# HABITAT

The United Nations Conference
on Human Settlements
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NOTES FOR AN ADDRESS
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FOR URBAN AFFAIRS
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Mr. Chairman:

I very much appreciate this opportunity of participating once again in the important deliberations of this Committee. Although I had to return to Ottawa for a few days, I have been following your discussions with great interest. They have been very productive and the foundation you are laying augurs well for the Conference next June.

The Canadian delegation, Mr. Chairman, recognizes that the essential political role of the Habitat Conference is to establish the central relevance of human settlements policy in the framing of national development strategies. This relevance, I think we must admit, has not yet been fully articulated, at least not in terms sufficiently clear to foster public understanding.

In Habitat, I think we must also recognize that we are dealing, in fact, with two sets of problems — those of the privileged and those of the deprived. I think no one would deny that these distinctions still exist in one degree or another in every country. Nor do I believe that anyone would deny that the problems of the deprived demand our primary attention.

Habitat will provide an opportunity to focus on the problems of both groups.

But the political priority should be clear. Out of Habitat must come a real commitment, first by national governments and then by the world community as a whole, to meet the needs of our poorest people. Millions of the less-advantaged are still to be found in the industrialized nations and Habitat should persuade governments to improve their condition. But the vast majority live, and will continue to live, in the rural settlements and the urban squatter settlements of the Third World. For the most unfortunate among these peoples, Habitat will be justified if it helps governments to ensure their minimum needs for survival. I am pleased to see that this fundamental priority is the central theme of the Habitat documentation.

I have no doubt which of the national goals put forward in paragraph 5 of PC/26 is paramount. It is the first in the list, saying that there should be "equitable distribution of the social and economic benefits of development among all national regions and groups, with special emphasis on the needs of the less favoured segments of the population."

I also support the document's call on nations to concentrate first on "the most critical and immediate problems of human settlements" and particularly the call for "provision of a minimum standard of housing, infrastructure and services to the most deprived segments of the population."

Habitat will be meaningful, and our peoples will perceive it as meaningful, if these challenges are accepted by the governments represented at Vancouver as programs for action and not just platforms for rhetoric.

To achieve the national goals recommended in PC/26, such as adequate shelter for every citizen and universal access to essential community services, will indeed require a redeployment of resources within many nations, as noted in paragraph 53. And, as the draft declaration itself says in paragraph 8, this will also require a more equitable sharing of wealth and resources between nations.

If national governments come to Vancouver prepared to commit themselves seriously to these goals, Habitat will have achieved an essential first step.

But our opportunities for lasting improvements in the human condition at Vancouver are much greater than that.

It is my conviction that at Habitat national governments should go beyond these broad goals of national policy. They should come prepared to state their commitment to achieve certain hard program targets in the basic areas, targets which can then provide priorities for national action and, just as important, priorities for international cooperation.

On the basis of my own experience — and I know that this experience is shared by my political colleagues — I am convinced that targets *are* necessary for nations — just as they are for individuals. They have enormous value in focusing and spurring the efforts of governments and people. They also serve as valuable measures of policy success.

The Canadian Government has established a target of one million housing starts over the next four years — 235,000 of these in 1976. In doing so we have challenged ourselves — and risk embarrassment if we fall short.

It may, of course, be argued that targets impose a bias on policy which is too quantitative and that targeted programs tend to receive undue emphasis at the expense of programs whose goals can be defined only in qualitative terms. In my mind this merely argues for care in target-setting. Targets which are desirable, realistic and achievable. As the Conference documents stress, there is great variation between nations and between regions and communities within nations. Program targets must obviously be very sensitive to these variations and aim at realizable accomplishments.

It would be unrealistic and perhaps inappropriate to suggest that national governments at Habitat should indicate their program targets in a *large* number of areas. But it should be possible and would be useful for Vancouver participants to report on their targets in a few basic areas — such as shelter, water and waste disposal.

The Habitat Conference could then go beyond this to discuss those targets that have a measure of universality and consider how the world community, through its various international bodies, can respond effectively and efficiently to assist nations in achieving their basic priorities.

I note, for example, that the World Bank has suggested in its recent sector paper on housing that "housing could be provided without significant subsidy to 80 per cent of the population of most cities." It goes on to suggest how this could be done — principally by lowering some prevailing construction standards that are felt to be unrealistically high in some areas.

This is the kind of thesis that can be debated most constructively at Habitat.

Like the national goals proposed in the draft Recommendations for National Action, the program targets discussed at Habitat should, in my view, focus on the most crucial needs for the least advantaged, especially in the developing countries.

Governments at Vancouver should be prepared to face these priorities squarely. They should concentrate on the ways and means available to governments and to agencies of the world community to relieve the most basic problems in human settlements in the shortest reasonable time.

This is not to say that Habitat can be asked, through the Declaration or in any other way, to guarantee the happiness of every individual. Rather, it is a suggestion that, through the discussions at Habitat, we can together devise reasonable targets for the reduction of reducible suffering and the elimination of unnecessary misery.

Among the basic areas of need for people in settlements, I would like to say a word about water. This is, I think, together with food, the most basic of the needs of people living in settlements. Access to safe water, provided in whatever manner the resources of each nation and community allow, is, in a very profound way, the keystone to any national strategy on human settlements.

