

Interview with Ms Maimunah Mohd Sharif, new Executive Director of UN-HABITAT at WUF9 held in Kuala Lumpur, February 2018.

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At the closing ceremony of the Ninth World Urban Forum (WUF9) held by UN-Habitat in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, 7 to 13 February 2018, Madam Maimunah Mohd Sharif, the newly appointed executive director of UN-Habitat, said that, after years of lobbying for the ideas of social inclusion and sustainable cities, she now had “to walk the talk”.

“UN-Habitat belongs to all of us,” she told the large audience. “We want you to see us as your indispensable partner. UN-Habitat wants to be a strong catalyst for the exchange of ideas, a hub of knowledge and excellence. My staff will do its part, but I urge governments to help us build the UN-Habitat you need and deserve.”

The forum, the first since the adoption of the New Urban Agenda (NUA) at Habitat III in Quito, Ecuador, in 2016, was attended by 22,000 delegates (49 per cent of them women) from 165 countries.

In a one-on-one interview in Kuala Lumpur the day after the conference, Ms Sharif, herself a Malaysian, spoke about her priorities in her new job.

The main priority, she said, is to strengthen the organization and to make known how it can help people everywhere through its programmes, training, advice, and partnerships with other organizations, from international to local ones. UN-Habitat wishes to continue to act as a bridge in terms of implementing the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) adopted by the UN in 2015.

During the interview, Ms Sharif said: “Many people think of planning as spatial planning. But the built environment is for people to use, not an end in itself. We are talking about how to give everyone a better quality of life.”

“Sometimes, countries have big plans but little money. We have to work smartly with our partners to help finance or provide expertise, such as self-building programmes, that can be used in countries that need them.”

She mentioned UN-Habitat's Urban Planning and Design Lab, which provides training and collaboration. She also mentioned the Singapore Center for Liveable Cities, a separate organization working with UN-Habitat to help train professionals from Africa.

The World Bank was one of several partners at the conference in talks to provide private investment for urban infrastructure to help finance the NUA in Ethiopia, Rwanda, Mexico, Brazil and other countries.

Ms Sharif, who studied town planning on scholarship in the United Kingdom, was Mayor of the City Council of Penang Island, Malaysia, before her new appointment. Prior to that, she was President of the Municipal Council of Seberang Perai, where she championed green and inclusive issues. Under her leadership, the council became the first local authority to implement and achieve six quality-based management ISO certifications.

Earlier in her career, she led urban renewal projects in George Town, which became a World Heritage Site inscribed by UNESCO in 2008, and for which Ms Sharif became general manager.

In June, UN-Habitat, which is based in Nairobi, Kenya, is due to be reviewed as part of the ongoing UN Secretary-General's reform. Ms Sharif said that she would be defining more clearly the organization's plans and priorities as part of that process.

In the meantime, Ms Sharif said that it is important for countries to develop an overall national plan that takes a long-term view to approach the most pressing requirements within each national context.

She divided the approach into three categories.

"The first category includes countries that don't yet have a town and country planning Act, but are implementing measures ad hoc," she said.

"The second category includes those countries that already have development plans done before the adoption of the SDGs and the NUA, and that would now like to review their plans."

"The third category includes those countries that have incorporated the SDGs and the NUA, and would like to measure the success of what they are doing."

Ms Sharif said that UN-Habitat was working toward providing tools, mechanisms and guidelines "to implement the NUA and the SDGs on the ground".

Often, she said, it was “a case of seeing is believing”: “successful strategies in some cities encourage other cities to follow suit”.

“But political timelines are very different from urban development timelines,” she said. “We need an efficient process of getting things approved so that we can grab the attention of political decision makers and implement policies within politically acceptable timelines – five years, for example – so that decision-makers and their electorates gain confidence in those policies.”

From that confidence, further plans can be implemented and monitored. One of the tools to do that, The City Prosperity Index, is currently being developed by UN-Habitat as a benchmark for a new definition of success in terms of sustainability and inclusiveness rather than simply GDP.

One of the other things that came out of WUF9 was work initiated by the European Union to develop an accepted definition of cities, which would enable urban initiatives to be implemented and monitored in a consistent way.

Michele Nayman holds a Bachelor of Town and Regional Planning from the University of Melbourne, Australia, and a Master of Science in Journalism from the Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism in New York, USA. She has worked as a journalist for news organizations including “The Age” in Melbourne, “The National Times” in Sydney, and “The Guardian” in London.