

UN-Habitat Assembly Highlights: Tuesday, 6 June 2023

The second day of the Second Session of the UN-Habitat Assembly (UNHA2) featured several First Ladies, UN-Habitat Executive Director Maimunah Mohd Sharif and other female guests to discuss “women shaping cities and communities,” providing inspiring examples from Botswana, Kenya and Türkiye. A special high-level thematic session was also held on universal access to adequate housing.

First Ladies High Level Dialogue on “Women Shaping Cities and Communities”

President Meyer opened the session, introducing its moderator, Kenyan journalist Victoria Rubadiri.

Saying “we cannot achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) without women and girls,” Maimunah Mohd Sharif, Executive Director, UN-Habitat, stressed the importance of including women and girls in local planning and decision-making. She noted that UN-Habitat’s Her City Toolbox can help in this regard, stating “if we’re not at the table, we’re on the menu.”

Delegates viewed a video about the work of Neo Jane Masisi, First Lady of Botswana, on gender-based violence, HIV and AIDS, youth drug dependency, and economic and social empowerment. This was followed by a video showcasing initiatives of Kenyan First Lady Rachel Ruto’s Mama Doing Good organization focusing on women’s economic empowerment, environment and climate action, and “faith diplomacy.” In a video message, Emine Erdoğan, First Lady of Türkiye, stressed the need for leadership in tackling urban waste issues and her championing of the Zero Waste Movement and Zero Waste Day.

The plenary heard impact stories from two beneficiaries of programmes empowering women in Kenya. Beatrice Achieng shared her person testimony with the Joyful Women Organization and its livelihood scheme, table banking. Ruth Njori spoke on the importance of these programmes to empower vulnerable and marginalized groups but asked for more work to address youth unemployment.

Ruto emphasized the need to raise the profile of sustainable urban development through the voice and agency of women. She challenged the audience to consider what cities would look like if they were planned with and for women, and underscored that cities will not be inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable until women are empowered.

The plenary then heard a poem from Botswana poet Tiawanda Dema.

Rubadiri conducted a discussion with Ruto and Sharif. Ruto discussed how her love of cycling led to advocacy of cycling in Kenya through Mama Cycling, and how an effort to help empower a rural woman eventually led to founding Mama Doing Good. She said the organization’s motto is the five Cs: convene, connect, collaborate, catalyze, and celebrate.

Sharif noted that achieving the SDGs by 2030 will require leadership and political will, engagement with women at every level, and providing women the space to share their talents. She emphasized both UN-Habitat’s normative work and its operational on-the-ground urban planning as tools for empowering women.

In a special intervention, Phildah Kereng, Minister of Environment and Tourism, Botswana, stressed the importance of providing safe environments and opportunities for women to pursue their trade and improve the livelihoods of their families. She also called for improved data and indicators on women in the urban environment, and investments in, among other things, the health of women and girls, and economic empowerment programmes. Kereng urged UN-Habitat and the first ladies to document success stories and undertake exchange programs to foster connection and provide inspiration.

High-level Session on Universal Access to Adequate Housing

Moderator Shipra Narang-Suri, UN-Habitat, opened the session by underscoring that housing is more than a roof and four walls, rather it encompasses people’s health, dignity, safety, inclusion, and wellbeing. Noting that slow progress in advancing the right to adequate housing “is a structural failure of our systems to deliver on the most fundamental promise to humanity,” she said the special session would showcase the role of adequate housing in unlocking multiple benefits and explore how to create a strong multilateral platform to operationalize the proposed UNHA2 resolution on delivering affordable housing for all.

In a keynote address, Ricky Burdett, Co-Chair, Council on Urban Initiatives, discussed how cities are reshaping cities and repositioning housing “at the center of a common good approach,” sharing examples from Barcelona, Bogota, Melbourne, Mumbai, Singapore and London.

