**Mr. Chair, distinguished speakers, participants, friends and colleagues**

It is an honour and pleasure to welcome you all to the “Oslo knowledge and policy conference”. To the second of three consecutive events arranged jointly by Habitat Norway and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. With the Ministry providing the funds and with NORAD as technical organizer. Habitat Norway is grateful for this financial and technical support.

I am particularly pleased to welcome today’s main speakers: director Even Stormoen from the Ministry of Foreign Afairs, professors Arif Hasan and Diana Mitlin from respectively Karachi and Manchester Universities, Co-ordinator Andre Dzikus from the United Nations Human Settlements Programme, Programme manager Jørn Øwre from the Norwegian Refugee Council and Marianne Millstein, Researcher, from the Norwegian Institute of Urban and Regional Research.

This conference is in reality about a triptyph. About the three e’s: economy, ecology and equity- the main properties of sustainable development. Our encounter’s starting point is the level of urban devastation, human degradation, growing inequality, insecurity and poverty that is developing almost at an exponential rate. UN extreme poverty definitions of 1,3 dollars a day cannot hide that.

The immediate perspective or purpose of this Conference is to contribute to the development of a set of urban policies related to the Habitat III/ new urban agenda process. Hopefully relevant both for the Norwegian Government as well as our civil society but also for a wider global audience. We want to discuss causes and their solutions. No more problem massage. A draft policy statement is already on your desk developed by the Board of Habitat Norway. Ready to be given more force, identifying who needs to act on what.

In a longer perspective we hope that the three Habitat Norway events this year could contribute to the production of a Norwegian Government urban development strategy and result in increased resources to human settlement challenges. It needs to be said that any foreign development policy that does not relate to major global trends like urbanization will soon become irrelevant and inefficient.

This conference has several contexts. One of them is that the massive foreign and national corporate buying of urban buildings and land - that took off after the 2008 crisis - signals an emergent new phase in major cities. We are seeing a systemic transformation in the pattern of land ownership: one that alters the historic meaning of the city. Such a transformation has deep and significant impl-cations for equity, democracy and rights.

A city is a complex but incomplete system. Cities has proven the capacity across histories and geographies to outlive far more powerful, fully formalised systems. From large corporations to national governments. In this mix of complexity and incompleteness lies the possibility for those without power to assert their interests. Or as the legendary statement by the fighting poor in Latin American cities puts it: “Estamos presentes”. We are present, we are not asking for money, we are just letting you know that this is our city. So, one of the main themes of this conference will be how marginalized groups organize and mobilize for the right to the city.

This conference is about knowledge. We need to understand cities better. Where people live, how settlements are designed, legal and political regulations, resources and conflict in urban informal settlements. Working with urban social movements like Slum Dwellers International and the Asian Coalition of Housing Rights, who understand slums and are not confrontational in their approaches, can help to provide data and information and resolve urban conflicts.

New thinking, new knowledge and new practices are also necessary to reform the existing humanitarian system which increasingly has an urban context. The broader humanitarian community is still not accepting the predominantly urban nature of crises and displacements. Most of us recognize how conflict in cities is leading to large scale urban destruction damaging critical infrastructure, houses and core urban assets at a scale beyond imagination. At the same time there is also pressure to manage large influx of conflict led displacement towards cities .

Current ways of responding to conflicts are highly compartment-alized, limited resources are frontloaded leading to fragmentation and lack of overall urban reconstruction efforts. Responders need to think beyond traditional lines of water supply specialists or shelter specialists. It is necessary to understand the urban context, markets, building practices and urban processes, land tenure relationships, planning and neighbourhood’s economy and much more. We need to be better prepared, to design responses in advance because we almost know where the next conflict will erupt, the next crime incident and the next earthquake take place.

This conference is about policy. During the last three decades coinciding with economic globalization neo liberal economic policies have risen and spread. The IMF and the World Bank have imposed neo-liberal “reforms” on many Southern countries as a condition for help in arranging debt rescheduling and further loans. Such policies have with the abolition of subsidies led to higher food prices, increased unemployment and wide spread cuts in welfare spending on such things as as clinics and schools. Most of this has hit the weakest groups hardest - particularly the growing urban population. A large proportion of the most disadvantaged here consists of single parent households headed by women. It has led to “food riots” all over the world also reflecting lacking governance systems that opens up for the voices and interests of migrants, refugees, women and young people. In vast regions of the world cities are in crises, creating radicalization and extremism among young people. Jihad becomes their only alternative.

Governments in the global South as well in the global North, intergovernmental organisations and global civil society have with some exceptions shyed away from urban inequality and poverty challenges Development resources made available for urban poverty reduction has been and is miniscule both bilaterally and multilaterally. What is worse is that the global interstatal architecture working with urban issues is in disarray. When it comes to urban - there is a need for new global, organisational approaches, a new institutional architecture, more financial resources, more space for local government and the global civil society. We really need a new urban agenda and Habitat III can contribute to its provision.

Although Norwegian contributions to urban development presently are being curtailed, we see strays of hope. In the Ministry and in NORAD there is an emerging interest for urban issues. Urban health for instance in its broadest sense, is being lifted in the geological layer of priorities. Our Government has also decided to prepare a Whitepaper on urban development to be launched next spring. As urbanization processes in Norway reflect and are part of global urbanization trends, it is very necessary that our national scenarios are discussed within the context of the global ones The new urban agenda and SDG goal 11 on sustainable urbanisation represent an important basis for the elaboration of such a Whitepaper.

In the early seventies the Student Parliament of Oslo - where I was a member - discussed a resolution condemning US warfare in Indo-China. The resolution text concluded with the following, and I quote: “If the Government of the Unites States of America does not with immediate effect withdraw all military forces and instalments from Vietnam, the Student Parliament of Oslo, Norway, cannot take full responsibility for the further international development”. Norway has always boxed a little above its weight in international politics. But when it comes to prioritizing and supporting urban development we certainly have not taken full responsibility and utilized our potential. We should try.