my first mission to the region since early 2020, and I will visit two more countries. In the coming months and years, I hope to visit more projects supported by Fukuoka and Japan in Asia and the Pacific. I want to encourage counterpart governments to seek more collaboration on environmental projects.

I also want to give credit to our private sector and academic partners. This multi-stakeholder collaboration is unique. Moreover, I commend that our specialists collaborate in special academic courses hosted by local universities. I hope that students will soon enough again be able to make study visits to some of our project countries and be inspired by the service resulting from our partnership and the mission and work of the United Nations.

I also want to say thank to all Japanese staff who have a source a knowledge, skills and dedication during the 25-year lifetime of office. I am also grateful for the continued hospitality that our international staff have enjoyed in Fukuoka.

And, at this occasion, allow me to thank all people of Japan, and the Government, for the generous support to UN-Habitat programmes in the region and in the Middle East and Africa and for the talent of Japanese staff that work with us. Throughout the lifetime of UN-Habitat in the region, we have been through so much together: responding to tsunamis in Indonesia and Sri Lanka, earthquakes and floods in Pakistan and Nepal, droughts and basic needs crises in Myanmar and Lao People's Democratic Republic, and shelter crises in Cambodia and the Philippines, to name a few.

In all countries, we enjoyed your support to help people and communities recover after crisis and do so in dignity, making their own decisions, in collaboration with their local governments and local businesses. Moreover, we have been able with your support to start supporting communities and governments in the face of the newest major crises, on climate action and waste management, on green building and marine litter.

Ladies and gentlemen,

I thank you for welcoming me in Fukuoka, not virtually but in person. Earlier this year, the General Assembly of the United Nations convened, mostly in person, a High-Level Meeting on accelerating the New Urban Agenda. I hope that Fukuoka Prefecture and City will join in the commitment to scale up the visibility of the New Urban Agenda in its policies and advocacy, as well as of the SDGs.

UN-Habitat restarted convening large events again last month – because we MUST. The Eleventh Session of the World Urban Forum was held in Katowice, Poland, with almost 11,000 delegates in-person and more than 6,000 online participants from 155 countries.

The Eleventh Session of the World Urban Forum had a special track on cities in crisis and urban crisis recovery, in the wake of the war in Ukraine. We live in a perilous world, where peace is never guaranteed. In a predominantly urban world, cities increasingly bear the brunt of conflict. Please stand with us in our mission for peace and development.

In 2023, UN-Habitat will convene its Second Assembly in Nairobi where we want local governments to have a prominent voice. I look forward Fukuoka's strong support of this important event.

I hope that the exchanges of people and staff can recommence at the soonest. I am glad that for this anniversary event and for the Asia Pacific City Summit of tomorrow, six country managers and staff could travel to Fukuoka, from Lao People's Democratic Republic, Mongolia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Thailand and Viet Nam. I could already meet them yesterday. I was grateful I could talk to our UN-Habitat regional team in-person. In the same way, I am grateful that we can be here together today, face to face, in solidarity to collaborate for a better urban future.

I wish you all good health, prosperity and success, and a hope for your continued resolve to reach out, with us, to people and communities in need.

Thank you!