General Assembly Second Committee


“Cities have the capability of providing something for everybody, only because, and only when, they are created by everybody.”

–Jane Jacobs

Over half of the world’s population currently lives in cities and by 2050 it is estimated that 66% of the global population will be urbanized. This reality has brought new international focus on providing assistance and capacity building for the management of cities. The United Nations (UN) has addressed issues related to cities and economic development since its inception and the UN Human Settlements Programme (UN-Habitat) is an embodiment of that effort. In many ways, improving city management helps to fulfil one of the basic premises established in the Charter of the United Nations, which states that the UN is determined “to promote social progress and better standards of life in larger freedom.” While there are a multitude of methods to promote sustainable human settlements, the General Assembly Second Committee often addresses issues related to energy, water, employment, and the environment.

Background

The roots of what is now UN-Habitat come from the creation of the United Nations Habitat and Human Settlements Foundation (UNHHSF) in 1975. Although its mandate was very limited, the UNHHSF was the first body dedicated to urbanization and helped developing countries by providing financial and technical support. In 1976, the first UN Conference on Human Settlements (Habitat-I) was held in Vancouver, Canada, and resulted in the creation of the direct predecessors to UN-Habitat, the United Nations Commission on Human Settlements and the United Nations Centre for Human Settlements. Given that most of the global population at that time was rural, it is unsurprising that these institutions were weak, poorly funded, and would remain that way for nearly twenty years.

5 Ibid.
6 Ibid.
7 Ibid.
The Second United Nations Conference on Human Settlements (Habitat-II) was held in Istanbul, Turkey in June of 1996.\(^8\) The international community was faced with a rapidly-changing reality that included much higher rates of urbanization – this led to the conference having two themes, "adequate shelter for all" and "sustainable human settlements development in an urbanizing world."\(^9\) The outcome of the conference, the *Istanbul Declaration on Human Settlements*, redefined the global outlook on addressing issues related to cities. The *Istanbul Declaration* recognized that not only are cities centers for culture and science, but that they also generate economic development and are intrinsically linked to rural areas.\(^10\) It also committed the international community to addressing issues related to the right to adequate and affordable housing, homelessness, unemployment, and the root causes of some of these issues, including a lack of adequate planning and infrastructure development.\(^11\) Included with the declaration was the *Habitat Agenda*, the framework for implementation that is still in place today, which includes international commitments on providing adequate shelter for all and creating sustainable human settlements.\(^12\)

After Habitat-II, the international community was galvanized around addressing these issues as never before. The *Istanbul Declaration* had strengthened the UN’s existing initiatives and allowed for major adjustments to take place after 1997.\(^13\) On January 1st, 2002, the UN General Assembly (UNGA) adopted A/RES/56/206, which for the first time established an independent program for addressing cities and urbanization, UN-Habitat.\(^14\) As UN-Habitat’s role was expanded, it began to partner with a huge variety of non-governmental organizations, civil society organizations, and other UN bodies as part of its broader effort to provide adequate housing for all.\(^15\)

**Current Issues**

Today, UN-Habitat is the principal body in the UN system for shelter, cities, and urbanization, and operates within its mandate is to “promote socially and environmentally sustainable towns and cities.”\(^16\) As cities grow in size and complexity, UN-Habitat has established numerous programs and initiatives in themes ranging from water and sanitation, energy, and mobility to legislation, governance, and planning and design.\(^17\) In spite of this, there are clear opportunities

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\(^9\) Ibid.
\(^11\) Ibid.
\(^14\) Ibid.
\(^15\) Ibid.
\(^16\) Ibid.
for improvement in Member States and UN-Habitat, especially in addressing environmental and economic issues.

*Sustainable Human Settlements*

As climate change and sustainable development have become core focus areas of the international community, the concept of sustainable human settlements has come to the fore. Chapter 7 of *Agenda 21*, a voluntary framework for sustainable development adopted at the 1992 UN Conference on Environment and Development, calls for “promoting sustainable human settlements development.”¹⁸ *Agenda 21* outlines that sustainable human settlements must provide adequate shelter for all, use land effectively, have effective sanitation and drainage systems, and use sustainable energy.¹⁹ In emerging economies, UN-Habitat has worked to promote sustainable cities through its Urban Low Emission Development Strategies project, which offers capacity building to local governments so that they can implement green initiatives.²⁰ Additionally, the negative environmental impact of slums, which often lack any sanitation infrastructure or proper housing, makes the Participatory Slum Upgrading Facility (PSUP) one of UN-Habitat’s most important initiatives.²¹ The PSUP is a partnership with the African, Caribbean and Pacific Group of States, the European Commission, and UN-Habitat that seeks to improve the lives of millions of slum dwellers in over 160 cities by providing policy and budgetary support to cities and helping with training and education.²² While these efforts have been effective, they come nowhere near addressing the whole environmental impact of cities. Infrastructure, including transportation, energy, and water infrastructure, remain a key challenge, especially in developing countries that often lack the capacity to develop effective infrastructure systems.

