

**UNITED NATIONS CENTRE FOR HUMAN SETTLEMENTS
(Habitat)**

UNCHS (Habitat), based in Nairobi, Kenya, is responsible for the formulation and implementation of the human settlements programme of the United Nations. Habitat serves as a think tank within the United Nations system, utilising its research and technical analysis capacity to enable governments to improve the development and management of human settlements. Habitat's operational activities combine technical advice, applied research, training and information. The Centre works closely with the United Nations Development Programme, the World Bank, other United Nations agencies as well as with other multilateral and bilateral development assistance agencies. Habitat and the United Nations Environment Programme are the only two UN agencies headquartered in a developing country.

Goals of the Centre

- **To assist governments in policy and strategy formulation to improve the living conditions of people in their communities by expanding access to adequate shelter, infrastructure and services for all;**
- **To strengthen the capacity of national governments and local authorities to mobilise public and private resources to improve urban environmental conditions and productivity.**

I. ORIGIN

Habitat has its roots in the post-war reconstruction and rehabilitation efforts of the United Nations, and this operational and pragmatic approach to addressing immediate needs of people continues to characterize Habitat's mission in the 1990s. In the aftermath of the Second World War it was clearly understood that peace building requires as a first essential step the rebuilding of shattered settlements and homes in order to house people and reconstruct political, economic, social and cultural life. This is equally true today.

The wave of decolonization which swept through Asia and Africa in the late 1950s, and the subsequent proclamation of the First Development Decade of the United Nations, led the Economic and Social Council to establish the Committee on Housing, Building and Planning in 1962, and the Centre for Housing Building, and Planning in 1965. Based in New York, their main responsibility was to assist the social and economic development efforts of new member states in human settlements related activities .

The United Nations Conference on the Human Environment, Stockholm (1972): Throughout the 1960s, unanticipated and unprecedented urban and population growth began to radically transform the demographic structure and spatial distribution of settlements in developing countries, a process which has continued to the present day. The social, economic and environmental consequences of this transformation were first raised at the 1972 UN Conference on the Human Environment in Stockholm. The Conference recommended that the United Nations convene a conference to focus the attention of the international community on the extremely serious decline of living conditions, particularly in developing countries.

The United Nations Conference on Human Settlements, Vancouver (1976): Following this recommendation and subsequent resolutions of the General Assembly the United Nations convened Habitat: the United Nations Conference on Human Settlements in Vancouver in 1976. The most significant outcome of the Conference was the recognition that human settlements was a new and important crosscutting issue of social and economic development. This was reflected in the Conference's recommendations for national and international action and in its call for more intense cooperation, as well as for more effective institutional arrangements, in the field of human settlements.

II. MANDATE

As a result of the first United Nations Conference on Human Settlements held in Vancouver in 1976, the UN Commission on Human Settlements was established as a new intergovernmental body and the United Nations Centre for Human Settlements (Habitat) was created as the secretariat to service the Commission.

Both the Commission and the Centre were mandated to assist member states in the management and development of human settlements. Habitat was charged to carry out this mandate through an integrated programme of policy advice, applied research, technical cooperation, and information dissemination. Habitat incorporated various human settlement units and activities of the UN system, including the Centre for Housing, Building and Planning, Vision Habitat and the United Nations Habitat and Human Settlements Foundation, among others.

III. CURRENT STRUCTURE

The United Nations Commission on Human Settlements is Habitat's governing body. It provides overall policy guidance, sets priorities and direction of human settlements programme of the United Nations. The Commission has a membership of 58 countries, elected for a four-year term by the Economic and Social Council. The Commission meets every two years.

The United Nations Centre for Human Settlements (Habitat) is headed by an Executive Director who is appointed by the Secretary-General. Present staff at headquarters number approximately 250 professionals with support service staff. In addition, Habitat has over 500 project staff and consultants under contract in the field. The Centre's organizational structure includes three substantive divisions: Technical Cooperation; Research and Development; and Information, responsible for effective delivery of services and assistance to Governments.

The Habitat and Human Settlements Foundation was incorporated into the Centre in 1977. The Foundation elicits voluntary contributions and funds specific projects and other activities of the Centre. The Executive Director serves as the Administrator of the Foundation.

IV. PROGRAMMES

Habitat carries out its work through an integrated programme of policy advice, research and development, training, information dissemination and operational activities, focused on priority areas defined by the Commission and contained in the Centre's Work Programme. These areas are, at present: global issues and strategies; national policies and instruments; managing human settlements development, including financial and land resources; improving infrastructure and the living environment; managing disaster mitigation, reconstruction and development, housing for all; strengthening local communities; and reducing poverty and promoting equity.

Guiding Principles: In the implementation of all of its programmes and projects, UNCHS is guided by the recognition of a number of key sectoral linkages, all of which illustrate how primary development objectives can be achieved through the improvement of human settlement conditions. These are the linkages between:

- (a) shelter development, employment generation and poverty alleviation;
- (b) shelter, infrastructure and environmental and public health improvement;
- (c) rural and urban development and economic growth;
- (d) participatory urban management and democratic reform, more effective governance and greater public accountability.

