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**FOR A BETTER URBAN FUTURE**

## **STATEMENT BY UN-HABITAT EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR MAIMUNAH MOHD SHARIF ON 15 JANUARY 2024**

### **Acceptance speech upon appointment as a fellow of the Royal Town Planning Institute**

A very good afternoon to all of you.

I am very honoured to be able to accept the very high honour of being conferred the fellowship by the Royal Town Planning Institute. If you asked me in 1985 when I graduated as a Town Planner from the University of Wales Institute of Science and Technology in Cardiff if the day would come when I would be a Fellow of the Royal Town Planning Institute, I would definitely have smiled broadly and not believed it would ever happen.

Even getting to Cardiff itself seemed like a miracle as I never had the opportunity to sleep long enough to dream. Instead, having to wake up at 4 a.m. to help my mother tap rubber in my village in West Malaysia, there were few opportunities for women beyond getting married and keeping a household in our rural living.

Never pretty enough or well-dressed enough to be the school bouquet girl, I decided long ago to be the recipient of many a book prize, a champion of sporting events and now, as Under-Secretary-General and Executive Director of the United Nations Human Settlements Programme, to be a fellow of the Royal Town Planning Institute. Indeed, urbanization presents many opportunities for my generation.

Madame President,

It will be my honour to convey to His Majesty the King all the worthy and good works of the RTPi when I meet with him at Dumfries House later this week. As our patron, His Majesty's lifetime support for well-planned, integrated, and well-managed cities is an inspiration to us all.

Indeed, throughout my career as a town planner, mayor and at the United Nations, I never forgot the key principles of good town planning. It is easy to get carried away by drawing lines and determining how people live and interact. But we must never play God by changing fortunes through a stroke of the pen. Instead, we have to be broad-minded enough to take into account the local context. The best-laid plans, as you all know, become reality when there is adequate and informed participation from local communities.

I have advocated that we must think global and act local. Today, after 2,000 bilateral meetings, having travelled to more than 55 countries in all regions of the world, and through UN-Habitat's active projects in more than 600 cities globally, I call upon all of us in the planning fraternity to think local, act global, learn global, and apply local.

What looks nice on the plan might not be what the local communities need. The best public open spaces, the best housing schemes, the best-laid basic services and transport plans are the ones where there is active participation by the people we serve.

I am particularly proud of UN-Habitat's people process and track record in public engagement. Before you draw the first line, you must establish key principles together with the people we serve. They must

be involved to determine what is the end result, what is the impact to the purchaser, to the local government, to the local communities – we must do no harm.

Here the RPTI continues to have great relevance. In the Commonwealth of Nations, 56 countries that share a lot common heritage and planning systems, the RPTI can help fill the capacity gap. In some countries, there is only one planner to 150,000 people. There is a lot we can do together.

At UN-Habitat, we hope to encourage the RPTI to help us strengthen our capacity building programme. Tangible projects that can be implemented when spatial planning is linked to economic and environmental planning. I keep telling my colleagues that what mayors need and what the private sector wants is to understand how integrated planning leads to better gross development value.

We also need to use the best principles of planning to take into account the externalities to people and communities; we must be brave enough to lose work by converting our clients to the principles of the Sustainable Development Goals.

They can do this by embracing technology to be more effective and efficient. I call upon the RPTI and indeed the planning fraternity to adopt new ways of thinking about planning aided by artificial intelligence but keeping to the principle of people-centred smart cities, which I introduced as a UN-Habitat flagship programme in the UN-Habitat 2020-2025 Strategic Plan.

I end this short acceptance speech by thanking the organizers for the honour to be a fellow of the Royal Town Planning Institute, which I gladly accept. If you want to go fast, go alone but if you want to go far, let's do it together.

Thank you!