Nineteenth session*
Nairobi, 5 - 9 May 2003
Item 6 of the provisional agenda**

Special themes

THEMES FOR THE TWENTIETH AND FUTURE SESSIONS
OF THE GOVERNING COUNCIL

Report by the Executive Director

1. The present report is submitted to the Governing Council in accordance with the standing practice regarding the preparation of special themes for consideration by the Council at its next and future sessions.

2. The United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-HABITAT) and its partners have been active in successfully launching and following up the global campaign for secure tenure and the global campaign on urban governance. Within the context of these campaigns and other related activities carried out by member States and UN-HABITAT partners, the secretariat wishes to propose the following three themes for the twentieth and future sessions of the Governing Council: first, the millennium development target of cities without slums; second, ensuring gender equality in local governance; and, third, civil society and local authorities.

3. The theme of the millennium development target of cities without slums will offer an opportunity for the Governing Council periodically to assess the implementation of the millennium development target on the reduction of urban poverty. It is envisaged as a recurrent paper that will include a review of the progress made, together with an analysis of shortcomings and suggestions to the Governing Council of possible improvements and approaches conducive to achieving the target, including through the orientation of UN-HABITAT programmes.

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* In its resolution 56/206 of 21 December 2001, the General Assembly transformed the Commission on Human Settlements into the Governing Council of the United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-HABITAT), a subsidiary organ of the General Assembly. This session has been designated as the nineteenth instead of the first session of the Governing Council to signify the continuity and relationship between the Governing Council and the Commission on Human Settlements.

** HS/GC/19/1.
4. The second theme, on ensuring gender equality in local governance, will highlight the role of women in the local development process. The discussions on this theme will be based on women’s right to empowerment through their participation in urban development and gender mainstreaming in human settlements development. Such issues as gender equality in control over and access to land, equal participation and representation in local decision-making and ensuring a safe living and working environment for women are some of the major concerns in human settlement development. It is proposed that these issues be discussed under three sub-themes: local-to-local dialogues; risk and security in cities; and gender and local governance.

5. The third theme, on partnerships between civil society and local authorities, will highlight the role of civil society groups – including non-governmental and community-based organizations, the private sector and local authorities as important strategic partners in sustainable urbanization. The contribution that civil society can provide in solving social problems and the need for a more participatory approach to urban development make civil society an invaluable partner in governance. Discussions under this theme would distinguish partnership from other relationships, such as cooperation or collaboration, and present partnership as something of a higher order, at once more elevated and more fundamental. It is proposed that discussions under this theme be carried out under three interrelated sub-themes: transparency and accountability; empowering communities; and partnerships for managing HIV/AIDS at the local level.

A. Theme 1: Millennium development target on cities without slums

6. The strategic vision adopted in 1999 by the governing body of UN-HABITAT announced the establishment of rights-based advocacy instruments – the Global Campaign for Secure Tenure and the Global Campaign on Urban Governance. Introduced as entry points to the wider mandates of UN-HABITAT, affordable shelter and sustainable urban development, respectively, the global campaigns are perceived as tools with which Member States can address both the political and the technical aspects of human settlements development.

7. In 2000, 189 Member States of the United Nations adopted the Millennium Declaration¹, in which they pledged to achieve 12 strategic development goals that each included a set of targets by which achievement of these goals were to be measured. UN-HABITAT is the focal point for target 11, which aims to achieve, by 2020, a significant improvement in the lives of at least 100 million slum dwellers. In addition, UN-HABITAT is a key player in target 10, which undertakes to halve, by 2015, the proportion of people without sustainable access to safe drinking water.

8. In September 2002, the Johannesburg Declaration on Sustainable Development² re-emphasized, in its paragraph 18, the importance of adequate shelter, clean water and sanitation as key basic requirements placing the area of responsibility assigned to UN-HABITAT at the top of the development agenda. The Plan of Implementation of the World Summit on Sustainable Development³ confirmed further the importance and the place in these activities where UN-HABITAT has recognized leadership.

