



CHAPTER FIVE

UNITED NATIONS HUMAN SETTLEMENTS PROGRAMME

PURVIEW OF THE UNITED NATIONS HUMAN SETTLEMENTS PROGRAMME

The United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-Habitat) was established in 1978 following the first United Nations Conference on Human Settlements. The agency's mandate is to promote socially and environmentally sustainable towns and cities. The agency conducts research, manages programs, coordinates urban policies and programs across the United Nations system and serves as a forum for international discussion on sustainable urbanization. The UN-Habitat Governing Council is the intergovernmental body responsible for setting the policy priorities and budget for the agency. The Governing Council meets bi-annually in Nairobi, Kenya.

Website: <http://www.unhabitat.org/>

HOUSING AND SLUM UPGRADING

One overwhelming demographic trend of the past two centuries has been toward urbanization: before the Industrial Revolution, the majority of the world's population lived in rural areas and were mainly subsistence farmers. The lure of higher pay and better jobs in cities began mass migration to urban areas; this trend has only continued in the ensuing decades. With modern farming technology such as tractors, new cultivation methods and GPS guidance systems, one person can do the same farming work that once required a thousand. Although the world's population has also risen sharply, technological advances have shifted populations from agrarian to urban, and this is reflected in urban sprawl.

Even with this continual urbanization, until the 1970s nearly two-thirds of the world's population remained in rural communities, so issues surrounding urbanization were largely overlooked. Accelerated urbanization brought a host of negative consequences as a growing percentage of the world's population lived in urban centers and the populations of some mega-cities exceeded 30 million people. While modern plumbing and sanitation systems are able to handle the waste of most of a city's inhabitants in developed countries, many of the poorest live in underdeveloped areas with limited or no access to sanitation, electricity, clean water and other city services. Dwellings are often built of whatever material is immediately available and are not structurally sound; fires can spread quickly and emergency response services are virtually nonexistent.

The United Nations has a long history of programs to address the challenges associated with urbanization. In 1977, the United Nations General Assembly established the United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-Habitat), the first official United Nations body specifically dedicated to urbanization and human settlements. Habitat I, the first United Nations conference to address the challenge of urbanization, was held in Vancouver, Canada. Crippled by inadequate political and financial support, the plan created by Habitat I was incapable of stemming the growth and spread of urban development problems and, in 1996, UN-Habitat held Habitat II in Istanbul, Turkey. The result was the Habitat Agenda, adopted by 171 countries.

Since its establishment, UN-Habitat has experienced mixed levels of success. Specifically tasked to achieve a significant improvement in the lives of at least 100 million slum-dwellers by the year 2020, UN-Habitat met this goal seven years ahead of schedule in 2013. However, the goal of reducing by 50 percent the proportion of people without sustainable access to safe drinking water and sanitation by the year 2015 has not yet been achieved. The current strategic plan of UN-Habitat, covering through 2019, focuses on seven areas: urban legislation, land and governance; urban planning and design; urban economy; urban basic services; housing and slum upgrading; risk reduction and rehabilitation; and research and capacity development.

In planning for the future, there are a number of inexpensive new technologies that may help alleviate some of the negative aspects of urbanization. Solar stoves, for example, reduce the need to burn biomass for cooking, and inexpensive solar panels help to power cheap and long-lasting LED lights and charge cell phones. It is now possible to 3D-print houses out of concrete and other materials; these house printers may one day be able to provide many rows of inexpensive structures for people to live in. Unused shipping containers have also been explored as a way to provide cheap, on-demand housing. Innovations such as water ATMs are being tested in the New Delhi slums of India and Mathare slums of Kenya, with the aim of improving accessibility, affordability and quality of drinking water in slum areas. Fostering entrepreneurship also helps, as people tend to care more about their communities when they have invested in them.

The challenges facing the global community include a growth in demand for adequate, sustainable housing that far exceeds supply. Without proper accommodations, poverty and unstable environments will continue to plague urban populations. The easy spread of disease and fire make slums-dwellers susceptible to dangers not normally faced in rural life, including extra stressors on immune and psychological systems. A lack of basic services, including medical and emergency providers, creates dangerous situations; these problems must be addressed at both local and national levels.

Additionally, as temperatures rise globally, lack of reliable electricity in slums and other urban areas presents a deadly challenge; climate change exacerbates these situations and can create new problems. As more housing goes up in cities and their outskirts, an eye toward sustainability is key to decreasing the negative environmental impact of mega-cities. These challenges create even more vulnerable populations, ensuring a cycle of poverty that is difficult to break. States must work together on regional and national levels to eradicate their slums and create better livelihoods for their citizens.

Questions to consider from your government's perspective on this issue include the following:

- What successes has your government had in dealing with urban development? Which best practices would your government encourage for other Member States?
- Which innovations should be considered priorities for improving access to water, sanitation and stable infrastructure in urban slums?



- What steps can Member States take to make urbanization more sustainable? What UN-Habitat programs or initiatives would support these efforts?
- How can Member States address the transnational effects of pollution from urban areas, particularly slums?

