



Sustainable Development for Cities

Transforming People's Lives, Leaving No One Behind

While cities are lauded as places of opportunity and engines of growth, they could create issues such as inequality and social exclusion if they are not well planned. **Maimunah Mohd Sharif**, Executive Director of the UN-Habitat, shares how the organisation works closely with developing cities to support them in achieving sustainable urban growth.

Cities are at the centre of economic growth worldwide, accounting for 80% of the global gross domestic product. Economies of scale and opportunities of agglomeration, realised by the concentration of people and economic activities, have the potential to transform cities into the loci of social progress and prosperity. However, if the process of urban development is not well planned, inequality and social exclusion are ever-present risks.

In fact, urban growth has become synonymous with slum growth in many

parts of the developing world. The multiplication of slums and informal settlements perpetuates disparities in opportunities especially for the poorest, exacerbating exclusion and poverty. This happens because cities are not expanding through a well-considered urban plan and land-use ordinance, but more frequently via informal land and housing developments that do not comply with official urban planning and management systems. This adversely impacts not just the people's lives, but also the sustainability of cities.



Maimunah Mohd Sharif is the United Nations Under-Secretary-General and Executive Director of UN-Habitat. Prior to her appointment in the UN-Habitat, she was the Mayor of the City Council of Penang Island. She championed Gender-Responsive Participatory Budgeting and Planning and was the first woman to be appointed as Seberang Perai Municipal Council President.





Village residents in Kilifi, Kenya were involved in the discussion for new maps that were produced after rounds of participatory mapping exercises.

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To help cities become more sustainable, both socially and economically, the United Nations General Assembly set up the United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-Habitat) in 1978 with the goal of providing adequate shelter for all and promoting policies for sustainable human settlements. For 40 years, UN-Habitat has been helping cities to develop holistic and evidence-based policies for adequate housing provision and sustainable urbanisation, using baseline data and clear indicators to track their progress. These indicators include the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) under the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, particularly Goal 11 to “make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable”. A detailed monitoring framework and accompanying tools such as the New Urban Agenda—an action-oriented document that provides guidelines and recommendations for sustainable development—enable local and national governments as well as other stakeholders to embark on a planned and sustainable path of urbanisation. The governments and private sector are encouraged to adopt these frameworks and guidelines in synergy with local and national policies.

Defining the Issues

One crucial part of the UN-Habitat’s work is studying and monitoring trends in global urbanisation and how cities and towns are growing, to gather data that sheds light

on the challenges at hand. The 2016 UN-Habitat Sample of 200 Cities revealed that unsustainable urbanisation triggers urban sprawls and low-density developments, resulting in high mobility costs and energy consumption. Cities consume over 70% of global energy production and contribute to about two-thirds of global greenhouse gas emissions.

Sample of 200 Cities also showed that homes and rental housing remain largely unaffordable, both in the developing and developed world, pushing those with low incomes towards slums and informal settlements. Today, some 1.6 billion people live in inadequate housing conditions globally, of which nearly one billion reside in slums and informal settlements, without access to basic services and security of tenure.

UN-Habitat’s data and research have also revealed that cities are consuming more land than needed to accommodate their growing populations, resulting in dramatically lowered residential population densities and fewer public spaces. There are two main reasons: an increase in land and housing speculation, and the difficulty faced by city governments to enforce urban legislation, plan and regulate urbanisation, protect public property, and ensure access to adequate and affordable housing. Cities often lack specialised knowledge and adequate data to respond effectively with evidence-based policies and programmes. Without data, capacity, and practical tools, some city governments may opt for “template” urban policies with stock solutions, which have limited benefits.

UN-Habitat collaborates closely with cities, mainly by supporting them with technical expertise to identify challenges and define the methodology, parameters and indicators to measure progress. In particular, UN-Habitat promotes an Integrated and Holistic Sustainable Urban Development Policy that brings together urban planning and design, legislation and municipal finance. Housing is also placed at the centre of urban policies and is supported by practical tools such as land readjustment and land-value sharing.



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Reforming Legislation to Unlock Land for Development in Banha

One example of how the UN-Habitat works with cities for concrete policy interventions is in Banha, north-eastern Egypt. Like many developing cities, Banha lacked effective urban laws and regulatory frameworks to deal with the challenges of urban development. Despite rapid urbanisation, the existing legal frameworks were outdated and irrelevant to the local context. This encouraged irregular land use and fragmentation, The affected the provision of infrastructure and basic services such as water, energy and sanitation, and led to sociopolitical and economic issues.

To promote capacity development in legislation, the UN-Habitat guided urban policy development in a participatory manner—not just by transferring international best practices, but supporting the local government to develop new urban laws that reflect local culture and practices. This involved several meetings, discussions and fieldwork sessions to understand the local situation. The UN-Habitat also conducted capacity building workshops to equip local officials with knowledge and skills to lead the legislation reform, which will help to unlock land for urban development, improve housing strategies and increase urban population density.

01 The UN-Habitat initiated the Bukoba Water Project in Tanzania, which improved residents' access to regular and clean piped water through rehabilitation of pipelines and construction of water tanks.

