

UN-Habitat Assembly Highlights: Monday, 5 June 2023

The Second Session of the UN-Habitat Assembly (UNHA2) opened with high-level speakers stressing the critical role of cities in addressing planetary crises and in achieving the 2030 Agenda on Sustainable Development (2030 Agenda) and its Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and the role UN-Habitat can play in helping them address these challenges. In his address, Kenyan President Williams Ruto offered his perspectives on the global climate change agenda and his plans for rolling out affordable housing. UNHA2 also created a Committee of the Whole (COW) and a drafting committee to discuss issues in greater detail and vet the many resolutions proposed for the Assembly's adoption.

Ceremonial Opening

Assembly President Román Meyer Falcón (Mexico) opened the session, calling for innovative and bold collective efforts in developing approaches to fulfill the objectives of the UN-Habitat Strategic Plan and providing better human settlements for all. Zainab Hawa Bangura, Director-General, UN Office in Nairobi (UNON), noted the long partnership between UN-Habitat and UNON and the importance of Nairobi for the UN system and the 2030 Agenda.

In a video address, UN Secretary-General António Guterres said the COVID-19 pandemic left more than half of the world behind in achieving the 2030 Agenda and to reverse this trend in time, "we must fight for the future we want." Under Secretary-General Li Junhua said that UNHA2 discussions should facilitate the High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (HLPF) review of SDG 11 (sustainable cities and communities) and pave the way for the September 2023 SDG Summit to make the breakthroughs needed to deliver on the 2030 Agenda. Outgoing UNGA President Csaba Kőrösi (Hungary) said cities are the epicenter of planetary crises and urged new, bold, and innovative commitments based on scientific inputs.

Maimunah Mohd Sharif, Executive Director, UN-Habitat, underscored that inequity and the triple planetary crises on climate change, biodiversity loss and pollution are felt first and foremost in cities and noted that the Paris Agreement's aspirations can only be achieved if sustainable urbanization is prioritized. She acknowledged the completion of the first phase of UN-Habitat's

governance structure and encouraged delegates to extend its Strategic Plan by two years.

Slumber Tsogwane, Vice President, BOTSWANA, acknowledged UN-Habitat's role in advancing sustainable urbanism for inclusive, connected, and prosperous communities. He noted African Member States are working together to advance the concept of resilient and sustainable cities and the African energy agenda. He underscored the importance of job access, cautioning that sustainable urbanization will not come without detailed economic transformation.

In his keynote address, William Ruto, President, KENYA, outlined Kenya's flagship initiative to deliver affordable and sustainable housing by 2030 as part of an overarching policy framework linking basic social services, sustainable energy and transport, green spaces, and waste management. Highlighting parallels with the global affordable housing shortfall for an estimated 3 billion people by 2030, he expressed concern that the current financial architecture is undermining progress on SDG 11. He urged the Assembly to strengthen UN-Habitat's capacity to lead a multilateral agenda for inclusive, safe, sustainable, and resilient human settlements. President Ruto then declared the Assembly officially open.

Heads of States Dialogue

In an interactive discussion segment, Moderator Eleni Giokos, CNN, invited President Ruto to outline his affordable housing vision. Concurring that the programme falls short of the target 250,000 houses annually, he defended a proposal to impose a 3% housing levy, stating it draws on successful experiences in countries such as Singapore and the Republic of Korea. He further noted that the feasibility of such a public-private partnership approach has been proven in Kenya's energy sector where more than 90% of Kenya's electricity comes from green sources. President Ruto stressed the need to depoliticize this issue, noting that the people living in informal settlements "should not wait a day for a better quality of life."

Emphasizing that there is no contradiction between the development and climate agendas, Ruto reiterated his belief that COP 28 "should be the last climate COP," explaining that the global community already has what it takes to make the right decisions to shift to a low carbon future. Citing the example

of Germany's response to a serious energy crisis unleashed by the war in Ukraine, he reminded delegates that sustainable urbanization is not a North-South problem and urged them to "adopt the right mindset" to change current pathways.

High-level Session on Climate Change and Migration Crises in Urban Areas

Cerin Kizhakkethottam, UN-Habitat, moderated the session, which aimed to unpack the links between climate change, migration, and instability.

Stating that Dhaka is one of the fastest growing cities in the world largely from internal displacement and migration, Abul Kalam Abdul Momen, Minister of Foreign Affairs, BANGLADESH, referred to his country's work in disaster risk reduction and called on UN-Habitat to contribute to norm setting to support climate migrants.

