



UN-HABITAT

**Address by
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**Forum on
SUSTAINABLE URBANIZATION IN THE INFORMATION AGE
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ECOSOC Chamber**

*Excellencies,
Distinguished delegates,
Colleagues,
Ladies and gentlemen,*

I would like to start by offering my apologies for not being able to attend this meeting in person, which is a matter of some regret to me. I am afraid that the demands placed upon me by the UN system require my urgent presence elsewhere. Nonetheless, I would like to thank UNDESA and the Global Alliance for ICT and Development for taking this initiative which we are proud to be associated with.

There are three mega-trends that are marking our modern society. The first two are omni-present. They visibly shape our societies and our daily lives. And, they are closely related. These two trends are globalization and information and communication technology. The latter is often referred to as one of the main driving forces of the new economy.

The third mega-trend is less talked about and certainly less present in the media. It has, nonetheless, an equally profound impact on the way we live. This third trend is “urbanization” and the growth of cities.

It is the combined impact of rapid urbanization and globalization that is increasingly shaping the development agenda.

On the one hand, cities present unparalleled opportunities for creating wealth and prosperity. Cities have become the driving force of global trade and the engines of economic growth. They serve as the nexus of our global financial markets, and the service centres of our information society.

On the other hand, cities also bring irreversible changes in consumption and production patterns. As human activity concentrates in cities, we change the way we use land, water,

energy and other natural resources. With just half of the world’s people living in cities, urban areas are already consuming 75% of world’s energy and are generating the bulk of our waste, including green house gas emissions. They are also harbouring some very worrisome trends in terms of social deprivation and exclusion.

The quest for sustainable urbanisation

Distinguished delegates,

Our quest for more sustainable social and economic development and environmental protection must be rooted in sustainable urbanisation.

The concept of sustainable urbanisation is not just a theoretical construct. It is based on the realisation that we must find a common ground between our efforts to protect and preserve our environment with our efforts to promote human development. It represents a pragmatic approach to pursuing growth with due regard for the ecology, and wealth creation with social equity.

This common ground is to be found in the way we apply the tremendous potential offered to us by the knowledge tools of the information age to the way we manage our cities and communities.

Sustainable urbanization is not an end in itself. We are living in a world where one billion slum dwellers are living in life-threatening conditions. And 95 percent of all urban growth is occurring in developing countries. In this context, the battle to achieve sustainable development and meaningful globalisation will be won or lost in cities.

The Role of UN-HABITAT in Sustainable Urban development

UN-HABITAT is one of the few international institutions that provides an overall perspective on urbanization. It is also the only UN agency with housing and urban development as its principal mandate.

The overarching goal of UN-HABITAT is to ensure an effective contribution to sustainable urbanization. The goal of sustainable urbanisation is liveable, productive and inclusive cities and towns. It embraces relationships between all human settlements from small towns to metropolises, between urban centres and their surrounding rural areas. As a process, it captures a vision of ‘inclusive growth’ that is people centric and embraces social harmony, economic vitality, and environmental sustainability.

UN-HABITAT, as part of the broader United Nations system, upholds a *human rights perspective* and a commitment to *mainstream gender and youth issues* to all its activities.

But most importantly, UN-HABITAT recognizes that *local authorities* play a crucial role in achieving national development and poverty reduction targets, including the Millennium Development Goals.

We are therefore committed to strengthening the capacity of local authorities to fulfill their role in this regard. Given the number of local authorities worldwide, UN-HABITAT focuses its efforts on ensuring the highest possible multiplier effects by supporting the efforts of global, regional and national associations of local authorities, other UN agencies, and training and capacity building institutions.

*Harnessing the power of information in support of sustainable urbanisation
Excellencies,*

A key challenge and opportunity is to harness the power of information age for development. UN-HABITAT has, since the World Summit on Information Society, adopted an integrated approach to make use of information and information technology in support of sustainable urbanisation.

The urbanisation of poverty

The first dimension of this approach is to monitor urbanisation trends and issues globally. However, UN-HABITAT cannot undertake such a massive task by itself. For this reason, it has involved over 100 cities and 30 countries in setting up a system of national and local urban observatories. Data is collected locally and analyzed globally. Key trends and emerging issues are highlighted in our flagship publications. But more importantly they form the basis of our policy work which involves support to national and local policy making and reform.

This work led UN-HABITAT to highlight the true extent of urban poverty and deprivation. Our 2006-2007 State of the World Cities report revealed what we have suspected for a long time – that slum dwellers are more likely to die early, suffer from malnutrition and disease, be less educated and have fewer employment opportunities than any other segment of the population.

On the health front, studies have shown that prevalence of the five diseases responsible for more than half of child mortality, namely pneumonia, diarrhea, malaria, measles and HIV/AIDS, is directly linked to the living conditions found in slums and not to poverty or level of income. These conditions are overcrowded living space, poor security, lack of access to potable water and sanitation, lack of garbage removal, and contaminated food.

