



Dusty Death?

Vancouver 1976: A Prophetic Conference

"In the world at large, millions will be born. The settlements will grow – in squalor and violence, or in work and hope. The whole world – linked by its communications, its airlines, its hijackers and its terrorists – has really only one choice: to become a place worth living in or face 'the way to dusty death'. And where else do people live save in their settlements? So where else is the salvation to begin?"

This prophetic statement made at the first UN Conference on Human Settlements in 1976, by Barbara Ward the author and thinker who popularised the term, *Spaceship Earth*, could have been written today. At the opening of the conference in Vancouver, Prime Minister Trudeau warned about the future of cities. On the streets, Margaret Mead and Mother Theresa marched to highlight the problems of providing clean water to the urban poor. Despite the prescience of these world leaders today, thirty years later, the reality is that sustainable urbanisation is even more of a challenge for the global community.

The Urban Crisis

In 1976 it was estimated that only one third of the world's population lived in urban areas. Today, it is almost 50 percent. Though the proportion of people living in urban areas in the Americas and Europe has stabilised at about 75 percent of the urban population, Africa and Asia are in for a major demographic shift. Currently only about 35 percent of their populations are urban, however, it is predicted that this figure will jump to 50 percent by 2030.

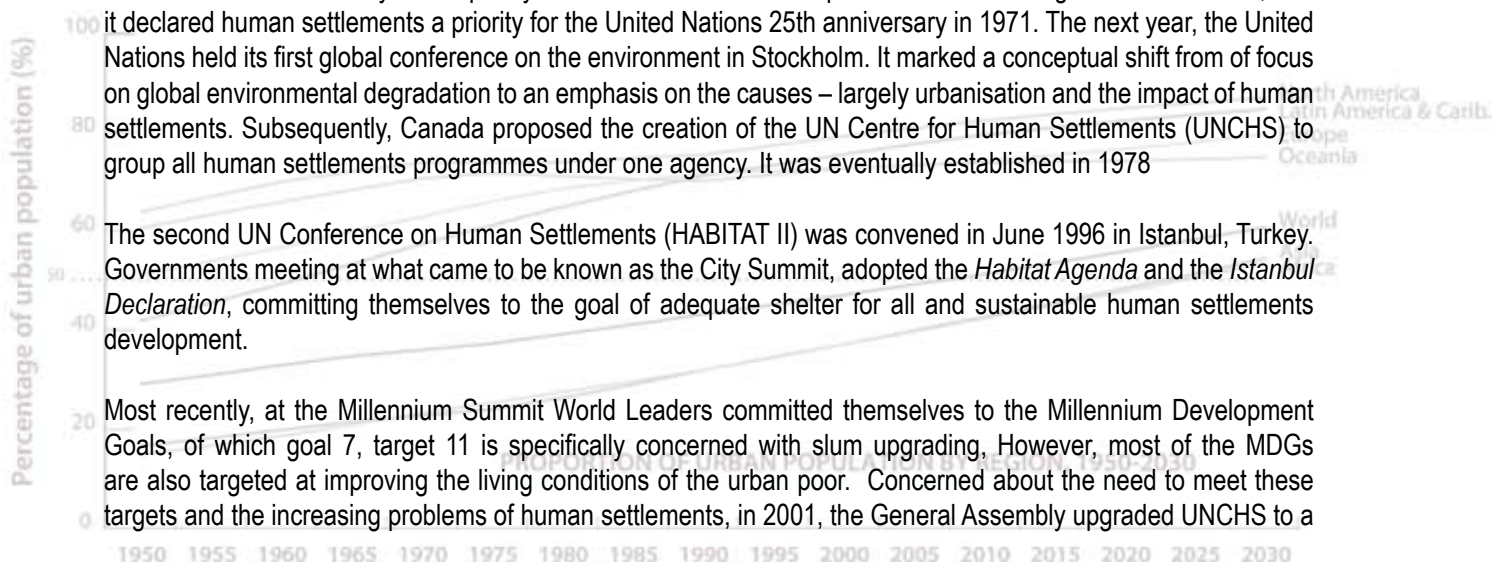
Whereas in 1950 there was only one mega-city, New York, with a population of over 10 million, today there are over 19, many of which are in the developing world. As cities sprawl into cities, turning into unmanageable, polluting, megalopolises, their expanding footprint can be seen from space. Hotbeds of pollution and industrial emissions, cities are contributing to climate change. On the ground, the urbanisation of poverty is leading to a proliferation of slums and squatter settlements. In many cities, over 50 percent of the population lives without adequate shelter and basic services. In fact, UN-HABITAT estimates that of the population of three billion urban dwellers, one billion are slum dwellers. What is worse, the figure is set to double by 2030.

