Our cities and homes define who we are, in many ways. They determine whether we will have access to education and job opportunities. They define our ability to lead a healthy life and the level of our engagement in the collective life of the community.

Every year around this time, the first Monday of the month of October, the UN commemorates World Habitat Day. We are ready to celebrate World Habitat Day and Urban October with all of you in a very special year, coinciding with Habitat III in Quito, where the New Urban Agenda will be adopted.

For this edition, the UN wants to highlight the relevance of decent housing for the urban quality of life. Because let's not forget it: adequate housing is a universal human right and should be at the centre of the urban policy.

It is part of the right to an adequate standard of living and it means much more than having four walls and a roof. For a home to be adequate, one must take into account many factors: Where is it located, its affordability and the availability of basic services such as water, sanitation and drainage.

Currently, over a billion people in the world -- mainly slum-dwellers -- are unable to enjoy this basic right to adequate housing. Over the last 20 years, despite increasing demand, housing policies have not been prioritized in national and international development agendas.

As a result, adequate housing is widely unaffordable for a relevant part of the world population. According to a recent study by the UN-Habitat’s Global Urban Observatory in collaboration with New York University and the Lincoln Institute, Public housing represents less than 15 per cent of housing types both in developing and developed world.

The tendency in the last two decades has been a rising cost of housing, forcing people to move far away to the outskirts of the city to find affordable housing. The approach to the housing market has clearly failed to provide affordable housing for the low-income households and urban poor.

Where housing is affordable, we always find a common characteristic: there is a strong and comprehensive housing policy addressed to the objective of housing affordability.

Success stories can be seen both in rich and poor countries and also where the price of land is cheap or expensive. Those are not the elements that generate affordability.

What makes the difference is the coherence and continuity of a public policy pursuing housing affordability regardless of the level of development of the country or the price of its land.

This is the reason why “Housing should be at the centre” of the urban policy. Affordable housing policy if well conducted can become not only the solution to a social and humanitarian problem but also a very powerful instrument of local development and prosperity. It can and it should be a win/win solution.

In addition, Housing should be located in the physical centre of the city. The challenges of urbanization including climate change, mobility and energy consumption cannot be addressed without the return of housing, and especially affordable housing to the physical centre of the city.
By now this might sound utopian, a kind of wishful dream but on the contrary, it is an urgent step towards an effective solution to the most pressing issues of our modern society.

This is why this year World Habitat Day puts the focus on the need to improve housing accessibility through a new strategy that we call “Housing at the Centre”.

The New Urban Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goal’s target “to ensure access for all to adequate, safe and affordable housing and basic services and upgrade slums by 2030” are both fundamental to ensure a dignified life for millions of people worldwide.

This October, let’s renew our global commitment to sustainable urban development by placing housing at the centre of urban policy and urban decision-making. Only in doing so, we will be able to build cities that are truly for all.

I look forward to celebrating together World Habitat Day, Urban October, Habitat III and World Cities Day in this very special October of 2016.