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Remarks for the UNHCR 4th Thematic discussion:

“Towards a global compact on refugees”

Measures to be taken in pursuit of solutions

(Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework)

14 November, 09.30 – 11.30

Panel I: How can we support voluntary and sustainable return?

(Focus on securing housing, land and property rights for returnees)

Excellencies, distinguished colleagues,

It is a pleasure to join you today, representing UN-Habitat.

We believe it is time for us to reframe our thinking in support of voluntary and sustainable return. Why? Because of the opportunities related to **urbanisation**.

Allow me to explain.

As the examples of Afghanistan, Colombia, Liberia, South Sudan, Somalia and so many other places show, **returnees tend to end up in urban areas rather than returning to their exact place of origin**, often accelerating urbanization, which is reshaping our world.

This can be a good thing. If well-planned and managed, it can maximize the potential of urbanization as a development tool, while contributing to peacebuilding, stability and facilitating re-integration of returnees into more inclusive, prosperous cities and regions. Often the reality is that a large proportion of refugees are displaced from rural areas, where they survived on subsistence ‘farming’ and marginal livelihoods, heavily reliant on weather and climate (favourable growing seasons). Refugee return and resettlement to urban areas offers the ‘potential’ for transformative change, for the creation of more secure livelihoods, better access to services and reduced vulnerability. This strategic approach will thereby contribute to the achievement of SDGs and can begin to address the issue of long term poverty and aid dependency.

However, as reality shows us, realising this potential is easier said than done in complex, fast moving environments and situations where societies and institutions are still rebuilding and cities struggle to cope with rapid growth.

The New Urban Agenda, agreed at Habitat III in Quito last year, offers a framework for the way forward. We believe the Global Compact on Refugees, and the Programme of Action in particular could usefully draw from it.

UN-Habitat would like to put forward 4 key messages which we hope can be reflected in the Programme of Action:

1. **Commit to the principle of durable solutions for returnees, including shelter, infrastructure, access to livelihoods** and encourage development partners to engage early in the process to support resilience building activities and approaches (rather than creating a culture of vulnerability and long term dependency).
2. **Give absolute priority to tackling land issues:** address land as a root cause and driver of conflict; facilitate access to secure tenure, avoiding informality, and put in place innovative fit-for-purpose land management systems
3. **Acknowledge return as a key driver for urban growth and plan for it:** pro-actively plan the cities where people move to but also look at the bigger picture of territorial development, connecting rural and urban areas, as part of national urban policies
4. **Give local authorities a voice, both globally, here at UNHCR and nationally and allow for a compact between national and local governments, supported by a broad coalition of actors**

Allow me to give some concrete examples and offer some lessons learned for the programme of action.

Somaliland 2005

Word had spread that trucks with refugees were about to return and the Mayor of Hargeisa was approached to find land to settle them. Previous waves of returnees to Somali cities had either ended up fuelling the growth of slum-like informal settlements or had been settled on isolated (and thus cheap) new settlements. These quickly proved unsustainable as people moved back into informal settlements in the city, seeking access to livelihood opportunities. UN-Habitat worked with the Mayor to accelerate planning of a major urban extension of the city, allowing for the full integration of the returnees AND

guiding urban growth in a more sustainable way. Basic land re-adjustments and redistribution tools de-facto captured part of the increased value of now urban land, creating space for basic services and returnees.

A **key lesson** for all involved was the importance not to find isolated solutions for the returnees but to integrate them into full-scale urban solutions and development strategies.

Fast forward to Afghanistan today.

Historical approaches to reintegration of returnees and the displaced had been characterized by settlement in purpose built, detached 'townships' created under the Land Allocation Scheme or a focus on return to place of origin as the most preferred durable solution. The scheme is now widely acknowledged to have largely failed.

The Government of Afghanistan is now moving full speed ahead with the implementation of the New Urban Agenda through its Urban National Priority Programme.

Over a million refugees are set to return to Afghanistan and efforts are focused on developing integrated urban development programmes which create the conditions for sustainable return.

The "City for All" Programme, supported by UN-Habitat, is underpinned by the fact that improved urban development for state building and peace-building includes, amongst others, two fundamental components: (i) effective land management, and ii) strategic urban planning.

This includes an incremental approach to improve land tenure security for approximately 330,000 urban households and 100,000 non-residential property owners in Kabul, starting with the issuance of occupancy certificates and improving the quality of community infrastructure and provision of basic services.

Key lessons: 1) the need to develop a broader range of land tenure options that can be made available in shorter time, with simplified rules and procedures, at limited cost for displaced and returnees ; this can include brokering and dispute resolution services; 2) reform the land administration system to be able to adapt

and respond to the faster pace of change required, especially in urban and peri-urban areas. This can include the simplification of rules and procedures for land transactions and land development; 3) land tenure arrangements and land ownership dynamics need to accompany physical planning and area-wide interventions to ensure that the solutions proposed are suitable and sustainable.

In conclusion, allow me to highlight again that the countries that refugees fled from will generally not return to their pre-conflict situation. So return is not necessarily to the areas of origin but where people believe they will have the opportunity to build new lives for them and their children.

This means looking at returnees as human and social capital that can help put a country back on a more sustainable and peaceful development trajectory, part of national development plans, national urban policies and urban growth strategies.

UN-Habitat has developed a global model of Urban Planning and Design Labs which can provide accelerated integrated planning support to cities to help manage return while planning urban growth. UN-Habitat is also leading the Global Land Tool Network, bringing together more than 40 organizations which have jointly developed appropriate land tenure options, including for returnees. UN-Habitat stands ready to help turn this Programme of Action into reality.

This requires a mobilization of different constituencies beyond the classic actors of United Nations, INGOs and national governments to drive an agenda of change.

The recently created Global Alliance for Urban Crises, to which UNHCR belongs, provides such a platform. It brings on board key actors such as local authorities, professional networks of built environment professionals and research capacity.

Thank you for your attention.