

UN HABITAT
FOR A BETTER URBAN FUTURE

URBAN IMPACT





The first quarter of 2020 has been particularly challenging for all of us. It began auspiciously enough with preparations for the 75th Anniversary of the United Nations in high gear. We were also to celebrate the 25th Anniversary of the Beijing conference on Women, with many events prepared and organised in the run up to the General Assembly in September. UN-Habitat was gearing up to support these wider UN programmes with the kick-off of the United Nations's Decade of Action at the 10th session of the World Urban Forum in Abu Dhabi. That world is now a distant memory as the planet has gone into lock down due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

At the time of writing, the global death toll from the pandemic has surpassed 160,000, with more than 2.3 million people infected worldwide. At UN-Habitat, we are very fortunate that early action and precautionary measures meant that none of our staff and personnel have been stricken with the disease. At Nairobi and elsewhere across our 90 global locations, the agency is now working from home. Daily meetings, webinars, the provision of services through digital platforms - this is now the new normal for the agency. We are working very closely with other UN agencies through the Inter-Agency Standing Committee to support humanitarian services to the most vulnerable communities.

During this crisis, the necessity and critical role of multilateral organisations has become very evident. There is no doubt that we are not perfect and as we are put under both greater scrutiny and great stress, we can spot the gaps, which will help us in the future as we strive to make ourselves fit for purpose. At the moment, we need to prioritise and focus on the most vulnerable communities and in the case of cities and human settlements, the focus has been on those 1 billion people living in informal settlements as well as wage earners who cannot afford to work from home.

Although this issue of Urban Impact is mostly given to coverage of the 10th Session of the World Urban Forum, we are also including UN-Habitat's immediate efforts to support precautionary and remedial efforts by local governments to help prepare the most vulnerable communities face the challenges of this global pandemic. An emergency fund of USD 1.3 million has been allocated to support 13 high impact projects across all continents delivered through our regional offices.

In the longer term, UN-Habitat is working closely with the United Nations Secretariat in New York to support the Secretary-General's socio-economic impact pillars. In our case, our efforts

are in pillar four, which is focused on the recovery stage. All together, some 70 projects have been identified as catalytic interventions that will help with the medium term recovery efforts by local governments and also provide assistance to communities in building up their resilience. We estimate that we will need to raise initial funding of USD 100 million to channel support to these crucial stakeholders.

As I look back at the first quarter of 2020, I am reminded of the optimism we all shared at the 10th session of the World Urban Forum. We had called for declared actions and with COVID-19, we must now walk the talk. You will find in this issue that the relevance of the Sustainable Development Goals, particularly SDG #11 and other urban-related SDGs, have not been diminished. COVID-19 has opened our eyes to the inequality in cities, the lack of investments in public infrastructure, the much-needed reforms in local governance, the right to shelter and housing, and the need for job security.

I am confident that as we look back at the 10th session of the World Urban Forum, as we review the declared actions that we made together, and as we review all our preparatory works to ensure business continuity in this age of COVID-19, we are more resolved than ever not to go back to business as usual.

To all the member states whom we serve, our partners in local governments, our supporters in the private sector and civil society; as well as the communities in which we draw inspiration, I would like to thank you for your renewed confidence in UN-Habitat. We will work doubly hard in these challenging times to find new ways of serving and fulfilling our mandate.

Stay safe and bon courage.

Ms. Maimunah Mohd Sharif
Executive Director, United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-Habitat)



On the Edge of COVID-19 Pandemic

By Neil Khor and Fernanda Lonardoní

As we are preparing to publish this first quarter issue of Urban Impact, UN-Habitat's quarterly magazine, all of us have adapted to a new normal - working from home to deliver services and provide help to the most vulnerable communities in a world gripped by a global pandemic.

Multilateral organisations are needed now, more than ever before as resources are quickly being repurposed to shore up defences against the spread of this deadly virus. The best defence, as the World Health Organisation (WHO) has advised, is to stay at home. Yet, it is precisely this action that is wreaking havoc on economies around the world and causing misery to millions of wage earners in all major cities.

At UN-Habitat, we have been asking ourselves some very hard questions as we look back at the 10th session of the World Urban Forum (WUF10), our main flagship event to launch the UN's Decade of Action which was held in Abu Dhabi. This was the first time that a WUF was held in the Arab region, and all in the midst of two major challenges - rising political tensions in the Persian Gulf and an epidemic arising in Hubei Province in China.



