

Speech at the High-level opening ceremony of the World Habitat Day 2022 in Balikesir, Republic of Türkiye

Date: 3 October 2022

Honorable Mr Yucel Yilmaz, Mayor of Balikesir and host of the 2022 World Habitat Day Global Observance in the Republic of Türkiye,

His Excellency Mr Necmeddin Bilal Erdogan, President of the World Ethnosport Confederation,

Honorable Mr Hasan Sildak, Governor of Balikesir,

Her Excellency, Madame Martha Peralta Delgado, President of the UN-Habitat Assembly,

His Excellency Mr Murat Kurum, Minister of Environment, Urbanization and Climate Change,

Winners of the 2022 UN-Habitat Scroll of Honour and fellow honourees recognized for the legacy projects of the ninth and tenth session of the World Urban Forum,

Distinguished delegates,

Ladies and gentlemen,

Let me thank the Government of Türkiye and the City of Balikesir for hosting the 2022 Global Observance of World Habitat Day. World Habitat Day was established in 1985 by the United Nations General Assembly through Resolution 40/202. Each year, World Habitat Day takes on a new theme to bring attention to UN-Habitat's mandate to promote sustainable development policies that ensure adequate shelter for all.

This World Habitat Day will focus on promoting all levels of government and all relevant stakeholders to reflect on the implementation of the New Urban Agenda at all levels, as well as the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals. Subject experts will be highlighting concrete efforts to translate policy into practice. Four roundtable panel discussions highlight the important issues of urban resilience, social equity, youth empowerment and urban regeneration. All inter-related with the theme of World Habitat Day 2022, which is Mind the Gap: Leaving No One and No Place behind.

The gap we are faced with is very worrying. It is estimated that one in every three urban dwellers are poor, the majority of whom are living in developing countries. By 2030, there will be 600 million people living in extreme poverty. Covid-19 has shown the gap with

regards to vaccine equality. 75% of people living in low-income countries do not have access to mental health care. Many children did not have access to education during the pandemic. 39% based on gender with girls denied access to education, 76% of the disparity was based on where you lived with rural folk at a disadvantaged and most glaring of all, 86% of the disparity was due to wealth. Whilst 5.3 billion people have access to digital technologies, 2.6 billion are not connected to the internet at all. While Europe has one planner for about 3000 people, Asia and Africa have one planner for about 77,000 and 100,000 people respectively.

Distinguished delegates,

I am most grateful to the Government of Turkiye for hosting us today as it also marks the return of the UN-Habitat in a big way since Istanbul hosted the Second United Nations Human Settlements Conference in 1996. Habitat II and the Istanbul Declaration laid the groundwork for the elevation of UN-Habitat from a centre to a programme of the United Nations Secretariat. I am truly grateful to His Excellency President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan for hosting Habitat II, at that time, in his capacity as Mayor of Istanbul.

Distinguished delegates,

Every first Monday in the month of October UN-Habitat has been co-hosting the global observance of World Habitat Day. This is in recognition of the growing need to channel resources to ensure that all human settlements have basic services, adequate housing and access to the right to development. I have expressed to Her Excellency Madame Emine Erdoğan, the First Lady of Turkiye. It was indeed a privilege for UN-Habitat to recognize the achievements of Her Excellency Madame Emine Erdogan for her Zero Waste national campaign last year. I am very pleased to announce that UN-Habitat is a signee of Her Excellency the First Lady's Global Initiative on Zero Waste. UN-Habitat hopes to support the expansion of its Waste Wise Cities programme through a regional hub here in Turkiye to serve the wider Eurasian continent.

On this auspicious day, let me also acknowledge the achievements of the Ministry of Environment, Climate Change and Urban Planning. His Excellency Minister Murat Kurum and the Government of Turkiye have achieved a level of sustainable urbanization that is most impressive. Covid-19 has widened the gap between the haves and have nots everywhere. To bridge the gap between the have and the have nots here in Turkiye, I have been informed that His Excellency the President is committed to building an additional 500 thousand units of social housing. Turkiye continues to be an abode of peace and with that stability the country is able to accommodate millions of refugees within its borders. Not forgetting places facing urban crisis owing to climate and conflict particularly in Pakistan, Albania and Ukraine.

Your Excellency Madame Martha Peralta Delgado, President of the UN-Habitat Assembly, thank you for your continued support and advocacy of our mandate. This year has been a busy one for us starting with the Executive Board Meeting in March, the High-Level Meeting on the Implementation of the New Urban Agenda in April, the World Urban Forum in June, the General Assembly meeting in September and now, the Urban October celebrations that starts with World Habitat Day. Thank you, my sister, for being with us in all these events. Your presence and support are most appreciated.

