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Earth Negotiations Bulletin

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A Reporting Service for Environment and Development Negotiations

UN-Habitat Assembly Highlights:
Wednesday, 7 June 2023

Delegates spent the day focused on the theme 'A Sustainable Urban Future through Inclusive and Effective Multilateralism: Achieving the Sustainable Development Goals in times of Global Crises,' looking at the key challenges and drivers affecting SDGs achievement, and how national and subnational governments and stakeholders can work together to localize the SDGs.

High-level Interactive Dialogue on the Special Theme for the Second Session of the UN-Habitat Assembly

Opening the morning session, Assembly President Meyer encouraged delegates to allocate 70% of their time to fieldwork and 30% to reflection to achieve the promise of the SDGs. Executive Director Sharif called for honest dialogue to identify, agree upon, and commit to transformative pathways and multi-level governance. Shipra Narang-Suri, UN-Habitat, introduced the Executive Director's background paper on UNHA2's special theme (HSP/HA.2/7).

Morning Keynote: Mariana Mazzucato, University College London, UK, introduced her vision for a "mission driven approach" to achieving the right to housing for all. She proposed a value-driven "right to housing framework" involving:
- committing to a housing mission;
- shaping (not tinkering with) the housing market;
- building an entrepreneurial state;
- creating symbiotic public-private partnerships for the common good;
- deploying public-value driven financing and taxation; and
- ensuring monitoring and accountability for delivering on housing missions.

High-level Panel 1: The Big Challenges of Our Time: This panel, moderated by journalist Laban Cliff Onserio, discussed experiences addressing three of the key themes of the special theme, on housing, climate change and crisis.

Ni Hong, Minister of Housing and Urban-Rural Development, China, shared national experiences in delivering affordable housing, including integrating scientific and technological innovation, putting peoples' satisfaction at the center of policies, and renovating existing infrastructure. He emphasized the importance of multilateral approaches, and called for leveraging existing initiatives, such as World Cities Day, and developing new platforms to create mechanisms for knowledge sharing.

In sharing local and regional approaches to addressing poverty, technology and climate change, Catalina Velasco Campuzano, Minister for Housing, City and Territory, Colombia, noted the universality of these issues. She called for enhanced South-South cooperation to share knowledge and experiences while also suggesting shared financial resources as a tool for progress, concluding that "we can do better when we work together."

Richard Chimwendo Banda, Minister for Local Government, Unity and Culture, Malawi, drew attention to the sector-wide impacts that extreme weather events, most recently Tropical Cyclone Freddy, have had on implementing sustainable urban development. He noted such effects were exacerbated by a lack of regulatory frameworks and compliance with urban policies and emphasized the need to not only build back better but become more resilient.

Sharing key lessons to promoting sustainable urban development, Małgorzata Jarosińska Jedynak, Deputy Secretary of State, Ministry of Development Funds and Regional Policy, Poland, highlighted the role of civic engagement and the importance of removing barriers faced by seniors and individuals with disabilities to ensure no one is left behind. She further underscored the need for private sector involvement.

High-level Panel 2: The Key Enablers Driving the SDGs in the Time of Crisis: Amruta Byatnal, Context Newsroom, moderated the panel on key enablers such as data, financing, digital transformation and territorial approaches.

Nga Kor Ming, Minister for Local Government Development, Malaysia, called national development plans central to policy integration, encouraging commitment across government levels. Stating "data is gold," he pointed to an SDG dashboard to monitor, measure, and disseminate SDG information.

Noting that the New Urban Agenda (NUA) includes commitments to rural communities, Emil Elestianto Dardak, Vice Governor, East Java Province, Indonesia, indicated small cities require the economic conditions to create non-farming jobs and skills to support infrastructure development. Lauding efforts to grant local governments responsibilities, he encouraged national governments to support them.

Calling African cities centers of consumption, rather than production, Oyebanji Oyelaran-Oyeyinka, African Development Bank, cautioned these cities were unable to generate their own funding or access financing for infrastructure investments.

Diane Hoskins, Co-CEO, Gensler, described urban design focused on people as an enabling condition. She encouraged architecture and design to create the "tangible vision" to support sustainable urbanization.

Dyan Currie, Brisbane City Council, City of Brisbane, called "good planning critical to create great cities." Noting her work with UN-Habitat's Stakeholder Advisory Group, she underscored the planning divide between developed and developing cities, encouraging collaboration to bridge this.

Fayaz King, Office of the UN Secretary-General's Envoy on Technology, shared five points for digital transformation: digital connectivity and capacity building, including school connections; digital cooperation; human rights; an open and inclusive internet, without surveillance or cyber bullying; and digital trust and security.

In follow up discussion, Byatnal invited delegates to share examples on SDG implementation enablers. Ming called for a comprehensive legal framework, clear and certain policy, and strong political will. Dardak suggested enforcing spatial planning laws. Oyelaran-Oyeyinka pointed to special planning zones in peri-urban areas to direct future urban migration. Hoskins called regulation "good for design and good for our cities." Currie suggested starting with a clear vision and aligning decisions to this. King noted data and innovation divides, pointing to a

global digital compact to be discussed at the 2024 World Futures Summit.

Afternoon Session: In a video address, UN Deputy-Secretary General Amina Mohammed asked if we are prepared for the future of the urban agenda and highlighted the importance of multi-level governance, long-term planning and strategic partnerships. She praised UNHA2 for assessing progress and setbacks on sustainable urbanization, suggesting Parties bring outcomes from UNHA2 discussion regarding SDG 11 to the High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (HLPF) in July 2023 and the SDGs Summit in September 2023.

