

A message from the Executive Director on disasters and climate change

In 2006, the world witnessed a series of disasters that have resulted in the dramatic loss of human life and property and the displacement of entire communities. Countless thousands of survivors lost their homes, their belongings and their source of livelihood.

While the response of the international community has been generous and, in most cases, prompt, the scale of destruction has highlighted two key questions: how can we prevent such devastation in the future? And what can we do to help the victims restore their livelihoods and their homes in a sustainable manner?

The answer to both these questions lies in large part on sustainable human settlements planning and management. Prevention can be greatly enhanced through the adoption and enforcement of more appropriate land-use planning and building codes.

The rapid restoration of homes and livelihoods, on the other hand, is more complex and difficult to achieve. It requires that humanitarian relief operations be conceived from the very start as a *bridge to development*.

The number and plight of internally displaced persons living for months, sometimes years in situations of prolonged dependency argue in favour of more sustainable solutions that combine short-term emergency efforts with the longer-term development.

I have seen at first hand the suffering after earthquakes in Pakistan or Japan, floods and droughts in Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean, wars in the Balkans ... The list goes on, as the cries of orphaned and abandoned children or starving babies echo in the mind.

The experiences have shown me that there is a dire need for governments and the international community to adopt early warning systems for cities, towns and villages. Whether the disasters are natural or of our own making, we must be prepared for them so that we reduce their impact.

This could contribute towards safeguarding livelihoods, human settlements and associated basic services which are easily destroyed when such disasters strike. During post reconstruction, special attention should be paid to environment, women's secure tenure, rights to land and adequate housing among other issues.

As we now move irreversibly into a new urban age with more than half the global population living in towns and cities, it is more urgent than ever that we take responsibility for shoring up our urban abodes against disasters.

This is a twofold process: with towns and cities growing today at rates unprecedented in history, and projections showing that by the year 2030 two-thirds of humanity will be urbanised. Cities are responsible for 80 percent of the carbon emissions that cause climate change. Yet our urban centres continue spewing out more and more of the pollutants that cause climate change and thus contribute to increasing numbers of freak storms, floods, droughts and other disasters we are experiencing.

In a special message to the United Nations Climate Change Conference in Nairobi, Kenya in November 2006, UN-HABITAT pointed out what may seem obvious: the impact of climate change takes place in cities, towns and villages. As our climate changes things are getting worse, threatening more extreme weather. If sea levels rise by just one metre, many major coastal cities will be under threat: Buenos Aires, Rio de Janeiro, Los Angeles, New York, Lagos, and Cairo Karachi, Mumbai, Kolkata, Dhaka,

Shanghai, Osaka-Kobe, and Tokyo. To cite just some, those are mega cities with populations of more than 10 million. Never mind the many more smaller cities and island nations. For example, under the same conditions, virtually the entire Maldivian archipelago will disappear. [see map pages 12, 13]. One example – New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina.

Everywhere the urban poor live in places no-one else would dare set foot – along beaches vulnerable to flooding, by railway, on slopes prone to landslides, near polluted grounds. They scratch out a living in shabby structures that would be flattened the instant a hurricane hit causing untold loss in lives and destruction.

In this new urban age, the mega-cities therefore loom as giant potential disaster traps. In sub-Saharan Africa, slum dwellers constitute over 70 percent of urban populations. In other parts of the developing world that figure is a shocking 50 percent. Ironically, as the climate change delegates met in Nairobi, drought refugees were migrating from the countryside to join the growing slum population.

In recognition of the agency's value-added, in April 2004, UN-HABITAT was invited to join the Executive Committee of Humanitarian Agencies (ECHA). This was quickly followed by invitations to participate in the Inter Agency Standing Committee (IASC) Working Groups in Geneva.

In recent months UN-HABITAT has worked actively with the IASC within the context of the Humanitarian Response Review. We are committed to assuming a stronger role and responsibility, under our mandate, in strengthening the UN collective response to shelter, land and property challenges in post-disaster situations and to further the implementation of *paragraph 111* of the 2005 *World Summit Outcome* pertaining to internally displaced persons.

It is imperative that we should heed the final word in this issue of the magazine of Deputy Special Envoy for the Tsunami, Mr. Eric Schwartz. The deputy to former President Bill Clinton, he constantly urges the international community to *build back better*.

UN-HABITAT fully endorses this idea, and articulates this in our own *Sustainable Relief and Reconstruction* framework, the blueprint we use to support our partners and help develop and refine the practice of *building back better*.