

Second World Urban Forum 2004 Barcelona the city as a culture of cultures

Opening Address by Mrs. Anna Kajumulo Tibaijuka, Under-Secretary-General and Executive Director, UN-HABITAT

Madam Chairperson,
Your Excellency Mr. Maragall, Madam Trujillo, Mayor Clos, President Gorbachev,
President Ahtisaari, Prime Minister Hariri,
Distinguished Ministers, Excellencies and UN colleagues at the podium,
Distinguished Ministers, Excellencies, Mayors and Parliamentarians in the audience,
Participants,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

We are honoured that the World Urban Forum has been invited to be an integral part of the highly successful Universal Forum of Cultures. I wish to extend a special thank you to Mayor Joan Clos and the city of Barcelona, the people of Catalonia and the Government of Spain for their invitation to host this global gathering. The warm welcome we have all received bears testimony to your commitment to international solidarity. Thank you.

This World Urban Forum is the second in the biennial series of global dialogues organized by the UN to address the main challenge of this century – the transition to an urban world. I thank all of you for coming to share your experience in the implementation of the Habitat Agenda and the fight against urban poverty.

The theme of this second World Urban Forum renders the city as the crossroads of cultures. Our sub-theme, integration and inclusion? (with a question mark), refers to the difficulties we face in making cities work for everyone. The question mark implies that we have not yet arrived at an effective strategy to do this. Despite some outstanding examples of cultural pluralism in cities, we do not yet have agreement on how to approach the fundamental issues of multi-ethnic and multi-cultural societies in an increasingly globalizing and urbanizing world. Indeed, because so many of us are complicit in the political use of cultural difference to maintain our economic and social advantage, we may not even recognize many of the problems, thereby making them intractable

And these problems are both legion and vast, hiding in plain sight as racism, economic exclusion, spatial segregation, and other forms of discrimination. In being honest, we would ask ourselves, what are the fundamental fears that emerge when strangers come to live amongst us? And, how can we overcome those fears, not just temporarily but permanently, so we can get on with human advancement?

Ladies and gentlemen, you have heard it before, but it is nonetheless important that just 50 years ago two-thirds of all people on earth lived in the rural countryside. Fifty years from now, two-thirds of all people – six billion of us – will be at home in the city. At this moment, 3 billion people, half the population of the planet, live in cities. Urbanization at this scale, with such accelerated velocity is driven by one thing above all others, migration – the flow of people from country to country and from countryside to city – from one culture to another.

As more of us make the city our home, we find ourselves part of a cultural jumble that threatens our individual identities. This, however, is the nature of city life. All cities are gathering places for humanity, where people of different economic, social and cultural backgrounds come together, each hoping to become part of the

productive tapestry that is the city. Progress in realizing our individual ambitions in this environment can be rapid or slow, depending upon many factors. Perhaps most important among these factors is the extent to which an ethos of cooperation and inclusion has taken root, driving out selfishness and fear.

An unfortunate reality is that the wholehearted acceptance of strangers – who may be branded by their peculiar habits, mysterious religion, uncommon appearance or puzzling behaviour – runs counter to our subconscious, which warns us against the unknown, as it has for a hundred thousand years.

We humans are now firmly wedged on the horns of a dilemma. The ultimate framework for togetherness is culture, but far too often the fears and selfish habits that can exist in any culture result in the exclusion of others. Why, for example, do so many established cultures resist sharing space with others? How can we overcome inbred fears and bad habits in order to create the openness that must become the principal hallmark of the city – the future home of mankind?

We have it in our power to build the inclusive, integrated and socially confident city – or the exclusive, class-ridden, insecure and anti-social city. Unfortunately, there are forces, many of them stemming from perceived differences among ethnic and economic groups, which work against creating a city that is unified in its diversity.

Each human being is guided by a bundle of family, clan and tribal conventions – our culture – that tells us how, when and whether we can share our lives with others. Break the rules, ignore the expectations of our own culture and the result can be psychological stress, social stigma and sometimes violent punishment.

All too often, when we fail to realize our own aspirations, an identifiable group of others becomes a handy scapegoat to cover our shame. Even in democracies, the demagogue can rouse the tranquil masses by pointing to a cultural minority – implying that an alien enemy is loose among us. As we have witnessed in crossroad cities like Sarajevo, once a model of cultural pluralism, it is tragically easy to upset the delicate structure of togetherness that may have taken many years to build.

