

# SMALL TOWN DEVELOPMENT APPROACHES



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United Nations Human Settlements Programme  
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**UN**  **HABITAT**

## **The Global Urban Economic Dialogue Series**

Small Town Development Approaches

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## FOREWORD



Urbanization is one of the most powerful, irreversible forces in the world. It is estimated that 93 percent of the future urban population growth will occur in the cities of Asia and Africa, and to a lesser extent, Latin America and the Caribbean.

We live in a new urban era with most of humanity now living in towns and cities.

Global poverty is moving into cities, mostly in developing countries, in a process we call the *urbanisation of poverty*.

The world's slums are growing and growing as are the global urban populations. Indeed, this is one of the greatest challenges we face in the new millennium.

The persistent problems of poverty and slums are in large part due to weak urban economies. Urban economic development is fundamental to UN-HABITAT's mandate. Cities act as engines of national economic development. Strong urban economies are essential for poverty reduction and

the provision of adequate housing, infrastructure, education, health, safety, and basic services.

The *Global Urban Economic Dialogue* series presented here is a platform for all sectors of the society to address urban economic development and particularly its contribution to addressing housing issues. This work carries many new ideas, solutions and innovative best practices from some of the world's leading urban thinkers and practitioners from international organisations, national governments, local authorities, the private sector, and civil society.

This series also gives us an interesting insight and deeper understanding of the wide range of urban economic development and human settlements development issues. It will serve UN member States well in their quest for better policies and strategies to address increasing global challenges in these areas

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Joan Clos', with a long, sweeping underline.

**Joan Clos**

Under-Secretary-General of the United Nations, Executive Director, UN-Habitat



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# INTRODUCTION

From June 2006 to June 2007, researchers from the School of Government at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill identified, studied, and documented fifty case studies of small towns across the United States that are using a wide range of community and economic development strategies to advance their communities' vision for prosperity. The case studies are a response to demand, from local public officials, for examples of real communities facing challenges related to globalization, geographic isolation, urban sprawl, aging populations and natural disasters. Case studies were published in 2008 in a report entitled *Small Towns, Big Ideas: Case Studies in Small Town Community and Economic Development*.

This report is a subset of thirty case studies. Its focus is community economic development (CED), defined as action taken locally by a community to provide economic opportunities and to improve social, civic and environmental conditions in a sustainable way. That is, CED is a process through which communities initiate their own solutions to local problems. CED strategies create economic opportunities, but in a way that improves social, civic and environmental conditions. Finally, CED strategies tend to include some consideration for sustainability, or for building long-term community capacity to

explicit goal of economic development is to make measurable improvements to the economic health of a particular jurisdiction. Equity, or the distribution of economic benefits, is only implicit in most definitions of economic development. CED addresses equity explicitly because it is a process whereby a community realizes positive changes in each aspect of community life – economic, social, civic and environmental.

Second, small towns typically have limited resources and capacity, so their economic development activities tend to include a broad range of strategies, including those that might otherwise be considered community development or capacity-building. In small towns, strategies for dealing with housing, transportation or leadership development tend to be combined with more traditional economic development strategies as parts of a community's comprehensive development strategy. "Success" in community development tends to be harder to define and measure, compared with economic development outcomes, but is important nonetheless. The social, civic and environmental impacts of a community's CED strategy have tremendous bearing on the extent to which a community feels that it is successful. Excluding these impacts would sacrifice elements of success that small

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