23rd session of the Committee of Experts on Public Administration

Written statement by the United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-Habitat)

Agenda item 6: Principles of effective governance for sustainable development

Governance is a key concept in the sustainable development debate which involves a continuous process of negotiation and contestation over the allocation of social and material resources and political power. Indeed, the continuous interaction among authorities, institutions, organizations, and citizens, shapes economies and societies and their structural change. Internationally agreed normative frameworks, including human rights standards, the Sustainable Development Goals (e.g., SDG 16 and 17), the New Urban Agenda, underpin the mechanisms and processes of governance.

While some countries have made great gains in health or education but seen only modest income growth, other countries have failed to make progress in life expectancy despite strong economic performance. This proves that a single model of governance cannot and should not be imposed, as governance varies across contexts and cultures. Governance systems have evolved in response to a multitude of socio-cultural and economic factors. Hence, it is more prudent to adhere to a set of universally acknowledged principles, such as participatory democracy, to delineate the essence of governance. Indeed, **UN-Habitat's 2021-2023 Comparative Study on Urban Governance in 10 Countries of the Global South**, confirms that progress on human development indicators, without meaningful people's participation and equal opportunities for all, can lead to inequality of outcomes.

The above contextual background brings us to the 11 principles of effective governance for sustainable development, under the auspices of the UN Committee of Experts of Public Administration, that were endorsed in 2018. These principles revamp societal, political, and economic strategies and guidelines in addressing the critical challenges our world faces today in relation to People, Planet, Prosperity, Peace and Partnerships. The first principle is **effectiveness**, and this is described by the three areas of competence, sound policymaking, and collaboration. The second is about **accountability**; the indicators of this aspect are integrity, transparency, and independent oversight. Finally, the third is **inclusiveness**, which includes leaving no one behind, non- discrimination, participation, subsidiarity, and intergenerational equity.

UN-Habitat, through normative and technical assistance initiatives, has been supporting countries and cities in applying the above principles as they are vital for translating policies and legislative frameworks into practical implementation tools. The first key principle is **effectiveness** to make national and local government institutions more responsive and accountable. Studies show that weak states are more prone to conflict and civil war. Therefore, it is highly desirable that there is sufficient capacity building to improve efficient administration; all governments at all levels to be responsive to the needs and demands of people, especially the vulnerable in society. Further, efficiency could ease administration, coordination, and mobilization of collaborative action to address an increasingly interconnected and complex development agenda. Such multilevel governance arrangements, including the involvement of non-State actors, are important to help shape policy and hold government institutions accountable for their performance and the quality of services delivered. In the urban context, where metropolises are emerging as connected urban, peri-urban, and rural territories which do not operate in isolation and have strong territorial interdependencies varying in economic, social, and environmental aspects, inter-municipal cooperation is key. This supports the quest to leave no one and no place behind by promoting integrated territorial development that facilitates housing, work, health, education, and other fundamental socio-economic rights for all without the limitations of administrative boundaries.

The second lever is **openness and transparency. UN-Habitat's 2023 publication on Enhancing Meaningful Participation in Spatial Planning Processes** provides evidence that informed citizens and the private sector are better able to engage in developing policy. Additionally, most non-State actors have more resources that governments can tap into and partner on service delivery, leading to improved development outcomes. Transparency in government practices sends strong and positive signals to citizens and investors. For instance, the more information a government releases, the greater the investment and subsequent positive effect on growth. The publication also posits that transparency in budget, expenditure and procurement in spatial planning processes lead to increases in service delivery. Transparency also has an intrinsic value (endorsed in various international conventions), namely, that citizens have a right to know how public revenue and resources are being used. Closely interrelated is the **issue of corruption** as it is a major hindrance to sustainable development, with a disproportionate impact on the poor and marginalized populations. Corruption is detrimental for health and education outcomes, equity, rule of law, and foreign investment. Indeed, **UN-Habitat's 2021 Guide on Leveraging Multi-Level Governance Approaches to Promote Health Equity**, highlighted that an estimated USD 500 billion in public health spending is lost globally to corruption every year. This amount is sufficient to fill the implementation gap for achieving universal health coverage. Robust anti-corruption and wider transparency and accountability policies should be mainstreamed at all government levels for improved development outcomes.

