



# HABITAT II



TO BE CHECKED AGAINST DELIVERY

**Statement by**

**Wally N'Dow  
Secretary-General of the  
United Nations Conference on Human Settlements  
(Habitat II)**

**OPENING THE THIRD SESSION OF THE PREPARATORY COMMITTEE**

**UNITED NATIONS  
NEW YORK**

**5 FEBRUARY 1996**



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Mr. Chairman, Excellencies, Distinguished Delegates, Ladies and Gentlemen,

I want to thank the Secretary-General for his inspiring words and for the leadership and support he has given to Habitat II from the outset. None of us will forget that he came to Geneva not quite two years ago to open the first substantive session of this Preparatory Committee, and that at that time he gave the Conference the designation that has since captured the imagination of the world: "The City Summit".

As the Secretary-General has just told us, Habitat II, which will address the problems of all human settlements, urban and rural, will be the last in the remarkable continuum of global conferences that mark this closing decade of the century. In opening the final session of this Committee, I want to pledge to him that our work will be guided by the charge he has given to us that Istanbul advance and integrate the goals of the other conferences of the continuum.

From the Children's Summit to the City Summit, the road stretches from New York to Rio to Bridgetown to Vienna to Cairo to Copenhagen to Beijing. Its next stop is Istanbul, but it will not end there. We will do all we can, Mr. Secretary-General, to make certain the road continues onward, into every hamlet, village, town, city and megacity, into every home, into every city and town hall, into every parliament so that the new millennium sees, finally, the realization of the Charter's promise of a better life in larger freedom for all peoples. The challenge to this promise posed by homelessness and inadequate and unsafe shelter cannot be underestimated, and we must meet it if social progress and human welfare are to be more than catch words and pious hopes.

It is with this challenge in mind that we open the third substantive session of our Preparatory Committee. There is an old Chinese saying that the journey of a thousand leagues begins with a single step. For us, that step was taken three years ago when, as our able Chairman has reminded us, the first organizing group for Habitat II met here in New York to start the journey on which we are now embarked. When we leave little less than two weeks from now, the Road to Istanbul -- the final stretch in the continuum -- will be clearly before us, and the final stages of our own journey of a thousand leagues will have begun.

At our first substantive session in April 1994, this Committee called for a broad-based participatory process, one capable of capturing the imagination and of mobilizing the energies and the commitments of a large cross-section of society, everyone with a stake in human settlements development and in the future of our cities. This call has been heard by the entire international community, and since its start, the Preparatory process has been a continuous ingathering of all who want to journey with us on the Road to Istanbul.

Governments, local authorities, the private sector, NGOs, community based organizations, civic and religious groups, young people and women's organizations, and professional and trade associations among them, have responded. They have come together under the umbrella of Habitat II for the simple reason that they see the objectives and goals of the "City Summit" mirroring their own concerns and aspirations.

It is their enthusiasm and commitment that has given the preparatory process the momentum that has brought us to where we now stand. It has validated the wisdom of the decision to hold a second United Nations Conference on Human Settlements at this critical juncture between past and future in the social and economic development of this fragile planet we all call home, a planet now urbanizing at a rate and at a pace never before equalled. It is this urbanization that underlies all we see and all we do, for its impact affects each and everyone of us in the tiniest rural hamlet and in the largest megacity. Where we live and how we live in the new millennium is everybody's concern in a world in which science and technology have all but done away with time and distance, and in which we are all neighbours in spite of ourselves, neighbours whose future is irrevocably interlinked.

That is why I am greatly encouraged by what I believe to be one of our major achievements, bringing nearly 150 countries into the preparatory process thus far, with the majority of them forming broad-based national committees covering the entire spectrum of society to prepare national plans of action. And a preliminary analysis of these plans shows us that the issues, problems, concerns and expectations being addressed by Habitat II are nothing less than the major issues of our day world-wide:

jobs, housing, security, services, the quality of the living environment, the right of ordinary people to have a say in the decisions affecting their lives, the very issues of direct concern to people in all walks of life and in all human settlements, large and small, rural and urban.