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CITIES AND CLIMATE CHANGE

Cities and urban areas produce approximately 70 percent of harmful greenhouse emissions and use almost 80 percent of energy worldwide. As global urbanization continues at a rapid pace, greenhouse gas mitigation and reduction are crucial in order to ensure a high quality of life for inhabitants within cities. Natural disasters and rising sea levels increasingly affect many major cities, and water and air contaminants continue to threaten the health of populations.

The United Nations has long been aware of and concerned with the environment and climate change. The 1972 United Nations Conference on the Human Environment made it clear that Member States valued the environment while still encouraging the development of existing and emerging economies. In 1992, the United Nations hosted the Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC). This Convention urged Member States to adopt domestic legislation protecting vulnerable areas from climate change and pollution. Although non-binding in nature, the UNFCCC has been ratified by every Member State and has established the main framework for negotiating international treaties limiting greenhouse gas emissions.

However, the greatest contribution to monitoring global development has been the United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-Habitat), established in 1978 at a conference in Vancouver, Canada, concerning global development and its impact on the environment. Tasked with promoting environmentally sustainable towns and cities across the globe, UN-Habitat also strives to provide adequate shelter for all. Through a series of three major Conferences on Human Settlements (Habitat I, Habitat II and Habitat III), UN-Habitat continues in its mandate to link human settlements and urbanization to environmental sustainability.

In 2011, UN-Habitat worked on several draft resolutions relating specifically to cities and climate issues. One topic touched on concerned environmental disaster response in urban environments and requested funding for development of early warning information systems, regional cooperation and participation from the community. Another encouraged greater access to basic services within cities, such as transportation and health services, a major priority in the creation of sustainable urban areas. In March of 2013, the United Nations Open Working Group on Sustainable Development Goals convened for its first session. It established a number of achievement goals to be reached by 2030. These include decreasing urban sprawl, increasing the percentage of recycled waste in cities by 40 percent and improving the energy efficiency of public buildings by 50 percent.

Other United Nations agencies have also stepped forward to help States with their environmental agendas. The World Bank Group began funding the Green Bond program in 2008 to assist projects fighting climate change in developing nations; the total bond amount has reached over \$59 billion in the last seven years. The World Bank continues to support sustainable infrastructure programs and has provided multi-million dollar loans to countries suffering from disasters as a result of increased weather and climate activity.

In addition to the United Nations, local government action has increased as a response to a perceived lack of will by national bodies. Cities themselves will certainly play a major role in combating future climate change. At the 2014 United Nations Climate Summit in New York, over 2,000 cities from across the globe created a Compact of Mayors in an attempt to coordinate city-level efforts to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. The C40, created in 2005 to group together mega-cities in fighting climate risks and impacts, also joined the new compact: during the summit, the C40 committed to collectively reduce carbon dioxide emissions by one gigaton by 2020.

Preparations are currently underway for the December 2015 United Nations Climate Change Conference in Paris. Representatives from



businesses and local and national governments will meet to try to create a universal, legally-binding climate change agreement. Additionally, Habitat III is set to meet in Ecuador in October 2016 to build on Habitat II and continue making progress on sustainable urbanization.

There are many issues that face urban areas, including aging and inefficient infrastructure. This compounds problems that arise from climate change. In areas of high poverty, where infrastructure is not fully developed, there is extra strain on both the environment and the city; in addition, lack of steady water supply and the potential for contamination are often attributable to climate change. Rising seawater often strains coastal city freshwater supplies while inland cities are facing water shortage crises as a result of global climate change and severe drought conditions. Additionally, desertification due to urban sprawl has compounded many of the current climate change issues: stripping the landscape of vegetation to create low-end, unsustainable housing leads to a deterioration of topsoil and an increased risk of desert takeover.

Unfortunately, many governments have found the cost and availability of sustainable technology to be a barrier to utilization. Member States are concerned that quickly reducing fossil fuel use will hamper industrialization and economic growth. As countries continue pushing their economic goals and expanding major industries, energy needs in the near future will be both large and unpredictable. Most States still see traditional energy sources as the most dependable way to supply these needs.

Major challenges moving forward include funding for infrastructure projects in developing nations, pushing investment in low-emission transportation and promoting renewable energy policies in order to pivot away from reliance on fossil fuels. Direct action by cities, individually and together, has led to ambitious goals and the United Nations and UN-Habitat work to give direction and guidance to assist groups like the Compact of Mayors to reach those goals. UN-Habitat will need to focus on building uniform regional standards for greenhouse gas reduction, implementing more efficient city planning and creating guidelines for transitioning to sustainable energy sources. With such diverse groups working outside of major supranational bodies, UN-Habitat can have a major role in coordinating any efforts toward fighting climate change in urban areas.

Questions to consider from your government's perspective on this issue include the following:

- How can Member States reduce harmful greenhouse gas emissions in developing countries where adequate finances and technology are not available?
- What can the international community do to ensure that developing countries have the same ability to access and implement sustainable technologies?
- What policies can Member States implement to encourage fossil fuel reduction and renewable energy in cities?

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