

**Statement by Mrs. Anna Tibaijuka
Executive Director of UN-HABITAT
Under-Secretary-General of the United Nations
on the occasion of the 14th
Habitat Professionals Forum
Strategic Meeting
Saturday 28th March 2009**

Mr. Derek Martin, Secretary General, International Federation for Housing and Planning,

Esteemed Professionals,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am delighted to open this Strategic Meeting of the Habitat Professionals Forum gathering such a distinguished group of planners, architects, surveyors and landscape architects. I know that many of you have travelled from far away to be here today. After 10 years of existence, this 14th session of the Forum could not be more timely on the eve of our 22nd Governing Council.

At the outset, I cannot stress more strongly how highly we value your wise counsel, especially in these times of climate change, rapid urbanization around the world, and slum growth at a time cities around the world, especially in developing countries, are faced with a terrible economic downturn.

Brief background

Our engagement with Habitat professionals dates back to the Habitat II Conference in Istanbul in 1996. The *Habitat Agenda* that arose from this was a great achievement, particularly the recognition of partnership as a key principle for our work. This internationally adopted document says – and I quote:

‘The successful implementation of the Habitat Agenda relies on the ability of many different actors within the human settlements sector to work in partnership. Understanding how all the different actors interface may prove to be the most important consideration in the implementation process and will largely rely on the principles of mutual benefits’.

Hence the Habitat Professionals Forum was established, under the auspices of UN-HABITAT in New York and thanks to the initiative of a number of organisations, almost all of which are present here today. These include the International Society of City and Regional Planners, the International Federation for Housing and Planning, the International Union of Architects, the International Federation of Surveyors, the Centre for African Settlement Studies and Development and the Arabian Urban Development Institute.

Initially, the Habitat Professionals Forum was established to review and assess progress in the concrete implementation of the Habitat Agenda. The Forum was also meant to contribute to our Work Programme through recommendations on priorities and orientations. Another central function was to raise awareness on urbanization and to contribute to the knowledge on effective practices that can enhance the urban environment.

Today, as we implement a new Medium Term Strategic and Institutional Plan covering the years 2008-2013, which places 'partnership' at the heart of our work, I wish to assure that it is our intention to support the objectives and activities of the Habitat Professionals Forum to the full.

Distinguished Partners,

As you know, the combined impact of rapid urbanization, climate change and globalization is resulting in increasing inequalities, which pose enormous social, economic and environmental challenges. One of our major concerns at the United Nations is the plight of the estimated one billion women, men and children who live in slums. One out of every six human beings is currently deprived of the most basic amenities, such as water, sanitation, security of tenure, durable housing and sufficient living space.

Needless to say, if these trends are not addressed and reversed, the slum crisis will continue to be yet another threat in the long list of threats to global peace and security.

Harnessing new ideas for cities

Another major concern is the impact of rapid and chaotic urbanization on our environment, and the ability of our planet to sustain diversity of life as we know it. As human activity concentrates itself in cities, irreversible changes occur in our production and consumption patterns. With half of humanity is living in cities, we must bear in mind that cities consume 75% of the world's energy and generate an equally significant proportion of the world's waste, including greenhouse gas emissions. As easily seen in satellite photographs from space, the ecological footprints of megacities is growing alarmingly.

How as professionals can we harness the positive aspects of urbanization to promote social inclusion, smarter growth and thus contribute to our collective stability and prosperity? How can urbanization become the cornerstone of a new inclusive civilization? How can we help create vibrant and socially cohesive urban communities?

At a time when unsustainable models are all too common, and have played a contributory role to the current economic malaise, as questions are asked of policy makers, you, the professionals can play a vital role.

It is clear that solutions cannot be achieved within the existing framework which has been tried and unfortunately found wanting. New, creative models are urgently needed.

As architects, planners, surveyors, engineers, landscape architects, you have an ethical if not moral obligation to help confront the urban challenge ahead. Take the architects for instance. While architecture is a reflection of the social and economic values of a given society and acts as a mirror of cultures, it is also a deliberate act of design. As architects, each time you draw a line, you define a space. That space can either perpetuate the existing reality or help create a new reality that is socially more inclusive and environmentally more sound.

The same goes for urban planners. Your design becomes part of the urban landscape for generations to come. And the users of what you design will either love you or hate you.

Your experience, in partnership with UN HABITAT can create a cross pollination of ideas, and come up with these new solutions.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

These are the very matters that have led our organization to recognize the importance of professional practice in human settlements. **UN-HABITAT is well aware that the human settlements professionals are crucial partners that must be engaged if the world's cities are to achieve sustainability.**

Our new Strategic Plan includes housing and urban planning as two of its six focus areas. In particular, meeting the Millennium Development Goals on better urban water provision and 11 on improving the lives of slum dwellers requires a concerted approach to land, basic infrastructure and services, affordable housing solutions, and accessible housing finance systems, through partnerships.

We are also about to engage in a Global Campaign for Sustainable Urbanization that will push for better designed urban spaces, safer and healthier communities, more equitable and harmonious cities, as well as a better quality of life for everyone.

As such, it is established that UN-HABITAT should enhance its brokering role by promoting dialogue between partners and help them to take concrete actions on urbanization issues. Habitat Professionals need to be fully brought on board in these renewed engagements with partners.

To conclude, I would like to stress that the role of professionals is central to our quest for sustainable urbanisation and for sustainable development. UN-HABITAT, the agency for sustainable urban development, stands ready to support and work with you in this endeavour.

I hope that together, we will move towards a much better model of sustainable urban development, one that cities and neighbourhoods can easily put into practice.

I wish to thank all of you for attending this Forum and I look forward to learning about the outcome of your deliberations.

Thank you.