Moreover, governments are using the opportunity afforded by the preparatory process to open a dialogue with civil society on how to confront, in partnership, the challenges of human settlement development. Ministerial meetings I have attended in virtually all regions -- Latin America, the Caribbean, Africa, and Europe, East and West -- have been unanimous in their Declarations of support for Habitat II. And the same has been true of the many governmental leaders I have met with in Asia and North America and elsewhere. In short, wherever I have gone in this past year both to advance Conference preparations and help build a constituency for it, the response I have encountered has strengthened my conviction that Habitat II is not only an idea whose time has come, as they say, but one the world urgently needs.

For as never before, Mr. Chairman, there is widespread agreement that in the decades to come, healthy, safe, productive and environmentally sustainable settlements are an indispensable pre-condition for economic growth and employment creation both in rural and urban development. In addition to national leaders, local authorities and non-governmental organizations, the private sector and all with a stake in the future of our cities and towns, have come forward and made the preparatory process for the Conference their own. In short, Mr. Chairman, the constituency of Habitat II is now universal. People everywhere share its concerns and hopes. The world is travelling with us.

We have reason to look at this groundswell of support and see it as an encouraging sign for tomorrow. But we have even greater reason to see it as an expression of concern for today. For as we approach the new millennium, Mr. Chairman, the world also stands at a veritable crossroads in history. Urbanization holds out both the bright promise of an unequalled future and the grave threat of unparalleled disaster, and which it will be depends on what we do today. This Committee knows the numbing statistics. At this late date I do not have to spell out the dimensions of the crisis, except to say that rich country and poor country, we are all in it together. North and South, East and West, we must all be equally committed.

We must, perhaps above all, approach the task confronting us not with despair, but with ingenuity and hope. For if our preparatory process has demonstrated anything, it is that we can prevail. I say this because one of the most encouraging results of our preparations for Istanbul has been the conceptualization and implementation of what we have called the Best Practices

Initiative. To date, the secretariat has received more than 500 nominations from some 86 countries. A large selection was presented in Dubai last November in a conference that exceeded all expectations, both in terms of attendance and in terms of the creativity on display there.

This unique collection of successful solutions to some of the world's most pressing economic, social and environmental problems was a significant response to a call from the General Assembly for a preparatory process that would "forge a positive vision of an urbanizing world," and anchor the Habitat Agenda in the realm of the possible, the feasible and the do-able. More important, the identification of best practices, together with their exchange and dissemination, points to a new and valuable tool for international cooperation aided by the latest advances in information technologies: the creation of a global data base.

The Dubai Declaration, adopted at the International Conference on Best Practices in Dubai last November, has been a high point of the preparatory process, and I want to express my gratitude to the City of Dubai and to the government of the United Arab Emirates for having made it possible. I am pleased to announce today that special Best Practice Awards sponsored by the cities of Dubai and Tokyo will be made at Istanbul. My thanks go to both cities not only for their generosity, but for helping us make the Best Practices Initiative a lasting legacy of Habitat II, eloquently testifying to our determination not to go to Istanbul to bemoan the situation, but to find answers.

Mr. Chairman, considerable progress, helped along by a significant number of donor countries and organizations -- and here I must express my particular appreciation to the World Bank and the United Nations Development Programme for their help -- has also been achieved in the collection of indicators, with 110 countries in the process of submitting shelter and urban indicators. These indicators are nothing less than a common language enhancing our understanding of urban problems and contributing to priorities for action. As Secretary-General Boutros-Ghali has observed, they provide us with the means to monitor our progress in attaining our goals as we move forward in the years ahead to implement the Habitat Agenda.