The third facet is **justice and rule of law**. The rule of law is relevant to all three dimensions of sustainable development. By ensuring stable, transparent legal regimes, the rule of law facilitates and promotes economic development. By ensuring equal opportunity and equitable access to basic services, the rule of law promotes social development. By strengthening the legal framework to protect the environment and ensure the fair, sustainable management of natural resources, the rule of law protects the planet. Effective rule of law frameworks, together with sound implementation, help prevent and mitigate violent crime, resolve grievances, and protect citizens; all key elements to contain violent conflict. Access to justice is a basic principle of the rule of law and in its absence, people are unable to have their voice heard, exercise their rights, challenge discrimination, or hold decision-makers accountable. For instance in cities, the nature of spatial planning decisions with the potential to affect proprietary interests and cultural aspects of life, makes disputes very likely. SDG 11.1 on access to adequate, safe and affordable housing and the New Urban Agenda, reiterate that the settlement of land disputes is crucial to enforce rights. This also ensures the smooth implementation of plans, informal settlements upgrading as well as climate adaptation options (e.g., planned relocations). A human rights based approach outlines that the dispute resolution system should be inclusive and impartial. For example, alternative dispute resolution offers physical and fiscal assistance to people who are unable to afford legal representation and access to the justice system. Therefore, it is highly recommended to recognize alternative dispute resolution mechanisms, such as arbitration and mediation. These mechanisms are generally confidential, less formal, less stressful than traditional court proceedings and importantly, seen as more accessible by the less privileged in society.

The fourth and final key factor is **meaningful public participation in decision-making processes**, which is both a human right, and a means to more sustainable development. **UN-Habitat's recent comparative research on this topic** has shown that when communities are actively engaged in their own development processes, project outcomes will be better targeted to local needs and results will be more sustainable. Participation in policy development and the design of development interventions by communities and society enhances trust between those who decide, those who implement the decisions, and the population at large. Furthermore, inclusive participation through consensus and dialogue with all members of society facilitates and galvanizes the development and implementation of policies. This is crucial for promoting equity and strengthening the cohesiveness of societies. One inspiring practice from the above UN-Habitat comparative study is the **Municipality of Peñalolén, Chile** that encourages the **participation of children and young people** by establishing, a

Municipal Advisory Council of Children and Youth through municipal ordinance. This Council is composed of 25 children between the ages of 10 and 17 years. The ordinance requires that their views on municipal policy issues of interest to them are considered and included in the design of public spaces.

The rationale to give increased attention to effective governance in the sustainability discourse is clear. However, a new urban governance approach is required to achieve sustainable development in this Decade of Action. The core of sustainable development is meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. There is thus a need to **develop institutions that promote inter-generational equity and planning for the long-term**. Finding synergies and coherence between government institutions through **multilevel governance arrangements** is necessary to allow proper coordination of resources, actions and capacities between the different governance levels, policy domains, and societal actors. **Innovation and digital governance** will also be key to addressing the complex, multi-sectoral challenges of sustainable development. The explosive growth in the use of technologies, notably smart mobile phones, is also rapidly opening new forms of engagement between the citizen, state and the private sector and new forms of monitoring and evaluation. These developments put a high premium on the capacity of the public sector to innovate and collaborate with people and businesses; skills many government institutions often lack. In 2023, **UN-Habitat launched the Digital Governance for Inclusive and Sustainable African Cities Massive Open Online Course** which constitutes a learning suitcase for city leaders, policymakers, practitioners, and other stakeholders to have a deep understanding of the process of using technologies to create a communication-based, collaborative, transparent, and sustainable environment for their citizens.