Concept note

Global Network for Sustainable Housing (GNSH)

Continued urbanisation, increasing shelter demand, and the challenge of environmental sustainability

The year 2007 marked an historic milestone: more than half of the global population lived in cities.[1] While the process of urbanisation brings with it many positive benefits and opportunities, rapid and sustained urbanisation also places enormous pressure on the provision of adequate, affordable and sustainable shelter in urban areas.

Nowhere better is this pressure evidenced than in many developing countries today. In many cities in Asia, Africa, Latin America and Eastern Europe, urban growth is synonymous with slum and informal settlement growth, meaning, quite accurately, that urbanisation equals informal housing formation. While over the last decade there have been a multiplicity of responses to addressing this housing challenge, environmental sustainability dimensions have seldom been considered.

The challenge of producing housing that is environmentally sustainable is not limited to developing countries. Globally, there is a lack of capacity, willingness, knowledge-sharing and institutional and regulatory support for mainstreaming sustainability dimensions within housing projects, programmes, and private sector housing development.

This is alarming considering the virtual consensus across the global scientific community that global warming and climate change is happening and that human activities (especially anthropogenic emissions of greenhouse gases) are having a significant affect in this. Particularly relevant is the fact that of all human activities, the consumption of energy within the building sector currently represents the greatest source of anthropogenic greenhouse gas emissions: roughly 40 per cent of all energy consumption and greenhouse gas emissions around the world.

Even in developing countries the building sector offers important opportunities for cost effective emissions reductions. Importantly, the ever increasing need to alleviate poverty, provide adequate housing for disadvantaged peoples and provide alternatives to urban slums in developing countries demonstrates a critical tension between the need to increase energy access to the world's poor and simultaneously reduce emissions on the global scale.

The Global Network for Sustainable Housing

It is within this context of continued urbanisation, increasing urban housing demand, and the need to mitigate the negative environmental effects of housing construction and use that UN-HABITAT is coordinating the development of a Global Network for Sustainable Housing (GNSH).

There is a wealth of knowledge on how to make housing environmentally sustainable, yet this knowledge is fragmented, uncoordinated and often inaccessible to stakeholders who need it most. Likewise, there is a wealth of experience from developed countries on 'green building' policies, instruments, designs, and monitoring mechanisms, yet this experience is often not disseminated to stakeholders working in the housing sectors of developing countries.

Furthermore, there is there is a lack of global knowledge exchange, partnership and collaboration, dialogue, and advocacy on the importance of developing sustainable housing, and the ways forward for achieving it.

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[1] UN-HABITAT, 2003; 2009

Aim, objectives and scope of the Network

The broad aim of the GNSH is to contribute to the universal realisation of the right to adequate housing whilst adapting and mitigating the negative effects of climate change through supporting the development and implementation of sustainable affordable housing practices and programmes.

The four primary objectives of the Network are:
1. *Knowledge exchange and networking:* To support the global coordination and knowledge dissemination of sustainable housing alternatives.
2. *Advocacy and policy direction:* raise awareness and promote sustainable housing alternatives (materials, designs, etc) and contribute to policy dialogue and development that can facilitate mainstreaming sustainability in national housing policies and regulations.
3. *Tool development:* facilitate the development of pro-poor tools and methodologies for designing, constructing and monitoring sustainable housing alternatives.
4. *Training, education, and capacity building:* strengthen the capacity of housing sector stakeholders – such as slum dwellers, the private sector, policymakers and housing developers – to produce sustainable and affordable housing.

Although the Network is global in scope it will have a strong focus is on developing countries. The Network seeks to have an equal balance of partners, members, and input from both developed and developing countries. Whist globally there is large variation in housing sectors, capacities, designs, etc, the intention is to connect partners and share lessons and experiences between countries and regions.

The UN-HABITAT-led Network will be composed of professional groups, multilateral and bilateral organisations, training institutions, academia, community-based organisations (CBOs), and grassroots organisations. It will advocate for the improved sustainability of housing and slum upgrading and create a forum for knowledge and experience exchange.

