



UN-HABITAT FOR A BETTER URBAN FUTURE

GLOBAL REPORT ON HUMAN SETTLEMENTS 2009

PRESS RELEASE

URBAN PLANNERS KEY TO MEETING CHALLENGES OF CLIMATE CHANGE & NATURAL DISASTERS

ACCORDING TO NEW UN-HABITAT REPORT *PLANNING SUSTAINABLE CITIES: GLOBAL REPORT ON HUMAN SETTLEMENTS 2009*

Urbanization and climate change are virtually inseparable. Cities form islands of heat due to their high energy consumption and greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions, and their high density of concrete and asphalt. The report also warn that cities are highly vulnerable to the effects of human-made and natural disasters. Low-lying coastal cities and island nations, especially in developing regions, are most at risk to the effects of rising sea levels due to climate change.

Despite this, the new UN-HABITAT report **Planning Sustainable Cities: Global Report on Human Settlements 2009** argues that better urban planning offers the best opportunity to reduce emissions through economies of scale and large-scale urban initiatives; it also calls for better long term post-disaster management strategies.

“This report assesses the effectiveness of urban planning as a tool for dealing with the unprecedented challenges facing 21st-century cities and for enhancing sustainable urbanization,” says Anna Tibaijuka in her introduction to the book. “There is now a realization that, in many parts of the world, urban planning systems have changed very little and are often contributors to urban problems rather than functioning as tools for human and environmental improvement. Against this background, the Global Report’s central argument is that, in most parts of the world, current approaches to planning must change and that a new role for urban planning in sustainable urban development has to be found.”

Local authorities are an essential locus of intervention for change. According to the report’s authors, civic authorities can and must, provide leadership to design and implement urban plans including practical participatory initiatives for urban communities. The report highlights case studies where mayors in cities around the world are already carrying out activities to encourage energy efficiency, renewable energy, cleaner production and applying regulations to control industrial emissions. In addition, the report points out that urban planning can ensure that programmes and projects undertaken after disasters attend to the long-term development objectives and needs of the affected areas, ensuring an effective transition to sustainable development.

THE GREEN & BROWN AGENDAS:

According to the report a significant dilemma for urban planners and politicians trying to implement sustainable urban development is how to integrate different concerns of the green and brown agendas. There is an urgent need to balance the needs of **The Green Agenda** which refers to the natural environment and **The Brown Agenda** which concerns the built environment.

Mitigating climate change is possible through improved urban design. This requires actions like the use of improved building materials; development of distributive power and water systems; developing sustainable transport to reduce congestion and the health impacts of fossil fuel-based transport; increasing photosynthetic public spaces; developing cities without slums; striving for carbon-neutral cities; and improving eco-efficiency.

These are many areas where urban planning can make a difference. As cities build freeways, more car traffic follows. On the other hand, if urban planners emphasised transit traffic, it could enable streets to become an important part of the sustainable transport system. Streets can be designed to favour pedestrian and cycle traffic. Whenever this is done, cities become more attractive and business friendly. For example, San Francisco removed the Embarcadero Freeway from its waterfront district in the 1990s after the Loma Prieta earthquake. The freeway has been rebuilt as a friendlier tree-line boulevard involving pedestrian and cycle spaces. Seoul, the South Korean capital, has removed a large freeway from its centre that has been built over a major river.

NATURAL & HUMAN-MADE DISASTERS

According to the report, since 1975, there has been a fourfold increase in the number of recorded natural disasters, the highest of which was 801 disasters in 2000. Between 1996 and 2005, disasters accounted for over US\$667 billion

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in material loss. Worldwide, the greatest increase in natural disasters has been in Africa, where a three-fold increase in natural disasters has been experienced in the last decade alone.

Location is a major determinant of the type and frequency of natural hazards in cities: 8 of the world's 10 most populous cities are on earthquake fault-lines, while 90 per cent of these cities are in region vulnerable to destructive storms. In Sub-Saharan Africa, for example, the level of urbanization in the coastal zone is 68 per cent, making it the most urbanized ecosystem within the region. Therefore, the report calls upon city planners and managers in Abidjan (Cote d'Ivoire), Accra (Ghana), Cape Town (South Africa) Dakar (Senegal) Lagos (Nigeria) Libreville (Gabon) Mombasa (Kenya) and Port Louis (Mauritius) to apply novel strategies to ease the effects of climate change.

Urban planning can contribute to post-disaster rehabilitation of human settlements since municipal authorities and local governments are best placed to coordinate relief and reconstruction efforts. Recommendations include steering settlements away from flood-prone coastal areas and those subject to mudslides; protecting forest, agricultural and wilderness areas and promoting new ones; developing and enforcing local climate protection measures; and implementing practices that enhance sustainable development.

A CALL TO REFORM URBAN PLANNING

In her conclusion, Tibaijuka says that the UN-HABITAT's report **Planning Sustainable Cities: Global Report on Human Settlements 2009** is published at a time when there is keen global interest in the revival of urban planning, within the context of sustainable urbanization. The report will not only raise awareness of the role of urban planning in striving for sustainable cities, but also offer directions for the reform of this very important tool.

GRHS/09/PR3

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