REORGANIZATION OF THE 21st AND FUTURE SESSIONS OF THE GOVERNING COUNCIL OF UN-HABITAT

Introduction

1. By its resolution 20/21 of 8 April 2005, the Governing Council, decided, in OP4 of that Resolution, to request “the Committee of Permanent Representatives to UN-HABITAT to recommend to the Governing Council at its twenty-first session, through the Bureau of the Governing Council, further proposals for improving the structure and organizational arrangements of the 21st and future sessions of the Governing Council including, in particular, the high-level segment”.

2. This decision of the Governing Council must be seen in connection with the decision of the Governing Council contained in Operative Paragraphs 2 and 3 of that same Resolution, which (in Operative Paragraph 2) called on the Bureau of the Governing Council to select the special themes of the sessions of the GC at least six months before the start of each session, based on advice from the Executive Director and in consultation with the Committee of Permanent Representatives, taking into account the outcome of the sessions of the World Urban Forum and the need for continuing focus on the Millennium Development Goals (and their targets) of relevance to the work of UN-HABITAT; and in (Operative Paragraph 3) also decided that the high level segment and the dialogues referred to in its resolution 16/12 should normally focus on those special themes and should constitute the substantive debate on the special themes.

3. By her letter of 16 October 2006, the Chair of the Committee of Permanent Representatives informed the Chair of the Governing Council, that after extensive consultations with the Secretariat and within the Working Group of the CPR, as well as within the Regional Groups, the suggested theme to be considered by the Bureau of the GC for discussion at the 21st session would be “Sustainable Urbanization: local action for urban poverty reduction with an emphasis on finance and planning”.

4. In light of this proposal, and its expected formal acceptance by the Bureau of the Governing Council, the purpose of this memorandum is therefore to make proposals for the organization in particular of the high level segment and dialogue at the 21st session of the Governing Council, taking into account also the new Rules of Procedure of the Governing Council which came into effect at its 20th session held in April 2005.

5. These proposals are being submitted fully cognizant that what motivated the Governing Council to draft and approve resolution 20/21 was a general dissatisfaction of Member States with the preparation and conduct of the 20th session of the GC, as evidenced by the extensive Annex to Resolution 20/21 which gave specific instructions to the Secretariat with regard to the preparation for and conduct of its future sessions. Member States called for greater focus and efficiency, for more quality and less quantity, particularly with regard to resolutions, documentation and side and networking events. This also explains, with regard to Para.3 above, why only one theme and one dialogue is being proposed for the 21st session.

Background

6. With the instructions of resolution GC20/21 in mind and following the guidance provided by the current Bureau of the CPR, the Secretariat prepared a proposal for the organization of work of future sessions of the Governing Council and the selection of the theme for the 21st session which was tabled at the meeting of the Working Group of 6 September 2006.

7. The Working Group accepted the proposals for less documentation and for the number of draft resolutions to be kept to the necessary minimum. It also accepted in principle the idea of only one theme for the 21st session. This was after having been informed by the Secretariat that there was no strict rule on two themes for a session as the number of themes has varied between one and three over the course of the two decades of sessions of first the Commission on Human Settlements and its successor, the Governing Council of UN-HABITAT. This in turn would mean that there would only be one dialogue at the 21st session. It also accepted the principle of a more robust Committee of the Whole through which the report of the Drafting Committee would first pass on its way to final approval by the Plenary.

8. However, the Working Group requested more clarification/information from the Secretariat with regard to the agenda items to be considered by the Plenary and the COW respectively and the time schedule for the 21st session. Furthermore, Members wanted more detail on the issues to be addressed by the High-level segment, its relationship to the Dialogue, as well as assurance that the context of both would be such as to attract participation at the highest level and that the 21st session would have a policy outcome of interest not only to the Governing Council, but also to the wider intergovernmental machinery of the UN at a time of System-wide reform.

9. The Working Group therefore requested the Bureau of the CPR to further elaborate on the specifics of the theme for the 21st session as well as to come up with a cohesive proposal for the discussions at the high-level and dialogue segments of the Governing Council.
10. Subsequently, after further consultations within the Secretariat and within the Bureau, and taking account of progress made in Regional Groups on the selection of the theme, the Secretariat presented further proposals with regard to the High-level segment and the Dialogue to the Working Group Meeting of 11 October 2006.