We can love the songs, dances, literature and cuisine of peoples whom we know will never ask to live amongst us. And we can accept and even cherish the ancient monuments that exist in our own environment knowing that the people who created them will not come back from the grave to join us. But the actual sharing of resources, space and power with those who, in the present, may hold different views or look different yields over and over again to the fearful and selfish side of our nature.

Even knowing within our hearts what we should do, we continue to invent forms of exclusion that force the stranger – the Other – either to become one of us or to be locked out of our lives and livelihoods.

Ladies and gentlemen, living together in peace has long been a cherished norm for all humanity.

Over time, strategies for achieving togetherness have been tried and tested. First, it was the idea of cultural assimilation, where the other group would be asked, or forced, to adopt our language and way of life and, in effect, become us. Over time, it was recognized that such assimilation denied people their right to cultural liberty – the right to be themselves.

More recently the prescription has been multi-culturalism, urging cultures to live side-by-side, as in a bouquet of flowers. It has been pointed out, however, that multi-culturalism is only superficially unifying and tends to enfranchise the most reactionary and traditionalist elements in an ethnic group – usually those of the older generation who want to enforce religious and cultural orthodoxy. This has the effect of freezing culture in time, taking away its essential adaptability, which is the sine qua non for sustainable urban life. Such cultural inertia further emphasizes differences, resulting in greater friction among cultures and making it less likely to find common ground over time.

Until we better understand the dynamics of cities and the concessions each of us must make to the imperatives of life in the city, people of difference will live together uneasily in tension. Sadly, many of the imperatives of modern city life are foreign to traditional cultures, just as many rural customs are out of place in the city.

It was only 200 years ago, at the dawn of the industrial revolution, that less than five percent of all human beings lived in all the cities of the world. The past fifty years has witnessed an accelerated wave of urbanization that has quickly washed over the planet, generating urban societies that are now struggling to create peaceful cultures of their own.

Such cultures can only succeed as a fresh synthesis, produced by the spread of the human-rights ethos, by universal education, by the dissolution of protected relationships in favour of open social networks, by intermarriage, by sport and debate as non-violent surrogates for combat and by all the other economic and social mechanisms that give priority to life-choice over blind conformity. In the sustainable city of the future, mixture becomes the starting point, not the problem.

Ladies and gentlemen, sometimes we are too busy scanning the horizon to realize what lies at our own feet. So it is with the United Nations.

The United Nations was founded in 1945 as an international forum for crisis management and conflict resolution, and since then has evolved into a beacon of shining principle. The United Nations is a family of different cultures, each of which is voluntarily subordinate to the mission of the whole. In an important way, the UN has moved beyond both assimilation and multi-culturalism by defining its mission in terms of universal human need. Even in the political society that is the United Nations, where self-interest of the constituent nations flourishes, farsighted leaders have agreed that the fate of each nation depends upon an agreed definition of our common humanity. And, so, we have embarked on a collective journey to discover what makes us all human. It is our dedication to this normative mission, not the mere acceptance of the individual cultures that makes the United Nations a vibrant family – a place to work for peace and prosperity.

In looking for exemplary practitioners of this mission I need look no farther than His Excellency, Prime Minister Rafic Hariri of Lebanon and the people of Lebanon, recipients of UN-HABITAT's Scroll of Honour Special Citation for Post Conflict Reconstruction. I congratulate the Prime Minister for his outstanding and visionary leadership in the post-conflict reconstruction of his country. I also congratulate the Lebanese people without whom success could not have been made.

Lebanon's 16-year civil war, which claimed a huge human and economic toll, was one of the longest conflicts in the second half of the 20th century. After years of physical and human devastation, rebuilding and rehabilitating that country needed

an outstanding leader with exceptional vision. Yes, a leader with love and commitment to the well being of all his people and willing to make the sacrifice required to bring a torn society together again and promote a culture of peace and prosperity – the mission of the UN.

Lebanon is an example to be emulated. In presenting this award, it is my sincere hope that other societies currently in conflict will learn from this Best Practice. On our part UN-HABITAT promises to continue our work in post-conflict reconstruction and in the promotion of a culture of peace, be it in our villages, towns or cities. This we shall continue to do in Afghanistan, Kosovo, Iraq, Somalia, the Democratic Republic of the Congo and other parts of Sub-Saharan Africa and beyond which regrettably are still embroiled in conflict.

