

Harmonious Cities – World Habitat Day 2008 – Luanda, Angola –

We now live in an urban world

In 2007, humanity witnessed a significant event in its history: the world's urban population, for the first time, equalled the rural population. This historic milestone represented both a demographic change signified by a shift or growth of populations, and more importantly, a social, cultural and economic transformation.

The change is even more remarkable if we consider that 200 years ago the human existence was overwhelmingly rural, with less than 3 per cent of the total population living in cities. Until then, the pace of urbanization was extremely slow. Urban growth began to accelerate in the 1950s, when the urban population accounted for one-third of the world's population. Since then, humanity has witnessed the fastest urban growth ever experienced, bringing the number of urban residents closer to the number of rural residents.

Urbanization has been an essential part of most nations' development. Evidence shows that economic growth, social and political change, technical and scientific advances and progress in various other areas are direct result of the urbanization process. Levels of income and performance on human development indicators are also strongly linked to urbanization.

However, in some countries and cities urbanization is raising red flags, particularly because an increase on income inequalities not only in developing countries, but also in various developed nations. In many other places, urbanization is synonymous to slum formation, with more and more people living in poor informal settlements, known as *Favelas*, *Ranchos*, *Chawls*, *Katchi Abadis*, and many other names that describe forms of deprivation, economic morbidity and social differentiation. Urbanization is also raising red flags because of the alarming number of countries that are observing an increase in land and resources consumption as well as more pollution and waste.

World Habitat Day 2008

The theme of this year's *World Habitat Day* on Monday 6 October 2008 is *Harmonious Cities*. This theme, chosen by the United Nations, is to remind all of us that a world that urbanizes can not claim to be harmonious if some groups concentrate resources and opportunities while others remain impoverished and marginalized. The theme *Harmonious Cities* is a good opportunity to remind all of us that urbanization does not necessarily mean unrestrained economic growth that generates poverty and exclusion. *Harmonious Cities* recalls all of us as well that urbanization can not be done at the expenses of the natural environment.

The connotation of *Harmonious Cities* means harmony in economic and societal relations, urban and regional relations and urban growth and environmental relations. It is a concept that parallels the economy, social justice, equity and politics, which are all independent and closely related to one another at the same time. This integration seeks to promote a more harmonious coexistence at city level.

A Call for Harmonious Urban Development

Cities have tremendous potential to combine safe and healthy living conditions and culturally rich and diverse lifestyles with remarkably low levels of energy consumption, resource-use and waste. However, to realize this potential there is a need to promote more balanced urban development by trying to harmonize the various interest, diversity and inherent contradictions within cities. The concept of *Harmony* calls not only for economic prosperity in cities and its attendant benefits, but for various other inter-related aspects such as equity, sustainability, fairness, social justice and good urban governance. Cities that are well planned and governed properly, when they are competent and efficient, and when they care for the poor and disposed have an enormous potential for more balanced social, economic and environmental development.

World Habitat Day Celebration in 2008

This Celebration provides an excellent opportunity to highlight key human settlement issues related to the *Harmonious Cities* concept. This concept is both a theoretical framework and an operation tool to act today. It is as well an instrument to raise awareness in different cities of the world about the need to shift policy priorities towards those more in need on the road to more balanced urban development. This can be done by addressing social, economic, environmental and political dimensions of urban growth in a more integrated manner.

Celebrations in each city should consider three dimensions of *Harmony* which have a direct impact on sustainable urbanization and overall national development. These three dimensions are:

- *Spatial Harmony.* Growth or decline of cities is not accidental. New city-regions, city-corridors and geographic cluster of cities explain some of the new location and comparative advantages of economically dynamic cities. However, is it possible to talk about a well-balanced system of cities in which regional planning plays a key role for more harmonious national development? Is it possible to articulate urban planning practices with new regional approaches to planning? How local decision-makers can work together with national authorities in search of more harmonious urban development?
- *Harmony within Cities.* Balanced development matters not only for the sake of social justice, but also for social cohesion and economic development. Disparities within and between countries and cities weaken political legitimacy and undermine development gains. Inequalities within cities have the potential to turn into social protests and generate

social instability. It is therefore at this level that social justice and equity issues need to be addressed in order to create a fair and just social order that will bring harmony in economic and societal relations. What is the best way to improve the lives of slum dwellers through low-cost interventions? How the cities' development agenda can integrate urban poverty related issues? How best articulate institutional responses to maximize benefits and cover more deprived populations?

- *Harmony between the built and natural environment.* Urbanization is the most powerful and irreversible phenomenon in today's world. It can be a cause of loss of biodiversity and environmental pollution; but it can be as well a way out to make environmental sustainability possible. It is believed that slum areas contaminate water and other resources, propitiate the conversion of cropland, forest and wetlands, and affect biodiversity and ecosystems; yet slum dwellers are the lowest consumers of water, land and other resources and are more likely to engage in recycling and other environmentally-friendly practices than their non-slum neighbours. Is it possible to design and implement cost-effective environmental solutions that without obstructing the growth potential of urban areas can preserve the natural environment? How economic, social, and environmental planning practices embodying urban sustainability can curb negative urban trends affecting the environment? Furthermore, cities have been blamed for the rise in greenhouse emissions and the resulting climate change. What policies need to be urgently adopted to reduce greenhouse gas emissions in cities? What adaptation and mitigation strategies have proved to be effective in poor countries?