



## Press Release

### Vancouver gears up for Third Session of World Urban Forum

**Nairobi/Vancouver, 12 June 2006** – The Canadian city of Vancouver is gearing up for the Third Session of the World Urban Forum, UN-HABITAT's premier international meeting on the state of the world's growing cities held every two years.

15,000 people have registered for the 19-23 June events – a week of discussions involving governments, local authorities, civil society and non-governmental organizations and experts in every sphere of urban life.

"It was in Vancouver 30 years ago that the agency today called UN-HABITAT was born," said Mrs. Anna Tibaijuka, Under Secretary-General of the United Nations and Executive Director of UN-HABITAT. "It is therefore auspicious that the Third Session of the World Urban Forum meets in Vancouver to examine the theme, *turning new ideas into action for a sustainable urban environment*. The Vancouver session of the World Urban Forum brings together many strands of global cooperation and bridge-building by providing a forum for dialogue that promotes universal values, such as tolerance, freedom, justice and equal rights."

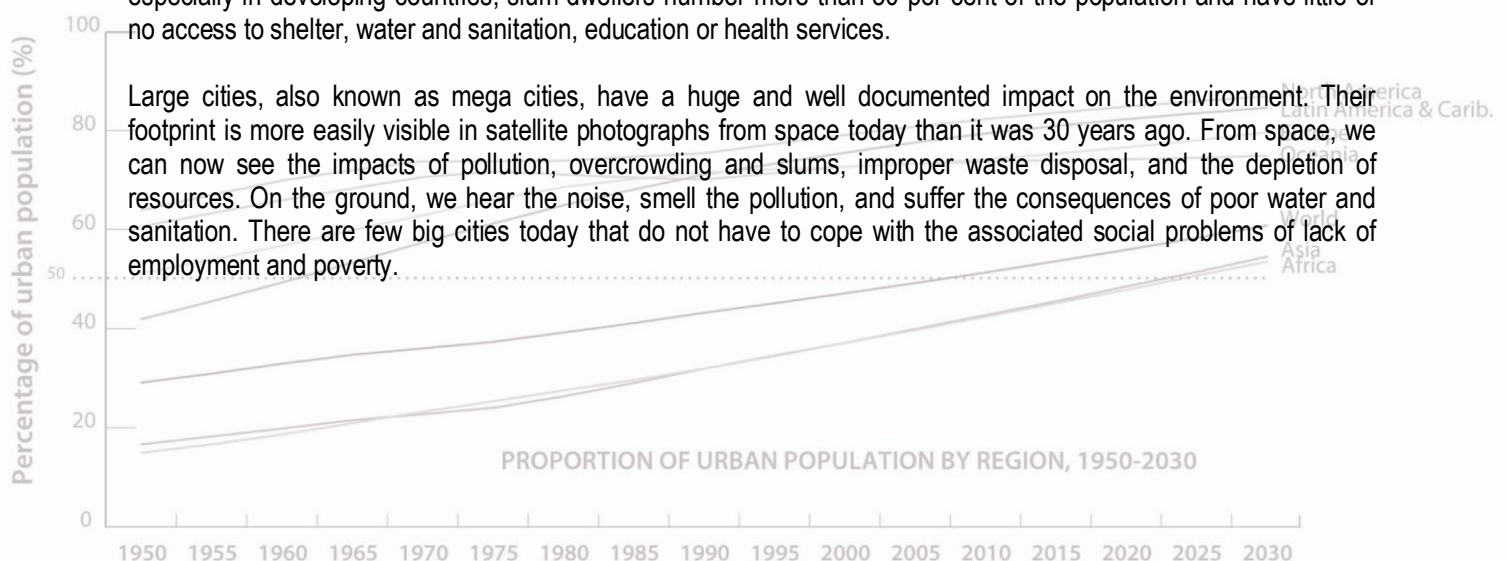
The occasion next week will be marked by a series of events ranging from a global youth forum to an exhibition looking back at the agency's history highlighting the Habitat I conference in Vancouver in 1976 when world leaders started to recognise the consequences of rapid urbanisation, especially in the developing world. That pioneering conference sprung from warnings about urbanisation at the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment (Stockholm, 1972) convened to deal with the perceived threat to the environment by human activity.

"Canada is pleased to partner with UN-HABITAT to hold the Third Session of the World Urban Forum," said Canada's Minister of Human Resources and Social Development, Ms. Diane Finley. "That historic meeting (Vancouver 1976) led to a new understanding about cities and communities, and the urgent need to make them sustainable to preserve a mutually supportive urban-rural balance."

In 1976, one-third of the world's people lived in cities. Just 30 years later, this rose to one-half and will continue to grow to two-thirds, or 6 billion people, by 2050. *Cities are now home to half of humankind.*

Cities are the hubs of much national production and consumption – economic and social processes that generate wealth and opportunity. But they also harbor disease, crime, pollution, poverty and social unrest. In many cities, especially in developing countries, slum dwellers number more than 50 per cent of the population and have little or no access to shelter, water and sanitation, education or health services.

Large cities, also known as mega cities, have a huge and well documented impact on the environment. Their footprint is more easily visible in satellite photographs from space today than it was 30 years ago. From space, we can now see the impacts of pollution, overcrowding and slums, improper waste disposal, and the depletion of resources. On the ground, we hear the noise, smell the pollution, and suffer the consequences of poor water and sanitation. There are few big cities today that do not have to cope with the associated social problems of lack of employment and poverty.





These are some of the issues that will be discussed in a series of Dialogue sessions at which experts will discuss how to manage cities better; Roundtables, involving government ministers, policy makers and planners. The aim is find sustainable ways to manage our cities and towns.

Much has been done since 1976 to place sustainable human settlements and the plight of the urban poor on the international agenda. The 64 recommendations adopted in Vancouver 30 years ago were reaffirmed by world leaders in the *Habitat Agenda* – the global plan of action for adequate shelter for all and sustainable human settlements development in an urbanising world – at the Habitat II Conference in Istanbul, in 1996.

But we need to do more. With 1 billion people living in slums, and thousands joining them every day, we are indeed sitting on a social time bomb that is ticking away quietly in many overcrowded, poverty-stricken corners of a geopolitical chessboard already fraught with new problems in the wake of the Cold War.

How we manage this situation is arguably the biggest problem confronting humanity in the 21st century, and the essence of the talks in Vancouver next week. As more and more governments recognise this, the United Nations needs to galvanise its strength as never before in the quest for sustainable urbanisation.

“Over the course of the next 30 years, people living in cities around the world will largely outnumber those living in rural areas. If current trends continue, extreme urban poverty is also set to double in that period to 2 billion people. It must be recognised that urbanization is an integral part of the structural changes that accompany economic development,” Mrs. Tibaijuka said.

The first session of the forum was held in Nairobi 2002, and the second in Barcelona in 2004. The fourth session will be in Nanjing, China in 2006.

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