



Remarks

by

H.E. Ambassador John W. Ashe
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World Habitat Day
Resilient Design for Sustainable Urbanization
Sustainable Urban Mobility

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Secretary General,
Distinguished Guests,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is not only my pleasure to celebrate World Habitat Day with you today – it is with a sense of responsibility, as we focus our attention on issues that are becoming increasingly more important and immediate in our world. Today’s observation of World Habitat Day comes against the backdrop of recollecting a recent devastating storm and on the cusp of global process aimed at defining a more sustainable future for all. And while it is true that, “yesterday is history; tomorrow is a mystery,” we, in the international community need to learn from the events of yesteryear in order to plan for a better tomorrow.

Like many of you, I recall almost a year ago when the City of New York and much of the Jersey Shore were severely hit by Superstorm Sandy. One year later, authorities, communities and city planners are still grappling with how to recover, adapt and rebuild, as well as how to better prepare for similar situations in the future. Today, we have with us officials who were involved in responding to that crisis and I commend their able management and dedication.

While Hurricane Sandy was no doubt devastating for large numbers of people, we cannot forget that developing countries often suffer even more in the face of such disasters. They often have less robust infrastructure and lack access to resources that are more readily available to their counterparts in developed countries. People living in poverty are always the hardest hit and populations in poor housing conditions are the most vulnerable. For these reasons resilience and disaster reduction policies must be embedded in development policies and our efforts to eradicate poverty. In fact, in our understanding of changing climate, risk planning, mitigation and adaptation, it is important to remember that Sandy was a mere Category 3 Hurricane and nowhere near the Category 5 Ivan which tore through the Caribbean in 2004, leaving regional economies and environments in ruin.

Today's meeting offers an opportunity to connect the local with the global. Though the experiences of New York and New Jersey last year were right in our back yards, they are unfortunately, not isolated incidents caused by extreme weather events. They are part of a growing trend fuelled by the impacts of climate change, compounded by increasing urbanization. With these emerging challenges becoming ever more apparent, building resilience needs to be incorporated into how cities think, plan, build and act.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The most recent report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) released only last week, rings more alarm bells. Scientists unequivocally agreed that not only is the climate getting warmer but the impact on rising sea levels is hastening, thus heightening vulnerability for our low lying cities and coastal areas. More than 1 billion people, as well as many financial and economic centres, are at risk. Least-developed countries and small island developing States remain on the front lines of climate risk. The IPCC report states that the rate of sea level rise since the mid 19th century has been larger than the mean rate during the previous two thousand years. If emissions continue to rise at such a rapid pace, by the end of the 21st century, we could see sea levels rising by as much as three-feet. The report stresses, with over 95% probability - that the impact of human activity is causing the acceleration and devastation of climate change. The fact that we need to build resilience in our countries and our cities to counter the effects of our own human activities should not be lost on any of us.

Last week's IPCC report is just the latest in a string of reminders that we in the international community have been receiving for some decades now. As far back as 1972, the Declaration of the Stockholm Conference, the first global conference on environment, warned of a coming crisis. The Stockholm Declaration states, [quote] "Man is both creature and moulder of his environment In the long and tortuous evolution of the human race on this planet a stage has been reached when, through the rapid acceleration of science and technology, man has acquired the power to transform his environment in countless ways and on an unprecedented scale." [end quote]. These changes are most

apparent in cities where demographic changes will push many cities to the edge of their ability to provide for their citizens, particularly in the developing world. By 2050, eight out of ten people in the world will be living in cities and many of these cities are in low lying areas.

More recently, world leaders adopted an Outcome Document at last year's Rio+20 Conference in Brazil that speaks to the importance of considering how disaster risk reduction, resilience and climate risks can feature in urban planning, as well as how sustainable and reliable transport contributes to the resilience of cities. Specifically, the document called for [quote] "disaster risk reduction and building of resilience to disasters to be addressed with a renewed sense of urgency in the context of sustainable development and poverty eradication, and to be integrated into policies, plans, programmes, and budgets at all levels and considered within relevant future frameworks." [end quote] Let us also be mindful that disaster resilience must address a range of natural disasters, such as earthquakes, which cannot be predicted with certainty and have devastating impacts economically and in the loss of human lives.

Distinguished Guests,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

While the challenges we are discussing today are formidable, they are also shared and can be tackled through cooperation and shared solutions. Disaster preparedness is a global effort that should involve multiple stakeholders including governments, international, regional and local organizations, the private sector and civil society. We should involve architects and engineers, educators and entrepreneurs, communities and youth to address the challenges of disaster preparedness and resilience. Disasters affect all sectors and disaster planning must also be cross-sectoral and multidisciplinary, if it is to be truly impactful and effective. It should also be undertaken at all levels: from individuals making plans to evacuate their families and protect their property to local government planning sustainable and resilient cities; from countries devising national

disaster reduction plans to the international community incorporating disaster reduction and resilience into the post-2015 development agenda.

For far too long, the international community has worked in silos: humanitarian action, poverty eradication, environmental protection, and disaster reduction were dealt with separately. To build resilient cities, serviced by sustainable transport, we must recognize the interconnectedness of all these dimensions and pull together knowledge, skills and best practices from different areas of expertise.

There is now a growing network of organizations, agencies, and governments that understand the critical importance of reducing risk to populations in vulnerable areas. For example, organizations such as UN Habitat and the United Nations Office of Disaster Risk Reduction are working to facilitate information sharing among cities and urban governments through their respective programmes: the World Urban Campaign and the Making Cities Resilient: 'My City is Getting Ready!' campaign. Furthermore, events like this one today have an important role in facilitating the sharing of experiences, lessons learned and best practices that can help us prepare and respond to risks and challenges.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

You are all part of a growing network of committed and courageous individuals and organizations, and today's dialogue has the potential to meaningfully contribute to our objective of building more resilient and sustainable cities. Your experiences, knowledge and practical know-how can and should contribute to the exercise that our United Nations is about to undertake, namely, defining a post-2015 Development Agenda, which will pick up where the Millennium Development Goals left off.

Let us therefore use this World Habitat Day as an opportunity to promote long-term sustainability of our cities and to foster collective inspiration, vision, leadership and, ultimately, action for our collective future.

Thank you.