

Introductory Remarks at the High-Level Luncheon

“Digital Cities, the Role of the Private Sector”

related to the launch of the Global Network on Promoting Digital Technologies for Sustainable Urbanization

by

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Mr. President, Excellencies, Distinguished Delegates and Friends,

It is my proud privilege to join you, Your Excellency Martin Sajdik, President of ECOSOC, Dr. Joan Clos, Executive Director of UN-Habitat and Secretary General of Habitat III and our distinguished speakers and guests, on this occasion to launch a Global Network on Promoting Digital Technologies for Sustainable Urbanization, inspired by the Economic and Social Council 2014 Integration Segment. As co-convenor of the Global Network along with UN-Habitat, I am convinced that this important initiative will be instrumental in securing our common future.

We are here to combat climate change, bring about cleaner air, water and sanitation and create safer and healthier urban spaces for our citizens.

The evidence is clear and the statistics speak for themselves. Urbanization is a major and inexorable trend of the 21st century. A majority of world’s people live in cities today and in a few decades more than two thirds will be city dwellers. Cities are the centers of human civilization, creativity and wealth. Cities are also a major source of the pollutants responsible for climate change. It is in cities that the future of the world will be determined.

But, as my friend, Dr. Clos, likes to point out, urbanization is not a force of nature. It is a man-made phenomenon. We can determine what direction it should take and what should be its outcomes. So, if we want to secure our common future, we need to build smart and sustainable cities. We need to have a clear, long-term vision. We need compelling leadership to articulate and communicate this vision. We need smart policy frameworks and evidence based urban planning, and we need smart and sustainable technologies and tools to implement it.

Furthermore, smart and sustainable urbanization can be realized only by engaging citizens and the business sector in a genuine and equal partnership with national and city governments. We have learnt that business cannot succeed in failing cities. Sustainable urbanization makes smart business sense. By now, most business leaders have accepted this reality. Our business models are increasingly based on the imperative of sustainability and our corporate social responsibility strives to support it.

It is equally evident that city governments often do not have the resources, the expertise and the technology solutions that can help transform cities into sustainable urban hubs of creativity and

wealth. The business sector can be a source of smart investments, and sustainable technologies and tools, if the right enabling environment is in place.

The question is how to reconcile the perennial scarcity of public resources with the imperative of sustainable urbanization. One of the great paradoxes of our times is that the world is awash with unprecedented wealth and, at the same time, suffers from great unmet public needs. The solution to this paradox, in my view, lies in what has come to be known as 'impact investing' meaning sharing and distribution of risks between public and private sectors, through a partnership approach to devise smart solutions that can leapfrog constraints and save money in the long-run. This is already happening in many cities around the world from Boston to Barcelona and from Seoul to Sao Paulo.

Indeed, there are many success stories: Vancouver is known for its green city images and for providing best livability and quality of life; Stockholm for the world's safest roads and walkability; Seoul for its accountability and transparency; Singapore for its efficient and free transit for early morning riders; and Copenhagen for its plans to become a completely carbon-free city by 2025 by using wind power, bio-fuel and other renewable energy sources.

What is more, successful cities are revenue-generating and self-sustaining enterprises. They are not a burden on the public budgets. In my view, the Global Network on Promoting Digital Technologies for Sustainable Urbanization should serve as a spring-board for partnership-building, networking and exchange of experience to learn from each other, build trust, accumulate and share knowledge across the world among city planners, business leaders, innovators and ordinary citizens who are the ultimate arbiters of our common future. We are all in it together.

It should be built as a network of networks, at minimal cost yet with optimum global impact. It should bring together national and city governments, businesses, technology companies and innovators, other networks such as UCLG, CSU, United Smart Cities, ANSIS, IGOs, NGOs and civil society.

It can use such tools as an annual global forum, standards and model-building, consulting assistance, disseminating best practices and creating data banks and repositories of knowledge and expertise.

Building on my experience of leading the UNICT Task Force, the UNGAID and the Global Compact and many other UN entities, I commit my support and the support of Talal Abu Ghazaleh Organization to the success of this initiative.

In closing, I would like to thank you all for the privilege bestowed upon me by inviting me to Co-Convene this important initiative with Dr. Joan Clos and I invite all of us to the first Global Forum on Digital Technologies for Sustainable Urbanization, which I propose be convened in Dubai, the smart city of the region, before the end of this year.

I thank you.