Summary report of the Fifth Session of the World Urban Forum (WUF 5)

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Overview

The Fifth session of the World Urban Forum in Rio de Janeiro attracted 13,814 people from 150 countries around the world, providing clear evidence of the effective demand for more global dialogue, exchange and mutual learning on sustainable urbanization. Such exchanges are required to meet the challenges and realize the opportunities entailed in the accelerating global trend towards an urbanized future, which has implications for every country. That was one of the key messages conveyed by UN-Habitat’s partners inside and outside government during a week of intense and often passionate debate.

Indeed the presence this time of more Heads of State, Government Ministers, Mayors, leading global foundations and big business reaffirmed the forum and its glittering exhibition as the world’s premier cities convention.

In a creative response and generosity, the Brazilian Government took the opportunity of hosting the Forum to build a modern waterfront convention centre which brings new prestige, investment, social space and many visitors to a once depressed Rio dockside neighbourhood in need of upgrading.

Many thousands of visitors streamed in to see more than 110 lively and vibrant displays from 35 countries – a huge increase on the numbers at previous sessions of the World Urban Forum. The exhibitors were as varied as the numerous interest groups attending the Forum, including a high number of women and youth. Learning institutions showcasing study packages; governments their best practices; big business with the latest in exciting new technology signalling a new dawn for a greener urban future and energy saving technology; and non-governmental organizations, including grassroots women from many countries showing how innovative people can be with their arts and crafts and ideas, no matter how poor.

The open and often frank debate on the main theme, *Bridging the urban divide*, produced a fresh range of interesting ideas for policy and practice that enhance the ideals enshrined in the *Habitat Agenda*. High on the agenda was climate change, with the huge impacts of disasters on cities, and reducing the huge urban pollution footprint.

A highlight of the Forum was the launch of the World Urban Campaign to elevate the drive by UN-Habitat and its Habitat Agenda Partners for better, smarter, greener and more equitable cities to a new level. It was launched by Mrs. Tibaijuka in what also underscored one of the main objectives of UN-Habitat – that of forging effective partnerships between and with the public, private and civil society sectors.

The power of the Forum was manifest in its large size, high level of representation, including two heads of state, vice presidents, a prime minister, senior ministers and other political leaders bringing a new level of sophistication. The Brazilian President, senior ministers and other political leaders were at hand.
Several member States in the Governing Council which oversees UN-Habitat made it clear they are paying very close attention to the wisdom generated by the Forum and will seek mechanisms to strengthen linkages between the ideas the Forum generates and the work of UN-HABITAT.

Indeed, the Forum, in its informal nature enabled the event to become a vehicle for international conversations and cooperation at every level as well as across social and economic divides. For example, in quiet meetings away from the fray, sometimes at networking events, government ministers from many countries met to discuss the problems of a rapidly urbanizing world. They used it forge new North-South, and South-South cooperation. It also provided a chance for fresh interactions between mayors and governments. And not least, it was also a vehicle through which grassroots women’s groups, youth or slum dwellers were able to interact with government, global parliamentarians and municipal leaders. Quite a significant number of participants were attending the Forum for the first time and almost all were inspired by initiatives and programmes for improving conditions in the favelas.

Added to the dynamic mix were the major and small foundations that could not afford to lose the opportunities offered by the Forum. Big business groups were also present and some of them are working with UN-Habitat around the world, to promote the World Urban Campaign, to bring know-how in disaster relief programmes, as well as in water and sanitation improvements, to initiate educational interventions and new ways of bridging the digital divide, and also in financing slum upgrading.

Another important highlight was a special meeting to help build back better in Haiti following an earthquake of such magnitude that it is considered the world’s greatest urban disaster. The country’s Prime Minister was at hand, and a special message from former President Clinton in his role as Special Envoy of the UN Secretary-General was read out. UN-Habitat is the lead coordinator for housing, land and planning. The special session, a precursor to a major pledging conference, was a seminal event too for South-South cooperation at the Forum.

