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MAJOR THEMES REQUIRING NATIONAL ACTION
IN THE FIELD OF HUMAN SETTLEMENTS

Note by the Secretary-General of the Conference

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MAJOR THEMES REQUIRING NATIONAL ACTION IN THE FIELD OF HUMAN SETTLEMENTS

Introduction

1. The purpose of this paper is to locate the Habitat Conference within the recent evolution of thinking about the development process and to show the linkage between the major themes and issues so far identified by the Secretariat and the Preparatory Committee. Some of these issues and themes are elaborated in background papers available to participants of the regional conferences.
2. Very briefly, it can be said that the 1950s were placed under the sign of growth. The introduction of national accounts into the practice of an increasing number of developing countries went hand in hand with the establishment of aggregate quantitative targets, expressed in terms of GNP or GDP, total or per capita. Economic development was largely equated with the growth of the national product, growth was related through ratios to investment, investment was limited largely to "productive" investment, and so on.
3. In the early 1960s the awareness of the limitations of the growth approach spread from theoreticians to economic planners and policy makers, who were faced with the apparent contradiction between the achievement of quantitative targets (the economic miracles) and an increasing dissatisfaction with the results of sectoral or indiscriminate growth. Under different names, growth and distribution, economic and social development, etc., the notion of justice was thus reintroduced in an otherwise oversimplified model of the development process.
4. The innovation of the Stockholm Conference (and the theoretical work preceding, in particular the consultation at Founex) was to introduce the concept of environment - which up to then had been seen as little more than a concern for pollution and other nuisances produced by industrial societies - as an integral dimension of development, as relevant to the rich as to the poor countries of the world, although in different modes.
5. Human settlements are by definition the places where human beings live. They are therefore the places where people enjoy a large part of the fruits of their economic activity, where they exercise what choice they can in their social and cultural relations but also the place where they are exposed to the more visible signs of injustice, inequitable distribution, uneven access to services and facilities, differences in life styles, etc.
6. Human settlements must therefore be seen as the locus of both the potential fulfilment of human aspirations and of the failure to achieve this potential. In this sense, the growth of human settlements can be seen in a positive light, lessening the burden of rural poverty and isolation and endowing the cities with a new, although as yet largely under-utilized, resource of human energy and skills. By the very activity of construction and improvement of human settlements, this human resource is fulfilled as it is used.
7. In this respect, Habitat is of course another conference on development, and as such a small step in the redefinition of its objectives and modes and of the responsibilities of the international community that follow from such redefinition.

National human settlements policies

8. Assuming that the overall objective of the Habitat Conference is to improve the quality of human life in human settlements for all people, the need to establish clear national policies as a prerequisite for effective action is self-evident.

9. The magnitude of the problems of human settlements in all parts of the world, as well as the complexity of the issues involved, would appear to demand not only this national policy direction but also integrated planning and programming in place of the fragmented, sectoral approach still common in most countries and also the fullest possible participation in planning and project implementation by all levels of society in order to encourage personal and group initiative and to maximize the mobilization of human energy.

10. The chief problems of human settlements are seen to stem from rapid population growth, unprecedented levels of rural to urban migration, unplanned and inefficient settlement patterns arising largely from historical accident undercapitalization of urban structures and increasing cost of services, rural stagnation, and the increasing degradation of the environment.

11. It is inevitable that human settlements policies will differ from country to country according to the particular confluence of political, social, economic and cultural factors pertaining, as well as development objectives and aspirations. However, considerable scope should be available for exchange of information, for promoting co-operation in research and for generating international supportive action.

12. Policies can be seen as a prerequisite for evolving plans (firm proposals including a time frame for implementation and reconciling potentially conflicting objectives), and plans in turn are a prerequisite for programmes and projects (including quantification of resources required to implement them). It is also inherent in the nature of human settlements that policies, plans and programmes cannot be conceived without a spatial dimension; hence, the importance of national, regional and local physical plans covering the entirety of the human settlements system and joined in a hierarchical relationship.

13. Components of a unified national policy on human settlements might include inter alia:

(a) A clear statement of objectives as an integral part of an overall national development strategy;

(b) Realistic targets for growth and distribution of population within the national network of existing and future human settlements;

(c) Guidelines at national, regional and possibly even local level for the location of principal economic activities, taking into account their potential and desirable interrelationships;

(d) Quantitative and qualitative targets for the principal sectors contributing to satisfactory human settlements, such as housing, basic services, transportation, social services, etc.;

(e) A broad distribution of responsibilities for legislative, financial and administrative matters among the different layers of national and local governments; and

(f) Broad medium- and long-term objectives for research, development and training.

