



# World Urban Forum

## Cities: Crossroads of Cultures

### Inclusiveness and Integration?

14-17 September 2016, Barcelona, Spain

## Dialogue On Urban Disasters

### *Turning disasters into opportunities for sustainable human settlements*

Wars and disasters play havoc with Millennium Development Goals and often turn back the development clock. Natural or man-made, disasters perpetuate poverty through loss of life and damage to property and the environment. They force developing countries to postpone development programmes. Precarious social, economic and environmental conditions become worse, particularly in human settlements. Every year in the past decade, disasters have affected over 200 million people – seven times more than those affected by conflict. In this dialogue, participants will discuss UN-HABITAT's 12 step guidelines to turn disaster into an opportunity for sustainable human settlements development.

### **The disaster-poverty nexus**

Cities in the developing world are vulnerable to rapid population growth, poorly planned urbanization and bad construction and maintenance. Rather paradoxically, many cities stand in areas that are most exposed to earthquakes, floods, landslides and other natural disasters.

Many parts of the world are caught in a vicious cycle of disaster and reconstruction. Although damage may be repaired, the causes behind the devastation linger on. Lack of institutional capacity only compounds the problem, often leaving the poor in chronically vulnerable situations. Factors that put human settlements at risk include inappropriate land use, poorly designed and constructed buildings and infrastructure, and an increasingly degraded environment.

War is the worst man-made disaster. Today's typical conflicts are internal, often waged in cities and villages by amateur militia, causing extensive damage to housing, property and the environment. The victims are mostly civilians, not to mention some 45 million refugees and internal displaced persons (IDPs).

### **UN-HABITAT's role**

Natural and human-caused emergencies are increasing in regularity. This calls for innovative approaches and a fresh look at traditional relief assistance. This has led UN-HABITAT to develop the notion of 'sustainable relief' for post-crisis situations, with poverty a major concern.

Any plan to mitigate and manage disasters effectively must focus on poverty reduction. Crises typically increase migration to urban areas, and conditions in developing countries only compound the impact on urban populations. With its focus on human settlements and 'shelter for all' agenda, UN-HABITAT has a crucial role to play.

### **What is 'sustainable relief'?**

'Sustainable relief' includes all phases of disaster management, from mitigation to response. The objective is to improve community and government capacities to prevent and mitigate disasters, which will reduce needs during the response phase. Short of preventing disasters altogether, sustainable human settlements can help mitigate their effects.

The key to disaster mitigation is to build a 'culture of prevention.' We need to consider what makes communities vulnerable. In practice, the level of vulnerability, or resilience, of a given community to disasters is a function of its social, cultural, economic and political setting.



### **Risk becomes opportunity**

Sustainable relief consists in meeting the long-term needs of the many and the emergency needs of the few. That is how cities can transform disasters into opportunities for sustainable development in human settlements. Meeting those needs requires strategies for safety, security and reconstruction, and others for sustainable IDP return and re-integration. These must combine with factors such as economic development, the introduction of good governance, and sustainable post-crisis urbanization.

Humanitarian and development agencies must work hand in hand. Recovery and reconstruction provide fertile ground for inclusive, participatory decision-making and strategic partnerships (including public authorities, civil society, business, etc.), not to mention good governance, capacity-building, sustainable standards, and women's empowerment.

### **Civil empowerment is vital**

Those measures will stand more than a slim chance of reducing the risk and effects of natural and other disasters only if the following three conditions are met:

- a shared understanding of the need for disaster mitigation
- effective civil society involvement in implementation
- the community's sense of ownership vis-à-vis disaster mitigation strategies.

Civil empowerment is an indispensable complement to any mitigation exercise. Attitudes must change. People, and women in particular, must be considered as active participants in disaster recovery programmes, instead of passive recipients. Beyond physical rehabilitation, disaster recovery is an opportunity for communities to build their own sustainability.

### **Secure tenure, secure future**

Through its two ongoing global campaigns on secure tenure and urban governance, UN-HABITAT promotes inclusion, participation and sustainability in human settlements, including sustainable, people-centred solutions in disaster management.

Security of tenure and rights of ownership make a huge difference to the maintenance, management and development of adequate shelter as a strategy to mitigate disaster in urban areas. In their absence, communities have little reason to invest in upgrading housing or infrastructure standards. When people have security where they live, they are better able to manage space and engage in activities that will reduce rather than increase their vulnerability.

Secure tenure is a vital ingredient in any programme looking to reduce the vulnerability of populations to future crises. It must be complemented by steps to protect the land and property rights of affected/displaced persons, as well as longer term solutions for the resolution of disputes over land and property.

### **Access and governance**

Access to resources such as land and water is often an underlying cause of conflict. Any response must include measures that favour equity while balancing formal and traditional systems. Allocation, use and registration of land and property must be rationalized. These various steps are crucial to both conflict resolution and future disaster mitigation. The principles of good governance have a major role to play in disaster management and sustainable recovery. This is particularly the case in post-crisis situations that involve recently established or custodial local authorities. Good governance enhances institutional capacities and decision-making.

### **Fresh approach needed**

Sustainable relief in human settlements is a process that requires a shift in thinking at all levels. Decisions made in the early post-disaster stages will have long-term effects on the success and sustainability of joint efforts in recovery. International agencies, governments and communities must realize this and develop new approaches.

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