

The Role of Civil Society in Achieving Sustainable Urbanization

1.0 Introduction

In a rapidly urbanizing and changing world, the sustainable development and management of human settlements is dependent on the principles of enablement, participation and partnerships involving a wide range of actors working together for the development of human settlements. The United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-HABITAT) is mandated by the UN General Assembly to promote socially and environmentally sustainable towns and cities with the goal of providing adequate shelter for all. UN-HABITAT cannot meet its mandate without the active engagement of a diverse range of actors, including those from civil society. An enhanced engagement with Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) will help UN-HABITAT to scale up its operations and become more attuned and responsive to citizens' concerns.¹

2.0 UN-Habitat's Definition of Civil Society²

UN-Habitat has defined Civil Society Organization as individuals and organizations acting voluntarily and on a non-profit basis to address specific issues of concern, and those working to create significant change by overcoming obstacles in the daily lives of people. These organizations have the following characteristics in common:

- An agreed purpose for their existence;
- A recognized legal status;
- Representation by democratically elected members.

The following UN-HABITAT Partners can be grouped under Civil Society Partners:

- Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs)
- Community-Based Organizations (CBOs)
- Professional Associations
- Religious Organizations
- Co-operatives
- Trade Unions:
- Academies and Institutions
- Human Solidarity Groups:.
- Women Groups:.
- Youth:

3.0 UNEP's Definition of Civil Society³

¹ UN-HABITAT (2009). Draft - UN-HABITAT's Civil Society Organization Engagement Strategy. UN-HABITAT

² Partners and Youth Section (2005). UN-HABITAT – Partners and Youth Section – Terms of Reference. UN-HABITAT

³ www.unep.org/civil_society/major_groups/index.asp

UNEP is also mandated to work with partners and believe that the commitment and involvements of civil society is critical to the effective implementation of the objectives, policies and mechanisms in the field of environment and development. In 1992, at the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) or Earth Summit, Governments agreed on the following definition of Major Groups:

- Farmers
- Women
- The Scientific and Technological Community
- Children and Youth
- Indigenous Peoples and Their Communities
- Workers and Trade Unions
- Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs)
- Business and Industry
- Local Authorities

4.0 Civil Society within the UN System⁴

The United Nations system has realized the importance of partnering with the increasingly global civil society. Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and other civil society organizations (CSOs) are UN system partners and valuable to the overall success of the UN's interventions. CSOs play a key role at major United Nations Conferences and are indispensable partners for UN efforts. Civil society are consulted on UN policy and programme matters and the UN organizes and hosts, on a regular basis, briefings, meetings and conferences for civil society representatives who are accredited to UN offices, programmes and agencies.

Two main manners through which the UN interacts with civil society is through the NGO Section of the Department of Public Information (DPI) and the United Nations Non-Governmental Liason Service (NGLS). The NGO Section of DPI oversees partnerships with associated NGOs and provides a wide range of information services to them. These include weekly NGO briefings, communication workshops, an annual NGO conference and an annual orientation programme for newly associated NGOs. NGLS provides a UN system-civil society interface and facilitates a number of innovations to UN system polices and practices. It promotes partnerships between the United Nations and civil society by providing information, advice, expertise and support services. Both these institutions are part of the UN's effort to strengthen dialogue and win public support for economic and social development.

In order for civil society organization to be a part of this system, they must register with UNDESA. They then can apply for consultative status with the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC).

⁴ www.un.org/en/civilsociety/

5.0 UN-Habitat's Policy on Collaborating With Civil Society

The Habitat Agenda is the main political and substantive document that came out of the Habitat II Conference in Istanbul, Turkey 3 to 14 June 1996. Adopted by the Member States at what was called the City Summit, the Habitat Agenda contains over 100 commitments and 600 recommendations on human settlements issues. Many recommendations are meant to exploit fully the potential contribution that partnerships can make to UN-HABITAT's work. The concept of partnerships was also recognized as the cornerstone of the document and for the first time, partners from the civil society were allowed to make contributions at formal sessions of a United Nations conference.

