



UN-HABITAT

United Nations High-Level Event on Climate Change

**The Future in our Hands: Addressing the Leadership
Challenge of Climate Change**

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We commend and welcome this timely initiative of Secretary General Ban Ki Moon and are pleased to highlight some key aspects of the issues from the human settlements perspective.

Humanity stands at a turning point in history. The year 2007 will see, for the first time, the majority of human beings living in cities. And by 2030, three-quarters of the world's population will be living in urban areas.

This urban transformation, which represents a major challenge for attaining the Millennium Development Goals, is inseparable from the issue of climate change.

Indeed, it is no coincidence that climate change has emerged at the forefront of international debate precisely at the same time, and virtually at the same pace, as the world becomes urbanized. This is because urbanisation brings about irreversible changes in our production and consumption patterns. How we plan, manage and live in our growing cities determines, to a large extent, the pace of global warming. This is because 75% of global energy consumption occurs in cities, and 80% of greenhouse gas emissions that cause global warming come from urban areas. Roughly half of these emissions are caused by the burning fossil fuels for urban transport; the other half comes from energy to heat or cool our buildings and to run our appliances. These are the hallmarks of our built environment and our quest for quality-of-life in urban places.

Global warming exacerbates existing environmental, social and economic problems, while bringing new challenges. The most affected today, and in future, will be the world's urban poor – and chief among them, the 1 billion slum dwellers.

Sea-level rise threatening coastal cities is only one piece of the puzzle. More extreme weather patterns such as intense storms are another. As the people of New Orleans continue to struggle to rebuild their homes and communities as a result of hurricane Katrina, tropical cyclones and storms, in the past year alone, have affected more than 117 million people around the world, mostly in developing and least developed countries.

Indeed, in some parts of the world, inland flooding is occurring more often and on a more intense basis. Not only are human settlements in low lying countries like Bangladesh being affected, recurrent flooding has also occurred in Europe, and for the first time this year, in large parts of Africa.

Also, we are witnessing more frequent flooding and drought in the same year, causing heavy impact on food production and security, transport and energy, and drinking water supply. For many of the world's less fortunate people who live in already life-threatening conditions in slums, the climate is already out of control and, perhaps equally important, out of comprehension. Indeed in the rapidly expanding slum settlements of Africa, about 1/3 of slum dwellers are environmental refugees driven off their land by advancing desert frontiers and failing pastoral farming systems due to environmental deterioration and climate change.

However, it is crucial to recognize that cities and urban residents are not just victims of climate change but also as part of the problem. And if cities are part of the problem, that means they must also be part of the solution.

We all agree that mitigation measures are urgently required. However, and to date, the measures we envisage at the global and national levels have yet to be accompanied by concerted measures at the city and local levels. While we fine-tune carbon trading mechanisms and instruments, we need to take immediate actions to make our cities more sustainable by revisiting our land-use plans, our transport modalities, and our building designs. There is a unique opportunity to bridge our global efforts in emissions control with local efforts to improve the quality of life and the productivity of our cities. Our cities are, after all, the driving force of our economies, and what better measures can we take than to reduce traffic congestion, improve air and water quality, and generally, reduce our ecological footprint.

At the same time, there is rising consensus that we must take immediate adaptation measures to reduce vulnerability. Yet, here again, we have yet to recognize the need to plan our cities and settlements to prevent loss and destruction of lives and properties. In the view of UN-Habitat, the time to act is now and the place to act is in the cities of the world. Cities have to take preventive action and planning to offset the worst. The United Nations has calculated that one dollar invested in disaster reduction today, can save up to seven dollars tomorrow in relief and rehabilitation costs. Thus, climate change issues have to be considered in urban planning, and planning capacities have to be strengthened.

There is no doubt that local authorities will be the front line actors in finding local answers to these global challenges. There are no one-size fit all solutions and each local authority will have to assess its own risks and vulnerability and plan accordingly, whether in coping with rising sea levels, cyclones, droughts, flooding, environmental refugees, in addition to already existing problems.

It is obvious that local authorities, especially secondary cities in developing countries that are growing the fastest, will be the most severely tested by these challenges. These cities, despite their rapid growth, contribute a minimal share to global greenhouse gas emissions. Yet they are the cities that are most at risk in terms of suffering the impacts of climate change.

Clearly, global cooperation is crucial.

This is where UN-HABITAT, the agency mandated to deal with the built environment through the implementation of the Habitat Agenda, comes into the picture. Since its creation in 1978, UN-HABITAT has supported hundreds of cities in improving their living environment. Within the framework of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) we focus on Goal 7, target 10 on halving the proportion of people without access to safe drinking water and sanitation by 2015, and target 11, making significant improvements in the lives of at least 100 million slum dwellers by 2020 and promoting cities without slums through slum prevention strategies at national and local level.

UN-HABITAT is thus mandated to fight urban poverty and vulnerability by providing secure shelter for all and improved infrastructure and services. To achieve this goal, particularly within the complexity of climate change, we collaborate with all spheres of government, civil society and the scientific and professional communities. Apart from sister UN agencies, we are also working in close partnerships with international, regional and

local financial institutions to mobilize requisite finance for investments into affordable housing and urban infrastructure.

UN-HABITAT is committed to supporting national and local authorities in their efforts to cope with the impacts of climate change. Our Strategic Plan for the next six years is driven by the vision of sustainable urbanisation.

We are convinced that climate change issues must be tackled within a broader framework of sustainable housing and urban development. This broader framework includes a holistic approach to participatory governance, urban environmental planning and management, and the harnessing of ecologically sound technologies. It requires new forms of partnerships with all major stakeholders, not least the people and the communities themselves, and from gender and age perspectives. It requires new paradigm shifts in the critical areas of transport, energy, water and waste management. It also requires, where appropriate, innovative approaches to post-disaster relief to build back better.

But UN-Habitat cannot do all of this alone. It can, however, fulfill its role as a true catalyst. For this reason, the fourth session of the World Urban Forum to be held in Nanjing, China in October 2008, will be dedicated to the launch of new partnerships, revitalized networks and financing arrangements in support of sustainable urbanization, and how to cope with the challenges of climate change.

In the meantime in November we are convening an interdisciplinary expert group meeting in Nairobi to work towards a comprehensive strategy on how to cope with climate change at city level.

We welcome all those committed to turning ideas into action to join us in our quest for more sustainable development.