Opening Plenary
UN Habitat Assembly
Remarks by the Acting Executive Director, UN Environment Programme

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Honourable Uhuru Kenyatta, President of the Republic of Kenya,
H.E Martha Delgado Peralta, Undersecretary for Multilateral Affairs and Human Rights of Mexico and
President of the UN Habitat Bureau
My sister UN Habitat Executive Director Maimunah Mohd Sharif

Excellencies,

Delegates, ladies and gentlemen

I am honoured to join you at this historic moment – the opening of the first-ever Habitat Assembly.

Asante sana, welcome to Nairobi.

Ladies and Gentlemen, the future of our planet is an urban one.

More than 70 per cent of the world’s population will live in cities by 2050 and resource requirements of an urban world could double in the same period of time.

Meanwhile, the overwhelming majority of people living in cities do not breathe clean air, and nearly one billion people could live in cities with perennial water shortages in 2050.

We need to get our cities right – to fuel green and sustainable growth, protect the environment, ensure equality for all, and keep the social fabric of our communities intact.

The organization of the UN Habitat Assembly is a welcome sign of the importance that Member States, civil society, partners and the UN system place on resilient, low-carbon and just cities that improve the quality of life for their residents.
Transformations are never easy, but I believe that in our deliberations this week, and as we continue on to the Secretary-General’s Climate Action Summit in September, we should be reminded of a saying in Kiswahili, “Mazingira ni chanzo cha kufuzu”, which means “the environment is the beginning of success”.

So with that in mind, please allow me to outline my vision for our cities.

**One, we need to build in circularity into the DNA of our urban systems.** This means fundamentally rethinking how our cities function – from waste disposal to clean mobility to urban planning. Smart and sustainable urban planning represents a tremendous opportunity to reduce the strain we put on the planet, while also improving the quality of life of billions of people, especially in low-income countries, which will account for 90 per cent of the predicted urban growth. Adopting circularity and resource efficiency could reduce greenhouse gas emissions in some sectors by up to 99 per cent, while decreasing the cost associated with achieving the targets of the Paris Agreement.

**Two, housing can no longer be viewed through the lens of affordability alone.** The historic sprawl of our cities, which expand by 2 per cent per year, can no longer continue, or else we run the risk of putting agricultural land and food supplies at risk. It is here that innovation can play a vital role. It can help reduce operating costs, improve comfort and reduce the strain on resources. What is sustainable must be affordable. Tapping into local sources of renewable energy, relying on local and alternative building materials can go a long way in bridging this gap. At the Fourth UN Environment Assembly for example, we showcased how coco fibre, an agricultural residue, could be turned into a modern, high-end material for housing. What
might typically rot and emit harmful methane gases was cycled back into the system, creating local employment and providing a low-cost input into housing. These are the kinds of wins we should aim for.

**Three, the quest for affordable, sustainable housing should be accompanied by an urgent need for clean cooling.** Indeed, the energy consumption of the cooling and heating sectors could be 33 times greater by the end of the century. We must be ready to meet the growing demand for cooling with smart, accessible technologies that improve people’s lives without harming the planet.

**Four, the natural world and the urban world must go hand in hand.** Our cities have grown at the expense of nature. Our financial accounts must acknowledge the value of our forests, oceans, and other natural capital. Environmental considerations should guide our infrastructure decisions. Over the next 15 years, nations will need to build US$93 trillion worth of low-emission, climate-resilient infrastructure to meet the goals set out in the Paris Agreement. This is a tremendous opportunity to build a new future for our cities and protect the planet’s natural wealth on which we all depend.

**Five, capacities are critical.** We must build the capacity of local governments to implement this vision of a sustainable urban future, including integrating circularity in design or in becoming more resource efficient. Cities have proven their capacity to innovate and act, for example in the hundreds of climate commitments taken at sub-national level in recent years. As many of you may know, a few months ago Nairobi hosted the Fourth UN Environment Assembly which focused on the role of innovation in changing the way we consume and produce. This is particularly critical for any discussion on our cities, and I look forward to
bringing together the strengths of multiple UN agencies and the outcomes of these important Assemblies towards supporting a sustainable urban future for the planet.

I also welcome the draft Strategic Plan for 2020-2025 that lays greater emphasis on climate action and improved urban environment, and is before the Assembly this week for adoption.

With these words, I end my remarks today. I wish you all the very best this week and I look forward to a highly successful Assembly ahead!