11. This revised proposal, in summary, suggested that instead of Agenda item 5 (Activities of UN-HABITAT), Agenda item 8 (Medium Term Strategic and Institutional Plan for 2008-2013) would be the focus of the High-level segment, whereas the theme for the Dialogue (between Governments and Habitat Agenda Partners, as stipulated by resolution 16/12) would be, in line with the expected outcome of consultations within Regional Groups, “Sustainable Urbanization: local action for urban poverty reduction with an emphasis on finance and planning”.

12. Resolution 20/21 had stipulated that the theme or themes selected for Governing Council sessions would be both the theme (or themes) of the High-level segment and the dialogue(s), but the above proposed arrangement was seen by the Secretariat to be appropriate for the 21st session for the following reasons:

a) The strategic focus of the MTSIP in its current draft form and the theme are compatible as both focus on sustainable urbanization and aspects of city-wide action, urban poverty and finance and planning.

b) Both the draft MTSIP and the context of the theme were informed by the outcome of the last World Urban Forum and the need to focus on the MDGs, in particular their targets 7 (slum upgrading) and 10 and 11 (water and sanitation).

c) Given the above link, and also given the fact that Habitat Partners (with the exception of Local Authorities) would not be able to participate fully in the High-level (governmental) segment as per the new Rules of Procedure of the Governing Council, this proposal would allow Governments to comment on the issue of Sustainable Urbanization as part of a strategic plan for UN-HABITAT within the context of its appropriateness and relevance at the national and international levels, while Habitat Agenda Partners would address the same issue within the framework of the theme and implementation at the local level at the Dialogue, where they would have an open forum on the third day of the GC session after the conclusion of the High-level segment. That segment would start in the Plenary on the first day (commencing after the Opening Ceremonial Session) and end in the afternoon of the second day.

d) Finally, this arrangement would also provide a link between the work of the Plenary and the COW and concentrate the focus of the debate at the Governing Council on core issues before the 21st session, given the time constraints of a 5-day working schedule. Here it must be pointed out that one of the compelling reasons for the re-organization of the work of the GC, as pointed out by the Secretariat at its 6 September 2006 presentation to the Working Group, is that the breadth and number of the activities and agenda items, reports and resolutions, etc. of the Governing Council sessions had originally been devised for a two-week meeting, and had never been revised to take into account the reduction of these sessions to five working days starting with the 18th session. A five-day
session, to underscore this point, only allows for 27-30 hours maximum of official meeting time each for the Plenary and COW to start and conclude all official business, and this is with a minimum of attendance of about 100 Government delegations and at least an equal number of local authority and other Habitat Agenda Partners delegations. Even if only Governments took part in the GC, this would only allow for 18 minutes of intervention for each delegation at the COW and the same amount of time for Plenary, without allowing any time for intervention by presiding officers, staff, etc. Therefore by having the same item in both the Plenary High-level and the COW, it would allow delegations to make their statement in either, given the constraints of time.

13. Returning to the format of the Plenary, after the conclusion of the debate in High-level segment and the conclusion of the Dialogue, as per the revised Secretariat proposal of 11 October, the outcome of the High-level segment and the Dialogue would be compiled in a report of the Chair which would be adopted by the Plenary on the morning of the 4th day of the session and if it provided the basis for a need for a new draft resolution, that resolution would be referred to the Drafting Committee.

14. In response to these new revised proposals of the Secretariat, the Working Group of the CPR of 11 October 2006 offered a number of suggestions which can be summarized as follows:

   a) That the focus on item 8 (Medium Term Strategic and Institutional Plan) in the High-level segment was too narrow and limiting, and that the High-level segment should focus on the theme selected as well. The Dialogue would also focus on the theme.

   b) That a focus on agenda item 8 (MTSIP) would get the discussions bogged down in technicalities. Rather what could be done would be to debate key aspects of the MTSIP only. This was supported by other delegations who felt that the high-level segment should focus on strategic issues. Technical aspects of the MTSIP should be dealt with in the Committee of the Whole.

15. The Working Group then entrusted the Bureau of the CPR, in consultation with the Secretariat, to finalize the proposals for the organization of work of the 21st and future sessions of the Governing Council, taking into account the observations made at the 11th October meeting of the Working Group. These final proposals would then be presented to the Working Group at its meeting of 6 December, with the view to incorporating them into the report of the Working Group to be submitted for approval by the CPR at its meeting of 7 December 2006.