Amna bint Ahmed Alrumaihi, Minister of Housing and Urban Planning, Bahrain, highlighted an initiative to design more

inclusive and sustainable towns to tackle rapid population growth and resource challenges, underscoring the importance of building strong partnerships with the private sector.

Henry Yap, Undersecretary of Human Settlements and Urban Development, the Philippines, discussed projects being implemented as part of the New Urban Agenda (NUA) with the overall aim of building “better, greener, and more inclusive cities,” and announced the first Philippine Urban Forum to take place in October 2023.

UN-Habitat Executive Director Sharif underscored the link between safe, affordable and sustainable housing and a just climate transition, and called for the discussions to propose a clear action plan and policies for implementation.

In the ensuing panel discussion, Charles Hinga, Principal Secretary, Housing and Urban Development, Kenya, noted progress in developing standardized components to promote local manufacturing and boost employment in the housing sector.

Audrey Guiral-Naepels, Deputy Head of Urban Development, Planning and Housing Division, French Development Agency, noted that the economic development of cities was historically linked to their capacity to provide decent housing for workers and underscored the importance of public-private collaboration.

Berry Vrbancovic, Mayor of Kitchener, Canada and co-President, United Cities and Local Governments, described housing as a right and necessary precondition for sustainable and inclusive development, noting the importance of creating space for local autonomy and leadership.

Carlos Martínez Velázquez, Director General, Institute of National Housing Fund for Workers, Mexico, described the Fund as one of the largest housing credit programmes in the world. He highlighted ongoing efforts to “learn from past mistakes” by ensuring stronger links between financing and social inclusion indicators.

Wrapping up the discussions, Moderator Narang-Suri stated that the lack of advancement on the right to adequate housing is a failure of markets as well as public policy at all levels. She welcomed the positive examples of multi-pronged approaches that are repositioning housing at the center of urban planning and renewal by exploring new and innovative financing and governance models.

Plenary

Dialogue on the Special Theme for UNHA2: The Secretariat introduced the Executive Director’s report on the special theme for the Assembly, “A sustainable urban future through inclusive and effective multilateralism: achieving the Sustainable Development Goals in times of global crises” ([HSP/HA.2/7](#)). Pointing to the UN Secretary-General’s Our Common Agenda report, he indicated it recognizes the transformative potential of cities. He noted eight pathways to support a sustainable urban future, *inter alia*: adequate housing as a right; integrated climate and biodiversity action; inclusive urban recovery frameworks; vertical and horizontal coordination and SDG localization; and an increased fiscal space. He stressed that cities be heard in multilateral fora, including the July 2023 High-level Political Forum on Sustainable

Development (HLPF) and the SDG Summit scheduled for September 2023 during the UN General Assembly.

Strategic Plan of UN-Habitat: The Secretariat presented progress on the Strategic Plan and plans for upcoming work ([HSP/HA.2/8](#), [HSP/HA.2/9](#) and [HSP/HA.2/10](#)). Among results, he highlighted a recovery framework and roadmap to accelerate NUA implementation, and efforts to improve basic services and create safer and cocreated public spaces. He suggested extending the Strategic Plan by two years to consolidate work and increase impact, noting UN-Habitat is preparing the 2026-2029 Plan. Delegates forwarded this item to the COW for further discussion.

National Statements: POLAND highlighted their work improving urban air quality by replacing home heating systems. The RUSSIAN FEDERATION expressed interest in emerging and digital technologies for urban management. NEPAL recognized urbanization as an opportunity to ensure housing and basic services,

LIBYA shared urgent measures undertaken to manage urbanization, particularly among youth. COSTA RICA outlined their collaborative efforts to solve the disconnect between cities and nature. CZECHIA emphasized the need for multilateral cooperation to achieve the 2030 Agenda.

The US shared efforts aimed at reducing barriers to upward mobility for vulnerable communities. JAPAN highlighted efforts abroad to promote and design environmental waste management systems. GREECE emphasized the relationship between coastal cities and the ocean and called for global efforts to support a blue economy.