9. While the primary responsibility to upgrade slums lies with the Member States, the United Nations system will complement their efforts by providing support in monitoring, analysis, campaigning and resource mobilization and through operational activities. The Governing Council is an ideal forum for Member States and UN-HABITAT periodically to assess progress in the implementation of millennium development targets 10 and 11 and the effectiveness of the United Nations millennium development goals strategy through its different components. It also offers an excellent opportunity for Member States to demonstrate their continuous commitment to the achievement of the goals through the adoption of sound policies and strategies and the resolute implementation of targeted action plans. The interrelation of the two global campaigns with the millennium campaign gives Member States an additional opportunity to focus their efforts on improving the lives of 100 million slum dwellers.
10. The sub-themes proposed for the millennium development target on cities without slums are as set out below:

(a) Global and country level monitoring and reporting: Member States, in conjunction with UN-HABITAT, will assess biennially where countries stand on the achievement of the target;

(b) The millennium project: The best strategies for achieving the millennium development goals are to be identified and experiences will be discussed and shared through a number of advisory task forces;

(c) The millennium campaign: The Governing Council will periodically check the efforts made in raising public awareness and the impact achieved; and

(d) Operational support: In addition, periodic assessments will be made of the efficiency of operational actions at country level with a view to ensuring that resources are correctly allocated, policies are on track with objectives and momentum is kept at the required level.

11. A format to conduct these activities will be proposed to the Governing Council, but it should be expected that this would be primarily achieved through discussion of targeted themes relevant to each stage of the development of the millennium development goals campaign. For specific issues, such as monitoring, data collection and discussion, regional networks of partners, regional programmes, etc., special events could be organized to bring together partners sharing the same concerns. As this is a recurrent activity, a mechanism for reporting to the Governing Council and for using the sessions of the World Urban Forum to assess lessons gained will be devised.

B. Theme 2: Ensuring gender equality in local governance

12. The first edition of the UN-HABITAT gender policy was adopted soon after the second United Nations Conference on Human Settlements, Habitat II, held in 1996, and published under the title Gendered Habitat: Working with Women and Men in Human Settlements Development. The following commitment was made in chapter III, paragraph 46 of the Habitat Agenda of 1996: “We commit ourselves to the goal of gender equality in human settlement development”. The Habitat Agenda reinforced the UN-HABITAT mandate to take into account women’s roles and needs in human settlements development, explicitly recognizing the principle of gender equality in human settlements development.

13. Besides the Habitat Agenda, there are several other internationally adopted and ratified documents that are crucial to promoting gender and women’s rights in all societies. These include such internationally ratified conventions as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, adopted in 1979 and the 1995 Beijing Declaration and its Platform for Action.

14. Reports received from Member States during the special session of the United Nations to review the implementation of the Habitat Agenda indicated that progress had been made towards promoting gender equality in human settlements development but more efforts were required. The new gender policy of UN-HABITAT, prepared after that review, has three overall objectives: first, to promote women’s equal rights and women’s empowerment internationally within the area of human settlements development; second, to support Governments, non-governmental organizations and other partners in capacity-building and development, in order to mainstream gender equality in human settlements development; and, third, to mainstream a gender perspective throughout all UN-HABITAT activities.
15. Within the context of the Habitat Agenda and the gender policy of UN-HABITAT, it is proposed that the Governing Council review the progress made towards ensuring gender equality in human settlement development. The discussion would address the following sub-themes:

(a) Sub-theme 1, local-to-local dialogue: these dialogues present a methodology through which organizations engage in a continuous dialogue with local authorities to forge sustainable urbanization. Over the past few years, these dialogues have become the means of opening up channels of policy discussion for grassroots communities. The dialogues have highlighted issues of gender sensitivity, participatory decision-making and democratic decentralization. The members of the Governing Council and UN-HABITAT partners would review experiences of local-to-local dialogues, share lessons and discuss progress towards gender mainstreaming in human settlements development at the local level;

(b) Sub-theme 2, security and risks in cities: Urban living is becoming increasingly insecure and risk-prone. The insecurity results from rising levels of crime, violence and terrorism. The risks associated with natural and human-caused disasters and conflicts are also greater in urban areas. The preparedness of cities to deal with disasters and post-conflict situations is extremely limited. The growing incidence of crime and violence in urban areas is the result of an unequal and exclusive society and the lack of institutional and social control. The poor and the marginalized are more often the victims of violence in urban areas: they live in a perpetual state of insecurity related to food, shelter, work, and personal safety. High concentrations of population and economic activities in cities also make them more vulnerable to terrorism. Women are the most vulnerable group and are affected by many forms of violence, including domestic violence. Discussions under this sub-theme would review the security and risks in human settlements, especially for women and other socially excluded groups, highlight the best practices in making cities more safe and secure and review policies and programmes related to building the capacity of local authorities and other stakeholders;

