



World Urban Forum

Cities: Crossroads of Cultures

Architecture and Integration?

14-17 September 2004, Barcelona, Spain

Dialogue On Urban Renaissance

A call for new powers for local governments in a globalizing world

The dialogue on Urban Renaissance aims to look at ways to improve the quality of urban life, making sure that towns and cities are places where people choose to live, work and enjoy themselves. Urban renaissance is a central tenet of UN-HABITAT's engagement with local authorities.

An unprecedented context

The need for an urban renaissance arises out of an unprecedented context. For the first time in history, the majority of the world's population will soon be living in what are defined as urban areas, including in the developing world. Today, 40 per cent of the population of developing countries already live in cities. By 2020, that figure will have risen to 52 per cent.

Africa and Asia, where major demographic change is expected, will pose the biggest challenge. By 2015, 153 of the world's 358 cities with more than one million inhabitants will be in Asia. Of the 27 mega-cities with more than 10 million inhabitants, 15 will also be in Asia. There will soon be mega-cities with 20 or 30 million inhabitants – i.e., conurbations larger than any in history.

What is 'glocalization'?

'Glocalization' is an innovative strategy that empowers local communities to pursue global standards or objectives as part of urban renaissance. In a new twist to globalization, the notion encourages global powers better to respect local powers and cultural diversity. One defining feature of globalization is the end of 'territorialism', a situation where socio-economic and political space is reducible to territorial parameters. 'Glocalization' has spun an apparent paradox whereby civil order is becoming more global and more local at the same time.

An enabling environment

Globalization places human settlements in a highly competitive framework and has caused many nations to come closer to democratic principles and political liberalization. Decentralization must be viewed in this context, at a time when local authorities strive to meet the time-bound goals and targets for human development set by the Millennium Declaration. How exactly do we achieve those objectives? The papers presented at the dialogue answer the question with a number of guidelines for urban renaissance. To put it briefly, it is widely accepted that governments at all levels should provide an 'enabling environment'.

The challenge is to create an all-inclusive system of governance that takes in the views of all partners. This is why democratic and decentralized governance is often considered as a requisite component of development initiatives. Decentralization and subsidiarity act as the cornerstones among the guiding principles for urban renaissance.

Decentralize and empower!

Decentralization enables local authorities to deal more effectively with the impact of globalization at the local level, filtering out any undesirable effects. The notion has been advocated since the 1980s and the 1996 UN-HABITAT conference gave it a major impetus. It has now become well recognized that stronger local authority encourages public engagement and a sense of ownership over services. Subsidiarity (the rationale behind decentralization) enhances governance transparency and, in many cases, equity among the population.

