



Interactive panel discussion: Cities as drivers of sustainable development

ECOSOC Chamber, 27 May 2014, 15:00 – 17:00

INFORMAL SUMMARY

Highlights and recommendations

- Sustainable urbanization should be **integrated in national policies and projects** in order to achieve the goals of the post-2015 development agenda.
- Urban planning and management should go beyond urban boundaries to improve **rural-urban connectivity** through investments in better infrastructure for transportation and communication, developing supply chains to create market opportunities for rural producers, and taking into account the needs and priorities of people living in rural areas.
- **Smart urban design** promotes walking, prioritizes bicycle networks, creates dense networks of streets and paths, supports high quality transits, promotes zoning for mixed use of neighborhoods, matches density to transit capacity, and creates energy efficient buildings and community infrastructure.
- Leveraging the power of **science, technology, and innovation** is crucial to harness new ideas and strategies to transform cities.
- **Human rights norms and values** should be reflected within the sustainable development framework.
- Placing **creativity, innovation, education and integrated resource management** approaches at the heart of urban renewal and planning can lead to more sustainable, liveable, safer and productive cities offering a better quality of life.
- Achieving sustainable development and urbanization requires **education** to change the way individuals, professionals and societies think and act.
- **Culture** is a driver of sustainable urban development and management. Cultural heritage, cultural and creative industries, arts and crafts, sustainable cultural tourism, culture-led urban revitalization and cultural infrastructure can serve as strategic tools for poverty alleviation, revenue generation and inclusive economic development, attracting investment and ensuring green, locally-based, stable and decent jobs. Furthermore, shared urban public spaces where creativity fosters social engagement, inclusion and security need to be promoted.
- UN Habitat could mobilize **biologists** to recode the negative capabilities of cities into positive ones.
- Governments should take a leadership role in managing the conflicts of interests between multiple stakeholders **partnering for development**.

Rapid urban growth in recent years, have been accompanied by numerous **challenges** in the areas of security and safety; water management; employment; access to technology; housing; infrastructure and transport systems. However, the potential of cities as drivers of sustainable



development, highlighted in the outcome document of the Rio+20 Conference, identified the numerous contributions of urbanization, if effectively managed, as a transformational force to integrating the economic, social, and environmental dimensions of sustainable development. Cities have been identified as an **opportunity** for investment, spaces in which development objectives at the national and local levels can be achieved and where global poverty can be eradicated. However, a “business as usual” approach to the development of cities will not be enough to keep up with the rapid pace of urbanization in the next coming decades. Cities need to be not only environmentally, but also economically and socially sustainable. To harness the full potential of cities as agents of development will require effective governance institutions and sound political leadership, inclusive participatory mechanisms, inclusion of rural-urban dynamics within development priorities, advancing multi-stakeholder partnerships and prioritizing environmental sustainability. **India’s** new Government plans to build 100 new cities, using latest technology and infrastructure, across the country to create a well-disbursed network of cities that are economically, socially and environmentally sustainable.

Urban-rural integration remains a big challenge in many countries. To address this challenge, **China** is considering reforms in some areas such as land, household registration and financial system to facilitate movement of productive resources between rural and urban areas. In addition, **China** is stepping up efforts to strengthen basic public service delivery mechanisms between urban and rural areas.

In order to address the interrelated challenges of urbanization and maximize the contributions of cities to development, cities must develop the capacity to produce sustainable solutions through efficient **governance institutions** and **effective political leadership**. **Urban governance** is an essential component to effectively manage cities, as the national, local, and regional governments plays a strategic role in guiding economic, social, and environmental policy decisions to sustain the quality of urban areas. It is essential that policies and decision making are also centered on the local conditions and viewed in the current economic and social contexts. For example, in **China**, the adoption of a new growth model prioritizes improving local governance to adapt new urbanization requirements that reflect the landscape of the country’s urban areas.

Urban design is an important element of sustainable urbanization. Superblocks with massive highways lead to widespread use of automobiles which create congestion and increase the cost of living for low-income households. **Sustainable community models** can not only result in reduced greenhouse gas emissions, but also address the fiscal solvency issue of small towns due to lower operating and maintenance costs and more efficient public services. Design principles of such a city include developing neighborhoods that promote walking, prioritizing bicycle networks, creating dense networks of streets and paths., supporting high quality transits, zoning for mixed use of neighborhoods, matching density to transit capacity, and creating energy efficient buildings and community infrastructure. Furthermore, policies that identify how to



appropriately and effectively utilize **public space** are crucial to building the future landscapes of sustainable cities. For instance, in **Croatia**, the physical planning system regulates the space of urban areas and provides recommendations for social and economic development, enabling the country to sustainably develop urban areas. One of the major challenges to sustainable urbanization is that there is no professional license for urban design in the United States. There is a need to address the **isolated thinking among professionals**, such as architects, traffic engineers and civil engineers) to promote a holistic approach to urbanization.

