

“Expert Group Meeting on Sustainable Urban Development in Asia and the Pacific: Towards a New Urban Agenda”

2-3 December 2014, United Nations Conference Centre, Bangkok, Thailand

SUMMARY OUTCOME REPORT

Background

The EGM, “**Sustainable Urban Development in Asia-Pacific: Towards a New Urban Agenda**”, was held in Bangkok, 2-3 December 2014 in order to share expert knowledge on urban issues in the region, and to consult with regional partners regarding the content and scope of the sixth Asia-Pacific Urban Forum, to be held in 2015.

The Sixth Asia-Pacific Urban Forum (APUF-6) will take place in 2015, back-to-back with the High-level Regional Preparatory Meeting to Habitat III for Asia-Pacific. The outcomes of both APUF-6 and the High-level Regional Preparatory Meeting for Habitat III for Asia-Pacific will feed directly into the Habitat III preparatory process and inform the drafting of its outcome document. This preparatory expert group meeting brought together international experts in urban development, representatives of civil society, academia and networks of local governments throughout the Asia-Pacific region in order to further multi-stakeholder dialogue and to ensure an inclusive process for APUF. The meeting was organized in line with the mandate provided to regional commissions by General Assembly Resolutions 67/216 and 68/239 and in response to ESCAP Resolution 70/12.

The EGM was organized with the following objectives:

- Identify and discuss emerging issues related to sustainable urban development in Asia and the Pacific.
- Identify and discuss priority issues for the region in relation to the post-2015 Development Agenda and Habitat III, which could be discussed at APUF-6.
- Engage key regional partners in the organization of APUF-6.

KEY POINTS FROM THE DISCUSSION

Session 1: Introduction

This session provided an overview of the preparatory process for Habitat III and the way in which the New Urban Agenda is being shaped, as well as its relationship to the Post-2015 Development Agenda. Discussion took place on the emerging SDGs and their relevance to urban development, and specifically the proposed ‘urban SDG’. Additional discussion took place on previous Habitat Agendas, their successes and failures, as well as what would be “new” about the “New Urban Agenda”.

- The participants learned that Habitat III would be held in Quito, Ecuador. This process would be preceded by 3 Prepcoms – the final one will be in Indonesia. This would present a positive opportunity for the Asia-Pacific. It was noted that the zero draft of the Habitat III outcome document would be shared with member states by April of 2016.
- The Habitat III secretariat (via skype) outlined the importance of a consultative process for the urban agenda. This included at the regional level. Furthermore, Habitat III was being developed through four key pillars: *Knowledge* – preparations of national reports, regional reports and the global report, as well as other research and data collection; *Engagement* - support for the participation, partnership, advocacy and outreach of the Conference; *Policy* – through high-level regional or thematic meetings; and *Operations* – managing the preparatory process.
- “Means of implementation” (MOI) was highlighted as a key issue in the discussion. This went beyond finance and technology to governance arrangements, capacity and an inclusive agenda. MOI is important for urban poor groups, NGOs, and local governments alike. The EGM heard that implementation of a new urban agenda, and the urban SDGs, would have greater success if its development was inclusive and based on partnership.
- Discussion took place that the NUA processes should not be overly focussed on policy prescription. There should also be emphasis on successful implementation of projects and the lessons from “living” and “successful” practices.

Session 2 – Sustainable Urban Development in the Post-2015 Development Agenda

The SDG process including the draft “Urban Sustainable Development Goal” (Goal 11) was presented. The central issue and question in the session was whether an urban SDG is helpful for the Habitat Agenda. Key questions included: Can all of the urban challenges be encompassed through the “Urban SDG”? Is there sufficient scope for urban criteria within the other SDGs?

- Participants raised the benefits and drawbacks of a specific urban SDG. Though an urban SDG would give great visibility to the urban agenda it could not possibly encompass all urban needs and priorities. While the absence of such a goal may be seen as a weak urban outcome, in reality almost all SDGs could be seen as urban concerns. The meeting heard that although a great deal of positioning and decision making had yet to take place on the SDGs, APUF should speak to the place of cities in the post-2015 development agenda through a specific session (at least).
- Participants from civil society, in particular, noted that key goals such as Goal 1 regarding poverty reduction or discussions regarding “Means of Implementation” would be focus points for local governments and urban areas.
- Participants noted that a key challenge with the MDGs, as well as the nascent SDGs, is who is accountable? While national governments will set the goals, local government and non-government actors would have a primary role in their achievement. More attention and support needed to be directed at the local level and those working at the local level. For

APUF, attention should be paid to this key issue, and any gaps, in the accountability system for the achievement of the SDGs.

Session 3 – Economic Development

This session identified and discussed key priority issues related to economic development. The region's cities have undergone profound economic transformation but this has come at a cost. Not all have benefitted and the environmental outcomes are increasingly serious. Cities must develop economically to meet needs, but quality of growth should be a priority.

