

UNHCR Statement to Habitat III

United Nations Conference on Housing and Sustainable Urban Development

Steven Corliss, Director, Division of Programme Support & Management

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Distinguished Delegates, Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is an honour to address the United Nations Conference on Housing and Sustainable Urban Development – Habitat III – on behalf of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, Mr. Filippo Grandi. Me gustaría comenzar expresando mi más profundo agradecimiento al Gobierno de la República del Ecuador y al pueblo de la ciudad de Quito por su cálida bienvenida.

Today, Ecuador generously hosts the largest refugee population in Latin America. Many have found protection here in Quito. UNHCR works closely with the Government at all levels and our civil society partners to link both refugees and local people to jobs and opportunities to start their own businesses, so that they can become independent, care for their families and build a better life.

Over the past few years, we have seen forced displacement reach levels not seen since the Second World War. Globally, more than 65 million people – boys and girls, women and men – have been uprooted from their homes and have taken a perilous and uncertain journey in search of safety. Most of them – nearly two out of every three refugees and four out of every five internally-displaced people – have settled in towns and cities. The traditional image of refugees living in remote rural camps does not describe reality in much of the world today.

Refugees, internally displaced people and the stateless are part of the fabric of urban life. They share our cities. But too often, they are invisible. The world's forcibly displaced and stateless people do not have a seat in this conference hall, but they do have an important stake in our success. The New Urban Agenda sends an important message that they are not forgotten, that they are included and that they will not be left behind.

Forcibly displaced people flee violence and persecution. They seek protection and safety. Cities offer them the possibility to blend into society and be part of communities, rather than being kept apart in camps. Most live in marginalized areas, often without access to adequate housing, infrastructure or basic services. They join the urban poor and share many of the same challenges that they face. But their situation is distinct and, often, even more difficult.

Each day can be a struggle to survive. Newcomers to the city, they may face barriers of language and culture that are compounded by discrimination, xenophobia and social exclusion. They often lack legal status or documents, forcing them to live "below the radar" and avoid contact with authorities. Working typically means informal employment in precarious conditions. Parents may send their children out to work rather than off to school. Children may have less chance of being arrested and detained, but the risk of exploitation and abuse is greater for them.

Refugees, internally displaced people and the stateless – like others – are drawn to cities by opportunity. They are people with skills, talents and aspirations. They also come seeking the things that most of us take for granted – to move freely and without fear, to have proper housing, to find decent work to support their families, to educate their children, to see a doctor when they are ill and to dare to hope for a better future. The New Urban Agenda speaks to each of these basic and very human goals.

The urbanization of forced displacement is changing the way UNHCR delivers protection and solutions. Working in cities and towns means working differently and working with different partners. For many years, UNHCR sought to bring development actors into our humanitarian work. We now see the task as anchoring refugees, the internally displaced and stateless people within the broader framework of planning and action for sustainable development. This is a key strategic direction for UNHCR.

We have reflected this thinking in our efforts to mainstream refugees and the other people UNHCR serves within national and local services for healthcare and education. It is evident in our market-oriented approaches to employment and livelihoods. We see it also in our expanding use of cash transfers for humanitarian assistance, where we work together with UN and NGO partners and, where possible, through national social protection systems.

We are broadening our engagements with national ministries, municipal and local governments and host communities. We are also working with the private sector in new ways to give people access to the real economy. Through a growing strategic partnership, we are combining UNHCR's knowledge of displaced populations with the World Bank's analytical capacities to build the data and evidence base and make the case that more inclusive, sustainable and development-oriented responses yield benefits both for forcibly displaced people and the communities where they live.

Last month, the United Nations General Assembly adopted the New York Declaration during the first ever Refugees and Migrants Summit. The Declaration calls upon UNHCR to coordinate a "comprehensive refugee response" where refugees are on the move in large numbers. This calls for engagement with governments at all levels and leveraging the expertise and resources – early on – of the widest array of partners, including development actors, international financial institutions and the private sector.

We see a real and meaningful convergence between UNHCR's strategic directions, the New York Declaration and the New Urban Agenda. All are inspired by and reinforce the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the fundamental commitment to "leave no one behind."

We are also tremendously encouraged that the shared vision of "cities for all" expressly includes refugees, returnees and the internally displaced people. If we could add just three words to this groundbreaking Declaration, they would be "and the stateless." Stateless people must not be forgotten.

We look forward to the adoption of the New Urban agenda and working with all of you to make it a reality in the lives of people everywhere.

Thank you for your attention.