PRESS RELEASE

POVERTY AND CLIMATE CHANGE CHALLENGE ASIAN CITIES’ SUCCESS
(Ch. 1: Introduction)

Asia's prominent role in the world economy is driven by the relentless dynamism of its cities, but these must prepare for climate change and adjust basic infrastructures and education to ongoing demographic growth if this success is to be sustained in the decades ahead, warns UN-HABITAT's State of Asian Cities Report 2010/11.

Although the Asian-Pacific population will not become predominantly urban before 2026 (see Table 2.1), Asian cities already epitomise the successful integration of the region in the international economy over the past two decades or so. However, the benefits are not equally distributed, as testified by slums and enduring urban poverty.

SLUMS AND POVERTY CAN BE TACKLED EFFECTIVELY – MORE IS NEEDED

Asia's urban populations expand but basic services like housing and sanitation do not follow suit. Still, the (quasi)universal extension of safe water networks and the achievement of the ‘slum target’ of the Millennium Development Goals demonstrate that positive change lies within reach. This goes to show that political will must continue to combine with institutional reform if cities are to accommodate the basic needs of their ever-expanding populations. Institutional innovation is also essential to enable emerging new urban configurations to contribute to much-needed balanced prosperity across whole countries.

IMPROVED EDUCATION CAN BRING MORE OPPORTUNITIES FOR THE FORMAL AND INFORMAL SECTORS

Asia's characteristic steep ‘urban divide’ also sees the informal economy sitting side by side with the symbols of its successful integration in world markets. The informal sector provides a fair amount of socio-economic resilience and must be better recognised by policymakers. Low-income communities contribute to the prosperity of Asian cities, which in turn must provide for their basic needs. A better-adapted educational system would enable both the formal and informal sectors to take advantage of fresh opportunities in global and domestic markets.

POLLUTION AND CLIMATE CHANGE THREATEN ASIA’S SUCCESSFUL MODEL

Better-balanced, sustainable prosperity would put the Asia-Pacific region in a stronger position to face the multiple threats associated with climate change. The current growth model damages the environment and no other region is more exposed to natural disasters. The effects of climate change, including rising sea levels, compound these natural threats to Asian cities. These conditions could at some point turn millions of Asian urban dwellers into ‘climate refugees’ virtually overnight.
A BROADER-BASED URBAN GOVERNANCE FOR BROADER-BASED PROSPERITY

The costs of adaptation and mitigation will come on top of the estimated 10 trillion US dollars Asian cities would need to spend over as many years just to meet all their new infrastructure and institutional requirements. The region’s age-old, inefficient bureaucratic approaches are unable to raise or wisely spend such enormous sums. Some countries have already realised that a new, broad-based type of governance is in order, combining decentralisation and community involvement, as well as adequate financial arrangements. Local authorities, business and non-governmental organisations have crucial, novel roles to play in sustainable socio-economic development.

Asian cities must begin now to engineer this more sustainable type of prosperity if they are, tomorrow, to live up to the promise they hold forth for the 50 per cent of the world’s urban population which they host today.