

Statement of the Executive Director, UN-HABITAT On the occasion of World Habitat Day 2009

We have chosen the theme, *Planning our Urban Future*, for World Habitat Day 2009 for a simple but very important reason: In many parts of our world urban planning systems have changed very little. Indeed, they are often contributors to urban problems rather than tools for human and environmental improvement.

It is clear to us at UN-HABITAT and to our partners in government, municipalities, and at community level that current approaches to planning must change and that a new role for planning in sustainable urban development has to be found.

Yet to blame urban planners and their plans for our urban problems is like turning back the clock and going back in history to a time when no-one could have foreseen the problems we now face.

It is a fact that slums are the worst manifestations of urban poverty, deprivation, and exclusion in the modern world. And it is a fact that today we have the technological know-how such as satellite-based Geographical Information Systems – undreamed of until not so long ago – the power, and the money to plan effectively for the targets established in the Millennium Declaration.

Many of the ills of urbanisation have been conveniently left at the doorstep of urban planners and planning. However, there are many reasons why that job may not result in a better living environment for all. In many countries planning has not been very powerful and developers, the private sector and individual citizens – who do not have the public good uppermost in their considerations – are relatively unconstrained in their activities. Powerful economic interests may feel threatened by planning recommendations. Politicians may not have an adequate sense of the public interest or plans may not reflect their priorities. Alternatively, planners may not have adequate training and their advice may be good or bad, taken or ignored. Plans may be unrealistic, given their resource requirements. Plans may not reflect the priorities of community groups. On top of all this, the implementation authority may be fragmented among jurisdictions.

In trying to correct these deficiencies, planning has opened itself to public participation and preference and to taking a more realistic view of the limits of the possible, while factoring in the resources likely to be available for implementation.

Yet, in today's world, despite many success stories that have come about due to planning's ability to reinvent itself, it would appear that the planning function still falls short in some parts of the world. Slums are multiplying, urban crime is rampant, development keeps sprawling, transport efficiency is declining, energy costs are rising, and health problems are increasing, while many citizens are walling themselves off from others. What's happening here? Has planning failed and does it need to be replaced by a more effective function?

Actually, there is no replacement for planning. It is a function that results from our uniquely human ability to anticipate consequences. As the world grows more and more urban, it is vital that, as governments accept urbanisation as a positive trend, planning fulfils its proper role in guiding urban development when it comes to improving access to services, and economic and social opportunities.

Urban planning will therefore have to continue to adapt so it is able to carry out its much-required effective role in shaping a positive urban future.