Discussing the decarbonization of buildings and construction, FRANCE noted sustainable urbanization is not possible without housing policies. QATAR shared their commitment to strengthening cooperation to promote employment opportunities. KUWAIT noted their support in providing infrastructure in areas experiencing conflict and crises.

TÜRKIYE called for collective responsibility for strengthening UN-Habitat and providing it with more resources. DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF CONGO (DRC) urged increased multilateral cooperation to achieve key NUA policy priorities. SAUDI ARABIA emphasized its Vision 2030 and its efforts to provide housing, improve quality of life, expand green spaces, and promote smart cities.

UKRAINE noted how the war has severely impacted its housing, hospitals, schools, and infrastructure. Exercising right of reply, the RUSSIAN FEDERATION decried raising “political issues” not related to UNHA2 agenda item.

The DOMINICAN REPUBLIC noted its efforts to promote construction of housing and regional efforts to implement the NUA. CAMEROON announced intentions to launch the First Conference of Ministers in charge of Town Planning to rethink, harmonize and make more applicable spatial planning and implementation instruments.

ZAMBIA noted its accelerated decentralization and promotion of multilevel governance as a way of enabling inclusive development and access to basic services. PAKISTAN underscored how climate change-induced crises, such as severe flooding, are creating climate migrants straining unprepared and

under-resourced cities. THE GAMBIA highlighted help from UN-Habitat's slum upgrading programme and requested help on solid waste management.

BRAZIL stressed his country's inclusion of the poor in public budgets to address socioeconomic inequality. ECUADOR outlined its national urban policy, which incorporates climate, gender and intergenerational perspectives to ensure safe and sustainable cities. YEMEN shared the impact conflict has had on housing, electricity and access to water and asked for support to strength services.

BAHRAIN shared experiences on launching funding mechanisms to address demand for housing. PALESTINE underscored the impacts of migration and conflict on cities, stressing the need for international cooperation and innovation. TANZANIA shared actions taken to combat climate change, including greening city initiatives and efforts to build resilience to rising sea levels among coastal cities.

BARBADOS called for action to halt the trajectory of global warming and discussed the need to restructure debt to allow for investment and planning.

DJIBOUTI described cities as sites of both progress and poverty, highlighting policy efforts to increase housing and address land ownership. MALAWI noted its initiative on circular cities, while lauding the importance of multilateralism in the wake of Tropical Cyclone Freddy. TONGA pointed to efforts to build a resilient housing sector, including access to environmental-friendly building materials and skilled labor.

COMOROS suggested affordable housing be part of comprehensive strategies tied to a country's socioeconomic conditions and welcomed support. Noting that poverty reduction is central to the NUA, SOUTH AFRICA highlighted its sponsorship of a resolution transforming informal settlements. KIRIBATI underscored the impacts of climate change among small island developing States, especially in growing informal settlements.

Noting rapid urbanization, NIGER expressed gratitude for programmes financed by the African Union. UGANDA invited parties to support their SDG implementation and the NUA, highlighting efforts to improve monitoring of urban indicators. ZIMBABWE acknowledged the rise of informal settlements and pointed to work with rural communities on water and sanitation access.

The PHILIPPINES highlighted its national housing programme and work on housing finance, indicating it collaborates with local authorities. SYRIA noted challenges on reconstruction after the recent earthquake. The UNITED ARAB EMIRATES noted COVID-19 recovery efforts and preparations for UNFCCC COP28.

Pointing to collaboration with UN-Habitat, PARAGUAY indicated it was updating its national urban policy. ARGENTINA highlighted efforts to localize SDG implementation and strengthen social inclusion and green growth policies. ESTONIA identified circular economy approaches as an enabler for sustainable urbanization, supporting calls to launch World Clean Up Day in 2024.