Like none of the other biennial forums before it, the World Urban Forum in Rio de Janeiro was a political event of note that helped governments, parliamentarians and local authorities push for legislation on sustainable, equitable cities at home.

The Forum, including the consultations, exchanges, and show-casing that took place attained a new level in Rio. It transcended the traditional characteristics of exchanging ideas and experiences, becoming a vehicle for which commitments were made, not simply in subscribing to shared norms and ideals, but in the pursuit of concrete goals and actions.

Stakeholders at different levels of governance, across constituencies, and from every region underscored the need for the Forum to reach out further on making our cities more sustainable. Action and follow-ups, monitoring and evaluation became a rallying call in much of the discussion. There is a need to capitalize on this momentum and to create a
mechanism for actual follow-up on these commitments on the part of UN-Habitat, governments and Habitat Agenda partners.

In many countries, the concept of the right to the city is relatively new and the Forum fostered rich discussions around this topic. One way of understanding the concept is not to define the city geographically or administratively, but rather as a space for citizenship with rights to use and ownership. Such understanding at government, city and community levels can lead to strong and effective ways of bridging the urban divide. While using different terminologies and references there was a valuable exploration of the essence of the right to the city across regions, constituencies, and levels of governance.

In a world with millions of people increasingly vulnerable to the deprivations associated with overburdened infrastructure, inadequate housing and outmoded health care systems, or deprived of urban service delivery, governments need to be aware that within the next 30 years, one in three people could be living in near total deprivation. These challenges are further compounded by an increasing number of refugees and internally displaced people, who often end up in cities. And by then it is projected that 70 percent of the global population will be living in cities.

This is why, among many emerging issues coming out of the forum, some of the most distinctive were the evolution of new forms of partnerships. The traditional nomenclature of public, private, and civil society has deepened further. And with it have come new modalities, tools, and norms that were shared and fostered in the course of the week.

The forum offered three key messages and opportunities for new partnerships: to build communities more sustainably; to restore security to housing markets; and to incorporate innovative and sustainable approaches in the way we plan for disaster and offset climate change.

It was acknowledged that the notion of sustainability and inclusiveness entails recognition and positive harnessing of the role, energy and vibrancy of key urban stakeholders, who are women, youth and children. They are after all in the majority, and they deserve a stronger voice in society. Urban governance and participatory practices need to pay special attention to the role and place of these actors. A number of living practices were shared of which concerted efforts need to be made in scaling them up.

The role of knowledge, education, information and capacity building was found to be paramount in bridging the urban divide. Universities and professional associations need to connect more with local institutions and communities. New tools, insights and techniques are required for bridging the divide and the two institutions are best positioned to provide these levers and play a rightful role.

The Forum underscored the urgent need to embrace a greener more sustainable future for the world’s metropolitan areas. Only such an approach can help raise the standard of living for billions of people and allow them to gain access to health, education and basic services. Only such an approach can promote democratic governance at the local level
where it matters and give concrete expression to a rights-based approach to development. Only such an approach can help all of us become more responsible and smarter producers and consumers and overcome the challenges of climate change.

The key messages emerging from the Forum requiring follow-up and action can be summed up as follows:

**Message 1:**

It is now time to move beyond advocacy and normative commitment on the Right to the City. More efforts now need to be directed towards putting in place appropriate legal and institutional frameworks as well as the necessary investments to make the right of the city a reality. The concretization of these rights needs to effectively deploy social and cultural diversities obtaining in each context and use these as a base for strength and urban vitality.

**Message 2:**

There is a need to conduct a thorough review and reflection of governance institutions. The prominence of cities in national landscapes, the changing social composition of cities, as well as the current challenges which confronting cities call for institutional renewal, including changes in behavior and political relations.

