Remarks

by

Mr. Gyan Chandra Acharya
Under-Secretary-General
High Representative
for the Least Developed Countries, Landlocked Developing Countries
and Small Island Developing States
at
Urban Thursday
Breakfast on Sustainable Urban Development on Small Islands

Ford Foundation Building
31 March 2016, New York
Excellency Ambassador Jumeau, moderator

Permanent Representatives, Ambassadors, and delegations from Permanent Missions

Representatives of the Ford Foundation,

Civil society representatives

Colleagues,

Distinguished guests,

Ladies and gentlemen,

Let me first thank the organisers, the Habitat III Secretariat and the Ford Foundation for the invitation to attend this event and make a few remarks. More importantly, I applaud and welcome the focus of the event on SIDS.

Last week we were discussing Small Islands issues in Aruba with a focus on Public Private Partnerships on issues of oceans, renewable energy, sustainable agriculture, sustainable tourism, connectivity, finance, and infrastructure all of which have a bearing on today’s discussions.

The global focus on this group of countries for example with today's discussions reaffirms the acknowledgement that they are a special case, in terms of their sustainable development. And as we have witnessed over the past two years, this special case has been reaffirmed by the international community with the adoption of the SAMOA Pathway, the Sendai Framework, the AAAA, the Agenda 2030, and the Paris Agreement.

Now, even as we start focusing on the implementation of these various globally agreed frameworks and agreement, we should also fully take into account the major UN processes that are taking place this year such as the Habitat III to be convened this October in Ecuador. There is a clear linkage between the above mentioned outcomes and the outcome of Habitat III.

SIDS face particular and unique urban challenges that for many are rooted in their geographic make-up and smallness, where land space is put at a premium. In many instances, the definition of ‘urban’ itself for many SIDS will need to be viewed through a SIDS lens. This will allow both SIDS and their partners to begin to understand these unique challenges that SIDS face on urbanization.

There is no doubt that urbanization has contributed to economic growth in many countries worldwide, including SIDS. Through the growth of urban centres, they support employment and organised economic activitis in the trade and services sectors. Although for many SIDS, this may not be reflected in their GDP, as many of the economic activities in many SIDS are undertaken in the informal sector.
At the same time, for SIDS, the lack of opportunities for gainful employment needs to be acknowledged as it is often linked to broader inherent SIDS issues, including their dependency on a narrow resource base. SIDS specific responses, appropriate support and mechanisms should be considered while taking the issue of urbanisation together with ensuring better opportunities for decent jobs to the youth, women and marginalized.

It has been reported that some 59% of the total population of SIDS already live in urban settlements. Due to their geographic size, the smallest among the SIDS are also the most urbanized. Other SIDS, including those whose make-ups are geographically archipelagic, tend to have lower populations in urban areas. Even though urbanisation rate in SIDS is about 1.4% compared to the global rate of 1.7%, the fastest urbanisation is taking place in the Pacific where it is at 4.3%, increasing to 16% if we include peri urban areas.

In many SIDS where available land is already limited, the competing demands on land use is another challenge that can be exacerbated by urbanization. Urban settlements in such context can hamper growth or the implementation of specific projects, including those concerning infrastructure that would in turn promote development. Therefore, innovative and targeted solutions should be sought in order to cater to their interests.

For many SIDS where cultural and traditional norms are still practiced, including those that are linked to land use, unplanned urbanisation can also lead to social instability within society and between communities in urban settlements.

The onset of climate change impacts will further exacerbate these challenges. Many SIDS populations live within 1.5kms from the coast with a number of them having 100% of their population living no higher than 5 meters above the sea level in countries like, Maldives, Kiribati, and Tuvalu. Critical infrastructure in many SIDS are also oriented along coasts. The challenges posed by climate change, urbanization, and others related to sustainable development of SIDS are interconnected.

These challenges call for a holistic approach to overcome them, given their interlinkages. Policy frameworks at all levels to address urbanization in SIDS, from the global to the local and community levels, will need to adopt an integrated approach that cuts across sustainable development, disaster risk reduction, Agenda 2030, as well as the climate challenge. Such an approach is imperative for SIDS who often face resource constraints, including human capacity constraints, where holistic approaches not only make good sense but they will also contribute to lessen burdens placed on SIDS capacities, in terms of implementation and follow-up.

Lessons learned from other existing mechanisms including those climate change related ones like the LDCs NAPAs and NAPs could be explored for implementation by SIDS as well. To increase the chances of success in the multipronged challenges faced by SIDS from urbanization to other challenges such as DRR, effective implementation of Agenda
2030, and building resilience in the face of climate change, the need for coherence is essential.

OHRLLS with its mandate from the SAMOA Pathway to enhance the coherence of SIDS issues in UN processes will continue to play its role in advocating for such enhancement, including in the linkages between Habitat III process and other UN processes as Resilint, inclusive, and sustainable settlements are priority issues for SIDS.

My office will be convening an Expert Group Meeting in June, here in New York, on the theme of urbanisation in SIDS. We hope to work with some of the stakeholders here today at the meeting and that the recommendations from the meeting will feed into the process leading to the Habitat III outcome. We believe that multi-stakeholder approach is key to attaining all our objectives and the role of the civil society is critical, as they play an important role from the community level to the national and the global levels.

I look forward to an outcome of the Habitat III that not only acknowledges the unique challenges SIDS face on urbanization but one that proposes tangible outcomes for SIDS pointing the way towards meeting and overcoming these challenges based on genuine and durable partnerships with all and at all levels.

I thank you for your attention.