These facts clearly demonstrate that the Committee has done its job, and done it well. Its members, and all the many others who have joined us on the road to Istanbul, have mobilized awareness at the local and national levels of the themes of the Conference and their importance to our quest for a more equitable and sustainable life on this globe for all people. And at the secretariat level, we are very grateful for the clear orientation and support we have received, as well as for the assistance and advice provided by so many of our other partners in the preparatory process: bilateral assistance agencies, local

authorities and their associations, NGOs, private foundations, the private sector, community, women and youth groups, professional associations and many others too numerous to mention.

My particular gratitude goes to the many governments that have responded to our call for necessary financial resources; to sister United Nations entities -- the United Nations Environment Programme, the United Nations Fund for Population Activities, United Nations Children's Fund, International Labour Organization and United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, among them -- which over the past eight months since PrepCom II have pledged additional and significant contributions to the Trust Funds and to other specific activities of the preparatory process; and to the United Nations Development Programme whose invaluable cooperation and inspiration symbolize the system-wide support and participation we are receiving.

My gratitude also goes to the Ford Foundation and to the hosts of the more than 100 meetings and other events worldwide on issues of relevance to the Habitat Agenda, as well as other regional and sub-regional preparatory meetings. And I would be remiss if I did not say a word here, too, about the support we have received from one of our most important partners in this preparatory process. I refer, of course, to our host country, Turkey, which is investing so much of its human, technical, financial and administrative resources in Habitat II. The Government of Turkey and the City of Istanbul are making every effort to ensure the success of the Conference, and I take this opportunity to applaud them for their generous help and cooperation. I should note, too, that the distinguished Representative of our host government will provide fuller details at a briefing he will hold during the course of this session.

I have taken the Committee's time to tell it of the support we are receiving for two reasons. First, because it is a source of pride to us that we are the recipients of such generosity from partners in all parts of the world. Second, because it has direct relevance to the serious financial dilemma confronting the United Nations today. It is with great satisfaction, therefore, that I am able to advise you today that more than ninety-five percent of the resources needed for Habitat II have come from external sources.

Mr. Chairman, the Secretary-General emphasized a point in his statement that I believe bears repetition as we reflect on the achievements of this Preparatory Committee since its Geneva meeting. I refer to the change in the rules of procedure that it initiated, and that the General Assembly endorsed, recognizing the important role of local authorities both in the debate and in the implementation of the Habitat Agenda, allowing for the first time in United Nations history a mechanism for the participation

of all concerned stakeholders in the official proceedings. In effect, therefore, Habitat II will be a "Partners' Conference," a partnership that, I am pleased to say, is already a reality.

This innovation will have far-reaching benefits not only for our own conference, but for other international meetings and, indeed, for the future work of the international community as it tackles the global challenge of sustainable development. By establishing fora for true dialogues between partners in human settlements development at Istanbul, we are also establishing a model for productive dialogues and cooperation so essential for success in all matters of economic, social and human development in the future.

It is this latter dimension of human development that is the key focus of our endeavour. Uppermost in our minds and in our hearts must be that we are here not to engage in parochial politics or to debate who should do what, but rather how we, all who have taken part in the preparatory process -- from national governments to local authorities, from the private sector to grass-roots organizations, from United Nations agencies to professional organizations -- can cooperate to promote human development by improving the living conditions in our cities, towns and villages. If we keep our eyes on this agenda -- and here I refer both to the larger agenda of human settlements development and specifically to the Habitat Agenda -- I am confident that we will arrive at a consensus on the issues before us.

Certainly, it would be ignoring the realities to say we are all of one mind on every one of these issues. If we were, there would be no need for this Committee to meet. Today, as we prepare to negotiate the Global Plan of Action, we begin the job of reconciling these differences, and on this I have no doubt that we will succeed.

I say this not to minimize the importance of the issues on which there are divergent points of view. We are not, for example, all of one mind on the issue of the right to adequate housing. But we are all agreed on the need for a political consensus, not a fruitless debate on who is right or wrong. For this reason I am confident that before this session ends, we will come up with a negotiated text even as we search for longer range solutions. But here, as with our other areas of difference, I am convinced that the issue is one of degree and emphasis, not of principle.