Two years of meticulous planning and millions of dollars had been spent by the United Arab Emirates and the Emirate of Abu Dhabi to host the event. Some 15 000 participants, a significant percentage being international delegates, had registered. By 27 January, WHO had declared an outbreak of the nouvelle coronavirus, a viral strain similar to SARS and MERS. At the time, there was little inkling that this would become a global pandemic. To all intents and purposes, it was an epidemic that could be contained largely in China, like SARS and MERS before it.

The WUF10 hosts were leaving nothing to chance. We held daily meetings with representatives of the UAE Government, particularly the Ministry of Health, to ensure that every precaution would be taken to screen would be participants. In the week leading up to the WUF10, on 6 February, flight restrictions were imposed upon all travellers coming from China. The Chinese Government voluntarily withdrew its official delegation to WUF10 as a precautionary measure. In the end, some two thousand registered participants traveling directly from China cancelled their participation for the greater good.

At the venue, through consultations with WHO and the Joint Medical Services of the United Nations Office of Nairobi, we worked closely with the UAE Ministry of Health as well as the Abu Dhabi National Exhibition Centre (ADNEC) to ensure that the venue was equipped for any eventuality. All hotels serving the Forum were provided with guidelines on handling suspected cases of the nouvelle coronavirus.

Precautionary measures which are now common place such as hand washing advisories and facilities, provision of sanitizers, and frequent cleaning of the venue were implemented rigorously, and with increased frequency. All participants and their travel plans were closely monitored should future contact tracing be necessary. To date, some two months after WUF10 ended, not one case of COVID-19 has been traced back to the conference.



Residents in Bhawanipur village, Gaurigunj Rural Municipality Nepal practice hand washing techniques to protect against COVID-19 © UNHabitat

WUF10 was probably the first and last conference of its magnitude in 2020. A week after the end of WUF on 13 February, the world had changed. What we had taken for granted - an integrated economy that gave rise to a global network of cities as production centres - is now under scrutiny. It was therefore opportune that the WUF provided us with the chance to reaffirm and renew our partnerships with cities, civil society and community stakeholders. They are now active on the frontlines of the COVID-19 battle.

Partnerships forged and strengthened at WUF10 have equipped UN-Habitat to deliver better services to the most vulnerable communities to prevent, respond to and recover from the COVID-19 pandemic. Key issues addressed at WUF10 such as urban inequality now have life and death significance. We heard the plight of communities living in informal settlements, as well as disadvantaged groups living in the midst of plenty in our mega cities. Clearly, the pandemic is impacting the world's most vulnerable people the hardest.

The WUF has always been a stakeholders' platform providing all interested in urban development with an opportunity to learn and share. Our Voices to Cities platform has now been superseded by webinars with UCLG, the Global

Task Force of Mayors and Minurvi. It is important for cities grappling with the pandemic to share their knowledge and experiences, as governors and mayors have a major role to play in slowing down the spread of the pandemic. Lessons learned from cities at different stages of the pandemic can help us all learn how mayors are keeping their cities functioning by ensuring continued food supplies, providing support to the most vulnerable and ensuring they have access to adequate health care.

With national governments launching stimulus packages to help their economies weather the impacts of the pandemic, we must not forget local governments. Those at the frontline must be supported to work with communities in ensuring that even as immediate needs are being met, focus remains on long term sustainability. As the Secretary-General said, ***“we cannot return to business as usual.”***

UN-Habitat is reaching out to cities and communities to offer them our expertise in water and sanitation, urban transport and other basic urban services. To establish long term solutions, we are enhancing our slum upgrading, the right to adequate housing, and security of tenure programmes as the basis for creating more equitable and sustainable cities. Both national and local governments are realizing that a different and more inclusive approach is possible and are considering alternatives to evictions, homelessness and rental default.

UN-Habitat is collaborating with and supporting the work of national and local authorities in informal settlements through a wide range of community based networks. Hand washing stations have been installed in strategic locations in informal settlements, and awareness campaigns are being conducted, including the sharing of practical information on minimizing exposure to infections.

Community volunteers are being trained and provided with the support they need to identify symptoms of illness and facilitate home care and self-quarantining. They are also actively engaged in community contact tracing to prevent further spread of the disease, and in the collection of data to enable evidence-based decision-making both at the community level and city-wide.

The 10th Session of the World Urban Forum happened in a different world than today. It may well have been the last major UN conference of a gentler age. However, the theme - culture and innovation - and the partnerships forged are more relevant today than ever before. This is the time for us to lay the groundwork if we are serious about turning the leaf. In the midst of the on-going lock down, we must commit to realizing the Declared Actions at WUF10, as only then can we make cities safe, inclusive and resilient for all in the age of crises that lies before us.

