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Healthy and Environmentally Sound Housing'

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*Madame Chair,
Your Excellencies,
Ladies and gentlemen*

Let me first thank the Kingdom of Bahrain for the hospitality and for helping to organise and host this most important conference. Let me also thank the United Nations for inviting me and for giving me the opportunity to address its audience.

Madam Chair –

Shelter is a basic need. Access to adequate shelter is one of the minimum requirements for people to live a content life. Shelter was singled out by the United Nations already in 1974 to be one of the so-called basic needs for all people to have. Still the goal has not been attained – yet.

Today we would have said that adequate and affordable shelter is a necessary element in what has become known as human well-being. Even so, unless we talk about the social consequences of slum dwellings, the housing aspect of development is more often not treated as a technical issue, a general but basic necessity, a required element in the development of rural and urban infrastructure, a thing which is deplored if the construction is considered to be sub-standard, a thing which is built in the hope that it will afford its inhabitants security, shelter, perhaps even warmth. Whereas the issues of housing and well being are obviously connected, they do not yet seem to have become part of the conscious discourse of development. And factoring in the entire aspects of health and the environment seem to complicate the issue further.

There is a growing understanding of the concept of ‘Human well-being’. Allow me to elaborate by presenting to you a few quotes from the UNEP Geo 4 Report, launched last October:

“For sustainable development to be achieved, links between the environment and development must be examined. It is also important to consider the end point of development: human well being. The evolution of ideas on development has made the concept of human well-being central to the policy debate. Human well-being is the outcome of development. Human well-being and the state of the environment are strongly interlinked. Establishing how environmental changes have impacts on human well-being, and showing the importance of environment for human well-being are among the core objectives of the GEO 4 report.”

The report further states that:

“People’s ability to pursue the lives that they value is shaped by a wide range of instrumental freedoms. Human well-being encompasses personal and environmental security, access to materials for a good life, good health and good social relations, all of which are closely related to each other, and underlie the freedom to make choices and take action.”

What is interesting about this report and a host of other reports is that they do not necessarily integrate housing issues in the overarching and detailed discussion on human well-being.

This is not to say that housing is not taken seriously – on the contrary. It is a known fact that most people spend most of their time in houses, private or public, workplace or the like. Thus housing is a necessity for all and housing policies are important aspects for the authorities to work on.

Having worked on the issue of '*Healthy and Environmentally Sound Housing*' for some time, my organisation, Friends of the Environment of Qatar, with the tacit support of the government in my country, has found a number of issues that appear to be disconnected in an overarching view on housing.

We would like to say that the issues of health and the environment are not well integrated in the area of housing. This is what we want to explore in our project. And if this exploration yields the result we have reason to believe it will, we would like further to explore the possibilities of developing a set of minimum global standards for '*Healthy and Environmentally Sound Housing*', perhaps going so far as to have this developed into a convention, and supply such a convention with indicators, follow-up systems, even a centre to monitor the development of healthy and environmentally sound housing around the globe.

Allow me to give you a simple example to illustrate what this is about:

A simple Google research we did some time ago using the concept of 'healthy housing' as key words yielded in seconds nearly 2 million hits. Using the concept '*healthy and environmentally sound housing*', it yielded almost 80 000 hits in the same time span. When we looked at the content of many of the hits, they all compared well with the impressions we had gained from having worked on this issue for some time:

- They all refer to what is going on in developed nations;
- They are basically about making the home green
- They are basically reactive rather than proactive
- They are concerned with what may happen if the house is infested, attacked by fungi, has bad sewage etc.
- They are almost exclusively concerned with private dwellings.

This does not necessarily mean that many of the initiatives and actions referred to in the context of the above were bad or insignificant – on the contrary. But what it does signify is that the concept of healthy and environmentally sound housing is a fairly new field, and not fully recognised globally by researchers, technical people, decisions makers or politicians.

So as not to be misunderstood: - allow me to emphasise '**global**'.

A number of countries, mostly among those we usually call developed nations, have developed standards that indeed deal well with quality in housing. Allow me to refer to a few of the more internationally known initiatives.

Some thirty years ago, doctors and nurses and social workers by observing what was known as a 'pathological path' found that many people actually got sick from living in their own homes. Today many of us are aware of the dangers involved in using the wrong building materials: asbestos or formaldehyde used in building materials; PCB is another troublesome compound; acryl amide, radiation, moulds, dampness, fungi, allergies, the list of materials that adversely affect human health in housing is extremely long today and we are making efforts to avoid using them. Yet this is a relatively new discipline, and its start only goes back to the early 1990s when serious risk assessments of health and housing were being carried out.