The recent food crisis is making front page news for quite some time now, with the World Bank warning of more food riots and the risk that 100 million people will sink into poverty owing to rising food prices. What we also need to know is that the most vulnerable group is made up of the urban poor and slum dwellers. These are people who are already living on less than \$2 a day and who have no alternative but to buy their food.

These other findings on the urbanisation of poverty are beginning to change national and international perceptions of development priorities. They have led our sister agencies including UNICEF, UNFPA and WHO to focus their research on the urban dimensions of hunger, malnutrition, infant mortality, disease and health. They have also led to the growing awareness that a critical battlefield for attaining the Millennium Development Goals will be in the world's rapidly growing cities.

Operational tools and methodologies

Distinguished delegates,

The second dimension of our integrated approach to harnessing the power of information, is the development and dissemination of operational tools and pre-investment methodologies. The tools are designed to help national and local institutions in implementing pro-poor urban policies and urbanisation strategies. Our key areas of focus are in land and housing; infrastructure and services; urban planning and management; and housing and urban finance.

Our work in these areas is increasingly geared towards investment programming. We endeavor to develop tools and methodologies that enable governments and local authorities to identify and prepare bankable projects. Our role is to help build capacities and to establish partnership arrangements with the World Bank, the African, Asian and Inter-American development banks, and more recently, with domestic financial institutions and the private sector.

Water and sanitation, slum upgrading and land management are a few areas where we have been able to package technical assistance and policy reform with follow-up capital investment. These initiatives demonstrate the bankability of pro-poor urban policies and show how we can bring pilot initiatives to scale.

Knowledge management

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The third dimension in our integrated approach to harnessing the power of information is in the area of knowledge management.

Member States, in adopting the Habitat Agenda in Istanbul in 1996, clearly identified local authorities and their civil society partners as front line actors in the quest for sustainable urbanisation. In their wisdom, they called upon stakeholders at all levels to identify and document best practices in improving the living environment.

Since 1996, UN-HABITAT, in partnership with Dubai Municipality, has been recognising excellence in improving the living environment. Every two years, twelve outstanding initiatives are discerned with the prestigious Dubai International Award for Best Practices in Improving the Living Environment. But these 12 award-winning practices are but the tip of the iceberg. Every two years we receive on average 600 to 700 documented practices. Most of these initiatives have made, and are still making, positive and lasting improvements to people's livelihoods and living environments. As a result, we now have documented over 3,000 best practices in sustainable urbanisation covering 140 countries.

This unique knowledge base is number one in its category on the web. It is used daily as a reference centre of what works. It has inspired and continues to inspire dozens of institutions, local authorities and their associations, training institutions and professional associations to use lessons learned from best practices as a means of improving knowledge and of transferring expertise and experience.

Today, over 40 partner institutions are engaged in all forms of transfers and learning. UN-HABITAT, in line with its mandate and vision for sustainable urbanisation, focuses on City-to-City transfers in recognition of the fact that cities are constantly searching for innovative and original solutions to common social, economic and environmental problems. Other agencies are actively involved in other aspects, and we are proud to be collaborating with UNDESA in documenting best practices in governance.

I should like to recognise the City of Bogota, the Mayor who is with us in this forum. Indeed the City of Bogota is one such best practice. Using an idea originally implemented by the City of Curitiba, in Brazil, the City of Bogota has used bus rapid transit to improve mobility, provide affordable transport, and to build important links and bridges between different neighbourhoods to combat social exclusion. Today, bus rapid transit is being adopted and adapted by urban agglomerations throughout the world to help make our communities socially more cohesive and environmentally more sustainable.

World Urban Forum

Excellencies, dear colleagues,

The power of information is the power of ideas and of knowledge. But transforming ideas into learning experiences and practice requires people with real world expertise and experience. For this reason the General Assembly mandated UN-HABITAT to organize every two years the World Urban Forum. The World Urban Forum is as a non-legislative meeting where government officials, mayors, professionals, the private sector and civil society organizations can engage each other as equals, in learning from each other and in forming new networks.

Between the first meeting held in Nairobi in 2002, which saw some 2,000 participants from 60 countries, to the third meeting held in Vancouver Canada in 2006, which witnessed over 10,000 participants from over 100 countries, the World Urban Forum has become the world's most important nexus for dialogue and debate, exchange and learning on sustainable urbanisation.

The 4th session of the World Urban Forum will be held in Nanjing, China, 3 to 7 November this year. The session will be devoted to harmonious cities and harmonious development. It promises to bring together an unprecedented concentration of ideas, best practices and knowledge on how people and their communities, governments and local authorities and the private sector are making our cities and communities more sustainable.

I look forward to meeting all of you in Nanjing and thank you for your kind attention.