Transforming Cities into Catalysts for Sustainable Development

Cities are where the battle for sustainable development will be won or lost. Over half of the world’s people now live in cities. By 2050 that number is expected to grow to nearly 70 per cent and much of this growth will take place in Africa and Asia. As countries urbanize, so do their development challenges. Migrants seeking new opportunities flood into urban areas putting pressure on municipal coping capacity. Informal settlements grow, municipal services become overstretched, water reserves and air quality may be compromised, all of which disproportionately affect the poor and excluded.

But cities are also the engines of global economic growth and innovation, and a major driver for poverty reduction. And as the level of government closest to the people, municipalities have the capacity for transformative impacts on the lives and opportunities of citizens with provisions for decent housing, affordable and efficient transit, water and sanitation, waste management, adequate policing, access to green spaces, or support for employment, arts and culture. Cities will play a critical role in achieving the SDGs, with Goal 11 dedicated to "Make Cities and Human Settlements Inclusive, Safe, Resilient and Sustainable." UNDP is joining forces with UN-Habitat to provide policy support to governments to deliver on this goal, bringing expertise from local governance and inclusiveness to urban resilience, energy, waste management and transportation all part of the New Urban Agenda to be adopted at Habitat III (Quito, Ecuador, Oct. 2016). With sufficient support, strong leadership and integrated planning cities can be catalysts for this new agenda and for a sustainable pathway that promotes equitable and sustainable development.

Policy Recommendations

- **Support integrated planning to balance economic, social and environmental aspects**
  As cities sprawl they lock themselves into unsustainable patterns where jobs and people are far from one another, transportation costs and congestion are high, inequalities grow, and environmental impacts are greater. It is both essential and possible to reverse this trend but the shape of future cities must be guided proactively. And with much of the area of cities still to be built before 2030, better informed and sustainable urban planning represents an unparalleled opportunity to transform development. But local governments often have fragmented information and statistics, and traditional cost-benefit analyses may not sufficiently intersect with the considerations provided by environmental and social impact assessments. So winning the battle for sustainable development in cities requires robust tools and capacity support to guide city planners and provide a balanced picture of the social, environmental and economic costs, tradeoffs and benefits. UNDP works with governments at municipal and national levels to build their capacity for integrated planning for more inclusive, resilient and sustainable cities.

1 UN Secretary-General’s High Level Panel Report on the Post-2015 Development Agenda
**Enhance coordination and cooperation across levels and scales for longer term, more comprehensive planning and action**

It is no longer useful to see cities as discreet, confined geographical entities. Flows of goods, people, information, finance and natural resources within and between cities are highly interdependent. Existing urban governance systems are not designed or equipped to respond to these complex challenges. Municipal administrations are geographically bound, often to areas that are much smaller than key aspects of the urban system (i.e. water basins). Poor inter-coordination mechanisms and perverse incentives across sectors and scale stymy coordination and collaboration. Since urbanisation stands at the intersection of these diverse economic, social, political, cultural and environmental policy streams, guiding the urbanisation process requires good governance - good policies, good division of labour and coordination - horizontally across sectors and vertically across levels of government. It also requires good cooperation between government, private sector, social organisations and citizens. UNDP’s ability to bridge scales and stakeholder groups is one of its major advantages in working in the urban context and it is important to provide comprehensive policy support at multiple levels.

**Foster social innovation and public participation for increased accountability, with an emphasis on the poor and excluded**

In complex systems like cities, development practitioners are faced with complex challenges that require reconciling multiple sets of experience and interests across sectors, geographies, and disciplines, including government, private sector, civil society, community based organizations, political parties, and academia. UNDP supports social innovation by building or strengthening networks across all levels of relevant stakeholders. This entails fostering discussion, dialogue and analysis between stakeholders who do not usually interact or share information in an effort to build consensus around the root causes of and solutions to key urban problems, wherever possible. Through this process UNDP also builds technical and institutional capacity by supporting local stakeholders, (government officials, CSO representatives, community leaders, students, with special emphasis on the poor and excluded) to undertake core project work – analysis, field work, program development, strategy development. By working in partnership with organizations/ networks representing poor and excluded urbanites, UNDP helps to bring social and political legitimacy to the informal sector, migrants and urban poor, thereby combatting existing social stigmas and promoting greater transparency and accountability in urban local governance.

**Address inequalities in access to municipal services**

Even the best urban plans may fail and gaps and inequalities in service delivery are a sad reality for most cities. Slum dwellers, ethnic minorities, women and girls, people with disabilities, the informal labour sector and others are often, if unintentionally, excluded from the economic benefits and services of life in the city. UNDP supports capacity to capture and analyze population data and to develop inclusive and integrated response strategies and improve delivery to leave no one behind. UNDP also supports participatory processes to assess the key barriers to equitable service delivery (financial, technical) and to explore potential partnership arrangements for managing urban development with greater involvement of the private sector and other non-state actors including community leaders.

**UNDP Support: Promoting inclusive and sustainable urbanization**

UNDP promotes a vision in which urbanization is managed in a more equitable and sustainable way resulting in continuous improvement to social, economic and environmental well-being for people in towns and cities. UNDP’s experience underlines the need for innovative, interdisciplinary and cross-scale approaches to promoting inclusive, sustainable cities. This includes the following country level work:

**Policy advisory and advocacy**

UNDP aims to foster inclusive, sustainable urbanization through institutional change – shifts in organizations, law, social norms, that move toward greater inclusion of poor and excluded people.

- **In Egypt** UNDP is working with the city of Alexandria to develop a Strategic Urban Plan to guide development until 2032 and an Urban Management Strategy to ensure a sustainable long-term city development.
- UNDP is supporting **Guatemala City** to develop an employment strategy within its youth policy, to create better economic, training, health and recreational opportunities through public-private partnerships. Over 9800 youth have been trained in this project creating opportunities for the city’s most deprived areas find employment.

**Capacity development**

UNDP helps strengthen capacities for designing and implementing urban sustainable development at the national, municipal and civil society levels.

- In Bangladesh the Urban Partnerships for Poverty Reduction programme is improving the lives of 3 million urban poor, addressing multi-dimensional poverty by supporting slum dwellers to identify, prioritize, contract and manage urban works (e.g. latrines, foot paths, drains) and offering apprenticeships and grants for small business and education.
- UNDP supported the **City of Belgrade** and ministries in Serbia, to improve the Sustainable Urban Transport planning process to better integrate social, economic and environmental aspects.

**Knowledge & South-South cooperation**

UNDP leverages its extensive network and experience to facilitate South-South collaboration between countries, regions and municipal governments.

- In 1995 UNDP launched the World Alliance of Cities Against Poverty to mobilize governments and all sectors of society to confront urban poverty and to enable local officials to exchange and fast-track tested solutions for improving living conditions. After nearly 2 decades of support, the Alliance has grown to over 900 municipal members and as a result of its success the programme has now been transferred to the UN Office for South-South Cooperation to be continued.