

A message for World Habitat Day 2010

Cities are the greatest legacy of humanity and the greatest achievement of our civilization. Around the world and through the centuries cities have endured and survived wars, famine, natural disasters, epidemics, crumbling empires, and the disappearance of the gods, kings and queens for whom they were built.

But we have to keep improving our cities, and doing that means making our cities better for those who live in them and for those yet to be born in a world that will be from here on forever urban. Today half of humanity lives in towns and cities, and the trends show that this figure will increase to two-thirds within the next two generations.

This is why the theme chosen for World Habitat Day, Better city, better life is so important to all of us. To that I would add the term smarter city, for it is only a smart city that can provide its citizens with a better life in our planet's new urban era. It is an era we are entering with many unknowns, especially when it comes to the global impact of climate change.

We have all the tools at our disposal in good science to mitigate against most such problems. We also have the tools and knowhow for good governance, education – especially for women and girls – health services, toilets for all, or energy efficiency.

We are smart, but we have to be smarter. And World Habitat Day 2010 is an occasion to highlight five strategic steps that can be taken:

1. ***Improve the quality of life***, especially for the estimated 1 billion people living in slums and other sub-standard housing around the world. Improved access to safe and healthy shelter, secure tenure, basic services and social amenities such as health and education are essential to a better life for every individual.
2. ***Invest in human capital***. This is a condition for socio-economic development and a more equitable distribution of the urban advantage. This will also enable cities and regions to implement policies more effectively and to ensure that they are properly adjusted to local needs.
3. ***Foster sustained economic opportunities***. Cities can stimulate sustained economic growth for the poor through labour-intensive projects. These include primarily public works and the construction industry. Cities in the developing world are starting to provide social security to give better access to economic opportunities for those traditionally excluded.

4. ***Enhance political inclusion.*** Today, more and more municipal and national authorities share the same basic philosophy: bringing government within the reach of ordinary people through enhanced mutual engagement. This means engaging people and their neighbourhoods in dialogue and participation in decision-making as a fundamental aspect of local democracy.

5. ***Promote cultural inclusion.*** Culture has historically been left out of the conventional international development agenda. More and more local development policies take into account the cultural dimensions of urban life, such as social capital, tradition, symbols, a sense of belonging and pride of place. This helps integrate ethnic minorities, preserve regional values, safeguard linguistic and religious diversity, resolve conflicts and protect the heritage.

As we move into a world of better cities with smarter policies, these are the five essential catalysts for success and a better life for all.



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