



UN-HABITAT

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Habitat Debate

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A future for urban planning?

UNITED NATIONS HUMAN SETTLEMENTS PROGRAMME

A message from the Executive Director



There was a time when messengers were executed for being the bear-ers of bad tidings, and to blame urban planners for our urban crises is like turning back the clock and going back in history to a time when no-one could have foreseen the problems that we now face.

We live in a world where UN-HABITAT research shows that nearly 1 billion people, or 32 per cent of the global urban population languish in slums, mostly in developing countries. In a process that we call the *urbanisation of poverty*, the locus of global poverty is moving into cities.

We have to find a concept of urban planning, which combined with concerted action by local authorities, national governments, civil society actors and the international community, works to alleviate the plight of slum dwellers. If we fail, the number of slum dwellers is projected to double over the next 30 years to 2 billion, making the cauldron of misery and the potential for social unrest twice as great as it is today. Member States of the United Nations are committed to "achieve a significant improvement in the lives of at least 100 million slum dwellers by the year 2020". UN-HABITAT is the agency mandated to help governments, municipalities and all urban actors find the way here.

It means that urban planners and their political leaders have not only to address the needs of slum dwellers for better shelter, but also the broader problems of urban poverty, unemployment, urban governance, low incomes, and a lack of access to basic services like water and electricity.

In 19th century Europe and North America, the slum problem in cities was the catalyst for modern urban planning. But we need to bear in mind that it took well over a century to substantially eliminate those slums.

Slums are the worst, most degrading manifestations of urban poverty, deprivation, and exclusion in modern world. And it is a fact that today we have both the technical know-how (such as Geographical Information Systems undreamed of in the 19th century) the power and the resources to plan effectively for the target established in the Millennium Declaration.

As we enter the 21st century, urban planning faces the challenge of harmonizing the global norms with locally distinct cultural conditions. While the broad framework for planning can have universal appeal, societies and countries should simultaneously be able to develop their own proposals and solutions. Rapid change, driven mainly by business and technology, has to be tempered by culture and local specificities.

In recent decades, spatial planning has been grossly maligned. Many of the ills of urbanization have been conveniently dropped upon the doorstep of urban planners. Planning, however, does not exist as an independent function or as a separate agenda. It is one of the responsibilities of government to anticipate the future and to prepare for it.

There are many reasons why planning may not result in a better living environment for all. Planners' advice may be good or bad, taken or ignored. Planners may not have adequate training. Politicians may have a distorted sense of the public interest. Plans may be unrealistic, given their resource requirements. Powerful economic interests may feel threatened by planning recommendations. Plans may not reflect the priorities of community groups or business interests. Implementation authority may be fragmented among jurisdictions.

In trying to correct these deficiencies, planning has opened itself to public participation, to a more realistic view of stakeholder interests, to advocacy work, to setting social priorities, to environmental impact analyses, to multi-jurisdictional management and other areas where consensus signals good governance at work.

Yet, in today's world, it would appear

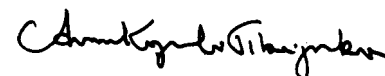
that the planning function still falls short. Slums are multiplying, urban crime is rampant, development keeps sprawling, transport efficiency is declining, energy costs are rising, health problems increase, and many citizens are walling themselves off from others. What's happening here? Has planning failed and does it need to be replaced by a more effective approach?

As the articles in this issue reveal, planning is accepted everywhere as a necessary function – a hallmark of human society. Municipalities, communities, and states all engage in planning. Where it is not working, however, there has been much experimentation and innovation to make planning fit the prevailing mood and political mode of governance. There have been some striking success stories.

The question raised in this issue of the *Habitat Debate* is how to make planning more relevant. It would seem that communication throughout the development process is part of the key. Open and transparent governance and inclusive are another big part. Likewise, some humility. Planning thus needs to be interdisciplinary, taking in social and cultural situations. There is no substitute to planning. But if it is not anchored to local conditions, it can easily be substituted by anarchy.

Thus the success of planning in the future may depend on the success with which we can cross the boundaries between the arts, design, urban and spatial planning, public policy, market forces, artistic creativity and cultural management.

Planning needs to be continuously re-invented.



Anna Kajumulo Tibaijuka
Executive Director

**Cover Photo:**

At a meeting in Davao, Philippines, members of civil society sign up to a statement of commitment as part of a new participatory process of local governance. Photo ©: Paul Taylor/UN-HABITAT.