No longer can we continue to do business as usual. Business as usual has resulted in unacceptable levels of social exclusion and deprivation. Heart-rending testimonials of homelessness, of forced evictions, and of lack of the right to the city served as a stark reminder of the human and social cost of disenfranchisement.

Repeated calls were made for new and bold approaches to planning, new paradigms for service delivery and new business models for urban development. Repeated calls were made for these bold new approaches to be accompanied by equally bold policy frameworks and leadership at the national and local levels.

**Message 3:**

Urban inequality is not limited to income but includes a number of other important dimensions. Bridging the urban divide thus requires an integrated approach that articulates economic, social, political and cultural forms of inclusiveness. Indeed, the framework of the Millennium Development Goals remains useful for implementing a multi-dimensional approach and for monitoring progress. There is a need to complete the three pillars of sustainability – social, economic and environmental – with the cross-cutting dimensions of technology and governance.
Message 4:

In a world where cities generate 80 percent of all waste and 60 percent of greenhouse gases, tackling urban poverty helps drive down these numbers. Making our cities more resilient and climate-proof requires better and more rational land use planning, greener and more robust building codes, and smart infrastructure and services. This can best be achieved by harnessing the full potential of technology for reducing the ecological footprint of our cities while making our public infrastructure and services more accessible and more affordable.

Numerous sessions including the launch of a global standard for measuring and reducing greenhouse gas emissions in cities and the presentation of the winners of a new building re-skinning award provided evidence of how such new technologies are making a difference. They require, nonetheless, governance structures capable of motivating and mobilizing people, communities, companies and public authorities to make investments today that not only save money tomorrow but also demystify the technological divide.

In the megacities of Africa, Southeast Asia and Latin America, all gain when markets opened for green technology to reverse the effects of global warming, so that billions of families can live in communities of choice, opportunity and hope. Failure here is clear for the economy and global security alike. Put another way; if well guided, the urbanisation process can be an engine for economic and social development. But if poorly managed or simply not managed at all, urbanisation can foster social exclusion, poverty and a greater urban divide.

Message 5:

This message coming out of the deliberations was a word of advice for all involved in urban poverty reduction: In effecting these changes, it is important to work with the poor, not for them. It was always important to keep in mind that those living in poverty had the right to uplift themselves, and the right to legal assistance in doing so, and the right to a say in decisions that affect their lives. In the spirit of the refrain of a Brazilian samba - when the voice of the slum is heard it, makes the whole city sing!

UN-Habitat research unveiled at the Forum showed that some 22 million people in developing countries had managed to leave slum conditions each year in the past decade. While the target of the Millennium Development Goals on slums has been surpassed, the total number of people living in slums around the world had, however, increased from 776 million to 827 million in the past decade. Thus there is a need for a new slum target in the Millennium Development Goals. Slums are a violation of human rights, and helping slum dwellers reclaim their rights strengthens society, and helps protect the shared environment. Addressing the slum challenge must also ensure equitable access to education and the safety of all citizens, especially women and youths.
Indeed, cities are not just about economies or populations – they are defined by their ability to bring people together along with their ideas and their culture. Local authorities need the freedom to take on these challenges backed up by better financing and better legislation with green building codes. Reducing the urban pollution footprint means better public transport, wiser energy use – each a factor in the urban divide. Social participation has to become a pattern of democracy and justice, and that must include migrants as well as indigenous people. It was noted that governments should not wait for the economy to improve before taking action to improve the lives of urban poor. Indeed, one of the simplest and cheapest things a government can do is take care of the poorest, and the Forum exhibited many best practices from which countries can learn from international experience.

All these measures help build the capacities of urban dwellers to be able to progressively realize their rights to the city. In bridging the urban divide, it is important that poor people respected as the subject of interventions, rather than simply the object. They have to be consulted in all matters pertaining to improving their lives. The right to the city had to be enshrined in law, forged in gender rights, and guided by civil society.

UN-Habitat’s new World Urban Campaign will advance the work of the international community to achieve these life-saving goals.