

High-level panel at UN-Habitat Assembly focuses on creating innovative, inclusive cities

A high-level panel featuring President Uhuru Kenyatta of Kenya, President Salva Kiir Mayardit of South Sudan, Prime Minister Josai Vorege Bainimarama of Fiji, and Prime Minister Maeen Abdulmalik Saeed of Yemen recently shared ideas on innovation in cities in front of a packed audience at the first UN-Habitat Assembly. Executive director of UN-Habitat Maimunah Mohd Sharif and the president of the UN-Habitat Assembly Martha Delgado were also part of the panel.



President Uhuru Kenyatta signs the visitors' book at the headquarters of UN-Habitat in Nairobi, Kenya watched by UN-Habitat executive director Maimunah Mohd Sharif and the president of the UN-Habitat Assembly Martha Delgado before he officially opening the first UN-Habitat Assembly.

The four leaders answered questions on urban innovation, partnerships with the private sector, and the role of multilateralism.

Kenyatta explained how the vision of affordable housing, a right enshrined in the 2010 Kenyan Constitution, is going to be a “massive challenge” in the urbanising world. “It is therefore important to us to look at alternative, new and innovative ways of achieving this objective,” he said, adding there was no way to provide affordable housing to people without partnership with the private sector.

Housing and infrastructure provision was also covered by Mayardit. The leader of the world’s newest country explained how they were looking for partnerships as they need to provide housing and infrastructure “from scratch”. He also emphasised the importance of development in sustaining peace and stability.

Tackling climate change

Bainimarama elaborated on how his country is using innovation to tackle climate change. Fiji is partnering with UN-Habitat to incorporate women and young people’s experiences into their urban planning to make their urban settlements more safe, resilient and sustainable. He agreed that private partnerships are “a must” but cautioned that “governments must lead and set standards through laws, regulations, policies and programmes”.

The consequences of conflict on urban areas was raised by Saeed. He said the recent war in Yemen had created an “extraordinary demographic change” within their towns and cities, as residents fled from conflict areas. He said in rebuilding, they planned to embrace innovative solutions while maintaining the cities’ unique identities.

“When it come to urban planning and housing, we need hundreds of thousands of units in certain areas. So we are striving for, and relying on the private sector to produce these,” he said.

Sharif pointed out that if the battle to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals is to be won or lost in cities, then “cities will have to continue to drive innovation in groundbreaking ways to achieve a lasting impact on communities and to ensure that no one is left behind”.

Delagado, who was unanimously elected president of the UN-Habitat Assembly, noted: “We need to bring the global agenda closer to the citizens and engage with local stakeholders. Experience shows that much of the creativity and innovation occurs at the very local level, through everyday experiences and encounters.”

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