

## Speech at the Smart Madinah Forum, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia

**Date: 19 February 2023**

Your Royal Highness Prince Faisal bin Salman bin Abdulaziz, Governor of Madinah Region,

Honourable Fahad Albulihshi, Chief Executive Officer of Madinah Development Authority and Mayor of Madinah Region,

Local and Regional Government representatives,

Colleagues,

Ladies and gentlemen,

A very good afternoon to all of you!

I'm honoured and touched for standing here among you in El Madina Almonawara with all its significance.

It is a great pleasure to be here at the opening of the Smart Madinah Forum 2023. Let me thank the city of Madinah for hosting this important Forum. A smart city, as you know, is not about technology. A city that is smart is made up of city managers and citizens who use technology to create a better life for all. This is why at UN-Habitat we are promoting people-centred smart cities. I am very pleased with our collaboration with the Madinah Development Authority, which I consider a smart partnership.

Technology is increasingly a very important part of all our lives, whether we live in a small village in Kenya using MPESA, a digital wallet to sell our agricultural produce, or we are using social media to express our unique cultural identity in the big city, technology is all around us.

We know that there are many opportunities to harness the potential of digital technologies for sustainable urban development. But there are also risks, challenges and unintended consequences. In the past decade, internet connectivity is a must if we want access to education, affordable housing, and critical government services.

In 2020, during the Covid-19 lock-down, my nieces and nephews could not go to school. Fortunately for them, the government's investment in digital technology infrastructure meant that they could attend virtual classes. Not so many are so lucky. In fact, nearly 50%

of humanity is not connected to the internet. The digital divide presents new challenges resulting in exclusion, bias and misinformation.

While digital technologies, data and innovation are key drivers for helping us achieve the Sustainable Development Goals, many smart city projects have yet to deliver the positive impact that we had hoped. Perhaps our expectations were too high.

I recall my own excitement with automation, sensors and large-scale IT systems. To some extent, city managers have made good use of the advancement in digital technology. We had in our mind futuristic-looking urban settlements with glass-encased skyscrapers and drones flying everywhere. In our rush, we did not see all the lonely people trying to connect with each other behind their mobile phones.

Ladies and gentlemen,

It is not unusual to see the private sector taking the lead by incorporating the idea of the ‘smart city’ resulting in new greenfield urban developments. I applaud their risk-taking and can-do attitude. The reality is that the smart cities of today take the form of business parks, shopping malls and gated communities. In most cases, the reality is yet to catch up with our expectations. We still have a long way to go before we catch up with the visual image of the smart city as thriving neighbourhoods.

However, more recently, we see a growing consensus that the vision of the smart city needs to be updated. Countries, cities, communities – and the private sector – are putting forward a more human-centric vision for the smart city. What is emerging is a realization that digital transformation – like cities and human settlements – is complex and requires leadership, effective governance, capacity and a strong commitment to sustainability. These are the key ingredients for good urbanism.

At UN-Habitat we talk about ‘People-Centered Smart Cities’. Our ‘smart city’ uses technologies to advance human development, overcome inequalities and ensure a better quality of life and a healthy planet. The UN-Habitat smart city aligns digital thinking with key urban priorities such as providing green and affordable housing. It improves the urban environment. It achieves these goals through effective local leadership.

To truly take advantage of digital technology for a better urban future, I would like to outline three key priorities.

First, smart city projects must take urban challenges as their starting point. A process of focusing first on key sustainability ambitions, such as reducing emissions, improving public transport or providing housing to marginalized communities, and then technology, will ensure that smart cities contribute to sustainable development. In some cases, this will mean less focus on futuristic narratives around automation, blockchain, big data and artificial intelligence; and more on digital public participation, the appropriate use of spatial data and the digital delivery of urban services. For example, working with technology developed by the UN Innovation Technology Accelerator for Cities, which UN-Habitat co-leads, the city of eThekweni has reduced the time it takes to map its informal settlements from several months to just 72 hours.

Second, smart cities require effective multi-level governance. Governments need to take an active role in technology and data - setting a strategic vision and goals, putting in place appropriate regulations and standards, establishing clear collaboration frameworks with the private sector and putting in place mechanisms for the participation of communities. Recent research by UN-Habitat into the governance practices of 250 cities across the world shows that more effort is needed. For example, more than half of the cities surveyed lacked a plan to guide their digitalization.

Third, we need a commitment to digital inclusion and human rights. As shown by UN-Habitat's recent work on the digital divide in smart cities, this divide is not only about physical internet access but also about gender, age, ability, culture, language and affordability. The digital divide also exists in some of the world's most connected cities, such as New York, where 1.5 million people lack broadband at home or on their mobile. There have also been concerns raised – including by the UN Secretary-General and the UN Human Rights Commissioner – that technologies are too often misused for example, in censorship and online harassment.

We are pleased to follow Madinah's efforts to become a human-centric smart city by aligning investments in technology with ambitions to become one of the most tranquil, generous and dynamic smart cities in the world. There is a growing movement of cities and countries that are making efforts to ensure that digital innovation is used to achieve the SDGs at the local level. Malaysia's current efforts to align smart cities with the Liveable Malaysia Agenda, Germany's smart city charter, Rwanda's smart city masterplan, Barcelona's digital city plan and Medellin's initiative to mainstream digital rights all come to mind.

Doing this effectively requires investment in capacity, technologies and infrastructure. UN-Habitat's research shows that only 14% of cities in low-income countries have a digital portal for municipal services. Only half of cities globally thoroughly consider technology investment and maintenance costs. In Africa, 60% of cities report that a lack of internet connectivity among residents is a barrier to smart city implementation.

By co-organizing the Smart Madinah Forum with the Madinah Development Authority, we are pleased to contribute to the discussions on the role of innovation in achieving sustainable development. The takeaways from these discussions will add to international dialogues on inclusive smart cities that will take place at the UN Habitat Assembly in Nairobi in June this year and the World Urban Forum, to take place in Cairo, Egypt, in 2024.

We need to make sure that cities and human settlements are inclusive, safe, resilient, and sustainable and that we leave no one behind.

Thank you, and looking forward to a very fruitful forum experience!