

Background documents CC-Tomorrow's Habitat

MAIN FORCES AFFECTING URBAN CHANGE UN HABITAT AGENDA

Over the last several decades, global changes in the physical environment, in the economy, in institutional structures and in civil society have had significant impacts on urban areas.

Environmental challenges

The most important environmental concern now is climate change. Climate change will affect the basic elements of life for people around the world, including access to water, food production, health and the environment. Hundreds of millions of people are likely to suffer hunger, water shortages and coastal flooding as global warming increases. The poorest countries and people are most vulnerable to this threat.

Environmentally sustainable urbanization requires that:

- greenhouse gas emissions are reduced and serious climate change mitigation and adaptation actions are implemented;
- urban sprawl is minimized and more compact towns and cities served by public transport are developed;
- non-renewable resources are sensibly used and conserved;
- renewable resources are not depleted;
- the energy used and the waste produced per unit of output or consumption is reduced;
- the waste produced is recycled or disposed of in ways that do not damage the wider environment; and
- the ecological footprint of towns and cities is reduced.

Only by dealing with urbanization within regional, national and even international planning and policy frameworks can these requirements be met. Priorities and actions for economic sustainability of towns and cities should focus on local economic development, which entails developing the basic conditions needed for the efficient operation of economic enterprises, both large and small, formal and informal.

These include:

- reliable infrastructure and services, including water supply, waste management, transport, communications and energy supply;
- access to land or premises in appropriate locations with secure tenure;
- financial institutions and markets capable of mobilizing investment and credit;
- a healthy educated workforce with appropriate skills;
- a legal system which ensures competition, accountability and property rights;
- appropriate regulatory frameworks, which define and enforce non-discriminatory locally appropriate minimum standards for the provision of safe and healthy workplaces and the treatment and handling of wastes and emissions.

For several reasons, special attention needs to be given to supporting the urban informal sector, which is vital for a sustainable urban economy. The social aspects of urbanization and economic development must be addressed as part of the sustainable urbanization agenda. The Habitat Agenda incorporates relevant principles, including the promotion of:

- equal access to and fair and equitable provision of services;
- social integration by prohibiting discrimination and offering opportunities and physical space to encourage positive interaction;
- gender and disability sensitive planning and management; and
- the prevention, reduction and elimination of violence and crime.

Social justice recognises the need for a rights-based approach, which demands equal access to 'equal quality' urban services, with the needs and rights of vulnerable groups appropriately addressed.

The global use of oil as an energy source has both promoted urbanization, and its easy availability has allowed the emergence of low density and sprawling urban forms – suburbia – dependent on private cars. An oil-based economy and climate change are linked: vehicle and aircraft emissions contribute significantly to greenhouse gas emissions.

Responding to a post-oil era, in the form of public-transport and pedestrian-based movement systems, more compact cities, present new imperatives for planning. Urbanization modifies the environment and generates new hazards, including deforestation and slope instability, thus resulting in landslides and flash flooding. The world's one billion urban slum dwellers are more vulnerable, as they are usually unprotected by planning regulations.

Economic change

Processes of globalization and economic restructuring in recent decades have affected urban areas in both developed and developing countries. Particularly significant has been the impact on urban labour markets, which show a growing polarization of occupational and income structures. In developed countries, firms have sought lower production costs by relocating to developing countries, to less developed regions within the developed world, or even from inner city areas to suburbs.

Urban residents are disproportionately affected by global economic crises. The current global recession that began in 2008 has accelerated economic restructuring and rapid growth of unemployment in all parts of the world. One important effect of these economic processes has been the rapid growth in the informal economy in all urban centres, but particularly in developing countries. Future urban planning in both developed and developing countries will thus be taking place in a context of inequality and poverty and with high levels of informal activity.

Institutional change

Within the last three decades, there have been significant transformations in local government in many parts of the world, making them very different settings from those within which planning was originally conceived.

The most commonly recognized change has been the expansion of the urban political system from 'government' to 'governance', which in developed countries represents a response to the growing complexity of governing in a globalizing and multi-level context. In developing countries, the concept of governance has been promoted along with decentralization and democratization.

These shifts have had profound implications for urban planning, which has often been cast as a relic of the old welfare state model and as an obstacle to economic development and market freedom. Generally, urban planning is highly reliant on the existence of stable, effective and accountable local government, as well as a strong civil society. Many developing countries simply do not have these. Under such conditions, urban planning will continue to be ineffective.

Changes in civil society

Since the 1960s, there has been a growing unwillingness on the part of communities to passively accept the planning decisions of politicians and technocrats. Planners have come to recognize that planning implementation is more likely to be effective if it can secure 'community support'. Successful participatory planning is largely conditioned by broader state / civil society relations, and the extent to which democracy is accepted and upheld.

There has been a tendency in planning to assume a one-dimensional view of civil society and the role it might play in planning initiatives. The ideal of strong community based organizations, willing to debate planning ideas, may be achievable in certain parts of the world, but civil society does not always lend itself to this kind of activity. While organized civil society has been a characteristic of Latin America, it takes very different forms in Africa, the Middle East and much of Asia, where social networks that extend beyond kinship and ethnicity remain, to a large extent, casual, unstructured and paternalistic.

URBAN CHANGE

Changes in economic and governmental systems, in the nature of civil society, and in the nature and scale of environmental challenges, have all had major impacts on processes of urbanization and urban growth, and socio-spatial dynamics in urban settlements.

Urbanization and urban growth

The global urban transition witnessed over the last three decades has been phenomenal. While the period 1950–1975 saw population growth divided between the urban and rural areas of the world, the period since has seen the balance tipped dramatically in favour of urban growth. In 2008, for the first time in history, over half of the world's population lived in urban areas and by 2050 this will have risen to 70 per cent.

Urban socio-spatial change

Planners and urban managers have to increasingly contend with new spatial forms and processes. Socio-spatial change has taken place primarily in the direction of the fragmentation, separation and specialization of functions and uses in cities. In many poorer cities, spatial forms are largely driven by the efforts of low-income households to secure land that is affordable and in a reasonable location, often in peri-urban areas. This process is leading to new urban forms as the countryside begins to urbanize. In fact, the bulk of rapid urban growth in developing countries is taking place in the peri-urban areas. Large cities are spreading out, engulfing nearby towns, leading to continuous belts of settlement.