

UN  HABITAT
FOR A BETTER URBAN FUTURE
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Forum on
SUSTAINABLE URBANIZATION
IN THE INFORMATION AGE
Role of Infrastructure in Metropolitan Development

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

First of all, I would like to say what a personal and professional privilege it is for me to join you this morning to discuss this most important topic. My special thanks go to UNDESA, the Global Alliance for ICT and Development, the Regional Plan Association (RPA), and the American Institute of Architects (AIA) New York Chapter for fostering this initiative of which we are proud to be associated with.

Importance of infrastructure

I've been asked to speak about the role of infrastructure in Metropolitan Development. But before I do so, allow me to place the issue of infrastructure within the broader context of current trends and issues regarding urbanisation.

Urbanization is increasingly at the forefront of all development concerns. Half of the world's population is now living in towns and cities, and this proportion is expected to rise to two-thirds within the next 25 to 30 years, by which time Africa will also have become a predominantly urban region. The bulk of this growth, over 90%, is occurring in developing countries which already host the majority of world's largest metropolises.

At the same time, with just over half of humanity living in cities, cities already account for 75% of global energy consumption and a similar proportion of all waste. According to the latest estimates, cities contribute directly to about 50 to 60% of green house gas emissions. However, if we factor in the green house gas emissions induced by urban consumption and production patterns the estimate goes as high as 80%.

Indeed, the way infrastructure will be planned and built will determine to a very large extent our future quality of life and sustainability of our very planet.

The importance of urban planning and urban form *Excellencies,*

Infrastructure systems are an integral part of urban planning and development. Decisions regarding infrastructure determine urban form. Urban form in turn determines the spatial distribution of people and economic activities, and thus how we deliver services and how we move people and goods around. Infrastructure therefore has both an immediate impact on our daily lives as well as long-term environmental impacts.

While the building of infrastructure can be disruptive of the local eco-system and often requires intensive use of physical resources and energy, what really matters is that the infrastructure we design and build today locks cities and especially metropolitan areas into consumption and production patterns for decades to come, if not longer.

Allow me to illustrate this point by using two examples in terms of the predominant modes of transport that people use in New York City as compared to Houston or Los Angeles. Whereas 54% of New Yorkers commute to work using public transport, this percentage drops to about 10% in the case of Los Angeles and to under 6% in the case of Houston. This is entirely attributable to how these cities were planned and the types of infrastructure that were envisaged. In the case of New York City, the metro or "subway" system, which accounts for the largest share of passengers using public transport, is based on infrastructure layout and design that dates back to 1867.

Lack of attention to environmental and social aspects in infrastructure development also reduces the profitability of investments and can negatively influence competitiveness of urban areas. On the other hand environmental quality and a more sustainable and socially inclusive spatial approach enhance the livability of a city, and thus its attractiveness for investment.

Current limitations and actions required

While many cities are currently implementing strategies based on the broad principles of sustainability (local Agenda 21), there is room for a more systematic integration of environmental and social issues into urban policies and investments in infrastructure.

Current practices for infrastructure project appraisal do not consider economic, social and environmental returns in an integrated and consistent manner. This lack of integration is in large part a result of the sectoral manner in which our institutions work and the way policies are formulated and adopted. This results in several distorting effects, including in public resources allocation. The challenge is to integrate economic, environmental and social policies to make our cities economically more competitive, ecologically more sustainable, and socially more inclusive and gender responsive.

Where good practices exist, there is a need to identify success factors and remove barriers to their replication. It is conversely important to identify innovative approaches to financing of infrastructure for sustainable urban development including accessing workers remittances, accessing sovereign funds, public-private-community partnerships and greater utilization of carbon financing for greening our cities.

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 and the infrastructure we build for ourselves and future generations.

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. The majority of these slum dwellers are living in the capital cities and large metropolises of Asia, Africa and Latin America. These regions account for 95 percent of all urban growth and a similar proportion of all future construction of infrastructure. In this context, the battle to achieve sustainable development will depend to a large degree on the type of infrastructure that is being planned in the cities of the developing world today.

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. This involves over 100 cities and 30 countries in setting up a system of national and local urban observatories. Data is collected locally and analyzed regionally and 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.

We are also working with our colleagues in both the regional commissions of ESCAP and ECLAC on a project entitled “eco-efficient and sustainable urban infrastructure in Asia and Latin America.” This project seeks to promote the application of eco-efficiency as key criterion for sustainable infrastructure development and as a basis for expanding infrastructure financing opportunities. The project will contribute to this goal by equipping policy-makers and planners with a methodology to assess the eco-efficiency and social inclusiveness of urban infrastructure in an integrated manner and develop strategies and policies to improve this. Activities will include city and sector level assessments, case studies, identification of good practices and policy options, and capacity building workshops (at national, regional and inter-regional levels).

The project comes at a critical juncture, as countries all over the world are developing strategies to address one of the worst economic crises of the last decades. Several of these strategies, including the one that is being implemented in China, centre on substantial investments in green infrastructure and affordable housing and services. This provides a tremendous opportunity to install sustainability principles in infrastructure development process and advance in terms of developing eco-efficient and smart infrastructure systems.

Several opportunities arise, including (i) economic opportunities (for example from energy efficiency gains, new business opportunities and job creation), (ii) financing opportunities (including carbon financing), (iii) regulatory opportunities (to create a more conducive regulatory framework by developing new or upgrading current legislation), (iv) institutional opportunities (to clarify roles and responsibilities and to strengthen capacities), and (v) political opportunities, as more and more leaders of the world recognize the need to urgently shift towards a “low carbon, green growth”.

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.

The 4th session of the World Urban Forum was held in Nanjing, China, 3 to 7 November last year. The session was devoted to harmonious cities and harmonious development. It brought 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.

The 5th session will be held in Rio de Janeiro next year.

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