

THE WORLD URBAN FORUM “CITIES: CROSSROADS OF CULTURE, INCLUSIVENESS AND INTEGRATION”

Opening Ceremony

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CITIES: CULTURAL AND ENVIRONMENTAL DIVERSITY

Ladies and gentlemen,

One of the major issues of the 21st century is the worldwide decline in cultural and biological diversity.

The globalization of communications and trade appears to be having a dramatic effect on many cultures. It is estimated that as many as half the world's 6,000 languages are threatened with extinction in the next century.

Global development is also affecting environmental diversity. Examples include the spread of the urban environment—with fields, wetlands or woodlands being replaced by roads, housing estates, parking lots and shopping malls.

Agriculture itself is also often responsible for diversity loss—either through intense farming methods that promote monocultures over huge areas, or by poor management practices that can cause land degradation and desertification.

Other examples of development and globalization leading to biodiversity loss include deforestation and invasions of alien species.

So, globally, the evidence is strong that cultural and environmental diversity is in decline.

What is the role of the city in this picture?

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As we have seen, urban sprawl can degrade the environment in many ways, by supplanting natural habitats, or by polluting the land and the air, the rivers and the seas. A city's ecological footprint can spread far beyond its borders.

However, well-planned cities can also be environmentally friendly. The concept of green cities where people can live in a clean and healthy environment is the theme of World Environment Day 2005, which is being hosted by San Francisco, a city strong in both cultural and environmental diversity.

The message of World Environment Day is that cities need not be either environmental or cultural deserts.

Ladies and gentlemen,

The growth and spread of cities is the most significant cultural trend of the last century. It is perhaps the single most important development issue of today's world.

Currently 75 per cent of people in the developed world live in urban areas. In developing countries the figure is 41 per cent, but that is where urban expansion is now greatest.

In 2025 it is estimated that two-thirds of all people will live in cities.

This mass migration of people also represents a transport of culture.

In an alien environment people often cling strongly to their culture. They also expose other people to their ways.

So, urbanization does not have to mean cultural loss.

Take New York for example—the home of the United Nations and one of the world's most cosmopolitan cities.

New York has been absorbing immigrants for centuries. Little Italy, Chinatown, Harlem, Queens, Brooklyn. They all have their own identity, their own pockets of culture. That is one of the city's strengths.

I would argue that the mix of cultures in the world's great cities is one of the more exciting and positive aspects of our globalizing world.

What about cities and environmental diversity?

Let us again take New York as an example. One of the city's most famous features is Central Park. Central Park acts as New York's lungs. It is quite literally a breathing space.

Without Central Park, New York would be a very different place.

Throughout the developed world, urban planners have become increasingly aware of how important the environment—clean air, green spaces, adequate provision of sanitation and freshwater—is to the health of a city, and especially to the physical and psychological health of its citizens.

Creating green cities is among the greatest challenges facing the developing world, where people are flocking to cities in unprecedented numbers.

They need an environment that is conducive to healthy productive lives.

Unfortunately, the urban environment they find often condemns them and their children to lives of poverty and ill health. The cities of the developing world are too often overcrowded and unplanned.

Green spaces and common land are subject to enormous pressure—both from the poor and from unscrupulous people who have sufficient financial or political power to grab prime land for themselves.

Urban sprawl is also swallowing green areas outside cities. These green areas within and outside cities are essential for people's quality of life.

UNEP and our sister agency, UN-HABITAT, are the only two UN programmes based in the developing world. From our vantage point in Nairobi we can see daily, first-hand, the urban challenges of the developing world.

Not surprisingly, we collaborate on initiatives to improve the urban environment in the developing world, for instance the Managing Water for African Cities project, building capacity for sustainable urban development in seven demonstration cities in Africa.

UNEP also provides access to a variety of urban and freshwater issues through databases and portals developed and maintained by our International Environmental Technology Centre, based in Japan.

We are also spearheading the Nairobi River Basin Project to identify and solve urban environment issues in our home city. Kenya's capital hosts one of Africa's largest slums, and faces a host of public health challenges related to sanitation and freshwater provision.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Many of the answers to urban environmental issues lie with the political will of local and national governments, and with the power of ordinary citizens. Much of UNEP's work is focused on building capacity in the developing world.

UNEP helps governments to develop and implement environmental policy.

It helps countries to draft and enforce environmental laws—including those that give citizens a strong voice.

It helps to provide knowledge and information on which to build policy.

It works closely with the private sector to encourage best practices and technological solutions.

And it works with civil society to make sure their voice is heard.

In the final analysis, cities are communities of people, culturally diverse, dependent on each other and on a healthy environment for security and happiness.

Only when communities are empowered, when they understand that they can and must take responsibility for their own environment, when they truly feel a sense of ownership and pride, can they learn to look after it.

Thank you