16. At its Bureau meeting of 26 October, the Bureau decided that the Secretariat would prepare a new proposal for the organization of work. It was also agreed that ultimately what should be considered, beginning with the 22nd session in 2009, would be a GC work schedule that would programme the High-level segment for the last two days of the session, preceded by the Dialogue on Wednesday, with the first two days of the session reserved for technical discussions of all other reports of the Session leading to the adoption of the full report of work at the Session, including resolutions, by the Ministers and/or heads of delegation at the conclusion of the High-level segment, which would also
debate the theme. The organization of the 21st session would therefore be a transitional arrangement.

Proposal for the work at the High-level Segment and Dialogue at the 21st Session of the Governing Council.

17. With all the aforesaid in mind, and cognizant of the time constraints of the Governing Council, the need for focus and efficiency, and the high probability that matters such as the Work Programme Budget, the technical aspects of the MTSIP, and yet to be tabled items, such as the implementation of the new Financial Rules for the HHSF, may take up a considerable portion of the attention of delegations, the following new options were put before the meeting of the Bureau of the CPR at its meeting of 24 November 2006.

Option A

18. That the High-level Segment begin immediately after the Opening (Ceremonial) session on the morning of the first day, following the Election of Officers (Agenda Item 2) Credentials (Agenda item 3) and Adoption of Agenda and Organization of Work (Agenda item 4).

19. That the High-level segment focus on the Strategic Issues of relevance to decision and policymaking at the national and international levels contained in the MTSIP and the theme paper, as well as issues drawn from other reports before the session which would be fully discussed only in the COW. This would require a new document to be written as background for this debate. Such a broad debate would provide a cohesive background for the discussion at GC21. The High-level segment would conclude in the afternoon of the 2nd day of session.

20. The morning of the 3rd day would be dedicated to the Dialogue on all aspects of the theme, guided by the theme paper. Here it should be noted that “Dialogue” in the parlance of UN-HABITAT as per Resolution 16/12 is an open exchange and forum for debate among National Governments, on the one hand, and local authorities and other Habitat Agenda partners on the other, debating matters of importance in the field of human settlements as equals, which would not be the case in the High-level segment, which is essentially a forum for discussion among Governments. It has been also noted by the Secretariat that there is some confusion among CPR Members with regard to the term “dialogue”, as UNEP has come to refer to its High-level Segment as a “Dialogue”. However, the UNEP “Dialogue” is essentially a debate among Governments on policy issues before UNEP during the course of which a report of the Civil Society Forum, held during the inter-sessional period of their Governing Council, is also tabled.

21. As the theme of GC21 will focus on “local action”, there is a logic to have a segment of the GC, within the dialogue framework provided by 15/12, during which Habitat Agenda Partners, who are mostly local, to fully express their views, in fact they may be the primary “interested party” with regard to this particular theme. For this reason, the theme paper should also focus on measures by which national governments and the international community can facilitate successful local action. These should be also included in the new background strategy paper for the High-level segment, to be
debated by the Governments, then brought to the Dialogue, at which Habitat Agenda Partners can provide their reaction and also illustrate how they will contribute through local action to poverty reduction.

22. The Secretariat would draft a report on the conclusions and recommendations of the High-level segment and dialogue on Wednesday afternoon/evening, which would be adopted by the Plenary on Thursday morning for possible further action by the COW or drafting committee if required.

Option B

23. Under this option, both the High-level segment and the Dialogue would be carried out under the single theme chosen for the 21st session, with the Government being the principal speakers at the High-level segment, and with the discussion continuing at the Dialogue, where Habitat Agenda Partners would have a greater voice and provide their inputs, leading to a consolidated set of recommendations which would be approved by the Plenary on Thursday morning. This option is appealing because of its simplicity, allowing GC21, within the COW, to concentrate on UN-HABITAT institutional strengthening, while the Plenary sends a political message which can be brought forward to other UN fora concerned with, in particular, the implementation of the MDG targets.

Action by the Bureau

24. After a presentation of the new proposals by the Secretariat, the Bureau decided to recommend Option A to the Working Group at its meeting of 6 December 2006 for its approval.

Further steps

25. If Option A receives endorsement of the Working Group, the following steps have to be taken immediately:

a) The theme paper will have to be written and a report writer identified. The annotated outline of the paper will need to be completed by 10 December 2006. Final paper to be out by 1 March 2007.

b) The annotated outline strategic issue paper to guide the high-level segment has to be drafted by the same deadline, with final paper out by 1 March 2007.

c) The scenario, including potential moderators, for the Dialogue has to be drafted to be included in the annotated agenda which will accompany the Notification for the meeting which needs to go out to Governments and Partners by mid-December 2006.