

U.S. Opening Statement
UN Habitat Governing Council GC22
March 30-April 3, 2009
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Thank you Mr. President and all protocols observed.

Allow me to join others in congratulating you on your election as President of the UN Habitat Governing Council and to thank you in advance for your vital service to the work of this organization.

Mr. President

We are gathered here to review and to guide the work of UN Habitat at a time of great challenge. As President Obama recently stated, "We are living through a time of global economic challenges that cannot be met by half measures or the isolated efforts of any nation."

I would add that we must all do our part, not just as nations, but as individuals, communities, and organizations. Members of this body have a responsibility to come together in common cause during our week of deliberations to help ensure that UN Habitat has the direction it needs to address the many challenges of urban settlements. Now more than ever it is essential that UN Habitat further strengthen its institutional capabilities through the Medium Term Strategic and Institutional Plan.

UN Habitat management has provided us with a very useful progress report on implementation of that plan. We are pleased with the progress. UN Habitat has taken important steps forward in enhancing program focus and incorporating results based management. The results framework for the Medium Term Strategic and Institutional Plan is as a very important tool that will guide UN Habitat. But, additional steps will have to be undertaken in order to make the Plan a full success.

It is important to act quickly to address identified management weaknesses and areas of risk. The UN Board of Auditors made a number of significant recommendations such as implementation of the new accounting standards, strengthening asset management, and adhering to rules for hiring consultants.

These corrections are vital to ensuring the highest standards of accountability and transparency. Just as President Obama has made accountability and transparency a key issue for his new administration, so has the UN system begun to recognize the positive impact this can have on an organization's ability to deliver on its promises.

During our deliberations we will take up the issue of organizational governance. Organizational governance is an important complement to the Medium Term Strategic and Institutional Plan. We have read with interest the external consultant's report and appreciate the concerns of the Secretariat. We need to ensure that oversight and interactions between the Secretariat and Member States are efficient and effective, and we are pleased that a constructive dialogue has begun.

Mr. President

UN Habitat has a clear leadership role in the execution of its normative functions, such as the identification of best practices, creation of training materials, monitoring of key indicators, and delivery of guidance to policy-makers. UN Habitat excels in these areas. Its regional reports and flagship “State of the World’s Cities report” are examples of excellent normative work.

The World Urban Forum in Nanjing last year demonstrated the growing recognition of the importance of urban development and UN Habitat’s leadership role on these issues within the UN system. UN Habitat is making strides in elevating shelter and urban issues within the UN community and fostering cooperative programming through, for example its Partnership Framework with UNEP.

I would also like to commend UN Habitat for building new partnerships with the private sector. Private enterprises have technical skills and know how to address urban development issues, such as expertise on infrastructure finance and construction techniques. This goes well beyond viewing the private sector as just a funding source.

Mr. President

I want to assure you of the new U.S. administrations continued strong support for UN Habitat. We are pleased to be able to double our support to

UN Habitat's core budget in 2009. While still a relatively modest amount, this contribution to core funding reflects the importance of Habitat's global mandate and Habitat's progress in implementing agreed strategic and institutional changes.

We also must recognize that the current difficult economic times pose new challenges, particularly as national budgets are strained and spending requirements increase. Thus, it is essential that UN Habitat set clear priorities for its future work and concentrates on its normative work where it has a unique advantage and leadership role.

The United States looks forward to our dialogue this week on promoting affordable housing finance in the face of the global financial crisis and climate change. UN Habitat's discussion paper underscores the importance of a sound policy framework in addressing these challenges. As budgets and official development assistance flows are strained, we must recognize the catalytic role of these resources. UN Habitat's ability to share knowledge and disseminate best practices will be critical.

The US Government is acting boldly to lift the American economy out of crisis and is working to coordinate international action to stabilize markets and restore the credit needed for housing and infrastructure investments. As President Obama has said, "Now is the time to work together to restore the sustained growth that can only come from open and stable markets that harness innovation, support entrepreneurship and advance opportunity." We are confident that UN Habitat has an important leadership role to play in facing the challenges of developing affordable housing.

The United States is equally committed to addressing the urgent and global challenge of climate change. As much as 78 percent of all human-generated emissions come from urban centers and at the same time cities are vulnerable to climate change. Cities are thus a key front in the battle both to prevent and to adapt to climate change. Local officials and communities, the people with whom UN Habitat works closely, have a key role to play in reducing greenhouse gas emissions and improving the resiliency of infrastructure and communities.

Mr. President

The United States looks forward to a constructive dialogue and a robust discussion of these and other issues that are before this session of the Governing Council.

Thank you very much.