The REPUBLIC OF KOREA presented its vision for carbon neutral and smart cities to promote effective response to global crises at the city level. INDIA flagged its ambitious housing

and sustainable water and sanitation programmes benefitting millions of low-income citizens. FINLAND welcomed the strong environmental focus in UNHA2 draft resolutions and drew attention to its work on localization and circularity.

Citing the impact of migration on housing, water and other resources, JORDAN highlighted efforts to develop an integrated housing vision linked to advance the NUA. MEXICO said it is prioritizing improved and culturally-sensitive housing in the most marginalized areas as part of an overarching smart cities initiative. PERU stressed the need to ensure equity and solidarity in urban design, highlighting universal access to water and sanitation and human capital as key pillars.

INDONESIA called for UNHA2 to deliver a substantive and ambitious outcome by stimulating multi-sectoral and multi-level partnerships. NICARAGUA stressed the need to "review" the 2030 Agenda in the wake of multiple crises and noted the contribution of the NUA in reorienting urban and territorial planning.

SINGAPORE shared experiences in developing a green building masterplan to accelerate towards a low-carbon environment and to restore biodiversity and expand nature reserve networks in urban areas. URUGUAY underscored the need to not only provide housing but to also strengthen communities by working alongside families. Noting 72% of their population is urbanized, ALGERIA discussed the inclusion of vulnerable groups in addressing housing demand.

OMAN underscored the need for balanced development between rural and urban areas. SWITZERLAND shared international efforts promoting services and opportunities for migrants, improving living conditions of informal settlements, and strengthening land access rights. Noting its aspiration to become a developed country by 2060, BURUNDI detailed its legal framework for compensation in cases of expropriation due to urban growth.

THAILAND focused on protecting biodiversity, developing a green economy, and reducing emissions as keys to promoting balanced growth. LAO PDR said it was drafting a housing law and hosted a national urban forum with broad stakeholder engagement. SERBIA suggested pooling resources to work together on positive multilateralism and lauded UN-Habitat's strengthened mandate.

The UN SCIENTIFIC COMMITTEE ON THE EFFECTS OF ATOMIC RADIATION underscored the importance of radiation safety for workers, while expressing the need to reduce exposure to radiation in homes, schools and food. The WORLD HEALTH ORGANIZATION highlighted their memorandum of understanding with UN-Habitat to work on shaping healthy cities, addressing air and water quality, and improving access to health care.

Committee of the Whole

COW Chair Dampety Bediako Asare (Ghana) noted that in addition to the four agenda items forwarded to the Committee for its consideration, the COW would also review all 13 draft resolutions and decisions as well as the Ministerial Declaration prior to consideration by the Assembly. The Committee forwarded the texts to the drafting committee chaired by Pakistan.

Activities of UN-Habitat, Including Coordination

Matters: The Secretariat introduced the documents for this agenda item ([HSP/HA.2/4](#), [Add.1/Rev.1](#), [Add.2](#), [Add.4](#) and [INF/2](#)). The Secretariat then provided an overview of key results and achievements across seven key areas: developing a new organizational structure to deliver integrated urban solutions; implementation of resolutions and decisions adopted by UNHA1; implementing the NUA; UN system-wide coordination on sustainable urbanization; collaboration with intergovernmental and international organizations; COVID-19 response and recovery; and normative guidance for catalytic impact.

On implementation of resolutions and decisions adopted at UNHA1, he highlighted: the implementation of the Strategic Plan in 86 countries; piloting of an urban safety monitoring framework; the launch of an online capacity building course on the NUA; and the establishment of the Centre for Urban Rural Linkages in Africa, the Local 2030 coalition and other issue-based networks. Among other notable achievements, he highlighted initiation of the UN Innovation Technology Accelerator for Cities to promote a people-centered approach to urban digital development; and co-convening the first Ministerial Meeting on Urbanization and Climate Change.