Excellencies,
 Ladies and gentlemen,

The first city to host World Habitat Day in 1986 was Nairobi, Kenya. At that time, the theme was “Shelter is my right”. Since then, the Global Observance has been held 35 times, in all regions of the world. Let me thank Mayor Yucel Yilmaz, Mayor of Balikesir, for agreeing to host the global observance this year. This is the first time World Habitat Day is taking place in the Eurasian continent and what better place to celebrate global efforts to narrow the gap between rich and poor than the fair city of Balikesir. The city and this region of Turkey is well-known as one of the ‘tiger economies’ of the Marmara region. From olive oil to cheese, Balikesir links both the rural and urban economies. It also has a diversified local economy powered by food production, tourism and manufacturing. In short, it is a model secondary city where sustainable urbanization is well-planned and managed.

Unfortunately, not all human settlements enjoy the public amenities, housing and economic development like Balikesir. According to UN-Habitat’s flagship World Cities Report 2022, urban poverty has increased dramatically due to Covid-19 and locked-down economies. In 2020, the pandemic-induced new poor globally was between 119 and 124 million people; this is projected to have risen to between 143 and 163 million in 2021. This is nearly double of the total population of Turkiye (84 mil) or ten times the population of Istanbul.

It is not surprising that SDG 10: Reduce Poverty within and among countries sits next to SDG 11: Sustainable Cities and communities. The two are very much related as rural-urban migration, climate disasters and man-made conflicts increases pressure on our towns and cities. The United Nations is once again indebted to the Government of Turkiye for its inclusive policies in the provision of shelter and aid to over 1 million refugees from Syria and other man-made conflicts.

Having grown up in a rubber estate in rural Malaysia, I understand first-hand how one can get trapped in the vicious cycle of poverty. We are often told that education will help us to get out of poverty. But access to education is not always equally accessible. As a child of rubber tappers, my first duty of the day was to help my mother tap rubber and then get the younger siblings ready for school. All had to be done before 5am before the 4 mile walk to school could begin.

Getting out of poverty is not simply about donations and the provision of scholarships. It is about equalizing access to education; it is about having enough nutrition to be able to focus in school and it is about having the basic services to be able to have the smallest chance in life. The best way to help ensure no one and no place is left behind is to provide equal opportunities and access to adequate housing, basic services, and financing.

Let me share with you three actions that we can all take today to build bridges to close the opportunities gap.

One: To Mayors

Without urgent and transformative policy action at all levels, the current situation will only worsen. The long-term costs of each incremental policy choice may not be clear, but each decision could shape the future of cities for generations. Wrong decisions by city leaders could entrench poverty, deny opportunity for millions, and widen urban disparities in ways that will become increasingly difficult to reverse. UN-Habitat working with the various Economic Commissions of the United Nations provides capacity programme for mayors and city managers. This includes the Mayors' Academy as well as other technical support we provide to enable city managers to carry out Voluntary Local Reviews.

Two: To National Governments

Within the Decade of Action window (2020-2030), cities and subnational governments should adopt a multidimensional approach to addressing poverty and inequality by investing in infrastructure and essential services, while addressing the multiple spatial, social and economic barriers that foster exclusion. At UN-Habitat we encourage Member States to adopt a 'plan-led approach' to encourage sustainable urbanization. It begins with developing national urban policies that help inform national development programmes and initiatives. To date, UN-Habitat's National Urban Policy initiative supported some 90 countries develop their national urban policies. We are now working with communities and cities to ensure that these national urban policies are developed together with them, for them and by them.

Three: Support a Human Rights Approach to Sustainable Urbanization

Informality is a reality of urbanization especially in developing countries. Looking into the future, cities should halt the exclusion of informal sector workers in all spheres of urban endeavor. Cities and subnational governments should acknowledge the legitimate contributions of informal workers and stop their harassment and penalization. The rights of informal workers should be guaranteed. These rights include legal recognition, economic and social rights, access to essential services and better representation in policymaking. Cities will not be able to offer a bright urban future if their informal sector workers are perpetually excluded from urban development processes.

Four: Involving Local Communities

Cities should focus on developing inclusive urban governance processes that promote transformative resilience to multiple risks by using local knowledge in the face of uncertainty. Urban leaders should draw on grassroots, civil society and private-sector efforts and build local alliances to deliver more effective strategies and co-design solutions to urban poverty and inequality. At UN-Habitat, we encourage the use of various tools developed to foster a ‘bottom up’ approach whether that be through participatory budgeting, the provision of land titles through the Global Land Tool Network; and the Participatory Slum Transformation Programme (previously PSUP).

Ladies & gentlemen,

I am very excited to be with all of you here this morning including the speakers at the four round-table sessions as we come together to understand what challenges are facing human settlements in this age of Covid, Climate Change and Conflict? At the same time, I am also inspired by the winners of the UN-Habitat Scroll of Honour this year. Each of them highlights the innovative spirit that is needed to bring about transformative change. Their achievements show that transformative change is possible and that it begins with leadership and commitment.

Once again, let me thank Minister Murat Kurum, Mayor Yucel Yilmaz of Balikesir, Madame Martha Delgado, the President of the UN-Habitat Assembly and the Office of the First Lady of Turkiye, Mme. Emine Erdogan for her patronage of World Habitat Day 2022. Thank you all for the support for this the 36th Global Observance of World Habitat Day.

Thank You.