

**KEYNOTE ADDRESS BY LN SISULU CHAIR OF THE AFRICAN
MINISTERIAL CONFERENCE ON HOUSING AND URBAN
DEVELOPMENT ON SOCIAL INCLUSION AND COHESION**

20 June 2006

World Urban Forum III

Vancouver, Canada

Master of Ceremonies

My fellow panelists

The Executive Director of UN-HABITAT, Dr. Anna Tibaijuka

Invited delegates, friends

Ladies and Gentlemen:

I am aware that we have moved on now in our discourse and use more acceptable terminology such as social exclusion. In this context – for which we are gathered here – to analyse the challenge that confronts us and find actionable solutions, may I be allowed to revert to the term poor, which represents exactly what I want to bring to all our attention. Poverty is what needs to be understood and specifically the urban poor, we need to see as a clear and present danger that we all have to address.

In bringing the term poverty firmly back into the centre of the debate, we are able to understand that exclusion has worsened the plight of the poor. A discussion paper of the recently established High Level Commission on the Legal Empowerment of the Poor (HLCLEP) emphasises a principle we need to consider:

“A majority of the world’s population is largely excluded from ... the services that directly affect their economic well-being. This aspect of the poverty

challenge may be as important as provision of education and health care, infrastructure, or improved social equity, but it has not been given sufficient attention by governments or by the international development community.”

This, I believe, is a central challenge facing us here – how we ensure that the issue of the urban poor, in particular, is given as much attention by the international community, beyond speaking about it.

Poverty is the condition of 88% of people in the cities of the developing world.

Historians define the modern era as that period where, by and large, the world was free of major wars. A period that at our most optimistic we would want to refer to as the period of the free world.

When the United Nations was formed, it heralded the creation of a world where we could all divert our energies to uplifting as opposed to destroying the world.

For us in the developing world, it offered boundless, but boundless possibilities. I am sure that the story I am about to tell is fabricated, but it has become legendary. The story is set in some African country in the war years. Basil Davidson, the African Historian tells of the efforts of the British to enlist African soldiers for support services in the war. “So”, says the white man, “you must understand it is your responsibility to support the fight against Hitler”. The black man of course does not quite follow the logic of this responsibility. So, the white man, in a painstaking effort to explain in a way that would convey the weighty matter to the simple mind of the African: “You see”, he says with great deliberateness, “it is wrong for one nation to govern another ...”.

He is of course explaining these lofty notions to a man in the cruel grip of colonialism. So, the legend goes, was born the idea, in the simple mind of the African, that it was indeed wrong for one nation to govern another ...

The point I want to draw from the story, however, is different. In the fight against Nazism, the world was mobilised against this scourge and the world responded to it as a common threat.

We face a similar threat now against humanity, and that is the scourge of poverty. The important question we might ask: Are we properly structured to mobilise the world against this new common threat against humanity, in the same way as we did against other threats. I ask this question, because somehow the poor find themselves alone in the struggle against poverty. The rich, on the other hand, have by and large become free and indifferent. To this indifference I will later return.

Last year, with the help of UN-Habitat, the African Ministers voluntary came together to form a forum where we could jointly address the common problems we face.

In the year that I have represented African Ministers of Urban Development at international for a as their Chairperson, I have been made to feel guilty about our situation, something to be curiously accommodating of, an unpleasant moment whose absolute brevity is paramount.

For all the commitment from an enlightened world, we are almost apologetic when we raise these painful truths and any return to these discussions is so politically incorrect.

With the beginning of this millennium, the world took a stand against poverty; committed itself to the Millennium Declaration. We were convinced then that the necessary steps had been taken to mobilise the world to collectively fight social exclusion. The Millennium Declaration was taken a step further when two years later, through the Johannesburg Declaration of the World Summit on Sustainable Development, we all declared:

“We will spare no effort to free our fellow men, women and children from the abject and dehumanising conditions of extreme poverty, to which more than a billion of them are currently subjected. We are committed to making the right

to development a reality for everyone, and to freeing the entire human race from want”.

We affirm the premise that cities are indeed engines of growth and when policies are correctly structured, will provide an opportunity to build social cohesion in areas in which , by historical design the poor had no place.

It is now a generally accepted truth of our time – that urbanisation will throw up one of the biggest challenges. When coupled with poverty it creates the complexity of problems that we seek to unravel today. Within the context of developing continents, the two are inextricably linked. And this is why urban shelter has become such a pressing issue. For nothing defines the reality of the developing world more starkly than through this prism.

This is the picture of a city in the developing world. The rich in residential areas with all the infrastructure and services and the poor in shacks perched precariously along the infrastructure routes: where poverty, disease and deprivation prevail.

