Executive Director’s report on the special theme of the first session of the UN-Habitat Assembly

Annotated outline

Background

On 6 December 2018, at its 71st session, the CPR endorsed the title and subtitle for the theme of the 1st UN-Habitat Assembly, as follows:

- Title: “Innovation for Better Quality of Life in Cities and Communities”
- Sub-Title: “Accelerated Implementation of the NUA towards achievement of the SDGs”

It was agreed that a detailed description should be developed for review at the CPR subcommittee level. This will lead to the development of a full theme paper, which will serve as a background document for the dialogue during the 1st Session of the UN-Habitat Assembly.

Justification

The inclusion of Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 11 on Sustainable Cities and Communities and the prominence of urbanization in several other SDGs, demonstrates the increasing recognition of sustainable urbanization as a key global transformative force 2016 marked another milestone in global urban policy with the endorsement of the New Urban Agenda (NUA) — the outcome document of HABITAT III, which provides an action-oriented roadmap to guide sustainable urban development globally to 2036. The NUA and SDG 11 firmly place urbanization at the forefront of international development policy.

The theme “Innovation for Better Quality of Life in Cities and Communities -- Accelerated Implementation of the NUA towards achievement of the SDGs” demonstrates the need to innovate to achieve SDGs and the aim of leaving no one and no place behind in the implementation of the global agendas.

From technology to institutions, organizations and modes of operation, to information and knowledge, innovation can have a transforming effect development and prosperity. Innovation is about connecting ideas, efforts and opportunities, resulting from cooperation, dialogue, funding opportunities and partnerships. Frontier technologies can boost economic growth, improve service delivery and the management of cities, while promoting broad-based inclusion and novel forms of participation and engagement.

Innovative data systems, funding opportunities and partnerships must be explored and the capacity of national and local governments to effectively test and implement innovative urban solutions should be significantly strengthened. Innovations need to be appropriately applied to ensure that the prosperity they bring is shared among citizens, cities and regions.

Innovative ideas can come from a creative worker, a community leader, a business person, an artist, a public servant or a scientist. The challenge is to ensure such ideas are recognized, funded, given a chance to fail and applied.
UN-Habitat can make a significant contribution in the field of innovation, including thinking through the longer-term impact on urbanization, the development of governance frameworks that integrate technologies and data into urban management, policies that ensure the appropriate use of technology in cities and human settlements, and smart city plans and strategies in urban planning and regeneration. This would require the creation of open, user-friendly and participatory data platforms.

**Overall Orientation of the Theme Paper**

Innovation can further the goals of UN-Habitat’s Strategic Plan 2020-2025, which contributes towards the following four goals: 1) Reduced poverty and spatial inequality in urban and rural communities; 2) Enhanced shared prosperity of cities and regions; 3) Strengthened climate action and improved urban environment; and 4) Effective urban crisis prevention and response.

Innovation can lead to accelerated implementation of the NUA towards achievement of relevant SDG targets, such as improving informal settlements, addressing urban sprawl, participation in urban planning, reducing air pollution, addressing climate change, promoting access to secure land tenure and strengthening urban resilience. It can also lead to better integration of urban development into national development and improve urban-rural linkages.

Both technological, social, economic and cultural innovation can enhance effectiveness and reduce inequality in access to land, housing, mobility and basic services across the urban-rural continuum.

The theme paper will consider the importance of vertical and horizontal integration and partnerships in policy making, implementation and monitoring at all levels to harness the innovations, resources and capacities of key actors, such as policy makers, regional and local governments, civil society, private sector and communities.

The paper will also discuss the need for innovative data systems for stronger evidence-based urban policy-making at national, sub-national and local levels.

Finally, the paper will contribute to improved positioning of UN-Habitat as a knowledge-based centre of excellence, offering evidence-based advice to Member States, local and subnational governments and partners and providing data to United Nations Country Teams.

**Annotated Outline**

(Total maximum 8500 words – 14 pages)

I. **Introduction (1000 words)**

This section will briefly set the scene by demonstrating the importance of innovation and positioning it within the framework of recent global agreements. It will be structured as follows:

A. Innovation as an accelerator of the quality of life in cities and communities
B. Facts and figures
C. Key commitments related to the New Urban Agenda and other global agreements
D. Focus of the UN Secretary-General on technological innovation
II. Promising practices on innovation for sustainable cities and communities (3500 words)

This section will present a regionally balanced selection of recent promising innovation practices. It will be structured according to the domains of change of the new UN-Habitat Strategic Plan:

A. Innovation for reduced spatial inequality and poverty in communities across the urban - rural continuum; Examples will focus on Increased and equal access to basic services, sustainable mobility, and public space; Increased and secure access to land, and adequate and affordable housing; and Effective settlements growth and regeneration.1

B. Innovation for enhanced shared prosperity of cities and regions; Examples will focus on Improved spatial connectivity and productivity of cities and regions; Increased and equitably distributed locally generated revenues; and Expanded deployment of frontier technologies and innovations for urban development.

