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Statement by Ralph Bresler, United States Director of International Development Assistance, Department of State International Organizations, on Item 95: Sustainable Development and International Economic Cooperation (b) Human Settlements, November 14, 1995

The United States Government considers Habitat II to be an important opportunity for drawing together and emphasizing the principles enacted at Rio, and in the subsequent series of major UN conferences culminating with the Fourth World Conference on Women. The policies and principles agreed to at this conference series should now concentrate on the practical realities of empowering people to solve shelter problems sustainably in their communities.

The United States finds that the current draft of the Habitat Agenda is sometimes at variance with the Rio principles, and that the document extends its attention into issues beyond the expertise of the UN Commission on Human Settlements and the Secretariat.

The United States supports strongly the concept of the government as enabler, a concept the UN General Assembly enshrined as the guiding principle for the preparatory process and the Conference itself.

This includes, where appropriate, providing market incentives for low income populations to gain access to shelter and urban services. We want to encourage policies which facilitate the development of markets and which expand the individual's freedom of action. We believe that these fundamental principles need to be respected consistently throughout the document.

The United States believes that the enabling strategy remains at the heart of the international consensus in the human settlements sector. Enablement was formally endorsed by the international community in 1988 in the consensus adoption by the UNGA of the Global Strategy for Shelter to the Year 2000, and many countries are in the process of developing enabling strategies for shelter. We will work to promote the enabling approach as an organizing principle in the final document.

We will work closely with our colleagues in the drafting process to ensure that specific formulations of the current draft are modified so that all countries can accept it.

We will also work to ensure that the overall philosophical thrust of the final document reflects a realistic approach towards the capabilities of local and national governments. We want to ensure it highlights the importance that should rightfully be given to community--based initiatives, the non-governmental sector, and the role of markets.

While nation states bear primary responsibility for development, shelter decisions are more often than not made by individuals. Habitat II must be about aiding those decisions, not making them. Habitat II is about micro-decisions that must be incorporated into a sustainable whole. Any document which emphasizes a government-oriented approach, unrealistic expectations of both central and local authorities and unproductive government interventions will be unacceptable to the U.S.

Rather, we would propose a partnership which is driven at the local level and supported at the municipal, state and central government levels. The Habitat Agenda must ultimately give adequate weight to essential actors in the shelter sector. In the vast majority of countries, the private sector, markets and private resource flows are the foundation for the improvement of human settlements. The document should emphasize this fact.

Moreover, the roles of local authorities, community groups, neighborhood associations, NGOs, and, most importantly, women, in the shelter sector should receive greater emphasis.

More generally, the document should highlight the importance of transparency, civic engagement and public participation in all levels of decision making on all human settlements issues.

The United States believes that government works best when it empowers people to make decisions rather than deciding for them. We have assisted with the development of many shelter strategies which make this very point, and this is an accepted view in most countries today. The current draft of the document needs strengthening in this area.

The United States itself has a national housing policy which continually strives for an appropriate balance between the public and private sectors. To be effective, the Habitat Agenda must stress that the basis for success lies in individual and community based activities within a framework of government facilitation.

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We strongly support equal access, which expands individual choice and community involvement, whereas equitable access often reduces choice. The U.S. and many other countries at the Fourth World Conference on Women agreed on this point, which was recognized in the Platform for Action in its assertion that women need "equal rights, equal responsibilities and equal opportunities." "Equity" is no substitute.

In addition, Habitat II's emphasis on urban issues reflects the realities that the world will face in the 21st century. However, the Habitat Agenda does not adequately reflect the importance of the links between rural and urban areas. These linkages are vital. There must be realistic policies which ensure that secondary centers are sustainable and that their links with the surrounding food-producing regions are strengthened in appropriate ways.

In a similar vein, its sections dealing with land also need to recognize that there should be a balanced approach on land use in order to ensure that all essential needs, including land for natural resources protection and food production, are included.

The United States wishes to reiterate that human settlements, more than any other element in the sustainable development equation, depend first on the individual and the community, acting within a framework established and protected at the national level. Local action that promotes sound individual decisions is key to eventual success.

In conclusion, the United States is prepared to work with all countries to refashion and refine this important document for the Habitat II Conference.

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