Review of Progress in the Implementation of the NUA and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development: The Secretariat presented progress in implementing the NUA and the 2030 Agenda ([HSP/HA.2/5](#)) highlighting: the NUA's transformative potential, including as a framework to achieve sustainable urbanization; a concern regarding low progress on NUA implementation; and a call to analyze obstacles to implementation. She noted efforts on housing, environment, the urban crisis, urban prosperity and inclusion, and finance and localization. Pointing to an upcoming SDG 11 Synthesis Report to the HLPF, she expressed concern that only 39 national NUA reports were submitted and proposed aligning NUA reporting to national urban policies and fora.

The US commented on the coordination of meetings to present NUA progress. FRANCE noted it was working on its NUA report for submission in 2023.

Report on the World Urban Forum (WUF): The Secretariat reported on WUF10 in Abu Dhabi, UAE, in February 2020 and WUF11 in Katowice, Poland, in June 2022 ([HSP/HA.2/6](#), [HSP/HA.2/INF/4](#), [INF/5](#), [INF/6](#)).

POLAND reported on WUF11, noting delegates from 155 countries, with 11,000 onsite and 6,000 online attendees. She said WUF11 prioritized accessibility so that visually and physically impaired participants could engage in the agenda and venue, pointing to 40 crisis-related events to help cities respond to natural and manmade disasters.

The Secretariat noted legacy WUF initiatives, including alumni advocacy networks, and financing and knowledge-sharing, notably the Legacy Fund and the City Investment Facility.

On WUF12 preparations, scheduled in Cairo, Egypt, in 2024, the Secretariat noted a high-level organizing committee chaired

by the Egyptian Prime Minister and engagement opportunities at forthcoming HLPF and SDG Summits.

The US requested information on the WUF theme and ensuring preparatory sessions are convened in hybrid or recorded format to enhance access.

Strategic Plan of UN-Habitat: COW Chair Asare noted the documents introduced in the morning plenary. The Secretariat outlined implementation of the current Strategic Plan, noting progress made in the Plan's four domains of change despite the COVID-19 pandemic and financial constraints. He suggested this proved the Strategic Plan is a robust framework for recovery and roadmap to accelerate NUA implementation for achieving the SDGs. He discussed the Executive Board's recommendation to extend the plan until 2025 so a new plan can be developed covering the period 2026-2029. He outlined three new policy areas – adequate housing, climate action and urban crises recovery – to be added in the new plan, as well as two new drivers, SDG localization and financing. He said the Secretariat intends to ensure that the new plan has a stronger emphasis on evidence, incorporates lessons learned, and provides for more monitoring and reporting on project delivery and impact.

The DRC expressed support for extending the current Strategic Plan until 2025 but stressed this has to be done through a formal Assembly decision and should not be considered as setting a precedent for future UN-Habitat strategic plans.

KENYA suggested that much has been achieved in implementing the Strategic Plan, but noted a lack of resources hampers full implementation. She expressed support for extending it and hoped that the midterm review will identify any gaps that can inform the preparation of the next strategic plan.

In the Breezeways

Delegates hit the ground running with a speedy review of key documents in the COW, leading to both sessions finishing early and providing impetus for the days to come. While negotiators still need to go through blocks of bracketed resolution texts, on face value at least, the discussions in plenary did hint at broad consensus around the need for more effective multilateralism and other key themes at this Assembly.

The afternoon saw a long list of ministers and high-level representatives making national statements, albeit kept to a strict three-minute limit that led to frequent cutoffs mid-sentence, prompting other speakers to read their statements at warp speed. While many lauded UN-Habitat's growing mandate and progress made in implementing its Strategic Plan despite the pandemic, concern was also whispered among delegates and observers about the chances of raising the necessary resources to match expectations, especially with sustainable urbanization so high in the 2030 Agenda. Some also expressed concern about the upcoming HLPF review of SDG 11 and what it might have to say about shortfalls in achieving the Goal.

Despite such nagging concerns, delegates ended on a high note, enjoying networking in a packed reception hosted by the Kenyan presidency and attended by the Kenyan Vice President and a lively cultural performance.