C. Innovation for strengthened climate action and improved urban environment; Examples will focus on Reduced greenhouse emissions and improved air quality; Improved resource efficiency and protection of ecological assets; and Effective adaptation of communities and infrastructure to climate change.

D. Innovation for effective urban crisis prevention and response; Examples will focus on Enhanced social integration and inclusive communities; Improved living standards and inclusion of migrants, refugees, internally displaced persons and returnees through effective crisis response and recovery; and Enhanced resilience of the built environment and infrastructure.

The selected practices will also highlight innovation in social inclusion issues, including Human Rights; Gender; Children, Youth and Older Persons; Disability.

This section will be based mainly on international best practice. It will include a few examples from innovation in UN-Habitat’s current work, such as recent innovations led by the Urban Basic Services Branch, Public Space Programme, Urban Planning and Design Lab, Housing Affordability and the Youth Programme.

III. Innovation as an institutional enabler (2000 words)

This section will look at innovation as an enabler for enhancing the performance of institutions that are working towards better quality of life in cities and communities. It will discuss the following issues:

A. Innovation approaches (Improved collaboration, Innovation Labs, Ideas incubators and accelerators, Co-creation, Design thinking)

B. Monitoring & knowledge (Innovative data systems, Digital sharing platforms, Data collection tools, Cloud services and visualization, Real-time data)2

C. Advocacy, Communications and Partnerships (Online tools, Online marketing, private sector partnerships, Innovative financing mechanisms) 3

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1 This section will include innovative practices on housing, slum upgrading, basic services and urban mobility (SDG targets 11.1 and 11.2). Whereas special focus on this area was proposed at the CPR subcommittee on 30 November 2018, this was not endorsed by the CPR on 6 December.

2 This section will include examples of innovative use of data systems for evidence-based urban policy-making. Whereas special focus on this area was proposed at the CPR subcommittee on 30 November 2018, this was not endorsed by the CPR on 6 December.
D. Capacity building (Building digital skills of staff, partner organizations and local governments, reducing digital divides)
E. Systems & processes (Digital transformation of government, Knowledge management, Digital tools to enhance efficiency)

This section will be based mainly on international best practice. Special attention will be paid to social inclusion issues. The section will include a few examples from innovation in UN-Habitat’s current work, such as on-line community consultation for SDG monitoring as well as innovations in partnerships and finance.

IV. Opportunities for expanding innovation in UN-Habitat’s work (1500 words)

This section will make proposals on how to expand its capacity to support member states and cities in applying innovation for better cities and communities. The focus will include the following areas:

A. Innovation through frontier technology, including digital transformation of local government; data processing and sensing technologies in cities; artificial intelligence in urban planning and management; enhancing access to technological innovation for small and medium-sized cities, communities and the urban poor;
B. Social, economic and cultural innovations, including community-led approaches and initiatives, to address inequality in access to land, housing, mobility and basic services and enhance rural-urban linkages;
C. Challenge-driven innovation, including funds to support cities identify, test and procure innovations and support the launch of start-ups and business plans for key projects;
D. Vision of UN-Habitat as a centre of innovation and excellence for sustainable urban development, including innovative approaches to data, knowledge management, capacity development and monitoring the implementation of the NUA and related SDGs

V. Issues for discussion (500 words)

Based on the above, this section will introduce selected key questions that may be addressed in the dialogue between Member States and partners during the UN-Habitat Assembly.

Structure of the Dialogue at the 1st UN-Habitat Assembly

The dialogue session on the proposed theme “Innovation for Better Quality of Life in Cities and Communities -- Accelerated Implementation of the NUA towards achievement of the SDGs”, would encourage debate on innovative initiatives by member states and partners to attain specific SDG targets at the local level. The dialogue structure will be further developed following the debate on the UNHA-1 schedule at the 72nd session of the CPR.

Expected outcomes

3 This section will include examples of innovative partnerships for coordinated and balanced implementation. Whereas special focus on this area was proposed at the CPR subcommittee on 30 November 2018, this was not endorsed by the CPR on 6 December.
As a result of the dialogue on the special theme and the related UN-Habitat Assembly resolution, the following outcomes are expected:

- Exchange of experiences between Member States and partners regarding innovative monitoring and implementation approaches, with replication of promising practices;
- Renewed political momentum and collaborative efforts towards accelerated implementation of NUA and the related dimensions of the SDGs;
- Strengthened reporting systems regarding the implementation of the NUA and the related SDG targets;
- Innovative advocacy and financing partnerships towards effective inception of the implementation of the UN-Habitat strategic plan in 2020.

Road map towards the 1st UN-Habitat Assembly

- 28 January: submission of annotated outline of theme paper
- 4 February: presentation and discussion of annotated outline at CPR subcommittee
- 5-22 February: preparation of the theme paper
- 25-28 February: internal review
- March: editing and translation by UNON
- 15 April: submission of final theme paper to UN-Habitat Assembly
- March-May: preparation of the dialogue on the special theme, including identification/invitation of moderator and speakers
- 29 May: interactive dialogue on the special theme at UNHA-1
- 31 May: adoption of a UNHA-1 resolution on the special theme