**Opening Remarks**

**The 19th Annual Session of Global Forum on Human Settlements**

**Theme: Invigorate Innovation and Local Leadership**

**for a Sustainable Urban Future**

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**Venue: United Nations Headquarters, New York City**

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Distinguished delegates and participants,

First of all, on behalf of UNCRD I would like to express our deep appreciation to all the co-organizers of this event, in particular the Secretariat of the Global Forum on Human Settlements.

Among others, SDG 11 connects with the vision for a sustainable urban future. Achieving SDG 11 requires coordinated efforts from governments, businesses, civil society, and international organizations to address urban challenges and ensure sustainable growth. This vision supports not only the quality of life in cities but also has broader implications for innovation, good governance and local leadership towards economic development, environmental sustainability, and social equity.

Today, more than half of the world's population lives in cities, and by 2050, this is projected to rise to nearly 70%. Cities are the engines of economic growth, cultural exchange, and technological advancement, but they are also the epicenters of some of the most pressing global challenges - climate change, resource scarcity, social inequality, and pollution. They occupy only 2% of earth’s land area but responsible for consumption of ~70% of all resource while generating approx. 75% GHGs.

The rapid pace of urbanization brings unprecedented opportunities, but it also places significant pressure on infrastructure, natural resources, and social services. It is clear that the solutions to these challenges cannot be one-size-fits-all. Each city has its unique context and socio-economic dynamics, and this is where innovation and local leadership become vital components for sustainable transformation.

Innovation is not merely about technology; it is about reimagining how we live, work, and interact in our urban environments or ecosystems. Sustainable urban development requires a shift from traditional practices to innovative approaches that prioritize people, the planet, and prosperity.

Leveraging technology is essential to drive sustainable development.

Adopting a circular economy approach, for instance, allows cities to minimize waste and maximize the reuse of resources while contributing to restoration and regeneration of natural ecosystems. By promoting sustainable production and consumption (SDG 12), urban areas can significantly reduce landfill dependency and transform waste streams into valuable inputs for new products and services.

While innovation is a powerful tool for transformation, it also needs the support of strong local leadership that understands the unique needs and aspirations of its communities.

Local leaders play a critical role in driving sustainable development through strategic vision, stakeholder collaboration, and community empowerment.

As we move forward, we must remember that sustainability is not just about protecting the environment but about creating cities where people can thrive—where every citizen has access to clean air, safe water, and green spaces, and where economic opportunities abound for all.

I wish all success of the Forum.

Thank you.