Madam Chairperson, Excellencies
Ladies and Gentlemen

This forum is greatly honoured by the presence of two truly distinguished world leaders, President Mikhail Gorbachev and President Martti Ahtisaari of Finland. Their presence here today underscores both the importance and urgency of the business at hand. Urbanization and globalization are occurring very rapidly. They will require international leadership and solidarity if everyone is to benefit from these processes and if the vulnerable groups, especially women and the children they support, are not to be left behind.

The contribution of President Gorbachev in promoting a culture of democracy and individual freedom is familiar to all of us. We as the world community all owe him our gratitude for the historical contributions he made in bringing the world's peoples and cultures together.

After this session, President Gorbachev and I will sign a cooperation agreement forging a partnership between Green Cross International, which he heads, and UN-HABITAT to work towards the attainment of the Millennium Development Goals for water, sanitation and human settlements. For me and UN-HABITAT it will be a privilege to work with this unique leader.

At 3.00 p.m. today President Martti Ahtisaari will be leading our discussion on Building Disaster Resilient Cities. President Ahtisaari is a well-known friend of Africa. He was instrumental in bringing liberty to Namibia after decades of colonial occupation and cultural domination. Recently he has just concluded the work of the Commission on the Social Dimensions of Globalization as part of his tireless efforts to include the poor and marginalized in global economic processes.

Madam Chairperson

Last but not least, I would like to recognize the presence of the former President of Benin, Mr. Nicephore Soglo. After successfully serving his first term as President of Benin, President Soglo retired to the local level and is now Mayor of Cotonou. In Africa, this culture of peaceful exit from power when time comes is rare and yet another "Best Practice" amongst us to be applauded and emulated.

In the next five days, you will enter into many dialogues and discussions, exploring the challenges of urban governance, urban poverty, access to services and many other elements of urban life. Each of these elements may already be infected in countless ways with old cultural patterns of exclusion and discrimination. It is my

hope that we eradicate these crippling social diseases by discarding the politics of cultural difference and by creating a common vision that will become the new cultural touchstone.

This is the grail of good governance, to strike a chord so profoundly beneficial that the dissonance of old ways fades as a new harmony drives society forward. Standing at the crossroads of cultures, our shared goal must be to create a culture of cultures – from many, one.

Ladies and gentlemen, in other words, we must strive to make the city as the home for a family, where all members are dedicated, above all, to a common mission of peaceful coexistence and eradication of poverty. Yes, the city is the engine of economic development, but it must also be the place to which we all can return for comfort, security and acceptance. Mixture is the starting point, not the problem. The problem is how to discover – recover – the elements of our own humanity. This is a job for all cultures, working together.

Madam Chairperson,

This forum will witness a conclusion of partnerships between UN-HABITAT and some of you who are key actors in urban development. I would like to single out the conclusion of the Memorandum of Understanding with Habitat for Humanity which has an extensive network to assist the poor and low income households to decent shelter not only in rich nations like the United States, but also other parts of the world.

Finally, Madam Chairperson, let me thank you and your co-chair, Mr. Soeren Haeggroth of Sweden for Chairing the 1st session of World Urban Forum and for coming to handover to the new Chair and Co-Chair. The outcome of World Urban Forum 1 was presented to the World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg with a successful outcome. Shelter and Sustainable Urbanization were recognized as a core sector in the Johannesburg Plan of Implementation alongside Water, Sanitation, Energy, Health, Agriculture and Bio-diversity or WEHAB.

Let me also express my sincere gratitude to all who have provided financial support. They are the City of Barcelona, Sweden, Norway, Austria, Rwanda, United Kingdom, Thailand, Italy, China and Canada.

I thank you and wish you every success in your deliberations. I eagerly await the outcome of this second World Urban Forum taking place in this historical and majestic city of Barcelona. I will be pleased to bring your conclusions to the attention of the Governing Council of UN-HABITAT which will meet in April next year. It will be my pleasure to welcome you to Nairobi for that meeting.

Presentation of the Scroll of Honour

I am pleased that Mr. Hariri has been able to spare time to join all of us today in person to receive his award on behalf of the Lebanese people. Allow me Madam Chairperson therefore to present the Special Citation to H.E. the Prime Minister.