Nick Simpson, Africa Climate Mobility Initiative, stressed that climate migration interventions must help people to move, to stay, as well as to support communities receiving climate migrants, pointing out that current climate emission pathways may lead to hundreds of millions of people impacted by displacement by 2050. He called for including local governments into national adaptation planning.

Rohey Malick Lowe, Mayor, Banjul, the Gambia, highlighted some of the consequences of climate change in her city, including flash floods that impact water and food security and sanitation, leading to displacement in vulnerable communities. She encouraged broader stakeholder collaboration at the local level and enhancing trust in local governments.

Asking how to organize multilateralism on the ground, Rose Molokoane, Co-Founder/Coordinator, Slum Dwellers International, called for "working with, not for," the urban poor to build climate resilience in informal settlements. She stated, "We are homeless, but not hopeless" and suggested empowering and collaborating with vulnerable communities to mitigate poor planning and climate vulnerability.

Major General Hisham Amna, Minister of Local Development, EGYPT, stated that climate change has different impacts, including drought and desertification that force people to move. Reminding delegates that Egypt hosted the UN Climate Change Conference (UNFCCC) 27th Conference of the Parties (COP27), he said the Loss and Damage Fund has gained considerable interest.

Closing the session, Kizhakkethottam underscored the need for meaningful and inclusive multilateralism to embrace challenges as opportunities to build resilient and equitable cities and human settlements.

Plenary

The plenary reconvened in the afternoon with opening statements. Johnson Arthur Sakaja, Governor, Nairobi City County, Kenya, emphasized the urgency to develop specific action plans to ensure cities are more sustainable and resilient

and the role of local governments in these plans. Elizabeth Maruma Mrema, Deputy Executive Director, UN Environment Programme (UNEP), highlighted the importance of partnership and collaboration between UNEP and UN-Habitat particularly regarding the role of urban centers in plastics pollution. Fatimetou Abdel Malick, United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG), called for a redoubling of efforts to achieve the 2030 Agenda and emphasized the role of regional and local governments in achieving the SDGs.

Executive Director Sharif stressed that SDGs are the bedrock of effective multilateral results. She expressed the hope that UNHA2 can contribute to the new social contract called for by the UN Secretary-General and that the Summit of the Future in 2024 and World Social Summit in 2025 will advance housing rights as part of that contract.

Delegates adopted the provisional agenda ([HSP/HA.2/1](#) and [1/Add.1](#)) with adjustments in agenda items 11 (Strategic Plan) and 13 (next UNHA) to reflect the need for UNHA2 to discuss decisions to *inter alia*: possibly extend the current Strategic Plan until 2025; hold a resumed UNHA2 in 2025; approve a new strategic plan; and convene UNHA3 in 2029.

President Meyer proposed an organization of work, which was approved without objection. Delegates also approved the creation of a COW, chaired by Ghana, to discuss in detail agenda items on activities of the UN Human Settlements Programme, implementation of the New Urban Agenda (NUA) and 2030 Agenda, WUF reports, and Strategic Plan of UN-Habitat for 2024–2027 as well as any resolutions forwarded by an *ad hoc* open-ended drafting committee, chaired by Pakistan.

Adoption of the Report of the Committee of Permanent Representatives (CPR): CPR Chair Saqlain Syedah (Pakistan) introduced the report of CPR ([HSP/HA.2/2](#)). She outlined the outcomes of the first Open-ended Committee of Permanent Representatives (OECPR-1) meeting in June 2021, to prepare for a high-level midterm review of the Strategic Plan, and review progress achieved in the implementation of UNHA1 decisions and resolutions. She noted four recommendations calling, *inter alia*, for: strengthened linkages between UN-Habitat's operational and normative activities to increase the impact of its work in support of sustainable and inclusive recovery; and support of the preparation of voluntary reviews by local and regional governments and building connections with voluntary national reviews. Syedah highlighted 13 draft resolutions and decisions considered by the recently concluded OECPR-2 meeting in preparation for UNHA2. Delegates adopted the CPR report.

Adoption of the Report of the Executive Board: Chair Silvio Albuquerque (Brazil) introduced the report of the Executive Board to the Assembly on its intersessional work ([HSP/HA.2/3](#)), highlighting key outcomes. He noted that despite considerable efforts, the Board's *ad hoc* working group on the draft stakeholder engagement policy had not concluded its work and had moved proposals on the way forward to this Assembly. Delegates adopted the report of the Board.

Activities of UN-Habitat, Including Coordination Matters:

Executive Director Sharif introduced the documents for this agenda item ([HSP/HA.2/4](#), [Add.1/Rev.1](#), [Add.2](#) and [Add.4](#)) and underscored that UN-Habitat's mandate has strengthened since 2019. Delegates agreed to refer this agenda item to the COW for further discussion.