Strategic Initiatives: The principal strategic initiatives undertaken by Habitat to achieve its human settlements development objectives are:

- ***The Global Strategy for Shelter to the Year 2000*** was launched by the United Nations in 1988. Informed by the experiences of Habitat as the implementing agency of the International Year of Shelter for the Homeless, celebrated in 1987, the principal objective of the Strategy is to improve global shelter conditions by the creation of a legal, institutional and regulatory environment which can facilitate the construction and improvement of housing by all social groups, but especially by and for the poor. The Strategy pioneered the enabling approach, which, rather than emphasizing direct government intervention, favours legal and other incentives to encourage all private sector stakeholders to become engaged in housing and urban development;
- ***Agenda 21:*** Habitat is the United Nations Task Manager for Chapters 7 and 21 of Agenda 21 - "Promoting Sustainable Human Settlements Development" and "Solid Waste Management and Sewage Related Issues". In carrying these responsibilities forward, Habitat is working closely with national governments, local authorities, the private sector, NGOs, the United Nations Commission on Sustainable Development and the United Nations Environment Programme;
- ***Reconstruction, Rehabilitation and Development:*** Over the last several years, regional conflicts and civil strife have increased the burden on the United Nations to provide relief and reconstruction assistance. Habitat is being increasingly called upon to make an early contribution to the continuum of relief, rehabilitation and development activities of the United Nations. Habitat has played a leading role in human settlement reconstruction and development efforts in Afghanistan, and has made contributions to resettlement programmes in Angola, Burundi, Cambodia, El Salvador, Eritrea, Guatemala, Iraq, Lebanon, Mexico, Mozambique, Somalia and Rwanda.
- ***Transition Countries:*** Since 1991, Habitat has become actively engaged in the transition countries of Eastern and Central Europe, in assisting national and local governments in formulating new housing and human settlements policies compatible with market economies; in strengthening the management capacity of local governments; and, finally, in building up the technical and managerial capacity of national and local authorities to face massive tasks of environmental clean-up.
- ***The Challenge of an Urbanising World:*** The Centre has taken the lead in the United Nations system in defining the policy response of the international community to the challenge of rapid urbanization in developing countries. This work was initiated in the mid-1980s with the Centre's publication of "The New Agenda for Human Settlements" and its close collaboration with the Development Assistance Committee (DAC) of the OECD in shaping donor policy responses to rapid urbanisation in developing countries.

Results: Since its inception 15 years ago, Habitat has significantly increased its delivery of assistance to governments both in terms of volume and value. Habitat currently has over 220 on-going technical cooperation programmes and projects with project budgets totalling over \$180 million. The technical cooperation activities of Habitat are also the most highly leveraged of any UN agency with the framework of national investment follow-up. While Habitat serves as executing agency for less than 2% of UNDP's overall development assistance resources, over the last five years Habitat projects have consistently resulted in national investment commitments ranging from US\$1 to US\$3 billion annually, or 20% of the total annual investment commitments related to all UNDP assisted projects.

Partnerships: Habitat's strong performance relative to its size has been made possible by a commitment to working in close partnership with other institutions in both the public and private sectors. Apart from national governments and local authorities, Habitat works closely with UN agencies, the World Bank, regional development banks, other multi-lateral and bi-lateral donors. as

well as with private sector corporations and associations. NGOs, community associations, women's groups and professional associations. Without such partnerships, Habitat would not have been able to achieve what it has over the past 15 years. In forging these partnerships, as well as in pursuing its coordinating role within the UN system, the Centre has up to now favoured a low-keyed and pragmatic approach, which has brought it considerable success, but possibly not sufficient public recognition.

V. THE FUTURE:

The Second United Nations Conference on Human Settlements (Habitat II), Istanbul, June 1996

In recognising the current and projected trends and challenges in human settlements growth and development, the United Nations General Assembly decided, in 1993, to convene the Second United Nations Conference on Human Settlements (Habitat II) to be held in Istanbul, Turkey in June 1996, 20 years after Vancouver. This will be the last global UN Conference of this century and will build upon the results of the series of UN global conferences held this decade in Rio, Cairo, Copenhagen and Beijing.

Habitat has been designated as the secretariat for the Habitat II Conference, to spearhead preparations at the global, regional, national and local levels. The goal of the Conference is to make the world's cities and communities safe, healthy and more sustainable and equitable. In preparing for the Conference, Habitat is committed to re-define and strengthen its mandate and programme by focusing on the lessons learnt over the past two decades:

- To address the truly inter-sectoral nature of human settlements and its linkages to critical development issues such as the advancement of women, employment opportunities, poverty alleviation, and the environment and development concerns of Agenda 21;
- To raise global awareness of the consequences of life and work on an urbanized planet where the above-mentioned critical development issues equally affect developed and developing countries and the global economy;
- To anchor the Conference with commitments from all stakeholders to workable and practical solutions;
- To promote more effective partnerships between all levels of government, the private sector and the community to mobilise human, technological and financial resources to implement those solutions;
- To develop new public-private partnership mechanisms at the local and global levels that can pave the way for more effective equity investments in infrastructure and urban development in response to the rapid growth of cities.