It has now become acknowledged as given, that for some time to come, we will live with this, where among the marginalised, there will be high levels of unemployment, coupled with high levels of illiteracy, poor health and compounded by high levels of crime, places where the gods will intermittently visit all manner of calamity from floods to fires. Unemployment rates run at 88%. These will often always be the later arrivals in the city, with the highest percentage of female headed households.

It is estimated that by 2030 approximately 60% of the world’s population will be living in cities. Nearly all of this global population growth will be absorbed into urban areas of the world’s least developed regions, the least able to absorb such growth.

Approximately 2 billion people worldwide will be living in informal housing/slums by 2020. We know that already by 2001, 31.6% of the global urban population lived in slums.

When this stark picture is thrown up, then you understand why, when we met in Barcelona in 2004, there was a radical mood about ourselves that wanted the plight of the poor to change and to change soon. I sensed an impatience from the poor. I understand the impatience today caused by, what is perceived to be, the lack of achievement of substantial progress in effecting the change necessary to improve the quality of life for all.

The position of the poor remain the same as we continue to meet.

Between 1990 and 2001, regardless of us establishing the Habitat Agenda in 1995 and the adoption of the Millennium Declaration in 2000, more than 200 million new slum dwellers were added to our cities. Worse, close to 3 billion people, representing about 40% of the world's population, are said to be in vulnerable positions that would make them to be in urgent need of housing and shelter by 2030. The urbanisation of poverty, that is what is increasing at a faster rate than we are able to deal with.

For Africa to make a difference to this situation, a couple of interventions are required. There is the need to ensure that all socio-economic programmes and activities on the continent are focused on ensuring that the basic survival needs of the most deprived are met. Only then can the focus fall on longer-term security.

Second, how do we structure our resources to meet the challenge. It is generally accepted that in the sub-Saharan African region continues the existence of weak local government in which the necessary municipal funding is not being raised locally because of a lack, among other things, of formalised asset registration.

Urban governance in Africa

Clearly, it requires far more will need to be done: if greater collaboration between national and local governments, and the inclusion of civil society in local decision-making, is desired. A more concerted focus on the poor, and far more attention on the governance dimensions of such an approach, is also required to eradicate all forms of exclusion. Areas for intervention to improve local governance include participatory decision-making, building bridges and partnerships between officials and citizens, transparency, participatory budgeting, fostering and nurturing grassroots women's movements, paying attention to what needs to change in governance to improve the lives of women and the development and utilisation of assessment tools to measure urban governance performance and make the necessary corrections.

Our experience has shown that inclusion of affected communities is absolutely essential. For through this there is complete ownership of the process. The process gains legitimacy and has "social protection" of the community.

None are better placed, with better knowledge of local issues than the affected people. No stronger driver of the process can be found anyway, as ultimately these are beneficiaries. And, importantly, the efforts of the poor to get themselves out of their situation are critical. Shack Dwellers International and other organisations need government support. They have to answer to their problem: saving schemes – all they need is support. Their efforts only bode well for governments.

I learned a valuable lesson then, as I am sure we will all learn lessons today. I had come to represent my country, where the urban poor constitute 30% of the population. I had never met their representatives. I met them in Barcelona and they challenged my right to speak on their behalf. I learnt a valuable lesson. Today I speak on their behalf with full authority. Governments' partnership with the poor is essential if we are to succeed.

Conclusion

In February last year, at our inaugural meeting as African Ministers, we made a historic decision to come together, commit ourselves to a framework for development. At the core of this would be how we meet our MDG targets. But importantly, we took a decision that we needed to pay more attention to the issue of housing, because this is at the core of urban poverty.

That, unless we draw the attention of the international community and form partnerships, we will continue along the same trajectory of exclusion that has dogged us. Unless we create better access to housing finance for affordable housing, and influence donor communities to prioritise housing, any talk of social inclusion will come to nought.

It should be noted that, despite the increasing urban concentration of poverty, bilateral and multilateral donors continue to prioritise rural support (only 2-12% of donor funding in Africa going to urban areas). Donors justify this on grounds of poor governance and lack of political support for donor funded capital investments in urban areas.

I am convinced that if we get all these fundamentals correct, we will get our development right. Once we have realised this, will we be able to ensure that the lives of slum dwellers are substantially improved by 2020 and that our world ceases to be an arena where social exclusion continues and indifference is pervasive. Because above all, we have to find a way out of the world's indifference to the poor.

At the opening of the Holocaust Museum in Washington in 1999. A holocaust survivor, Elie Wiesel, in an impassioned speech, had this poignant message about indifference:

“It is much easier to look away from victims. It is all awkward ... to be involved in another person's pain and despair. Indifference reduces the other to an abstraction. Indifference, in fact, is a crime”, he concludes. I would take

the liberty now to go on to add that in this specific matter, indifference denies the rich, the rich experience of humanity.

On a global level this indifference leads to exclusion – the other is an abstraction, an awkward space in our lives.

We have achieved much in the modern era - let us not allow indifference to dehumanise us.

I thank you