Review of Progress in the Implementation of the NUA and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development: Executive Director Sharif introduced her report on this subject ([HSP/HA.2/5](#)) and the report by the UNGA President on the outcome of the high-level UNGA meeting to assess progress in the implementation of the NUA ([HSP/HA.2/INF/3](#)). Cautioning that not enough countries have submitted progress on NUA implementation, she called this a lost opportunity to track sustainable urbanization. She suggested using national urban forums and that the NUA be perceived as a tool to achieve the 2030 Agenda. Delegates agreed to refer this agenda item to the COW for further discussion.

Report on the World Urban Forum: Executive Director Sharif introduced the Executive Director's report on the 10th and 11th sessions of the World Urban Forum (WUF10 and WUF11) ([HSP/HA.2/6](#)). She announced WUF12 would take place in Cairo, Egypt, from 4-8 November 2024. The agenda item was referred to the COW for further discussion.

National Statements: The EUROPEAN UNION called for focus on key priorities, including biodiversity loss, to ensure the implementation of the SDGs and the NUA, but cautioned on resource constraints when adopting resolutions. South Sudan, on behalf of the AFRICAN GROUP, noted adequate and affordable housing, urban planning and equitable financing as areas of concern and sought for resolutions and constructive engagement to support sustainable urbanization. Palestine, on behalf of the ASIA PACIFIC GROUP, emphasized the impact multiple crises have had on slowing SDG implementation, and called for national, sub-national and multilateral action to get back on track.

BANGLADESH drew on his country's experience to propose a sustainable urbanization agenda focusing, *inter alia*, on: building viable models for slum upgrading with tenure security; mobilizing additional financing; advocating for a just climate transition; and investing in knowledge and technology.

KENYA stressed that sustainable urban futures cannot be realized without effective multilateralism, highlighting efforts to develop a localized version of the NUA.

EGYPT underscored the responsibility of the international community to support the legitimate development aspirations of developing countries, while adapting to emerging challenges.

ETHIOPIA, highlighted efforts to revitalize the country's territorial development policy for a balanced approach to rural and urban development.

TUNISIA welcomed support from the UN-Habitat Regional Centre for the Arab Region and noted the importance of addressing the Palestinian question.

CHINA highlighted his country's progress in developing "cities by people for people," offering to share experience

and commitment to supporting UN-Habitat to leverage global platforms to realize a sustainable urban future.

GERMANY noted that if not handled well, urbanization can have severe impacts on the most vulnerable. He expressed support for strengthening the role of UN-Habitat as the "urban development brain of the multilateral system," but stressed that this should be accompanied by improved efficiency, transparency and accountability, and better linkages with other agencies on the ground.

MALAYSIA noted efforts to provide adequate, high quality and affordable housing, as well as efforts to enhance urban biodiversity.

Calling sustainable urban development an enabler to prosperity, AZERBAIJAN underscored its long-term partnership with UN-Habitat, acknowledging that it hosted a national urban forum and will host World Habitat Day in 2023.

MOROCCO highlighted its first national urbanization report and a new urban housing structure since 2022.

Lauding progress on the Spanish Urban Agenda, SPAIN noted its candidacy to host the next World Expo with a sustainable cities theme.

Calling climate change an opportunity to move to more ecological development, VENEZUELA urged UN-Habitat and partners to leave no one behind.

ITALY underscored vertical and horizontal coordination of the SDGs, noting its support to SDG localization.

COLOMBIA highlighted citizen participation in the design of urban space and community ownership of certain basic services, such as community water management in rural areas.

In the Breezeways

Kenya's self-proclaimed "hustler" government took center stage at the high-level opening, with President Ruto unveiling his flagship programme to build 250,000 new houses annually and a fleet of shiny new electric buses transporting UNHA2 delegates to the conference venue as part of the Nairobi Governor's pledge to advance sustainable urban transport. President Ruto drew hearty applause for his call to make COP28 "the last climate COP" to galvanize commitment on climate actions among Member States. However, many speeches that followed zeroed in on the complex and interconnected challenges that countries face, with several underscoring that cities are the epicenter of these challenges.

As the afternoon agenda turned to procedural questions, the Chair of the Executive Board expressed disappointment on the continued lack of consensus within the Board's *ad hoc* working group on the stakeholder engagement policy. One observer quipped that if the UN-Habitat Executive Board cannot agree on a policy to put to a later Assembly for approval, perhaps UN-Habitat can take a page from the workaround used by its UN sister agency, UNEP, when the UN Environment Assembly could not agree on a UNEP stakeholder policy: UNEP instead adopted a stakeholder engagement "handbook."



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