In my own country, I have seen what a beneficial effect national programs to provide water and sewer systems to communities have had over the years on the quality of life. Such seemingly modest programs have transformed life in hundreds of villages and agricultural communities throughout Canada, making them more attractive and livable places and releasing valuable human energy previously devoted to carrying water.

The provision of safe drinking water in every definable community by the year 2000 might seem to be a very modest goal for a human settlements conference to deliberate upon and, hopefully, endorse. Modest though it may appear, we should remind ourselves how far short the world still is of realizing the goal of the World Health Organization; namely that "*piped* water should be available in all *premises* of a community."

WHO data prepared for this conference shows that at the end of 1970 more than 1000 million people still had no safe water at all — piped, pumped or pulled up in a bucket.

The long-standing interest of WHO in the provision of safe water in human settlements arises from its commitment to reduce disease. But the provision of safe water is also the first essential for any effective program to improve the economic conditions of the world's poorest citizens in settlements.

When we focus on the most crucial needs of the under-privileged, we quickly find that before we can do much of anything else, we have to have safe water.

The answers to other basic problems — health, food, shelter, even employment — depend *initially* on safe water, or they can't get started.

The variety of settlement problems that depend for relief in the first place on safe water alone is one of the best examples of the interdependence of all of the solutions to our community problems.

A poor man too sick to work because of bad water can't benefit from new job opportunities arising from a development project. In rural villages the world over, millions of woman-hours are wasted hauling water from distant sources.

As the delegate from Tanzania pointed out earlier this week, simply providing one water tap within a quarter mile of people in this plight means an immediate improvement not only in health but in productivity.

This wasted energy and capacity can then be diverted to the more productive purpose of providing other essentials for human life in their communities, such as, for instance, growing more food, helping to build shelter, schools and roads.

At Habitat an indication of national commitments to such basic program targets will make it easier for international and bilateral development programs to respond to the most urgent of our human settlements problems.

Canada has recently decided to focus its aid to a much greater extent on what my government sees to be the most crucial problems of development — public health; shelter and energy; food production and distribution; rural development; education and training; and demography.

Your experience would be valuable to us in determining how you view this assessment of crucial problems and what you perceive to be the areas of most urgent concern within them,(particularly)the relationship between shelter and public health and the emphasis I have given to water in these remarks.

The disposal and treatment of human waste would appear, from my perspective, to be of very critical concern in many parts of our countries, the potential for improving health standards, reducing infant mortality and simply making communities more tolerable places in which to live.

The experience of Habitat may well sharpen this focus and so help Canada direct its development assistance more efficiently to human settlements problems most in need of urgent treatment.

From 1973 to 1975 only about 12 per cent of Canadian aid was used in support of programs for safe water, sewage treatment, housing, schools and roads — the basic goals for improvement before this conference. I would ask if, in the opinion of developing nations, this is an appropriate reflection of your priorities.

Habitat may help Canada achieve another development target to which we have been aspiring for more years than a government cares to admit.

Although from 1969 to 1975 Canada increased its international aid at an average rate of 21.7 per cent per year, we still found ourselves having recently to reaffirm our commitment to the .70 per cent of GNP target which we had originally hoped to achieve by 1975. So far, we've only made it to .52 per cent.

This commitment is a cornerstone of Canada's strategy for international development cooperation which is founded on the belief that in our increasingly interdependent economic system, a breakthrough in the prospects of the least privileged will ultimately benefit all countries, including Canada.

While the urgent needs of developing nations must be a priority concern, the industrialized nations must demonstrate that they will not permit the continuing abuse of their resources; that our cities must reverse a trend to blight in our urban cores; that concentration need not result in congestion and stagnation; that transportation need not control people and their settlement patterns but be controlled to achieve desired patterns and reverse the trend to polluting our environment and dissipating finite resources.

With our wealth and resources we have all too frequently created chaos while with foresight and will we can achieve a higher degree of fulfilment in our dynamic cities and the option of a different, more tranquil fulfilment in our smaller centres.

A firm commitment by nations in Vancouver to focus the priorities of development assistance more directly on the most crucial needs of our human settlements is the result most likely to convince our peoples that Habitat is a valuable exercise in international cooperation.

This is the best way to overcome the scepticism about the effectiveness of the United Nations and the real value of Habitat which we must admit currently exists in many countries, including Canada. May I hasten to add that this scepticism is not shared by the Canadian Government, nor, I believe, by a majority of Canadians. But it is an attitude we would be unrealistic to ignore and must try to dispel by our decisions.

I suppose that every UN Conference has had to face this. Habitat will be no exception. When we meet in Vancouver at the end of May, the relevance of the United Nations to basic human problems once again goes on public trial.

In every country we still fall short of human capacity to alleviate existing misery. In urban and rural communities of rich and poor nations alike, men, women and children still suffer and die unnecessarily — not from conditions formerly imposed by humanity's limited capacity to manipulate nature for its benefit, but from willful human indifference, neglect and selfishness.

Yet no country is so rich it can afford to waste the contribution of any citizen, and no government is so poor, so lacking in neighbourly aid, that it can convincingly claim it has no answer to basic human needs, and no hope for distributing minimum standards of subsistence to all in its human settlements.

It is Canada's hope that at Habitat the ethical will finally be recognized as the practical.