

Opening Remarks

By

**Ambassador Anwarul K. Chowdhury, Chairman of GFHS,
Former UN Under-Secretary-General and High Representative**

at the 15th Annual Session of Global Forum on Human Settlements

In my capacity as the Chairman of the Global Forum on Human Settlements (GFHS), I extend a very warm welcome to all the participants at this Fifteenth Global Forum on Human Settlements (GFHS 2020). This annual gathering focusing on the new urban agenda with wide-ranging participation of variety of stakeholders from various parts of the globe is taking place for the first time as a virtual event because of the continuing global pandemic bringing immense, varied challenges to the humanity and to our planet.

At the outset let me say how much I appreciate and value the presence of Professor Vandana Shiva, a fellow South Asian and an eminent and wise global leader who is admired by all. I am looking forward eagerly to listen to her inspiring words.

I am particularly delighted that a number of key multilateral voices would be joining us to share their wisdom and activism with the Forum participants. Among them are Professor Petteri Taalas, Secretary-General of WMO; Patricia Espinosa, Executive Secretary of UNFCCC – I recall we were colleagues at the UN as delegates; Malcolm Johnson, Deputy Secretary General of International Telecommunication Union; Elizabeth Maruma Mrema, Executive Secretary of the Bio-Diversity Convention; Xinsheng Zhang, President of IUCN; and longtime well-wisher of GFHS Shamshad Akhtar, former Executive Secretary of UNESCAP; Dr. Bambang Susantono, Vice President for Knowledge Management & Sustainable Development at the Asian Development Bank. Last but not the least; I am also joined by my GFHS colleagues Taj Hamad, our dear Vice Chairman and Lu Haifeng, our dynamic Secretary General.

As the preparation for GFHS 2020 was in full swing, the United Nations launched its latest report titled “Policy Brief: COVID-19 in an Urban World” on 28 July this year, providing

constructive guidance for responding more efficiently and effectively to the pandemic, building back better and greener, and enhancing urban resilience, inclusiveness and sustainability.

As the GFHS Chairman, I issued a Statement on 3 August 2020 asserting that “As an UN-accredited global non-profit organization, the Global Forum on Human Settlements welcomes very warmly and extends its strongest support to this Policy Brief. GFHS resonate greatly with the views of UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres that “cities have proved to be ‘ground-zero’ the world over for the COVID-19 pandemic, and leaders everywhere urgently need to rethink and transform cities to respond to the reality of COVID-19 and potential future pandemics. In responding to the pandemic, the first line of business is to tackle inequalities and safeguard social cohesion. Second, we must strengthen the capacities of local governments. Third, we must pursue a green, resilient and inclusive economic recovery.” This Statement has been shared with the Executive Office of the Secretary-General in New York.

Over the past 15 years, GFHS has been providing a global platform for high-level dialogue on urban issues and promoting sustainable cities and human settlements for all, which is also in line with the recommendations of the Policy Brief.

With the objective of undertaking a timely and effective opportunity to implement this Policy Brief, GFHS 2020 has been convened in incorporating an observance of Urban October with the theme “Post-Pandemic Recovery and Transformation: Resilient Cities, Healthy Planet”. It is co-organized by GFHS in partnership with World Meteorological Organization (WMO), International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), International Telecommunications Union (ITU) and International Science Council (ISC), in collaboration with UNDRR, UNDP, UNESCAP, UNECE, ADB, World Oceans Council and other international organizations.

This Forum aims at calling on the international community to draw lessons from the pandemic and accelerate green transformation, to promote biodiversity conservation, to strengthen urban safety and resilience with special focus on the needs of women and girls //and children, and to strengthen the capacities of local authorities and foster partnerships towards achieving the SDGs.

You would recall that following adoption of the New Urban Agenda by Habitat III in 2016 in Quito, Ecuador, the mission of GFHS was tailored as *“Committed to Sustainable Cities and Human Settlements for All”*.

2020 also marks the 15th anniversary of the establishment of the Global Forum in 2005. I have the pleasure of being its Chairman since 2007. On the occasion of this special anniversary, I am delighted to announce that GFHS, along with its partners, have decided to co-produce a depository of the wide-ranging and huge array of academic literature as THE LIBRARY OF THE GLOBAL FORUM ON HUMAN SETTLEMENTS which will be bilingual in Chinese and English. This is also a part of our contribution to the global commencement of the Decade of Action on the SDGs. The library is planned to be launched towards the end of this year.

In my remarks today I would present a broader perspective of the human settlements agenda in a global setting. At the outset, let me assert the centrality of sustainability in all our endeavours and initiatives for global development, progress and prosperity. Sustainable development is the fundamental, intergenerational responsibility of our societies’ efforts which benefits all, including our planet as a whole.

We are experiencing in reality the beginning of a *new urban era*. It is projected that globally urbanization levels will rise dramatically in the next 35 years to reach 70 percent by 2050. We thus live at a time of unprecedented, rapid, irreversible urbanization.

Urban growth is most rapid in the developing world, where cities gain an average of 5-6 million residents every month. As cities grow in size and population, harmony among the spatial, social and environmental aspects of a city and between their inhabitants becomes of paramount importance. UN has said rightly that: “Our struggle for global sustainability will be won or lost in cities.”

Urbanization offers unprecedented opportunities for increasing living standards, life expectancy and literacy levels, environmental sustainability and more efficient use of increasingly scarce natural resources. For women, urbanization is associated with greater access to employment opportunities, lower fertility levels and increased independence. Yet urbanization does not necessarily result in a more equitable distribution of wealth, wellbeing and opportunity. In

many low and middle income nations, urban poverty is growing compared to rural poverty. A gendered perspective of urban poverty highlights fundamental issues of equality and social justice by showing women's unequal position in the urban labor market, their limited ability to secure assets independently from male relatives and their greater exposure to violence.

While slums continue to grow in most developing countries, reinforcing other forms of inequality, urban planning requires a shift from viewing urbanization mainly as a problem to seeing it as a powerful tool for development.

Cities have the potential to shape the future of humankind and to win the battle for sustainable development. Cities are at the forefront of the global battle against climate change. In the last two decades, cities and urban centres have become the engine-rooms of human development as a whole.

The UN has asserted that "The way in which cities are planned, run and managed is crucial. The leadership role of mayors and city governments is therefore of fundamental importance."

All these are very succinctly articulated in Goal 11 of the UN's 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development to "Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable." But the international community really needs to do its best to achieve that goal.

Let me conclude by underscoring that sustainable urban development is one of the most pressing challenges facing the human community in the 21st century. As more and more people make cities their home, cities will be the arenas in which some of the world's biggest social, economic, environmental and political challenges will be faced and need to be addressed.

It is therefore significant that GFHS has since its establishment been focusing on these challenges at each of its annual conferences. GFHS 2020 is again another timely and relevant gathering that is aimed at making the international community alert and proactive.

In conclusion, I reiterate the core message of Secretary-General Guterres when he launched the Policy Brief in following words:

"Now is the time to rethink and reshape the urban world."

Now is the moment to adapt to the reality of this and future pandemics.

Now is our chance to recover better, by building more resilient, inclusive and sustainable cities”.