Similar considerations apply, Mr. Chairman, to the all-important area of international cooperation to implement the Habitat Agenda. As the distinguished delegates are only too aware, this remains a major unnegotiated area in the Habitat Agenda -- issues of financial and other resources, as well,

indeed, of institutional arrangements to assure successful attainments of the Habitat II goals through studious and concerted follow-up of the Conference agreements.

In my opinion, Mr. Chairman, what really matters in the end is that all of us want a Habitat Agenda, a plan of action that will stand as a clear commitment to follow-up actions. It should be explicit in what is to be done and how it is to be done. And it should clearly define and, as necessary, augment the roles and functions of relevant institutions, particularly already existing ones, such as the United Nations Centre for Human Settlements and its governing body, the Commission on Human Settlements, to ensure they are equal to the task and endowed with sufficient strength and capacity to lead the way in cooperation with partners at all levels.

Mr. Chairman, since the last session of this Committee, an Informal Drafting Group has done an outstanding job in preparing a comprehensive draft of the Habitat Agenda, making it nothing less than the Member States' document. Together with related documents that complement it, it is now before the Committee for its consideration, I urge us all to join hands and complete the job, to take the action needed to fulfil our vision of Habitat II as a conference of enablement. The international support of local action is an important question, but the first and most important effort is what a country is engaging itself to do to improve the situation of housing and urbanization at the local level: enabling people to achieve local solutions. That, we believe, is the key to sustainable human settlements.

Excellencies, distinguished delegates, ladies and gentlemen, we are agreed that the problems of ensuring a safer, healthier, more equitable and more sustainable living environment is a universal challenge. It is a challenge that knows no national borders nor does it differentiate between rich and poor, North and South, East and West. The many people and organizations throughout the world who have contributed so much to the preparatory process are now waiting to see how the Habitat II Conference will respond to them, how it will help them in their quest for jobs, for security, for a better future and better homes for their children. We owe them answers.

We owe answers to the cities and towns that are so directly concerned with the outcome of our deliberations. We owe answers to the business sector, which has been a particularly active partner and now stands ready to encourage productive economic investment. And we owe answers to the young people, women's organizations, NGOs and all the others on the Road to Istanbul with us -- the professional and academic communities, policy-makers at all levels, urban and rural, local and national. All are keenly awaiting new directions, new ideas, new opportunities.



To respond to these expectations may involve the adaptation of some international mechanisms, the changing of programme priorities and the strengthening of agencies and bodies. We should not shy away from tackling these issues when they come up in the discussion of the Habitat Agenda. You have been daring and innovative during the entire preparatory process. Now that we approach Istanbul, nothing must stop or diminish your enthusiasm and creativity to arrive at a successful conclusion: A Habitat Agenda, an agenda for action, as innovative and inspirational as the process that created it.

Mr. Chairman, permit me to conclude with a personal perspective. In the wake of the cold war, the struggle between the old and the new, typical of a period of structural change, can be perceived most clearly in large cities in both the North and the South. That is where the reforging of a new form -- a more compassionate, more humane form -- of human solidarity must begin. We have in our hands the ability to influence the outcome and thereby help guarantee a safer, a more just and healthier life for all. It is up to us to take the action that is needed.

But all we do to attain that end, Mr. Chairman, can be negated in an instant by the impact of strife and conflict and war on human settlements. Even as we advocate with our right hand, if you will, measures to build and make cities more livable, we are destroying them with our left hand. Witness Rwanda and Afghanistan and the ongoing struggle in the Balkans. I speak here of a matter not on our agenda. but if we avert our eyes, we will continue to destroy more than we can ever build.

Here, as in the issues before this Committee, we must all have the courage, over the next ten days, to make our voices heard, to express our human solidarity, to demonstrate our deepest convictions. Only in this way will we ensure that the Habitat Agenda not only lives up to the challenges it was designed to meet, but that it fulfils the expectations so many around the world have vested in it. We represent their hope for the future. We cannot fail them.