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Specifically, the UN-Habitat supported a land readjustment programme that helped the local government enact a new law to tax property developers and improve the city's street network. In exchange for formalised building permits and higher density developments, landowners released 30% of their land to the municipality. This resulted in increased land and property values, while also providing opportunities to develop affordable housing for urban communities, achieving one of the targets of SDG 11, which aims to ensure adequate safe and affordable housing and basic services for all, as well as to upgrade slums.

The project introduced an active consultation process that established clear channels of communication between lawmakers and constituents, leading to an unprecedented 98% consensus among the landowners for the application of the new law. It also improved all stakeholders' understanding of the problems associated with the existing legal framework, leading to the formulation of consensual alternative policy options. The Banha example illustrates the importance of secure tenure rights with legally recognised documentation, and the progress towards SDG 1, which aims to eliminate poverty in all its forms. Beyond Banha, the UN-Habitat has helped over 40 countries to reform their legal frameworks for urban projects as well.

Mapping Public Spaces in Nairobi

Similarly, the UN-Habitat has supported 12 countries to improve the lives of over 500,000 people through the Global Public Space Programme. Well-managed public spaces, though essential to improve the quality of urban life, have been neglected in many cities due to development pressures. Such was the case in Nairobi,

Kenya, before the UN-Habitat initiated a project to develop a city-wide public space strategy in 2012. This strategy combined physical work, technical guidance, capacity building and close stakeholder engagement.

The UN-Habitat provided Nairobi with technical advice and tools to improve policies, plans and designs for safer, more inclusive and accessible public spaces. The UN-Habitat's City-wide Public Space Assessment Tool, which enables cities to digitally map the distribution, location, connectivity, availability, accessibility, quality, comfort and safety of public spaces, revealed significant disparities in the provision of and access to such spaces across Nairobi. The city had an average of 3.9 m² of open public space per capita (2.5% of land allocated to open public space). This figure is expected to drop to 2.4 m² per person by 2030 if the city does not create new open public spaces for its growing population. However, the average public space per capita dropped to only 1.13 m² in Mathare and 0.61 m² in Dandora, which form a stark contrast with over 8.6 m² in the high-end neighbourhood of Westlands, less than 20 minutes away by car.

The situation has prompted the UN-Habitat experts to work with local groups, especially youths, to improve public spaces in slums and low-income areas such as Mathare and Dandora. In Dandora, the Dandora Transformation League collaborated with the UN-Habitat, City County of Nairobi and other key partners to adopt an innovative community-driven approach in rehabilitation and management of public spaces. The residents pay an appointed youth monthly, who will then be responsible for the regeneration and maintenance of their courtyard—a small unit in the neighbourhood—and the

01 Beyond Banha, participatory slum upgrading is also taking place in other areas such as Kilifi, Kenya, to improve the lives of the urban poor and make urbanisation more inclusive.



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adjacent public streets. Through this project, Dandora residents enjoy the creation of new public spaces, more vibrant street life, increased sense of personal safety and civic duty, economic opportunities for the youth and a general improvement of quality of life for residents. The project started with one courtyard in 2014 and has reached more than 120 courtyards in the neighbourhood today, engaging the youth in creating a better quality of life in their neighbourhood. It has also recently won the 2018 Dubai International Award for Best Practices for Improving the Living Environment.

The mapping of public spaces also revealed that dangerous and deserted areas inhibit people, particularly women and girls, from using and benefiting from them. The lack of pedestrian-friendly infrastructure also affected people's mobility and hence, their enjoyment of public spaces. Only 16% of the open public spaces in Nairobi are accessible by a 5-minute walk and 32% are reachable within a 10-minute walk. The unequal distribution of public space in the city compromises the quality of life, particularly for disadvantaged communities.

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To address this issue, the UN-Habitat initiated a pilot project to redesign and rehabilitate selected public spaces. The Jeevanjee Gardens project emphasised a participatory approach that involved some 50 local organisations. These stakeholders worked with the UN-Habitat to improve the security, accessibility and appeal of the public park that was considered one of the most insecure places in the city centre. The project improved walkways, created cycling paths, installed public lighting and provided benches, public toilets and trash bins. Today, the place is safer and is thriving with 5,000



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daily visitors including women and girls. By achieving one of the targets of SDG 11—the provision of universal access to safe, inclusive and accessible, green and public spaces, in particular, for women and children, older persons and persons with disabilities—the Nairobi example illustrates how working towards the SDGs can make a positive impact on individual lives.

As seen from these examples, cities that focus on sustainable development can avoid the pitfalls of inequality and exclusion of vulnerable groups as they urbanise. The SDGs are also interlinked for holistic, integrated and sustainable development. While technical knowledge and tools have a big impact on the progress, what is even more crucial is the collaboration between different parties, to ensure that global, national and local agendas remain linked in a common objective towards sustainable urban growth. Only then can cities provide opportunities for everyone to prosper, leaving no one and no place behind. ●

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01 Jeevanjee Gardens in Nairobi is now a safe, accessible and comfortable public space for all.

02 Sunken Car Park in Nairobi is another vibrant and inclusive public space where people can enjoy skating on weekends.