Afternoon Keynote: Violet Shivutse, Chair, Huairou Commission, said localization is fundamentally about partnerships, which is key to achieving SDG 11. She suggested grassroots organizations have much to teach local authorities, while cautioning that building meaningful partnerships requires equal access to resources and strengthening the capacity of constituency groups such as hers.

High-level Panel 3: Multi-level Governance and SDG Localization: Julians Amboko moderated this discussion between national and sub-national governments and stakeholders.

Juhani Damski, Permanent Secretary, Ministry of the Environment, Finland, said employing multi-level governance in Finland's work on the SDGs has resulted in considerable progress in achieving the Goals, and the linkages created in the process are useful for addressing other issues. He stressed the importance of UNHA2 adopting the proposed resolution on SDG localization.

Ignacio de la Puerta, Director, Territorial Planning, Urban Planning and Urban Regeneration, Basque Government, Spain, said his region has developed its own urban plan, linked to the EU Urban Agenda, by working with all stakeholders. He added that to assess its effectiveness, shared, accessible and verifiable information is needed.

Nora Vargas, Chair, San Diego Association of Governments (SANDAG), said collaboration between the US-Mexico cross-border local and state authorities is a concrete example of multi-level governance driven from the ground up. She cited the launch of a programme providing free public transport for youth as an example of youth inclusion in policy initiatives.

Noting that many women in Africa are still left behind, Rohey Malick Lowe, Mayor, Banjul, The Gambia, narrated her own journey as the sole female mayor in the country, and outlined various ways her office is mainstreaming women's empowerment to bridge the gender gap.

Lenin Zambrano, Indigenous Representative, Ecuador, discussed achievements in integrating the voices of youth in SDG localization processes, noting the importance of access to education and intergenerational dialogue in protecting cultural values and traditions.

In subsequent discussion, Damski expressed optimism about the future of multi-level governance, citing how local and regional networks are partnering to influence global processes. De la Puerta stressed the need to "walk the talk" by implementing actions set out in the NUA. Noting the complexity of governance arrangements in the region, he highlighted ongoing efforts to create inclusive platforms to jointly identify and coordinate sustainable urbanization projects. Further noting lessons learned on ensuring inclusion and mutual accountability, Vargas underscored the importance of institutionalizing change by "meeting people where they're at," stating this is one of the functions of the SANDAG forum.

Lowe said a focus on gender sensitization and awareness is yielding dividends in increased women's political participation and leadership. Regarding challenges in SDG localization, she highlighted the need to invest in high quality data and strengthen coordination across levels. Pointing out that increased youth inclusion and empowerment has only been achieved through a long social struggle, Zambrano highlighted efforts to consolidate these gains through localized education and mentoring by indigenous leaders and professionals "to bridge the future and the past."

A representative of the Geneva Cities Hub emphasized that, as political actors, cities have great potential to drive multi-level governance, but this requires their formal recognition within multilateral processes.

A participant from Portugal called for exploring standards setting to encourage the involvement of cities and regional authorities in multi-level governance, modelled on private sector certification processes.

High-level Panel 4: Key Takeaways: Directions for the Summit of the Future: Onserio moderated this panel.

Via video, UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) President Lachezara Stoeva (Bulgaria) noted the importance of the Assembly leading up to the HLPF in July 2023, with SDG 11 being one of the five Goals under review, as well as the SDG Summit in September 2023 and the Summit of the Future in 2024. She further expressed the importance of developing outputs at the Assembly to shape the path forward, and to reconfirm the central role of the NUA as a road map for SDG 11 implementation.

Michal Mlyná, Deputy Executive Director, UN-Habitat, urged participants to utilize the gatherings and deliberations at UNHA2 to share knowledge, forge partnerships and practical cooperation, and to develop practical solutions for national, regional and local governments and stakeholders. He emphasized the need to translate inputs and recommendations from governments into action-oriented results, while asserting that "the future starts today."

Speaking to the role of academia, Stephanie Egerland, Chancellor, HafenCity University, Germany, noted that although schools and universities can train, support, and equip youth with the tools they need to implement change, participatory solutions are key. She underscored the need for solutions to be conceived at the local level and that academia must support, rather than drive, these ideas.

Jean Pierre Elong Mbassi, Secretary General, United Cities and Local Governments Africa, discussed how the issues cities face today emerged from historical planning designed against nature and stressed the need to recognize nature as a solution. In developing sustainable cities and communities, he noted the need for enhanced trust, engagement and accountability between government and citizens and for innovation to drive localized solutions as opposed to standardized approaches.

Musonda Mumba, Secretary-General, Ramsar Convention, described the "deep connection" cities have historically had with water and provided examples on the power of wetland restoration to promote resilience and biodiversity in urban areas. She drew attention to the interconnected linkages between rural, urban, and natural areas before stressing the need for conversations at the Assembly to turn into action.

In the Breezeways

At its halfway mark, participation at the Habitat Assembly appeared to be dwindling. Despite enthusiastic multi-stakeholder discussions in four high-level panels – dedicated to the UNHA2 special theme on a sustainable urban future through inclusive and effective multilateralism – some questioned if, with the imminent HLPF review of SDG 11, time would have been better spent reviewing implementation progress and remaining gaps. Still, the UNON breezeways remained busy, with delegates running between regional ministerial meetings, strategic lunches and networking events, and the drafting committee. All this hyperactivity perhaps demonstrates that UNHA's greatest strength may be what is often craved: connecting local and national policymakers to foster that city-to-city horizontal policy learning. This has certainly been the case across the more than 40 side events, tackling such issues as low-carbon city transport and energy systems, SDG localization, nature-based solutions, innovative financial instruments, and so on. As with other multilateral processes, these "offline" spaces are increasingly becoming the locus of knowledge exchange, strengthening issue-based networks, mobilizing resources and assembling "coalitions of the willing" to accelerate actions on the ground.