

World Habitat Day 2012
Message of the Executive Director
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CHANGING CITIES, BUILDING OPPORTUNITIES

We selected the theme, *Changing cities, building opportunities*, for World Habitat Day this year because our quest to improve cities and provide better services and opportunities for the world's growing urban populations is more urgent than ever.

In little over a generation from now, our projections show that two-thirds of the global population will be living in towns and cities – up from 50 per cent today in the fastest urbanisation ever experienced in history.

If we are not careful, and do not plan for this what will become of our cities, the greatest legacy of our human civilisation?

The main challenges confronting cities and towns all over the world today include unemployment, especially among youth; social and economic inequalities; unsustainable energy consumption patterns; urban sprawl; high percentages of people living in slums; high levels of vulnerability to natural disasters; inadequate urban basic services, especially water, sanitation and energy; poor mobility systems and increasing emissions of greenhouse gases.

Given that, historically, urbanisation has been a source of development rather than a result of it, it is clear that it can be used as a powerful tool for transforming production capacities and income levels in developing countries. This requires a mindset shift on the part of decision makers, away from viewing urbanisation as a problem, and instead towards seeing it as a tool for development.

This was strongly reaffirmed by our partners at the sixth session of the World Urban Forum in Naples last month. And at the 2012 Rio +20 summit in June this year, world leaders formally recognised the "important role" cities play in sustainable development.

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They cited the need for a holistic approach to urban development and human settlements which provides for affordable housing and infrastructure and prioritises slum upgrading and urban regeneration. And they further stressed their commitment towards improving the quality of human settlements, so that all people have access to basic services, housing and mobility.

The latest edition of our flagship report, *The State of the World's Cities 2012-2013 – the prosperity of Cities*, we call for new thinking on how we can advance towards the urban future, particularly in seeking for shared and holistic prosperity.

We should create a new type of city – the city of the 21st century – a smart, people-centred city, one that is capable of integrating the tangible and more intangible aspects of prosperity; a city able to rid itself of the inefficient, unsustainable urban habits of the previous century.

It is time for changing our cities and for building new opportunities. The synergies between urbanisation and development should help us to improve the quality of life of millions of citizens. This implies a fundamental paradigm shift and a reappraisal of how we have traditionally conceived urban development. Place matters. We can no longer afford to develop plans and strategies as if location is an irrelevance.

Major changes are necessary. We have the science and the knowhow. And we know too that our ever growing cities are just where the changes can be implemented fastest and new opportunities created. We must all become city changers.