*Employment, Education, and Income Inequality*

In spite of many States struggling to providing housing and employment to all of the citizens flowing into their cities, the trend of urbanization shows no signs of stopping. Employment is among the most important concerns, but is also one of the hardest to address. Some cities, in partnership with the UN Capital Development Fund, have turned to microfinance, which consists of small loans made to individuals, as a way to provide economic opportunity that also increases the role of women in the economy.²³ This has had mixed results however, and some States now

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¹⁹ Ibid.
²² Ibid.
consider microfinance to be an ineffective tool. Education has proven to be a consistent method for providing long-term economic opportunity and the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization has increasingly worked with cities to provide quality learning environments in urban areas. Still, both national and local authorities in many Member States struggle to handle and ever-growing and increasingly diverse base of students, which has caused educational quality to suffer and, in some cases, for students to not have access to higher-levels of education. Too often, this lack of economic opportunity causes disparity in wealth, which has caused most cities to have increases in income inequality since the 1980s. This fact, combined with an increasing urban-rural divide, has become a major concern of the international community, and many consider new methods of city management to be the way to address income inequality and ensure employment.

Future Outlook

The Post-2015 Development Agenda

Since 2000, the international community has been focused on accomplishing the Millennium Development Goals, which included such lofty aspirations as eradicating extreme poverty and hunger and achieving universal primary education. These goals, accomplished or not, will expire at the end of 2015, and the international community has all but settled on the framework for the post-2015 development agenda. The Report of the Open Working Group of the General Assembly on Sustainable Development Goals listed what are likely to be adopted in September as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), including several items related to human settlements. The 12th goal is the most directly applicable, however, and calls for the international community to “make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable.” There are seven proposed targets within this goal, including everything from access to adequate, safe, and affordable housing to reducing the environmental impact of cities and creating more green and public spaces. The SDGs will represent a huge step forward in how the international community addresses cities, but they have already come under scrutiny as

24 Ibid.
26 Ibid.
28 Ibid.
31 Ibid.
32 Ibid.
the financial, technical, and logistical means of implementation for the SDGs have largely not been negotiated or agreed to. Without effective means of implementation, it is likely that the international community will struggle to make progress on the huge number of goals and targets proposed.

*The Third United Nations Conference on Human Settlements*

In *A/RES/66/207* the UNGA called for the third United Nations Conference on Housing and Sustainable Development (Habitat III) to be held in line with the conference’s bi-decennial cycle. Habitat III will take place in Quito, Ecuador in October of 2016, likely making it the first major international conference to take place after the adoptions of the SDGs. Member States were invited to submit national reports at the beginning of the planning process for the conference, and preparatory committees have begun meeting to establish the agenda and base documents for negotiation. Some of the major themes of the conference have already been selected, including the effects of urbanization on development, addressing cities’ impact on climate change, and how urbanization can address social integration and equality. More importantly, in *A/RES/67/216* the UNGA decided that the outcome of the conference would be a “concise, focused, forward-looking and action-oriented outcome document, which shall reinvigorate the global commitment to and support for housing and sustainable urban development” and be called the *New Urban Agenda*. It is important that Member States wishing to influence the *New Urban Agenda* work to do so now, in the lead-up to Habitat III.

**Focus Questions**

1. What near-universal urban problems can the UN help to address?
2. What aspects of city management are likely to garner general international agreement?
3. What problems do cities in your country have? Do you have a high rate of urbanization?
4. In that type of urban infrastructure does your country need the most improvement?
5. How has your country promoted sustainable human settlements?

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34 Ibid.
6. Are there any problems that you share with most of your region or bloc?

7. How should the international community address implementation of the SDGs and what should be included in the New Urban Agenda?
Works Cited


