UN-HABITAT NOW AND THE WAY FORWARD:
Input to Analysis of Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats

A. Introduction

UN-Habitat is committed to sustainable urban development. The charting of a new strategic direction for UN-Habitat and identification of new priorities comes at a time when Member States are calling for more prioritization of the agency’s work. Clear evidence of this has emerged from several discussions of the Medium-term Strategic and Institutional Plan (MTSIP).

The MTSIP Peer Review carried out in 2010 included a recommendation that required UN-Habitat to define clearly and transparently its policy and programme priorities in the short- and long-term. The MTSIP Peer Review also recommended that “… the next Executive Director of UN-Habitat should consider a new organizational structure with the aim of achieving better alignment with the MTSIP focus areas. Achievement of results within the MTSIP priority areas should be the primary motivation for any such reorganization.”

In light of the above, the present paper, which is based on an analysis of UN-Habitat’s current strengths and weaknesses, presents the Executive Director’s new vision and strategic direction. It is based on the desire to promote excellence, in terms of both programme delivery and organizational management, and to ensure greater focus and coherence in the organization’s substantive work.

The substantive work of UN-Habitat will prioritize three key areas: (i) new urban planning, with emphasis on planning in advance of migration and population growth; (ii) urban legislation and governance; and (iii) urban economy, including creation of decent jobs in urban areas.

B. UN-Habitat Now

The new strategic direction has to be understood against the background of three key issues concerning UN-Habitat’s current status: (1) its achievements, good practices and relevant contributions; (2) the organization’s products and services that constitute the instruments for the delivery of its mandate; and (3) the issues that need to be defined and addressed by a new vision, or strategic direction. A recent preliminary review by UN-Habitat’s Executive Director and Division Directors has addressed these issues.

1. UN-Habitat’s achievements, good practices and relevant contributions

UN-Habitat’s achievements range from global flagship reports and the World Urban Forum, through capacity building of local government institutions and professionals, to implementation of country projects, including in post-conflict and post-disaster contexts. Table 1 presents, in summary form, UN-Habitat’s currently recognized achievements, good practices and relevant contributions.

Table 1: UN-Habitat’s achievements, good practices and relevant contributions

- Successful country-level operations, particularly in challenging environments such as Palestine, Afghanistan, Indonesia, Bangladesh, Somalia, Iraq, Sudan and Haiti
- Innovative water and sanitation development approaches and solutions, including through partnering with regional development banks and multilateral financing institutions
- World Urban Forum, now the world’s premier conference on urban issues
- Strategy on the continuum from relief to sustainable recovery, as part of the UN’s wider humanitarian work in post-conflict and post-disaster contexts
- Contribution to the attainment of the Millennium Development Goals target on slums, i.e. significant improvement in the lives of at least 100 million slum dwellers by 2020
- Flagship publications, i.e. the Global Report on Human Settlements, the State of the World’s Cities, and Urban World, as global monitoring, policy information and advocacy tools
- Increased global consensus on addressing urban issues towards safer, healthier and more liveable, equitable, sustainable and productive human settlements
- Strengthened governmental partnerships at regional level through the creation of common ministerial platforms (AMCHUD, MINURVI, APMCHUD)
- Improvement of knowledge on urban safety and security through addressing major threats to the wellbeing of cities, such as crime and violence, insecurity of tenure and forced evictions
- Monitoring of forced evictions and identification of alternatives, such as in situ upgrading and negotiated resettlement, through the Advisory Group on Forced Evictions
- Promotion and recognition of inclusive as well as gender and youth sensitive practices of urban planning and local development

2. UN-HABITAT’s products and services for the delivery of its mandate

In order to promote sustainable urban development and adequate shelter for all, the organisation currently works through different means that are officially established in the biennial work programme of UN-Habitat. They are in the form of the products and services presented in Table 2.

Table 2: UN-HABITAT’s products and services

- **Strategic country projects** in support of good urban governance and poverty reduction, including in post-conflict and post-disaster environments
- **Capacity building and training** of national and local authorities to empower them and strengthen public institutions
- **Results-based and knowledge management** for promoting innovation, systemic learning and results-based reporting
- **Urban forums, global campaigns, seminars and meetings** for effective advocacy, exchange of good practices and stimulation of debate on sustainable urban development issues
- **Provision of technical assistance** and capacity support at the country and local levels
- **Pilot projects** on innovative approaches to encourage the replication of practices for sustainable urban development on the ground
- **Publications** to raise awareness and enhance knowledge about human settlements conditions, trends and tools for sustainable urban development around the world
- **Strategic partnerships** through cooperation agreements and memorandums of understanding to amplify the catalytic role of UN-Habitat
- **Provision of policy/advisory services** to governments and Habitat Agenda partners in their implementation of the Habitat Agenda and Millennium Development Goals
- **Reporting** to the Committee of Permanent Representatives, the UN-Habitat Governing Council, the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC), the UN General Assembly and other UN bodies, as well as to donors and partners

3. Issues to be defined and addressed in a new strategic direction

There are a number of problems hampering the effective delivery of UN-Habitat’s mandate. These are both substantive and managerial in nature, and have been identified in a number of assessments, including the MTSIP Peer Review, the on-going biannual MTSIP progress reports, consultations
with the Committee of Permanent Representatives and donors, and Office of Internal Oversight Service (OIOS) in-depth assessments. Table 3 presents a summary of these problems.