Neil Khor was the Officer-in-Charge of the 10th Session of the World Urban Forum

Fernanda Lonardoní was Project Lead of the 10th Session of the World Urban Forum



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Abu Dhabi Proud Hosts of WUF 10

The Tenth Session of the World Urban Forum was officially opened on 8 February 2020 at the Abu Dhabi National Exhibition Centre (ADNEC).

The colourful, high-tech opening ceremony was graced by His Highness Sheikh Theyab bin Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan, Member of the Executive Council and Chairman of Abu Dhabi Crown Prince's Court, accompanied by the Executive Director of UN-Habitat Ms. Maimunah Mohd Sharif.

President Ashraf Ghani of Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, Prime Minister Frank Bainimarama of the Republic of Fiji, and the Chairman of the Department of Municipalities and Transport representing the Local Organizing Committee of World Urban Forum 10, H.E. Falah Al Ahbabi were among the dignitaries present.

In his video message, the UN Secretary-General, Mr. Antonio Guterres, thanked Abu Dhabi for hosting the gathering – the first time the World Urban Forum has been held in the Arab Region. He noted that urbanization is one of the megatrends of our times and steering it well will help address global challenges such as climate change.



As we embark on a Decade of Action to deliver the Sustainable Development Goals, the world's cities, towns and communities will be at the heart of this work. The United Nations counts on local and national leaders, businesses, civil society and other partners to help provide solutions to global threats, including the climate emergency.

Mr. Guterres, urging participants to make sustainable urbanization a reality and ensure that no one and no place is left behind.



What I hope to see from the Tenth Session is a set of declared actions. Commitments that we will make on a voluntary basis as individuals, communities, cities and countries, at local, regional and global levels, that help mark this Decade of Action to accomplish the SDGs by 2030.

*Ms. Maimunah Mohd Sharif
Executive Director, United Nations Human Settlements
Programme (UN-Habitat)*

The Executive Director of UN-Habitat, Ms. Maimunah Mohd Sharif said UN-Habitat could not have asked for a better host than Abu Dhabi. She highlighted the special significance of the Tenth Session of the World Urban Forum, saying the World Urban Forum had truly come of age as the world's premier gathering of thinkers and doers for sustainable urbanization, and this year it coincided with the 75th anniversary of the United Nations. The UN-Habitat Executive Director she called on the Forum to come up with concrete actions.

Thanking the President of Islamic Republic of Afghanistan and the Prime Minister of the Republic of Fiji for their continued support of UN-Habitat, Ms. Sharif said it was their sense of urgency, their ability to translate policy into practice and to regard urbanization in holistic terms that would ensure it could be transformed into opportunities for sustainable development.

President Ashraf Ghani of Islamic Republic of Afghanistan said that meeting the challenges posed by the scale and scope of urbanization in the context of global uncertainty, disruptive and destructive change required fast action.



“Urgent, systematic and global action is required. We have the tools and repertoire of techniques to solve the problem,” he said, adding that the world needed change in the culture of states, culture of people, and the culture of global organizations.

The Prime Minister of the Republic of Fiji said the Forum offered the opportunity to discuss the role of cities in averting crises by making urban living synonymous with sustainability. He said living standards in cities had grown remarkably, but that progress has come at the cost of a warming world.



“The old model of development is untenable; if we continue to urbanise on carbon-intensive industries, the world's cities will crumble into hotbeds of inequality and extreme vulnerability,” he warned.



H.E. Falah Mohammad Al Ahbabi, the Chairman of the Department of Municipalities and Transport and coordinator of the Local Organising Committee of WUF10. ©UN-Habitat/Azeem Baig

Welcoming participants to Abu Dhabi, the Chairman of the Department of Municipalities and Transport and coordinator of the Local Organising Committee of the Tenth World Urban Forum, H.E. Falah Mohammad Al Ahbabi thanked UN-Habitat for its support, guidance and vision in making the Forum in Abu Dhabi a reality.



“It is a privilege to see the world's greatest minds in urban sustainability come together from more than 160 countries to challenge the conventional ways, to tackle crucial issues and discover new insights on urbanization. With more than 18,000 registered participants and 580 speakers with 133 exhibitors, we have strengthened our capacity and remain united in our vision to create a better world for the next generation,” he said.

The ceremony opened with a dazzling virtual tour of Abu Dhabi featuring some of the Emirate's most important cultural sites.

Cities of Opportunities: Connecting Culture and Innovation

By Eduardo Lopez Moreno



Brasov, Romania ©Shutterstock

Culture and innovation: the creative capital of cities

Culture is an elusive term that takes different concepts and definitions. From a functional point of view, it has to do with art, beliefs, capabilities, habits, morals, behaviors and forms

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