Minimum needs and standards

14. The goal of the Conference (as noted in paragraph 8) is to improve the quality of life in human settlements for all people. However, this strongly implies that minimum needs for a life of dignity, opportunity and fulfilment must be secured for those in the most deprived strata of each society. Within national contexts, these minimum needs should be identified and wherever possible quantified. Plans and programmes directed toward the overall objective (improvement in the quality of life) must be based on achieving these minima as a first priority. Hence, acceptance of the concept of minimum needs and standards acquires double importance: as a political commitment to achieving an objective, and as an instrument for measuring progress toward that objective.

15. It is unarguable that large numbers of people throughout the world - and in some cases perhaps the majority of national populations - live in conditions that are unacceptable to the very societies to which they belong. Although the concept of poverty may be relative between societies, it is absolute within a given social and cultural context even if it defeats precise administrative measurement.

16. Fundamental human needs can be classified in three broad categories: biological, social and emotional. Beyond the most basic needs to sustain life (food and shelter from the elements) and basic services (water, light, transport, education, health), they may also include such diverse factors as privacy, safety, dignity, mobility, access to open spaces, cultural demands etc.

17. Meaningful minimum standards will vary with time and conditions, as well as between countries and regions. Close relationship must be established to the resources available in each society, as well as to geographic, climatic, political and social factors. Standards must be flexible and dynamic in order to accommodate economic changes and/or technological innovations.

18. Although standards are common in such areas as minimum nutritional needs, education and health, and are beginning to be introduced in environmental areas of air and water purity, only modest efforts have been devoted so far to assess minimum needs and suitable standards in human settlements, and these have been limited largely to physical shelter: thresholds of overcrowding, floor space per person, presence of physical facilities, etc. Even these standards have been evolved within narrow social and cultural contexts, almost inevitably reflecting the values and mores of a dominating class, whether indigenous or foreign. There has been virtually no concern manifested for other needs within the framework of human settlements as complex systems, for instance relating shelter to such activities as work and leisure.

19. Most importantly, there is a need to identify and quantify meaningful standards in societies which in the past have tended to imitate those prevailing in the industrialized countries (e.g., building codes, transport facilities, education and

health care systems). It must be recognized that this attempt to copy the standards of the industrialized countries despite grave disparities in resources and differences in the type and scale of problems has contributed to a widespread inadequacy of services, and also to the formation of dual consumption patterns detrimental to the interests of the majority of the people.

20. Assuming the above, action should be taken in the following areas:

(a) To identify through a concerted effort of research and participation of all concerned, minimum needs to be met in human settlements within the context of national priorities of social and cultural value systems and of ecological constraints;

(b) To establish measurable levels or degrees of satisfaction of such needs to be used as meaningful standards;

(c) To evaluate the extent to which such standards are currently attained for each member of the society and identify the major obstacles to such attainment, with particular reference to the problems of the most deprived strata of the population; and

(d) To review the most significant technologies available to achieve the desired standards and assess their potential impact in functional terms.

Resources for human settlements

21. Recent world developments have drawn attention to fundamental issues concerning the use and distribution of resources which are unfortunately presented in terms of crises: the energy crisis, the food crisis, the housing crisis, etc. What should be apparent is that there are basically two kinds of problems: localized scarcities, which could be overcome by better distribution of existing resources, and global scarcities, which require fundamental changes in patterns of consumption and in technology. Underlying both are the issues of alternative life styles and unequal access to resources.

22. The concept of "neutrality" of technology, especially in terms of developing countries, is increasingly recognized as spurious, and there is a growing awareness of the extent to which choice of technology is political. An example is the choice between production systems using capital-intensive or labour-intensive technology.

23. Existing technologies are the product of a long development process whose origins are fixed in the industrialized countries of the northern hemisphere. Their appropriateness in other settings is now in question, first because they are old, and secondly because they were evolved in response to the needs of other societies.

24. Resource issues calling for intensive examination, particularly in developing countries, include the following:

(a) To evaluate and, where possible, correct the adverse effect of unfettered market systems on the distribution and use of resources in human settlements;

(b) To explore and, where appropriate, encourage alternative life styles to be reflected in innovative forms of human settlements and more sensible consumption patterns;

(c) To generalize the use of social costing in the planning, construction and managing of human settlements, with particular emphasis on the environmental effects and employment generation of alternatives;

(d) To encourage research and development of alternative technologies in key areas relevant to human settlements (energy, urban transport, shelter, etc.), with particular reference to the conservation of scarce resources and compliance with sound environmental standards.