Table 3: Issues that need to be defined and addressed in a new strategic direction

- Imperative need for effective management systems based on evidence and performance, as well as for improving core productivity and minimising bureaucratic load
- Need for a strong and well-coordinated internal strategic planning and implementation function
- Inadequate capacity to harvest relevant and strategic knowledge, innovation and lessons learnt – both internally and externally – in support of sustainable urban development and effective coordination of normative and operational activities
- Inadequate external communication and need to improve the image of the organization
- Persistent financial constraints, unpredictable funding and lack of functioning agency-wide resource mobilization system
- Lack of efficient delivery in field projects, especially in emergencies
- Too many small and overlapping organizational units
- Limited normative work on urban planning and design, urban legislation, local economic development and municipal and urban finance

C. The Way Forward

Sustainable urban development is the theme of UN-Habitat’s Medium Term Strategic and Institutional Plan 2008 – 2013 (MTSIP). It is, and will continue to be, the overall framework within which UN-Habitat addresses more specific priorities.

Within the framework of the MTSIP, three programmatic areas will be prioritized in UN-Habitat’s work, namely: (i) New Strategic Planning (under MTSIP Focus Area 2); (ii) Local Institutions, Governance and Legislation (also under Focus Area 2); and (iii) Urban Economy and Finance (under Focus Area 5).

The strategic and programmatic priorities proposed in this document are fully in line with UN-Habitat’s mandate. They also reflect significant global trends and are aligned with both the MTSIP and the Work Programme and Budget for 2012 – 2013.

1. New Urban Planning

The new challenge in many cities today is the need to plan in advance of migration and urban population growth, at the scale of the challenges. In recent years, there has been a realization that urban planning systems in many parts of the world, especially in developing countries, are not equipped to deal with current urban challenges. Urban planning has changed relatively little in most countries since its emergence about one hundred years ago, although a number of countries and cities have experimented with some innovative approaches in recent decades. New urban planning is not comprehensive. It is strategic and involves planning in phases. The starting point in this phased planning process is public space, specifically the street.

Preventing urban sprawl and minimizing the demand for mobility, slum prevention and upgrading, improving access to basic urban services (including transport, energy, water and sanitation),

---

1 These new priorities have already been integrated in the draft Work Programme and Budget for the 2012 – 13 biennium distributed and endorsed at the 39th session of the CPR
implementing climate change mitigation and adaptation measures, improving urban safety and security, and achieving social integration all require robust and effective urban planning systems. UN-Habitat will enhance its contribution towards the reform of urban planning in order to make it a more effective tool for governments to achieve sustainable urban development. Special attention will be paid to the promotion of: increasing the density of urban settlements and of mixed land-use in order to take advantage of agglomeration economies and to minimize mobility demand, urban networks with sustainable transportation, sustainable energy and the green economy, slum prevention and social integration.

2. Urban Legislation and Governance

Without effective institutions and governance systems, there can be no urban planning, economic growth and development. Good governance and institutions also require an effective legislative framework.

Urban legislation in many developing countries is outdated and is still strongly shaped by colonial planning legislation. Yet urban areas have changed considerably in recent decades and are now very different places from the past. Besides, in the coming decades, a set of new urban challenges will have to be faced, and governments need to be well-equipped to address these. An important precondition for achieving sustainable urban development is that urban legislation is up to date and is responsive to current urban issues.

Besides responding to current urban challenges, such a reappraisal should seek to make cities more socially inclusive and sustainable, as well as enhance the role of cities as engines of economic growth. It must also support the strengthening of local authorities, including their capacity to deliver basic services and infrastructure.

UN-HABITAT aims to increase its legal knowledge base to be able to better respond to the needs of Member States and local authorities with respect to urban development.

3. Urban Economy

An immense challenge facing cities all over the world today is how to create decent jobs for their people. Interest in cities is increasing around the world, in part, because more people are living in cities than ever before and, in part, because recent trends towards fiscal decentralization and globalization have highlighted the importance of cities as economic agents.

In this context, it is crucial to understand the dynamics of economic development of towns and cities, and the factors which contribute to sustainable urbanization. Such efforts require the promotion of economic and financial reforms to strengthen the capacity of towns and cities to act as engines of economic development and to enhance their contributions to assets and wealth building, value creation and capital accumulation in national and regional economies.

D. Conclusion

UN-Habitat will promote excellence in programme delivery, and will strive towards greater programmatic focus and coherence. It will build on its achievements and good practices and, in terms of substance, will focus on: improving the effectiveness of urban planning; strengthening local institutions, governance and urban legislation; and promoting urban economic development and effective municipal finance. The final aim of sustainable urban development is improving the living conditions of the increasing numbers of people who are reaching towns and cities all over the world.