

Cities as Symbols of Hope: The Habitat and Istanbul+5 Process



"The UN 'Habitat II' conference on cities showed how far we have to go to develop truly sustainable cities and societies. It is still hard to imagine what a sustainable city might look like, and even whether such a thing is possible. But that shouldn't put us off working towards that goal. Social justice, a clean environment, and economic security for all are targets we wish to achieve. We cannot have one without the other."
Church 1999

The Istanbul +5 process and beyond

In June 2001, the General Assembly of the United Nations (UN) meets to review progress on how far countries have gone in implementing recommendations made at the 1996 **2nd UN Conference on Human Settlements - Habitat II**. The Review Process is referred to as **Istanbul +5**, as this city hosted the 1996 Conference. The UN Special Session in New York will look at what has already been achieved, and will attempt to set out what other actions and solutions are needed to make sustainable cities and communities a reality.

The goal of Habitat II (1996) was to increase world awareness of the problems and potential of human settlements, and to commit the world's leaders to making our cities, towns and villages healthy, safe, just and sustainable. The overall themes of the event were:

- Adequate shelter for all
- Sustainable human settlements in an urbanising world

Habitat II marked the twentieth anniversary of the first UN Conference on Human Settlements, held in Vancouver in 1976. The conference made improving people's quality of life its most important objective for human settlement. The Vancouver Declaration contained 65 recommendations for action by national governments. It called for wide participation, and the provision of adequate shelter and services for all as a basic human right.

Habitat II re-visited these issues, re-assessed the priorities, and outlined what actions were still outstanding. The **Istanbul Declaration** and its action plan – **the Habitat Agenda** - has been described as a "practical roadmap to an urbanizing world" setting out approaches and strategies for achieving sustainable development in the world's urban areas. It promotes a "positive vision...where all have adequate shelter, a healthy and safe environment, basic services and freely chosen employment" (Habitat Agenda, clause 21). It places a strong emphasis on gender equality, partnerships and international co-operation. The underlying message is that good urban governance, which involves transparency, accountability, popular participation and partnerships, is required before sustainable urban development and adequate shelter for all can be attained. This implies that city governments respond to, and are accountable to all urban residents, including the poor. "It means recognising that urban poverty is not inevitable" (Tibaijuka 2000). 171 Governments signed up to the Declaration.

Key themes of the Habitat Agenda include:

- **Sustainable human settlements:** making settlements more sustainable – socially, economically and environmentally.
- **Adequate shelter for all:** e.g. access to land; security of tenure; equal rights; access to essential services.
- **Urban Governance:** promoting local leadership and involving and widening people's role in decision-making and action.

Habitat Process

Briefing Sheet



- **Equality and Social Cohesion**, especially gender equality: taking account of needs of women and men at all levels of decision-making.
- **Sustainable economic growth**, eradicating poverty: financing shelter and human settlements, promoting local economic development.
- **Implementation and monitoring**: striving for international co-operation, better co-ordination, information exchange.

Why the Habitat Agenda and Istanbul+5 is important?

"Access to safe and healthy shelter is essential to a person's physical, psychological, social and economic well-being." (Agenda 21 Section 7.6)

By the year 2000, over half of the world's population was living in cities, with the other half increasingly reliant on urban areas for their economic survival. Today, the size and number of cities in the developing world is rapidly increasing, with many so-called mega-cities like Sao Paulo. More than one billion people live in poverty without adequate shelter. Human settlements are increasingly vulnerable to natural, human-made and technological risks threatening the livelihood, health and lives of people.

Cities can be vibrant centres of culture and civilisation, but for many people they are places of urban poverty, alienation and disadvantage. "The difficulty with any mega-city is the twin dilemma of attempting to deal with providing basic services and attempting to deal with the massive amount of poverty that plagues so many of the mega-cities of the world" (Glaeser 2001).

Inadequate shelter impacts on the health and security of people. Homelessness usually has a serious negative impact on people's ability to participate in wider society. People living in poverty, such as women and children who are the most vulnerable and disadvantaged, suffer the most.

Cities which fail to provide high quality urban environment in which to live, lie at the heart of the agenda of sustainable development. In addition, the question of who decides what is meant by 'adequate' shelter is unanswered. Other major challenges facing urban areas include:

- Rapid rates of international and internal migration
- Rapid and continuing urbanisation
- Unsustainable patterns of production and consumption
- Poverty, inadequate financial resources, lack of employment opportunities, and a widening gap between rich and poor
- Growing insecurity and rising crime rates
- Rising traffic congestion and increasing pollution
- Inadequate water supply and waste treatment facilities

Words into action – who's involved?

The United Nations Centre for Human Settlements (UNCHS) provides the leadership and serves as the focal point for implementing the Habitat Agenda. Habitat II made it clear that national governments have the primary responsibility in implementing the Habitat Agenda. Governments as enabling partners are called upon to create and strengthen effective partnerships with women, youth, elderly, people with disabilities, vulnerable groups, Indigenous Peoples and communities, local authorities, private sector and NGOs in each country.

Habitat II emphasised the need to empower people and to encourage participation from a whole range of stakeholders. The Istanbul +5 review process will consider just how far these strategies have gone in encouraging all the key 'actors' in the public, private, and community sectors to play an effective role at national, state/regional metropolitan and local levels in human shelter and sustainable development.

