

Background

Mrs. Tibaijuka was asked the following question at the Chief Executive Board meeting of the United Nations in Poznan, Poland, on Thursday 11 December:

Question: To Ms. Tibaijuka (UN-HABITAT):

With rapid urbanization, so much of the action is planning for our habitats of twenty years from now. Our choices will play out in spatial planning, building industry standards etc. As a small agency facing this enormous task, how are you working with other parts in the UN system to address these issues, as well as urban transportation and other action at the local level?

Below is a summary of her response.

It is no coincidence that global climate change has become a major international development issue at precisely the same time and the same pace as the world has become urbanised.

We live in a world where, according to UN-HABITAT's research, 1 billion people languish in slums, mostly in developing countries. In a process we call the *urbanisation of poverty*, the locus of global poverty is moving into cities.

So when it comes to urban planning, we have to find a system that works to alleviate the plight of slum dwellers. It must combine concerted action by local authorities, with that of national governments, civil society and the international community. If we fail to do anything about this, that figure is projected to double over the next 30 years to 2 billion, making the cauldron of misery and the potential impacts of disaster, twice as great as today.

Member States of the United Nations committed themselves to "achieve a significant improvement in the lives of at least 100 million slum dwellers by the year 2020" (Target 11, Goal No.7). UN-HABITAT is the agency mandated to help governments, municipalities and all urban actors find the way here.

It means too that we have to link urban planning to the global challenges created by the urbanisation of poverty, and the threats posed by disasters that result from climate change. We need to think globally and locally at the same time.

We have to be careful that powerful economic interests may feel threatened by planning recommendations; that plans may not reflect the priorities of community groups, especially when it comes to climate change mitigation, and thus that they might not reflect the priorities of politicians either.

With such issues in mind, we have, for example, started working with cities in Ecuador, Mozambique, the Philippines and Uganda to integrate climate change

concerns into their planning processes. At the national level, we are working with UNDP and UNEP.

Municipalities, communities, and states all engage in planning. And we therefore work at the national and local level at the same time so that local processes become part of a country's national processes and priorities.

Communication of problems, especially those like climate change impacts expected in a long time hence, is a key to successful planning.

In this new urban age, many mega-cities around the world loom as giant potential disaster traps. In sub-Saharan Africa, slum dwellers constitute over 62 percent of the urban populations. In south Asia, the figure is close to 50 percent. Everywhere it is the urban poor who live in places no-one else would dare set foot - along beaches and river estuaries prone to flooding, alongside slopes vulnerable to landslides after heavy rains. They live in shaky structures that would be flattened the instant disaster hit, causing untold loss of life and destruction.

As UN-HABITAT plays a more and more active role in humanitarian crises around the world, we work as one UN ever more closely with our sister agencies through our seat on the Executive Committee of Humanitarian Agencies (ECHA), as well through as our participation in the Inter Agency Standing Committee working groups in Geneva.

On the question of a breakthrough for energy conservation in new housing:

She cited the example: UN-HABITAT and UNEP is developing an exciting new project with the governments of Burundi, Kenya, Rwanda, Tanzania and Uganda on *Promoting energy efficiency in buildings in East Africa*.

As 40 percent of the total national energy consumption is used in buildings, this project will save at least 10 percent of that energy – an amount sufficient to cover the total energy needs of Rwanda and its neighbour, Burundi.

With UNEP we are setting up a city network for energy efficient buildings so that cities in the developing world can benefit from the latest thinking and the best ideas.

Finally, on the urban transport question and other action at the local level:

How we plan, manage, operate and consume energy in our cities is the key driver behind the phenomenon of global warming.

As we all know, urban transportation is the planet's fastest growing source of greenhouse gas emissions. As such, just one dollar spent reducing this is the

single most cost-effective measure local governments can take in climate change mitigation.

While cities must indeed “adapt” to the impacts of climate change within their boundaries, they remain in the driver’s seat in terms of continued efforts at mitigation. As I said earlier, planning is the key. There is still time to reduce the overall impact of this ecological catastrophe by better planning.

As cities sprawl, energy consumption vastly increases both from transport and housing energy distribution costs. Low-density, sprawling cities are two to three times more expensive to run and service than more densely populated cities.

UN-HABITAT promotes urban development strategies that integrate better land use planning, environmental conservation and transport systems. We promote public transport and non-motorized transport as alternatives to over-reliance on the private automobile.

With UNEP we serve on the steering committee of the *Eco-mobility alliance*. It represents a broad swathe of government, civil society and private sector to fashion better urban transportation and reduce its ecological footprint; we work directly with UNESCAP in Bangkok, and ECLAC in Santiago on UN Development Account projects. These promote more sustainable urban infrastructure investments in our cities, including those in urban transport and urban energy access; and we work under the inter-agency "UN-energy" group as part of a One UN to encourage sustainable energy consumption.

Many of the climate change problems begin and end in cities. Reducing urban poverty will thus make a huge contribution to reducing climate change and its impacts.