- In order for cities to be harnessed as economic drivers of modern economies, and for their role to be properly recognised, the EGM noted that new types of institutions were needed to bridge the gap between policy making, financing and urban development. Current, orthodox institutions, structures and methods are unable to respond to urban challenges in timely and appropriate ways. New institutional frameworks or structures which bridge the gaps between silos (such as transport planning and urban planning) as well as between the national and local scale would be of particular interest when thinking about how institutional innovation could take place.
- Participants cited infrastructure as a fundamental factor in underpinning future economic growth for cities and their regions. However, infrastructure types must also be considered in terms of holistic benefits. Focusing on materials that do not “lock in” embodied energy (i.e. using alternative construction materials and design) as well as focusing on projects that underscore compact urban growth are more desirable than mega-projects that facilitate car usage, for example.
- Representatives of the private sector stated that the city is now a crucial investment vehicle. Urban areas not only bring together many potential consumers, but the economic multipliers of operating in these contexts are now well known. A challenge is ensuring that the investment outcomes are equitable, and sustainable. The needs and the scale of financing needs in Asia and the Pacific require new financing methods. But, in order to build low-carbon futures financing needed to include sustainability as a key goal.
- Participants expressed support for increasing local authorities' access to financing, and overcoming finance gaps at the local level. Addressing these issues would be useful at APUF.
- Many cities are suffering from human resource and skill gaps, in particular in green urban planning, but also regarding the uses of new technologies. Cities in Asia-Pacific have the potential to “leap frog” more orthodox practices or policies that have been used elsewhere in the past. How do we develop and share this knowledge, and apply technologies that are ‘fit for purpose’ and scale?
- The case studies of Hong Kong and Singapore are often cited as examples that pair both urban efficiency and economic success in the region. How can examples such as these be

scaled for other parts of the region? Participants noted the need to bridge the disconnect between an urban agenda and workable and adapted practices in order to bring sustainability to Asia-Pacific's cities. APUF, and the high-level intergovernmental meeting to be held in Indonesia, should speak directly to how to close this gap and create new visions for the region's urban future.

Session 4 – Governance

Governance is essential to the development of sustainable cities. In particular it was recognised that there was an urgent need to move beyond past and current policy fragmentation, and towards holistic and sustainable frameworks. In recent decades the number of actors with a role in governing cities has multiplied. Rather than seeing this as creating confusion and unpredictability, such diversity needed to be better harnessed.

- Participants noted the myriad of urban governance challenges within the Asia-Pacific region – in particular the difficulty of enabling the poorest to participate or fully contribute to decisions or policy implementation. Understanding *for whom* governments govern, was considered important to participants. Participants also stated that sustainable cities were also in the interest of private enterprise, because societal and economic gains were intrinsically linked.
- Disciplinary or functional divisions between city departments, professions and administrations (“silos”) were cited as posing real barriers to efficient and effective governance. Many argue that governance methods that take territorial approaches to urban challenges should be used: the problem should define the territorial scope and engagement of stakeholders, rather than the other way around.
- Underlying almost all governance challenges are inefficient systems of land management, which result in affordability problems for the middle class and the poor, and often leave the most vulnerable populations without secure tenure arrangements. The challenge of data availability is also crucial as land recording is still haphazard. The Global Land Tool Network (GLTN) has done much work on new tenure arrangements for cities, and land use planning will be important to the new urban agenda and regional discussions.
- Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) and e-Governance, were also noted as important tools for changing the way that decision-making and urban planning takes place. Current planning was seen as failing by making pre-determined choices for people, rather than providing the basis for ideas and exchange.
- Participants remarked that traditional or customary governance models, as they are practiced in some parts of the Pacific sub-region, are “hybrid” systems that combine customary or non-formal practices with formal systems. They could be of interest for parts of the Asia-Pacific region. Innovative forms of governance such as these could be learned from.

Session 5: Social Development in Urban Areas

This session identified and discussed key priority issues in relation to social development. Cities in the region are becoming more socially complex over time. The emergence of the world's largest middle class represents a significant opportunity for new social relations but also a great challenge in meeting expectations. The region must also manage growing inequalities and close gaps. Rising prosperity throughout the region has not translated into the social gains expected, and economic growth has not brought about secure employment, especially for youth. Future ageing will present significant new challenges.

- Participants noted the continued significance of the urban informal sector for the region's urban areas. The informal sector should no longer be seen as a manifestation of unplanned urban growth, or as a "market failure" but a policy opportunity. Very few cases of officially sanctioned informal commerce or housing have been able to take hold in the region. There is an urgent need to re-look at the informal sector and its role in future urban development in the region.
- Participants noted that there was evidence of greater inequality in the region's cities. While poverty reduction/eradication should stay as a priority for policymakers, inequality was of great concern and more needed to be done to address growing gaps.
- Women and youth more often than not had the more vulnerable livelihoods. In many cities women increasingly had to balance both wage-earning and domestic roles. Youth continued to lack decent access to education or training, and typically were unable to accumulate assets. Migrants were also identified as a growing and vulnerable group in many cities. Intergenerational poverty is evident across the region's cities.
- Participants noted that the private sector is also increasingly providing services traditionally provided by the state but that greater coordination and partnership needed to be forged across government, civil society and the private sector to ensure service delivery and with regards to nascent social protection systems.
- Although the MDG target "reducing the number of slum dwellers by 100 million" had been

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