The Habitat Agenda clearly states that partnerships among countries and among all actors within countries from public, private, voluntary and community based organizations, the cooperative sector, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and individuals are essential to the achievement of sustainable human settlements development and the provision of adequate shelter for all. Partnerships can integrate and mutually support objectives of broad based participation through, *inter alia*, forming alliances, pooling resources, sharing knowledge, contributing skills and capitalizing on the comparative advantages of collective actions. These processes can be made more effective by strengthening civil society organizations at all levels. Every effort must be made to encourage the collaboration and partnership of all sectors of society and among all actors in decision-making processes, as appropriate. The Habitat Agenda also commits to promoting responsive international cooperation between public, private, non-profit, nongovernmental and community organizations.

UN-HABITAT has also recognized the need to play an enhanced leadership and catalytic role in promoting sustainable urbanization. The agencies Medium Term Strategic and Institutional Plan (MTSIP) overall strategic goals are to "support governments and their development partners to achieve more sustainable urbanization." It aims to promote policy and institutional reform and impact at scale. UN-HABITAT will play a strengthened catalytic role, emphasizing partnerships and the development of a new enhanced normative and operational framework.

Given that explicit recognition by the Governing Council and the MTSIP it is now clear that the civil society are playing a significant role in UN-Habitat's formal proceedings. They therefore play a significant role in the 6 Focus Areas of the MTSIP. These will be further elaborated below

6.0 UNEP's Policy on Collaborating With Civil Society

In 1973 UNEP first promoted the policy of civil society engagement by setting up an NGO Section which was charged with coordinating UNEP's programmatic activities with parallel efforts of NGOs. In 1974, an independent coalition of environmental NGOs was established as the Environment Liaison Centre International to connect groups around

the world with the work of UNEP. ⁵

In 1992 at the UN Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) civil society became a full player in the global decision-making arena. This is legitimized as Agenda 21, Chapter 28, calls on UNEP to raise “general awareness and action in the area of environmental protection through collaboration with the general public, non-governmental entities and intergovernmental institutions.”⁶

The past years have witnessed an acceleration of consultations and collaborative thinking on how UNEP should be working with civil society. Global and regional meetings have been convened with civil society representatives to gather their views on engagement with UNEP. Electronic consultations have also been conducted. In this endeavour, it is clear that the way forward is to build stronger bonds and to promote respect for the cultural diversity among the major groups engaged with UNEP.

Governing Council Decisions 21/19 and SSVII.5, adopted in 2001 and 2002 respectively, provided the institutional endorsement for the active participation of civil society in shaping UNEP’s priorities. The resulting strategy for enhancing civil society engagement, presented to Governing Council in 2003, was based on three pillars of engaging civil society at a policy level, engaging civil society at a programmatic level, and strengthening institutional management within UNEP to meet these ends⁷

In 2004, the Major Groups and Stakeholders branch was established to help deliver the strategy of civil society engagement including all the Major Groups (outlined above in Section 3.0). The Major Groups are critical for the success of the Programme of Work 2010-11, as they raise awareness and disseminate information to a wider audience. Therefore UNEP’s is currently researching ways on how best the Major Groups can help *implement* the Programme of Work 2010-11.⁸

7.0 Areas of Intervention

7.1 UN-HABITAT’s Medium-Term Strategic and Institutional Plan’s (MTSIP’s) Six Focus Areas⁹

- Focus Area 1: Effective advocacy, monitoring and partnerships
- Focus Area 2: Promotion of participatory urban planning, management & governance
- Focus Area 3: Land and housing
- Focus Area 4: Environmentally sound basic urban infrastructure & services

⁵ UNEP (2003). Enhancing Civil Society Engagement in the Work of the United Nations Environment Programme: Strategy Paper. Presented at the 22nd session of the Governing Council Global Ministerial Environment Forum

⁶ UNEP (2003). Enhancing Civil Society Engagement in the Work of the United Nations Environment Programme: Strategy Paper. Presented at the 22nd session of the Governing Council Global Ministerial Environment Forum

⁷ Stoddart, Hannah (2009). Enhancing the Role of Major Groups and Stakeholders in the Implementation of UNEP’s Programme of Work 2010-11