Employment creation is a top priority for cities, as employment is the key to unlocking the necessary resources to generate economic and social development and enhance environmental sustainability. **Labour-intensive infrastructure investments** could be implemented using locally available resources and serve as an opportunity to generate three to five times more employment than conventional small-scale and medium-scale infrastructure methods in urban areas. **Cultural and creative industries, sustainable cultural tourism, and culture-led urban revitalization and cultural infrastructure** can serve as strategic tools for poverty alleviation, revenue generation, employment creation, and attracting investment for inclusive economic development. Furthermore, sound investments in **science, technology and innovation** can harness new ideas and strategies to transform the economic landscape of urban areas and facilitate long-term sustainable gains. Overall, proper policy support and integrated mechanisms can create new employment opportunities in urban areas, which will thus alleviate the pressures of informal job sectors, informal economies, and generate economic growth.

Adopting **participatory mechanisms** to facilitate **social engagement** is another necessary component to enable cities to achieve sustainable development initiatives. Sustainable urbanization requires the participation of the entire population and the **rights of all individuals** to be fully recognized. Mechanisms for participation and organization of citizens should be further strengthened and prioritize within policies and regulation of national government and intergovernmental institutions. Such mechanisms can provide a solution to the increasing issue of social inequity and further strengthen rural-urban dynamics to drive the sustainability of urban areas.

A vibrant **cultural life** and the quality of urban historic environments are key for achieving sustainable cities. Local governments should preserve and enhance these environments in harmony with their natural settings. **Culture-aware policies** in cities should promote respect for diversity, the transmission and continuity of values, and inclusiveness by enhancing the representation and participation of individuals and communities in public life and improving the conditions of the most disadvantaged groups.

In terms of the environmental dimension of development, there are still many pressing challenges to overcome, namely, inefficient management of water resources in urban areas; ecosystem and unsustainable consumption natural resources; and the coercive effects of climate



change. However, cities are a type of **socio-ecological system that can produce positive outcomes** that allow urban areas to contribute to environmental sustainability. There is an inherent need to utilize and build upon the dynamic features of cities that can re-orient the material and organizational ecologies of urban areas towards positive interactions with the biosphere's ecologies. Biologists had discovered a bacterium, when put in brown waters — a major challenge of cities—, produced molecules of plastic that were not only durable but also biodegradable. Another bacterium had the ability to purify the surrounding air when placed in concrete by depositing a substance that sealed off buildings and therefore greenhouse emissions. In addition, a UST-TSU building in Tsu City, **Japan** covered with photocatalytic tiles, has an air-purifying effect that is resistant to the accumulation of soot and can address the mass pollution produced by infrastructure and transportation. It is thus critical to harness and implement **green technologies** into the construction and design of cities in order to scale up energy efficiency and environmental sustainability.

Resources of any government will not be sufficient to fund the infrastructure requirement for urbanization. In this regard, tax incentives and credits and effective land management can help unleash the economic potential of cities to fund equitable cities. **Multi-stakeholder partnerships** between private and public sectors are a very important solution in the term of sustainable urbanization which can leverage financial resources, technology and innovation, crucial to transforming cities of today and in the future. Social partners need to be an integral part of public-private partnerships. It is fundamental that the local government should assume the leadership role in facilitating the exchange of experiences, new ideas and innovations as well as identifying cross effective solutions generated by the introduction of new technologies. Local government must also contribute to balancing conflicting interests of key stakeholders in order to build transparency and accountability. Such multi-stakeholder partnerships are thus an essential component in reinforcing the interlinkages between urbanization and achieving sustainable development in order to devise a truly holistic post-2015 agenda.

Sustainable development and urbanization can only be achieved if individuals, professionals and societies change the way they think and act. **Education** is central to achieving this change. It helps ensure that cities are socially just, ecologically sustainable, economically productive, politically participatory and culturally vibrant. **Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) of UNESCO** motivates learners to reduce their carbon footprint and choose more sustainable lifestyles.