There are today many identified initiatives on the issue of healthy housing, but few on healthy and environmentally sound housing. The European task force on housing and health” is one such initiative working in conjunction with the University of Warwick and WHO in Europe.

The University of Warwick hosted last year an international conference on Housing and Health organised by Warwick Law School and the World Health Organization, Europe. The conference provided an opportunity for cross-disciplinary and international discussion focusing on policy-relevant research to inform practice. Speakers included leading scholars, practitioners and researchers in a variety of inter-related fields from all over the world.

The broad agenda covered:

- Aging Population
- Energy Precariousness
- Cold Homes
- Housing and Home Accidents
- Housing Design, Improvement and Replacement
- Children and Housing
- Housing and Pests
- Health-based Auditing of Housing

As I have said the integration of environment and health in housing and buildings standards have been recognised. But it is still not a widespread recognition with practical consequences in many countries.

Most nations, and they do not constitute the majority of the nations in the world today, most nations working on these issues have identified a number of areas of concern to be addressed. They are:

- To enhance spatial efficiency and attention to biodiversity
- To reduce energy consumption in the building stock
- To document and reduce the use of hazardous substances in construction
- To reduce construction waste and increase recycling and reuse of materials
- To focus on high quality and good building style in the built environment
- To ensure environmentally sound building management and maintenance
- The focus today is shifting ground from environment in general to energy efficiency and low carbon usage
- Focus is on technical solutions

This leads me to conclude that we are faced with a number of challenges as these challenges point to what is missing in the global work on housing issues.

- Focus is not on integrating environment and health issues
- Focus is not on developing indicators or instruments for monitoring healthy and environmentally sound housing
- Focus is not on policy
- Focus is not holistic
- Focus is not global

This is some of the background for the Qatar's initiative on 'Healthy and Environmentally Sound Housing' and why the initiative is so important.

Thanks to an initiative taken by my organisation Friends of the Environment, whose Chair is Dr. Saif Al Hajari of the Qatar Foundation; we may see a growing global interest for the issue of *'Healthy and Environmentally Sound Housing'*. Perhaps global standards or even a global convention developed for healthy and environmentally sound housing working with the UN in may be realized in a few years. Now this project also has the support of His Highness the Emir of Qatar, Sheikh Hamad Bin Khalifa Al-Thani, and his Consort Her Highness Sheikha Mozah Bint Nasser Al-Missned, and the project is being developed under the aegis of the National Health Authority in Qatar.

What is being developed in this project has not really been done before. The project aims at creating a holistic approach to housing, public and private. This will create structures that meet minimum standards in the areas of health and environment.

The working vision contains the following elements: plans, structures and living space must meet standards within the areas of health and the environment. What is planned and built must not cause harm to people, be environmentally sensitive and friendly, use sound principles of spatial planning, be sustainable, create a real sense of security and safety, create a sense of social responsibility and be cultural and region specific.

A number of deliverables will hopefully be attained during the project span:

- The Qatar codex for building standards and spatial planning
- A global declaration or a convention on the same incorporating the principles expressed in the vision for the project.
- Cutting edge research and science delivered including best practices
- A centre of excellence for the above
- A ten year strategy to follow up some or all of the above

A steering committee for the project is in the process of being composed, and two international meetings are planned, one to take place next year, 2009 and one the following year in 2010. These meetings will be coordinated with initiatives within the UN system and within research and policy development that corresponds to the main interest of this project.

Ladies and gentlemen, the Millennium Development Goals carry an urgent message, an urgency that contains the following basic message: sustainable development cannot wait any longer. May I remind my esteemed audience that the Brundtland Commission that gave us the concept of 'sustainable development' did so in 1987, 21 years ago.

We have the knowledge, the tools and the resources to continue and implement what was well begun in 1987. We, members of the Friends of Environment in Qatar and the government of my country believe this project on *'Healthy and Environmentally Sound Housing'* carry important elements which will contribute to implement the Millennium Development Goals and realize sustainable development. That is why we embarked on the project a few years ago; - that is why we also intend to finalise it.

Thank you for your attention
Dr. Muhammad Alsayrafi
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