⁸ Stoddart, Hannah (2009). Enhancing the Role of Major Groups and Stakeholders in the Implementation of UNEP’s Programme of Work 2010-11

⁹ UN-HABITAT. (2007). Medium-Term Strategic and Institutional Plan: Supplementary Report. Presented at the 21st session of UN-HABITAT’s Governing Council

- Focus Area 5: Strengthened human settlements finance systems
- Focus Area 6: Excellence in management delivers MTSIP planned results effectively and efficiently

7.2 UNEP's 6 Priority Areas¹⁰

- Climate Change
- Disasters and Conflicts
- Ecosystem Management
- Environmental Governance
- Harmful Substances and Hazardous Waste
- Resource Efficiency – Sustainable Production and Consumption

8.0 The UN's Role in Enabling Civil Society¹¹

The UN is aware that they cannot achieve the objective of sustainable urbanization alone. They must collaborate with their civil society partners in order to make a significant impact globally. Above the role of civil society in achieving sustainable urbanization has been discussed. However civil society requires support from UN-Habitat and the following actions are some of the ways in which the UN can support these organization

The following are some of their responsibilities:

- a) Strengthening the capacities of civil society to better meet UN-HABITAT's and UNEP's mandate at all levels. This strengthens the civil society's knowledge, effectiveness and builds on a common ground of understanding to better meet the challenges of sustainable urbanization.
- b) Engaging civil society to influence policies through policy-dialogue relating to the UN policies and strategies and in so doing promoting a sense of ownership and creating synergy for programme needs and strategies.
- c) Facilitating civil society in dialogues with other partners, for the effective delivery of projects and programmes, building on information sharing among actors in the civil society and helping to inform on proven approaches and methodology within the sector.
- d) Encouraging civil society dialogue and influence in governmental policy-making at national and local levels and thereby taking into consideration relevant sectors of the society and building political will and public acceptance to tackle issues of sustainable urbanization

¹⁰ Stoddart, Hannah (2009). Enhancing the Role of Major Groups and Stakeholders in the Implementation of UNEP's Programme of Work 2010-11

¹¹ UN-HABITAT (1998). A Guide For All Partners. UN-HABITAT.

- e) Up-scaling of the UN's work through the effective utilization of civil society capacities and influence at the national and local level. This will increase the effectiveness of the UN's interventions by utilizing the already existing capacities of civil society such as participatory planning and implementation, as well as other methods that target major vulnerable groups.

9.0 Civil Society's Role in Sustainable Urbanization

As mentioned above, civil society plays an important and substantial role in achieving sustainable urbanization. In general, civil society has the responsibility to:

- a) Provide the link to the local communities and organizations
- b) Up-scale the interventions of international organization
- c) Improve awareness of and educate the public on sustainable urbanization issues through the dissemination of information, publications and all pertinent materials
- d) Provide scientific, law and policy expertise in their relevant areas
- e) Implement projects in their respective areas
- f) Adapt global work programmes to national and local realities
- g) Act as watchdogs through advocacy and fostering accountability

In more specific terms, there are two types of civil society partners, those that have a normative capacity and those that have an operational capacity.¹²

The following are some responsibilities of normative or awareness and advocacy partners:

- Ensure a broad geographic representation,
- Show a commitment to assisting those emerging national and regional organizations to become part of their networks; and,
- Assign representatives who have the representation mandate of their constituencies;
- Have a recognized legal status with democratically adopted statutes,
- Equal and just representation in the governing of the organization and its members,
- Serve through established headquarters, and
- Have appropriate mechanisms for accountability and sufficient resources to ensure the effective flow of communication.

The next set of responsibilities lie with the operational or implementation partners:

¹² UN-HABITAT(2003). UN-HABITAT's Policy on Partnerships with Civil Society Organizations.UNHABITAT

- Established standards and capacities in the technical, managerial, administrative and financial areas,
- Outreach capacity,
- Internal democratic and transparent governance structure,
- Legal status,
- A good performance record,
- Accountability mechanisms,
- Equal and just representation in governing of the organization and its members, Representation of and credibility with the local community and an existing infrastructure.