(c) Sub-theme 3, gender and local governance: Many countries have adopted policies and programmes to increase the representation and participation of women in local governments, not only to empower women, but also for gender-sensitive and responsive governance. The policies related to increased representation include time-bound targets for gender equality in local governments, quotas for the nomination, appointment and election of women councillors, achieving gender balance in local government service, etc. Discussion is proposed on a review of progress in Member States in the area of the representation and participation of women in local governments, and their impact on local governance and the target of gender-sensitive urban development.

C. Theme 3: Partnerships between civil society and local authorities

16. The campaign on urban governance identifies the principle of civic engagement and citizenship as an important element of local governance. It states that the people are the principal wealth of cities; they are both the object and the means of sustainable human development. Civic engagement implies that living together is not a passive exercise: in cities, people must actively contribute to the common good. Citizens, especially women, must be empowered to participate effectively in decision-making processes. The social capital of the poor must be recognized and supported. It is proposed that the civil society and local government partnerships under various sub-themes would be reviewed with the following characteristics: trust, respect, ownership, long-term shared responsibility, reciprocal obligations, equality of decision-making, mutuality and balance of power.
17. Under this theme the following three sub-themes might be considered:

(a) Sub-theme 1, transparency and accountability: The accountability of local authorities to their citizens is a fundamental tenet of good governance. Transparency and accountability are essential to the understanding by stakeholders of local government and to a realization of who is benefiting from decisions and actions. Access to information is fundamental to this understanding and to good governance. Laws and public policies need to be applied in a transparent and predictable manner. Elected and appointed officials and other civil servant leaders need to set an example of high standards of professional and personal integrity. Local authorities have adopted various mechanisms and tools to promote transparency and civil society groups have been active in ensuring greater accountability of local authorities. It is proposed to review these experiences, discuss the transparency and accountability toolkit being developed at UN-HABITAT and develop guidelines in consultation with local authority partners;

(b) Sub-theme 2, empowering communities: Communities, especially poor communities in urban areas, are often viewed as the target of urban development efforts. The community empowerment approach, by contrast, treats poor communities and their institutions as initiators, collaborators and as resources for human settlement development. Communities are not homogenous entities, nor are they all equipped with representative, accountable and transparent organizations. Differences often divide communities along lines of wealth, gender, ethnicity and other social factors which often preclude women, the poor and the marginal from having a voice in community decisions and from enjoying the benefits of local development investments. Discussions under this sub-theme will share experiences that strengthen accountable, inclusive community groups; support broad-based participation by poor people in the strategies and decisions that affect them; facilitate access to information and linkages to improve economic and social security; and improve governance, institutions and policies so that local and national governments and service providers, including non-governmental organizations and the private sector, respond to community needs and demands;

(c) Sub-theme 3, partnerships for managing the HIV/AIDS pandemic at the local level: An estimated 28.1 million Africans were living with HIV at the end of 2001. By that time, a further 17 million had already died of AIDS – over three times the number of AIDS deaths in the rest of the world. In several southern African countries, at least one in five adults is HIV-positive. An effective response to HIV/AIDS from the human settlement viewpoint has to achieve three basic objectives: it must reduce the number of new infections; it should expand access to care and treatment for people living with HIV/AIDS through appropriate shelter policy; and it needs to reduce the impact of the pandemic on social and economic development through improved governance. Good urban governance is positively related to enhanced outcomes in the management of HIV/AIDS, in prevention (decreased transmission) and care of those infected with and affected by HIV/AIDS. Where governance structures have been mobilized towards building community capacity and participation and have worked collaboratively with local government agencies, innovative and strengthened responses to health issues emerge. Discussions will focus on the partnership of local authorities with all stakeholders to develop sustainable programmes in managing the HIV/AIDS pandemic at the local level.

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1 General Assembly resolution 55/2 of 8 September 2000.


3 Ibid., resolution 2, annex.


5 Ibid., annex II.