Proposed organisational structure and partners

The proposed organisational structure will include: GNSH Secretariat, which will coordinate the network (possibly to be based at UN-HABITAT in the Shelter Branch); an International Advisory Board, which will meet bi-annually to formulate and monitor the strategic direction of the network and guide programme implementation; a Steering Committee, comprised of members of UN-HABITAT; GNSH partner organisations of professional groups, multilateral and bilateral organisations, training institutions, academia, community-based organisations (CBOs), and grassroots organisations; and GNSH members, those individuals and organisations registered as members on the website (Figure 1).
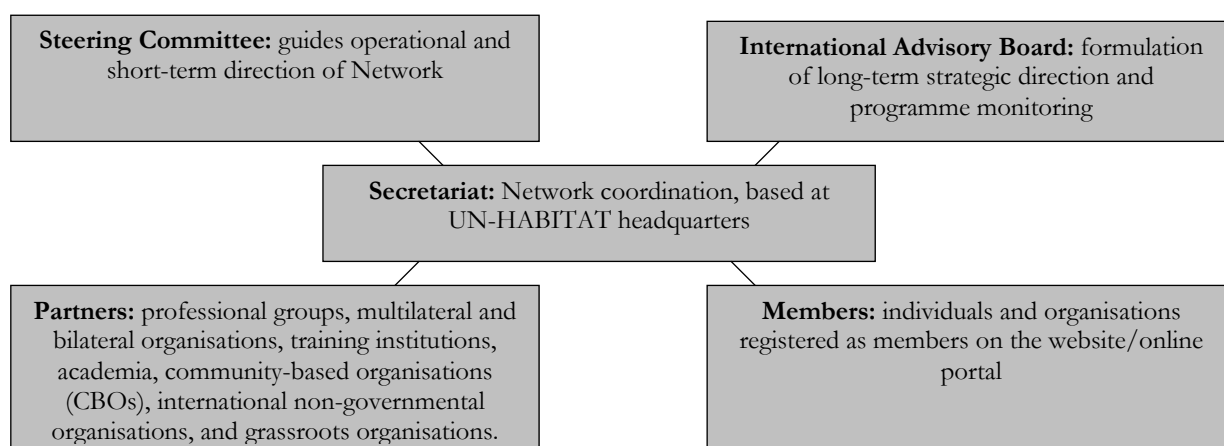

Figure 1: Proposed organisational structure

The criteria for partners to join are:
1. Commitment to the development of pro-poor sustainable housing knowledge, solutions, and practices
2. Contribute funding and/or knowledge
3. Represent organisations working at a regional or international scale
4. Engage with the Network for non-commercial purposes only.

Proposed activities and next steps:

The following are proposed as the core operational activities of the Network:

- The maintenance of online knowledge sharing platform. The primary outlet of the network will be a website, *i-BUILD*, hosted on the Urban Gateway. It will have several functions, although primarily it will act as a library for knowledge on sustainable housing and post news, events, and listings of relevance to Network members (see the Concept Note for more information).
- Hosting an bi-annual international conference. This will provide a forum for network partners and members to share experiences and new building technologies and designs, and network and develop stronger partnerships for future collaborative work. There could also be an exhibition to showcase innovative sustainable housing products and cutting-edge housing sustainable programmes and projects as well as a student/'young professionals' forum to encourage research and knowledge dissemination to a young practitioners and researchers.
- Hold dedicated side-events, special sessions, and/or roundtables on this thematic area at relevant conferences held by partner organisations.

To initiate the Network UN-HABITAT will lead the following proposed primary activities:

- Hold a two-day Expert Group Meeting (EGM) in December 2011 with 10-12 participants representing key organisations that should shape the network (for example, academia, NGOs and CBOs, 'green building' rating and monitoring organisations, and 'appropriate technology' organisations working in the field).
- Develop a core group of founding partners, 'champions', to constitute a Working Group that will define, shape and initiate the Network.
- Hold a second meeting at the World Urban Forum in September 2012 where the Network will be officially launched.