

## **2020 International Mayors Forum**

### **"Local Governments and the Sustainable Development Goals in times of the COVID-19 pandemic"**

**Remarks by Mr. Amson Sibanda, Chief, National Strategies and Capacity Building Branch, Division for Sustainable Development Goals, UNDESA**

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Excellencies,  
Distinguished panelists,  
Ladies and Gentlemen,

Let me start by thanking the United Nations Office for Sustainable Development (UNOSD) and all those involved in organizing the 2020 International Mayors Forum. This platform provides an opportunity for cities and local governments from around the world to discuss new ideas and issues of mutual interest, including the common challenges they face implementing the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and its Sustainable Development Goals.

As we gather here today, the world is not on track to achieve the 2030 Agenda. Poverty, hunger and inequality are on the rise and job losses continue to mount. The digital divide threatens to cause irreparable damage to the hopes and aspirations of millions of children without access to affordable technological devices and services.

Some of the gains we had made since the adoption of the 2030 Agenda have been wiped out by the COVID-19 crisis in a matter of months.

Hence, this platform provides opportunities to cities and local governments to scale and advance the implementation of the SDGs at the local level by sharing and promoting locally appropriate SDGs acceleration and innovative actions, aligning SDGs with local plans and strategies, building partnerships, raising awareness at the local level of what SDGs are, and ensuring that we promote the collection and analysis of disaggregated, timely and accurate data that supports the design of policies and interventions that are relevant to the lives of urban inhabitants.

I might add, the objectives of this platform are also aligned with those of Local2030, a network and platform that supports the on-the-ground delivery of the SDGs, with a focus on those furthest behind.

The theme you have selected – “Local Governments and the Sustainable Development Goals in times of the COVID-19 pandemic” is quite timely.

In many ways, it underscores that the success of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development hinges on implementing bold and inclusive local actions and effective collaboration between all relevant actors, including local and regional governments, civil society and community-based organizations and the private sector.

Furthermore, efforts to localize the implementation and follow-up of the 2030 Agenda can also succeed if genuine and inclusive efforts are made to promote the participation of local and regional governments in voluntary national reporting, monitoring and evaluation.

A review of the Voluntary National Reviews that were presented during this year’s high-level political forum on sustainable development has shown that coordinating mechanisms at multiple levels of government, including local government, are important in many countries, as the implementation of the SDGs relies on the concrete application of programmes and policies at the local level, requiring effective vertical alignment between national and local governments.

However, challenges remain in making these arrangements as effective as possible. Hence, it is platforms like the International Mayors Forum that must closely examine these gaps and challenges that have been further compounded by the COVID crisis and come up with concrete solutions to tackle them.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Following the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic, we have all seen how cities, towns and local governments have borne the brunt of this pandemic, which has since morphed into a debilitating economic and social crisis. As the Secretary-General noted in his Policy Brief on “COVID-19 in an Urban World”, this pandemic has laid bare and heightened the many challenges that have been brought about by the remarkable growth of cities in recent decades, particularly worsening social and economic inequalities and the growth of overcrowded and marginalized informal settlements. The pandemic has also presented many of our greatest opportunities to protect people, prosperity and planet.

During the initial round of this pandemic, an estimated 95 per cent of cases were found in urban areas. Within cities, COVID-19 has not affected all neighborhoods or social groups the same. The pandemic has disproportionately fallen hardest on poorer, overcrowded neighborhoods. A study carried out in July by Mumbai municipality, the government think-tank Niti Aayog and the

Tata Institute of Fundamental Research found out that over half of Mumbai's 7 million slum dwellers had had been exposed to the novel coronavirus. The high prevalence rate in these informal settlements could be explained by a combination of several factors, including poverty, low incomes, overcrowded and inadequate housing, lack of access to clean water and sanitation, and health care.

These are all areas where local governments can play a more significant role when it comes to improving service delivery and the achievement of the 2030 Agenda.

The COVID crisis has also inflicted huge economic pain on local governments, undermining their ability to finance the implementation of the 2030 Agenda. At the beginning of the pandemic, local governments had to redirect existing expenditures towards emergency responses. And as the virus spread, they also began to implement measures to control the pandemic such as business closures and lockdowns that further curtailed economic activity and their ability to raise revenues.

Estimates from the World Bank and United Nations entities suggest that in 2021, local governments may on average lose 15 to 25 per cent in revenues. Cities with less diversified economies, particularly those that depend on tourism have been hit especially hard.

The sharp decline in business and property taxes and other revenue streams over the past few months has compromised municipal governments' ability to provide basic services and invest in public infrastructure, transport and adequate and affordable housing. This has also led to cuts in critical public services, often worsening poverty and hunger, health outcomes, inequality and social exclusion.

With many businesses and civic activity shutdown, some have wondered if cities will be able to survive and resume their role as central nodes of the global economy. ***“New York City is dead forever. Here's why”*** was the headline of one article written by James Altucher in August this year and was reprinted in the New York Post. While New York and many cities have been devastated by the COVID crisis, what this headline grabbing article missed is the resilience of local governments, businesses and communities.

If history is any lesson, COVID-19 is not the first pandemic or major crisis to devastate cities and towns. Cities such as New York were able to rebound, flourish and experience a cultural renaissance following the devastating impact of the 1918 Spanish Flu and economic crises such as the 2008 Great Recession.

History has also taught us that cities are the places where good ideas on how to respond to crises start. Because of the large concentration of people, including a highly educated workforce, cities are hubs of energy, resilience and innovation.

But for cities and local governments to harness and effectively leverage these advantages, policy choices matter, particularly with respect to public investments in universal, inclusive and equitable access to safe, quality, effective and affordable health care services; quality education; poverty eradication; a new generation of social protection measures; combating inequalities; strengthening local governance systems and capacities; and fostering a green, inclusive recovery.

And as amply highlighted by the sacrifices of frontline workers during this pandemic, particularly healthcare workers, women and low-wage workers, cities and local governments must also scale up investments in the care economy.

The crisis also highlights the imperative for cities and local governments to rethink their strategies promoting a green, inclusive and resilient economic recovery. Local governments also need to fully implement the Paris Agreement on Climate Change and the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction in order to reduce the risk of the economic, social and environmental impacts of climate change and disasters.

Ladies and gentlemen,

The COVID-19 crisis highlights the critical role local governments play as front-line responders in crisis response, recovery and rebuilding. They are also at the forefront of service delivery, economic development and infrastructure investments.

And as the number of people living in cities and towns continues to rise, we need to unlock opportunities for all urban inhabitants, including those left furthest behind if we are to build back better and achieve the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development within the Decade of Action and delivery.

Moving forward, let us continue to leverage the opportunities presented by the International Mayors Forum to further strengthen cooperation among national governments, cities and local governments and reinforce ties between local governments and the communities they serve.

Thank you.

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