

## URBANIZATION AS A DRIVER FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

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### UN-Habitat's vision of urbanization

encompasses all levels of human settlements, including small rural communities, villages, market towns, intermediate cities and large cities and metropolises, i.e. wherever a stable community is continuously located and there are housing units together with permanent social and economic activities, common public space, urban basic services, and a local governance structure.

The city is a **human construct**; a socially-constructed human artifact. Though it is often regarded as inevitable at best, the growth and development of cities is far from spontaneous and uncontrollable. Urbanization can be steered and shaped in a collectively desired manner. The more we see cities as voluntarily shaped the more we recognize their positive potential as levers for sustainable development.

**We need to see the city more as an asset and a solution.** Urbanization presents an opportunity to solve many of the challenges confronting contemporary human development. Well-planned and designed cities can generate higher levels of societal wellbeing, global economic growth and means of livelihood and foster sustainable development. The key is to promote a more proactive perspective on the city. This will prevent negative, self-fulfilling perceptions of urbanization and piecemeal problem solving.

How can cities deliver this? In two words: **urban economy**. As economic science has proven, dense networks of people, infrastructure, institutions and innovation possess enormous agglomeration advantages. In many cities these advantages remain untapped. But by leveraging their economies of scale, cities can unlock their inherent potential to create value and wealth, reduce overall costs of societal transactions and promote productivity and innovation. The first

step in these lines is to establish the physical pattern of connectivity. The second is to prevent negative externalities.

Despite the challenges facing cities – demographic explosion, institutional incapacity, increasing segregation, fuel shortage and climate change, to name but a few – the prospect for cities is promising. However, to realize this, we must adopt an **urban paradigm shift**. Such a paradigm has to steer cities away from unplanned and spontaneous urbanisation, car dependence, lack of proper connectivity networks and lack of adequate public space.

The old paradigm has locked many cities in the developed world into congested, energy inefficient and expensive model. It has also heavily influenced the aspirations of cities in the developing world that must accommodate the majority of the world's population growth over the next four decades. But **retrofitting obsolete systems and leapfrogging to new efficient systems**, respectively, will allow cities to maximise their agglomeration advantages and economies of scale.

This new urban paradigm requires several fundamental shifts:

1. **We must re-embrace the adequate compact and mixed-use city.** Cities and their component neighbourhoods need to be compact, integrated and connected. This requires a shift away from the mono-functional city of low density and long distances, which is poorly connected, socially divided and economically inefficient. Instead, the new paradigm optimizes well designed demographic and economic densities and privileges proximity among firms and people within a dominantly mixed land-use pattern. The resulting human scale minimizes transport and service delivery cost, optimizes the use of land and promotes social diversity. It also supports the protection and organization of urban open spaces.

**2. Reasserting urban space is a highly effective entry point for improving a city's functioning.**

The way in which space is deployed and shaped is central to the process of city development. This will determine the value of the land and will require value-sharing mechanisms. Urban public space is the backbone of the city. It allows people to live amidst complexity, negotiate differences, and assert their identities and access resources in ways both formal and informal. Effective policies on the establishment, management and maintenance of urban space are the key for economic performance and efficiency, as well as inclusivity, walkability and social interaction.

**3. Urban practitioners must move from sectorial interventions to those that address the city as a whole and are at the scale of the problems.**

The prevailing fragmented, sectorial approach to urban development has only created enclaves of successes with little transformational impact. Partial solutions tend to worsen the conditions of the city, often producing dysfunction in the whole. Addressing the many problems characterizing cities today – such as sprawl, segregation and congestion – requires a more holistic, integrated, and city-wide approach in which solutions should be at the scale of the problems.

**4. Urban planning and design set the critical spatial framework.**

Good urban planning and design should establish minimum common space, optimised street connectivity and social mix with a variety of housing prices within an area. The resulting urban fabric will be fine grained, with a variety of housing types, an inviting public realm, pedestrian-friendly streetscapes, defined centres and edges and varying transport options.

**5. Smartening land-use planning and building codes is essential.**

Effective law codes and regulations are key instruments for pursuing resilient and low-carbon urban development. Such codes should limit specialised land use zoning; encourage mixed use through floor space designated for economic uses and mandate minimum street area as a proportion of a neighbourhood's overall land area. There is an urgent need of increasing the standards of public space from the nowadays existing average of 10% up to, at least 30%.

**6. Cities must promote endogenous development.**

The new urban paradigm requires strategies, plans and model projects that activate endogenous factors. Such factors include

nurturing and utilizing local assets – particularly human capital – maximizing tangible and intangible local opportunities, exploiting local potentials, and positioning the city within the outward macro context of regional, national and global development. A well-planned city can directly improve by 15% its employment rate by means of increased construction and urban basic service provision.

**7. City-dwellers themselves – particularly the poorest and most vulnerable – must remain the primary beneficiaries.**

These are the primary stakeholders who directly and personally experience a city on a daily basis. The 'right to the city' remains a powerful principle for ensuring that the collective interest of a city prevails. A human rights-based approach is the only way to uphold the dignity of all urban residents in the face of multiple rights violations, including the right to decent living conditions.

This call to action requires creating a new urban model for the 21st Century. It constitutes a paradigm shift not only in and amongst cities, but also in city-shaping institutions. Cities desperately need concrete examples of how to creatively apply sustainable development principles to dynamic and complex urban contexts. They also require strengthened local government capacity to engage with the private sector and academic institutions and harness community knowledge and resources. Successful innovations often remain small islands of excellence in an ocean of resource-hungry "business as usual" urban development. Fortunately enough, there are already a number of successful cases that can be commented and shared. They need to be multiplied to scales that generate significant impact.

UN-Habitat has institutionally realigned itself to this new urban paradigm. In so doing UN-Habitat calls upon the entire landscape of urban actors and city changers to align their own ways of working to the evolving needs of the contemporary city, to combat the socio-spatial challenges of sprawl, segregation and congestion and to help unleash the inherent power of urban agglomeration for proper and well defined compactness, integration and connectivity. This is both necessary and possible now more than ever. It is important that the Post 2015 Development Planning Framework takes into account the fundamental potential of urbanization to promote sustainable development.