International Institutional Responses

The UN General Assembly first explicitly cited its concern at the "deplorable world housing situation" in 1969, and it declared human settlements a priority for the United Nations 25th anniversary in 1971. The next year, the United Nations held its first global conference on the environment in Stockholm. It marked a conceptual shift from of focus on global environmental degradation to an emphasis on the causes – largely urbanisation and the impact of human settlements. Subsequently, Canada proposed the creation of the UN Centre for Human Settlements (UNCHS) to group all human settlements programmes under one agency. It was eventually established in 1978

The second UN Conference on Human Settlements (HABITAT II) was convened in June 1996 in Istanbul, Turkey. Governments meeting at what came to be known as the City Summit, adopted the *Habitat Agenda* and the *Istanbul Declaration*, committing themselves to the goal of adequate shelter for all and sustainable human settlements development.

Most recently, at the Millennium Summit World Leaders committed themselves to the Millennium Development Goals, of which goal 7, target 11 is specifically concerned with slum upgrading. However, most of the MDGs are also targeted at improving the living conditions of the urban poor. Concerned about the need to meet these targets and the increasing problems of human settlements, in 2001, the General Assembly upgraded UNCHS to a



fully fledged programme: The United Nations Human Settlements Programme, UN-HABITAT. At the same time, it established the World Urban Forum as the international think tank for all things urban.

Possibilities and Policies

Today, UN-HABITAT's mission is firmly established – *to promote socially and environmentally sustainable human settlements development and the achievement of adequate shelter for all.*

As the world becomes increasingly urban, it is essential that policymakers understand the power of the city as a catalyst for national development. UN-HABITAT's strategic vision is thus anchored in a four-pillar strategy aimed at attaining the goal of Environmentally and Socially Sustainable Cities.

This strategy consists of *advocacy of global norms, analysis of information, field-testing of solutions and financing.* These fall under the four core functions assigned to the agency by world governments – monitoring and research, policy development, capacity building and financing for housing and urban development.

The work of UN-HABITAT, as the focal point for implementation of the *Habitat Agenda*, the *Declaration on Cities and other Human Settlements in the New Millennium* and the *Millennium Development Goal 7, targets 10 and 11*, has drawn the agency and its partners in government, regional and local authorities, and civil society increasingly closer to finding solutions to the problem of sustainable cities.

The present Executive Director of UN-HABITAT, Mrs. Anna Tibaijuka, has been at the forefront of the recent efforts to raise awareness about the urban crisis.

"The future of the planet will be won or lost in the streets of our cities. The environmental future is closely linked to how cities manage their world's resources, minimising their impact on the surrounding environment. Equally, the social future of the world is dependent on whether cities are inclusive. All citizens, rich and poor alike, should share in the benefits offered by urban areas. Excluding the poor is a sure recipe for disaster: it can only lead to conflict and unrest," said Mrs. Tibaijuka. "The meeting in Vancouver gives us the opportunity to revive the spirit of the original meeting. All of us, the international community, governments, local authorities, the private sector and civil society must not only heed the clarion call of people like Barbara Ward, but also commit the necessary political and economic resources. We cannot and must not let our cities die a dusty death. Together we can make a difference."

This is a UN-HABITAT Feature/Backgrounder¹, please feel free to publish or quote from this article provided UN-HABITAT is given credit. Suitable photographs are available on our website. For further information, please contact: Mr. Sharad Shankardass, Spokesperson, or Ms. Zahra Hassan, Press & Media Liaison, Press & Media Relations Unit, Tel: (254 2) 7623153/7623151, Fax: (254 2) 7624060, E-mail: habitat.press@unhabitat.org, Website: www.unhabitat.org.