

Regional African Ministerial Conference on Habitat (Istanbul+5) Implementing the Habitat Agenda

**Statement by
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Chairperson,
Honourable Ministers,
The Executive Director of the UNCHS,
Excellencies,
Friends,

Robert Rauschenberg, one of the world's most celebrated artists, has made several posters for the United Nations. Of all these, he found the assignment to paint the theme poster for Habitat II, which he entitled "Clan Destiny", the hardest of all. The reason, he explained, was that this last major UN conference of the millennium brought together all the concerns of the previous UN conferences, focusing them sharply on that most basic of human needs: a place to live. Rauschenberg characterized Habitat II as more than just a conference, but rather a movement- of the Clan, in search of its Destiny.

Four years since the conference that was popularly known as the "City Summit" in Istanbul, it is my honour to welcome you to the African regional caucus meeting in preparation for the five- year review of Habitat II next year. As is the case with other United Nations regional economic commissions, the Economic Commission for Africa (ECA), in collaboration with the United Nations Centre for Human Settlements has initiated this preparatory regional meeting at the request of the UN General Assembly.

More so than any other region in the world, Africa is sitting on a time bomb where the goals of sustainable human settlements and adequate shelter for all are concerned.

What do we see in most cities in Africa today? Drove of people mulling about the streets. High unemployment. Desperate vendors, usually youth and women, selling an assortment of goods at traffic lights and on street corners. Gaping potholes and dilapidated infrastructure. Dark alleys. High security fences around the homes of the privileged often with private security signifying the inability of law enforcement agencies to cope with rising levels of crime. An ever growing number of street children. Shantytowns that are periodically raised to the ground and then reappear. Broken down sewers and poor sanitation. Squalor that has led our poets and writers to decree that although both urban and rural poverty are a painful blight on our landscape, there is a particular psychological dimension to urban poverty that adds a sense of human degradation.

With 35 percent of its people living in urban areas, Africa is one of the least urbanized regions in the world. But with an urbanization rate of 5 percent per annum, the continent is recording the fastest urban growth rate in the world. Indeed, it is estimated that by 2020, 52 percent of the continent's population will be living in urban hubs. Under current trends of widespread urban poverty and deprivation, contrasted with relative wealth, this represents a sea of social discontent and disorder in the making- a time bomb as I put it a moment ago.

Yet, as we were reminded at Habitat II, urbanization is not about to stop, nor should we seek to stop it. The world over, urbanization has been associated with innovation, progress and development. It is not only the heart of the New World in the making- it is the engine driving it. The challenge is therefore not one of bucking the trend, but rather of managing the process.

What does this mean for Africa?

First, we need to examine the macroeconomic context in which urbanization occurs. Historically, urbanization has been linked to rapid industrialization and economic growth. In contrast, urbanization in Africa has been taking place in the context of negligible industrial and economic growth rates. In other words urbanization is more a result of the

push factor- rural poverty, conflict and war, rather than of the pull factor- thriving urban centers that offer better prospects of employment. No matter which way we turn, we cannot escape the need for far higher rates of private investment and economic growth at the macro level if we are to successfully tackle issues such as housing on the ground.

Second, we need to think much more creatively about private- public partnerships. Several examples are now emerging of public authorities hiving off responsibilities such as providing lights, water and refuse collection to the private sector with positive results, especially where this has ensured a system of cross subsidization between those who can afford such services and those who cannot. Private public partnerships should extend to the financing and development of low cost housing schemes- another area where, with the right mix of policy and ingenuity, win- win solutions can be found.

Third, the issue of human settlements has cast a critical spotlight on matters of governance, and especially on local government. In most African countries, political and administrative power is highly centralized. Cities neither have the political nor financial clout, let alone the administrative and technical capacity, to make decisions critical to the way people live. An increasing emphasis on decentralization over the last decade has often not been accompanied by the necessary fiscal power to enable local governments and communities to raise revenues to finance investments and the operational costs, essential for the sound management of cities.

One of the great successes of Habitat II was in bringing local authorities in as full partners in the process. Throughout the world, municipal authorities have realized that cities need to be more productive, better managed and more competitive if they are to be financially sustainable. This is an area in which we in Africa still need to work much harder.

The fourth issue that I put forward for your consideration is that of citizen participation. Experience elsewhere has taught us that civic engagement is key to the management and sustainability of cities. Yet in Africa we shun the urban poor and often treat them as vagabonds rather than communities in partnership for development. Countless case studies show that where so-called urban squatters have been given title to their land, and even the most minimal of site and service support, they have willingly pitched in with sweat equity and whatever little resources they can lay their hands on to develop homes in which they take pride.

Fifthly, we need to encourage the progressive transformation of the informal economy of cities into the formal economy, and to encourage the emergence of small and medium scale enterprise. Rather than treat these entrepreneurs like parasites, we need to re-examine our regulations and by laws to see how we can encourage and facilitate their enterprise.

Sixth, we must harness the energies of women. To quote one UN official, if a woman's place is in the home, then she better at least have a home! In Africa, women are invariably denied title to land and to houses. Often the homes that women struggle to build are taken away from them when their husbands die. Ironically, the most successful self-help housing projects on the continent are driven by women. They have proven more than competent molders of bricks, architects and construction workers. Women also constitute the majority of those in the informal sector- the biggest source of income for most African urban dwellers. If only out of self interest, we would be foolish not to tap the energy of over half of Africa's people.

This leads me to my final point- the importance of sharing best practices. Often our problems are so overwhelming that we retreat into Afro pessimism. One of the great breakthroughs of Habitat was its emphasis on best practices show cased in Dubai before the Istanbul conference. We have wonderful examples in Africa of low cost, indigenous architecture. Is there really nothing we can do about either the galling urban sprawl or the unimaginative "match-box" low cost housing schemes that we have managed to come up with?

Chairperson, Honourable Ministers, Excellencies,

In Africa, as elsewhere, vibrant, prosperous cities can provide the basis for national progress and prosperity. Their emergence will depend a great deal on the outcome of consultations such as the one you are about to embark on here today. I wish you all the very best in your deliberations, as we in Africa put our best forward to keep step with the Clan in search of its Destiny.

Welcome again, and thank you!