Land as a resource

25. Land as the key resource of human settlements is immediately evident. It is moreover a resource which is absolutely limited, because it is impossible to produce except in rare geographical circumstances and because it is only indirectly affected by technology. Yet, demand is increasing very rapidly in the face of population growth, urbanization and economic development. Hence, land must not only be considered in terms of ownership but also of the use to which it is put.

26. In many societies private ownership constitutes a powerful incentive to the kind of investment upon which the growth and vitality of human settlements depend. However, private and inadequately controlled urban land ownership is held responsible for major distortions: speculations, inordinately high land valuations, shortages of supply in prime areas of need, and disregard for social functions. Concomitant effects on housing and public services, especially for the most deprived strata of the population, are of increasing concern.

27. Response to these conditions and concerns has been a rising pressure for public ownership of urban land, either transitionally or permanently, or at least very close regulation of private ownership through use of controls, taxation or other restraints.

28. In all societies, some public ownership of land is deemed essential for certain specific uses - for example, highways and transport systems, administrative buildings, educational and health facilities, public utilities, parks, etc. It is considered likely that in the future, as a direct consequence of the need for human settlement planning, public ownership of land in and around urban areas will increase.

29. Requirements of planning and proper allocation of land in terms of use also may dictate the transition of land ownership from private to public and then back to private hands, particularly through redistribution to user owners. In this sense, public ownership is not seen as an end in itself, but as a tool of social as well as economic reform.

30. Of special interest are methods for the recapture of land value added as a result of public action (e.g. improvement of services) for social use. Many variants of this social requirement already exist through forms of taxation, but further study of the effectiveness of these and other methods is a necessary area of research.

31. Methods of public acquisition will differ from country to country and city to city (nationalization, expropriation for social use, legacy, forfeit, means of payment, etc.) and there is a growing need for modernization or introduction of the necessary legal, fiscal and administrative structures involved.

32. Areas for action on land ownership and use in the years ahead will include the following:

(a) To promote the integrated planning of future land requirements for human settlements, with particular reference to alternative uses, potential environment impact and the needs of the masses;

(b) To review the experience acquired in direct and indirect regulation of land use in human settlements, with particular reference to the problem of eliminating the abuses of private ownership, facilitating public acquisition and recapture of value added for community use;

(c) To evaluate the effects on land utilization of alternative patterns of human settlements, of infrastructural and transportation systems, and of construction technologies.

Human settlements institutions

33. The inadequacies of present institutions are widely recognized; more difficult is to define the avenues along which they should be reformed or substituted. In any case, two important and related aspects of the problem will be the need for better trained professionals and government cadres and the necessity to involve people in the formulation of goals and of programmes designed to achieve them.

34. In most countries the institutions within the public sector concerned with the policies, plans and implementation of programmes for human settlements are of three basic types: political, financial and technical. Often or even usually these institutions are entirely separate from one another, despite the fact that they deal with the same or interrelated problems.

35. If comprehensive, national human settlement planning and programme implementation is to be achieved, it will become necessary to reorganize and/or create institutional arrangements which will be able to fulfil their assigned roles.

36. In some cases it may be necessary to establish an authority responsible for all the stages necessary for integrated human settlement policy, plans and programmes. To avoid dangers of over-centralization and autocratic decision-making, such institutions should be structured so that policies and strategies would be open to public scrutiny, sufficiently flexible to be able to respond to changing needs and conditions, and accessible to the communities they serve through public participation in the implementation of solutions and development of innovative approaches.

37. No matter whether new institutions are formed or old ones revitalized, there will be a growing need for skilled professionals and administrators in all facets of human settlement planning and management. Training of such cadres will be a vital support activity to the elaboration of all human settlement activities. Most importantly, it is seen to be of paramount importance that training programmes stress the potentials represented by human settlements and the need for innovative, indigenous solutions.

38. Action regarding appropriate institutions should:

(a) Reflect the integrated approach to human settlement policies in correspondingly integrated institutions dealing with policy making, financial and technical aspects of human settlements;

(b) Encourage the reform of existing institutions and where necessary create new institutions to ensure participation of the public in decision-making and implementation of human settlement policies;

(c) Ensure through appropriate training programmes an adequate supply of personnel in human settlement institutions at national, regional and local levels as well as in the necessary professional and administrative disciplines.
