

**Opening of the Latin America and the Caribbean
Inter-Ministerial Meeting on Sustainable Cities
CR 3, 10h**

12 December 2013

**Office of the President of the General Assembly
H. E. Paulette Bethel**

Mr. Joan Clos, Executive Director of UN Habitat,
Honorable Ministers,
Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is my pleasure to welcome you to the Latin America and the Caribbean Inter-Ministerial Meeting on Sustainable Cities, and deliver this message on behalf of H.E. Mr. John W. Ashe, the President of the General Assembly. The President has asked me to convey his regrets that he could not be here for today's meeting, which is dedicated to a topic of increasing importance in a region we both call home.

Over the course of this meeting, we will no doubt hear many times that cities have the potential to either propel or undermine our efforts to build a more sustainable world. Cities are the economic hubs that produce wealth and innovation, yet they also consume the most resources and put significant strains on our environment.

The region we focus on today, Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC), is the most urban of the developing world, and perhaps of the entire world. In LAC, four out of five people live in cities, although in vastly different circumstances, ranging from expanding megacities to smaller urban centers in densely populated small island developing states (SIDS).

Urbanization in the Latin American and Caribbean region has been both rapid and recent, with half of urban growth taking place in the last forty years. In many cases, the urban management experience in LAC has produced impressive results and is a source of inspiration and best practices for the rest of the world. Generally, the quality of life for the region's urban dwellers has improved, with better access to water, sanitation and transport, and more economic opportunities. The region has much to share and many success stories, as well as advice to impart. In this regard, I look forward to your contributions this afternoon.

The specific needs and circumstances of countries in the LAC region vary greatly, as it includes both powerful emerging economies, as well as very small island developing states. With that in mind, I would like to draw your attention to a few areas that require attention and threaten to set back gains.

1. Foremost, is the issue of inequality. The physical and social segregation that affects many cities of the region reflects the pervasive problem of inequality. While the proportion of people living in informal settlements has decreased over the last twenty years, there are still over 100 million slum dwellers in Latin America and the

Caribbean. Sustainable policies and equal access to basic services can play a key role in addressing such inequalities. For example, providing access to clean water and sanitation and to transport and sustainable energy can significantly improve the lives of the urban poor. It is also critical to ensure the right to decent housing, particularly for those who face legal and social barriers to secure land or house ownership, such as women and indigenous and marginalized groups.

2. The second issue I would like to address is security. Crime and citizen security have gained increased attention over recent years in the LAC region. Populations living in poverty, women and children are often significantly more vulnerable to rampant crime and violence. Such insecurity limits their freedom of movement and their ability to make choices; disrupts life at home and at work; and has damaging impacts on entire communities. The cost of violence is devastating for individuals, but can also significantly hinder economic development for communities and nations.
3. The third challenge is disaster management and resilience. The vulnerability of cities to natural disasters is all too familiar to the inhabitants of the American continent. Climate change has led to extreme weather events, which have increased in frequency and magnitude and upended the livelihoods and well-being of many city-dwellers. At the same time, rising sea levels threaten urban infrastructure and critical facilities, such as roads, schools and hospitals, in many countries. Cities must continue building capacity

for disaster prevention and preparedness, as well as strengthening their resilience in the face of rising sea levels and devastating natural disasters. This will require broad partnerships drawing on the skills and expertise of multiple stakeholders from national and local governments, as well as from the civil society and the private sector. As you focus on resilient cities during the latter part of the day, I am confident that your discussions will generate innovative ideas to tackle this complex issue.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The discussions that you have throughout this three-day session will provide inputs to the meeting of the Open-Working Group on sustainable cities and human settlements in the context of the post 2015 development agenda, which will take place in just about one month. With calls for a Sustainable Development Goal related to cities, the proposals and ideas you produce here can play a critical role.

In addition, preparations are underway for the Third United Nations Conference on Human Settlements, to be held in 2016. I am very pleased to see that Latin America and the Caribbean region has taken the lead in the preparatory process, which is already ongoing in many of your countries. Twenty years after Habitat II was held in Istanbul, it is time to evaluate our accomplishments, think of new ways to design and develop our cities and plan for long-term urban sustainable development.

This sharing of experience and ongoing discussions at the international level is certainly valuable, but the real reward is when it translates into concrete improvements at the local level, and in the daily lives of urban dwellers. May you return to your home countries with renewed energy and innovative ideas about how to build the sustainable Cities We Want, as a key and vital part of the Future We Want.

Thank you.