Groups or institutions likely to be involved include: national governments, local government, cities' associations, professional groups (housing, planning, environment, development etc), NGOs, community based organisations, academia, private sector, private, non-profit foundations, labour unions, political bodies, and the Bretton Woods international financial institutions, such as the World Bank.

Like other events within the UN's recent global cycle of conferences, the Habitat Agenda is grounded in the

principles enshrined within the 1992 Rio Earth Summit debate, such as equality of opportunity to women, the right for people to participate in decision-making and equality of access to information and education. The issues discussed within the Habitat Agenda form an important building block to the Rio+10 process, as well as being a source of inspiration for practitioners on the ground attempting to make a difference in our cities.

"You need to create access to clean water for everybody, you have to get rid of everybody's solid waste.... You can't say I'll only clean garbage here and not there because flies don't know boundaries. So things like that have to be planned for the whole city." Sheela Patel, Director, Society for the Preservation of Area Resource Centres, speaking about Sao Paulo, Life II

The Istanbul +5 Review Process

The June 2001 Review will particularly look at progress made on:

- Action at the national and local levels
- Partnership and the role of civil society
- Monitoring and assessment
- International Co-operation

All countries have been invited to prepare a report on national and local implementation of the Habitat Agenda, reflecting a wide range of views from different stakeholders, in addition to the government perspectives. Countries will participate by monitoring and evaluating their own performance on meeting their national plan of action through the collection of information such as urban indicators, and by identifying best (good) practices in improving the living environment. The Best Practices Initiatives, promoting learning by example, was one of the major outcomes of Habitat II.

As part of its review, each country has been asked to re-establish its broad-based (and supposedly gender-balanced National Committee) to promote dialogue between stakeholders and create consensus on what has been achieved. National reports are being produced and fed into the Regional Preparatory meetings. These meetings have encouraged wide multi-stakeholder involvement, with participants from regional government, national and international institutions, international banks, and NGOs working together to promote dialogue. The meetings have enabled regions to assess the progress of the Habitat Agenda at both the national and regional level. UNCHS has used information from countries' review processes to compile a synthesis of main trends and issues relating to each of the commitments made in the Habitat II agreement. The UNCHS material will highlight changes in policy and legislation since Habitat II, institutional weaknesses, obstacles encountered, and a general overview of experiences. The Review Process will also consider new challenges and impacts, for example, globalisation, which has increased rapidly since Habitat II.

Getting involved

Each country takes the Habitat II recommendations and adapts them to meet specific circumstances. Making the Habitat Agenda real is about helping people use the ideas and outcomes of the conference in developing solutions to the problems they face in their own towns, cities and villages.

Local authorities, communities and individuals all have a role in building sustainable and healthy urban living conditions. Local Agenda 21 programmes, environmental improvement projects or community-based neighbourhood campaigns focused on self-help and local quality of life are starting points. Contact your local authority or municipality to find out what's happening. Join national campaign groups or other focal points keeping the pressure on decision-makers. Raise your own awareness and share any useful information. Use your own networks. Get involved in any way you can.

Helpful links and information sources:

Stakeholder Toolkit for Women: www.earthsummit2002.org/toolkits/women/index.htm

UNCHS (Habitat) www.unchs.org and www.istanbul5.org

UNED Forum Central information resource with document downloads (UN etc), newsletters, briefing material, national reports plus links to the Road Map of how all the processes fit together: www.earthsummit2002.org

Panos Institute: www.oneworld.org/panos

References

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- Tibaijuka, A. Editorial – Habitat Debate. UNCHS Vol.6 no.4. 2000.
- UNCHS Habitat Debate Vol 6 No.1 2000.
- UN Earth Summit – Agenda 21. New York United Nations Dept of Public Information 1993.
- World Commission on Environment and Development 1997 "Our Common Future" (Brundtland Report)

Glossary

Sustainable Development: "Development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (Brundtland Report, 1987) also "development which improves people's quality of life, within the carrying capacity of the earth's life support system." (2nd World Conservation Strategy (UNEP))

Sustainability: Working towards sustainability involves:

- Social development: increasing social equity
- Environmental protection: protecting and improving the environment
- Economic development: developing economic security for everyone

Stakeholders: Groups or organisations who have influence in a particular area of policy or are affected by policies. Agenda 21 identified 9 Major Groups: women, children and youth; indigenous peoples; NGOs; local authorities; trade unions; business and industry; science and technology, and farmers. This is not an exhaustive list; at any stage in a process there can be other specific stakeholder groups.

"What is the use of a house if you haven't got a tolerable planet to put it on?" H.D. Thoreau

Also see

This short Briefing Sheet is one in a series specially prepared by UNED Forum for Life II. It aims to outline key issues covered within the topic and to act as a sign-posting service to further information sources and official documentation. Many issues are cross-cutting so we encourage you to investigate the other material available. Other sheets include:

- **A World of Difference? The Earth Summit 2002 process**
- **Investing in the Future: Financing for Development Process**
- **Making Women Count: The Beijing Process**
- **Promoting Development with a Human Face: The Social Summit Process**
- **Whose Decision it is Anyway?**
Decision-making Processes at the national & international Level
- **Promoting Involvement in the Search for Sustainability -**
We are all Stakeholders Now
- **Resource Sheet - more Background Information and Inspiration**
- **Frequently Asked Questions**

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