Editor

Roman Rollnick

Design & Layout

Jerle Juma

Editorial Board

Daniel Biau (Chair)

Lucia Kiwala

Anantha Krishnan

Eduardo Moreno

Jay Moor

Jane Nyakairu

Lars Reuterswärd

Paul Taylor

Farouk Tebbal

Published by

UN-HABITAT

P.O. Box 30030, GPO

Nairobi 00100, KENYA;

Tel: (254-020) 621234

Fax: (254-020) 624266/7, 623477, 624264

Telex: 22996 UNHABKE

E-mail: infohabitat.debate@unhabitat.org

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

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UN-HABITAT OFFICES

HEADQUARTERS

UN-HABITAT

P.O. Box 30030, GPO,
Nairobi, 00100, Kenya
Tel: (254-020) 623120
Fax: (254-020) 624266/624267/
624264/623477/624060
E-mail: infohabitat@unhabitat.org
Website:
<http://www.unhabitat.org/>

REGIONAL OFFICES

Africa and the Arab States

UN-HABITAT Regional Office for
Africa and the Arab States
P.O. Box 30030, GPO,
Nairobi, 00100, Kenya
Tel: (254-020) 621234/623221
Fax: (254-020) 623904/623328
(Regional Office)
624266/7 (Central Office)
E-mail: roaas@unhabitat.org
Website:
<http://www.unhabitat.org/roaas/>

Asia and the Pacific

UN-HABITAT Regional Office for
Asia and the Pacific
ACROS Fukuoka Building, 8th Floor
1-1-1 Tenjin, Chuo-ku
Fukuoka 810-0001, Japan
Tel: (81-92) 724-7121
Fax: (81-92) 724-7124
E-mail: habitat.fukuoka@unhabitat.org
Website: <http://www.fukuoka.unhabitat.org>

Latin America and the Caribbean

UN-HABITAT Regional Office for
Latin America and the Caribbean
(ROLAC)/Oficina Regional para
America Latina y el Caribe (ROLAC)
Av. Presidente Vargas, 3131/1304
20210-030 - Rio de Janeiro RJ,
Brazil
Tel: (55-21) 2515-1700
Fax: (55-21) 2515-1701
E-mail: rolac@habitat-lac.org
Website: <http://www.unhabitat-rolac.org>

LIAISON OFFICES

New York Office

UN-HABITAT New York Office
Two United Nations Plaza
Room DC2-0943
New York, N.Y. 10017, U.S.A.
Tel: (1-212) 963-8725/963-4200
Fax: (1-212) 963-8721
E-mail: habitatny@un.org

Geneva Office

UN-HABITAT Geneva Office
ONU-HABITAT Bureau de Genève
Maison Internationale de l'Environnement 2
International Environment House 2
7, Chemin de Balexert
5th Floor
CH-1219 Châtelaine, Genève
Postal address:
UN-HABITAT Geneva Office
Palais des Nations
Avenue de la Paix 8-14
CH-1211 Genève 10, Switzerland
Tel: (41-0) 22 917-86 46/7/8
Fax: (41-0) 22 917-8046
E-mail: habitatgva@unog.ch
Website: <http://www.unhabitat.org>

European Union Office

UN-HABITAT Liaison Office
with the European Union and
Belgium
14 rue Montoyer
B-1000 Brussels, Belgium
Tel: (32-2) 503-35-72
(32-2) 503-1004
Fax: (32-2) 503-46-24
E-mail: unhabitat@skynet.be or
unhabitat.admin@skynet.be
Website: www.unhabitat.org



UN-HABITAT

INFORMATION OFFICES

Central Europe

UN-HABITAT Information Office for
Central Europe
H-1124 Budapest
Németvölgyi út 41. 2. ep. 1.1.,
Hungary
Tel/Fax: (36-1) 202-2490
E-mail:
horcher@unhabitat.datanet.hu

India

UN-HABITAT Information Office
5th Floor (East Wing)
Thalamuthu Natarajan Building
(CMDA Building)
Egmore, Chennai 600 008
India
Tel: (91-44) 2853-0802/ 2855-5834
Fax: (91-44) 2857-2673
E-mail: unchssp@md2.vsnl.net.in

China

UN-HABITAT Beijing Information Office
No. 9 Sanlihe Road
Beijing 100835
People's Republic of China
Tel: (86-10) 6839-4750, 68350647
Fax: (86-10) 6839-4749
E-mail: unchspek@public.bta.net.cn
Website:
<http://www.cin.gov.cn/habitat>

Russian Federation

UN-HABITAT Executive Bureau in
Moscow
8, Stroiteley Street,
Building 2
Office 809
Moscow, 119991
Russian Federation
Tel: (7-095) 930-6264
Fax: (7-095) 930-0379
E-mail: unhabitat@gosstroy.gov.ru
URL: www.unhabitatmoscow.ru