

From the United Nations: Habitat and the World Family Policy Forum

Anna Kajumulo Tibaijuka, executive director of UN-Habitat

[Delivered by Mariam Yunusa, senior human settlements advisor in Nairobi, Kenya.]

As we embark on the twenty-first century, we must be aware that for the first time in history we are becoming an overwhelmingly urban society. Half of the world's population already lives in cities. With the advent of globalization and the liberalization of trade, cities are becoming global engines of economic growth, loci of consumption and production, and centers of service provision. We have all witnessed the impact of this trend. On the positive side, we see a rebirth of cities and urban centers, celebrating both universal and local values of society as expressed by architecture, art, music, and culture. On the negative side, we must witness the decline of the equally fundamental values of equity and equality, be it between men and women, or the rich and the poor.

More families today than ever before live in absolute poverty. For UN-Habitat—the city agency—that means more families than ever before live without a secure and healthy place to sleep, work, recreate, or procreate. No less than one billion people are living on less than one U.S. dollar a day. These people do not have adequate shelter. How can these families and these children survive? What can we do?

First, we must realize that we are talking about the urban poor, both in developed and developing countries. We are witnessing nothing less than the urbanization of poverty, and increasingly those who happen to be most affected are women and children. Under the pressure of rapid urbanization, especially in developing countries, families are faced with challenges of survival. As governments are forced to divert resources to deal with exigencies of war, famine, crime, and disease—investments in community development, youth care, and family support systems dwindle.

When development is destabilized by conflict and instability prevails, family welfare is jeopardized and society is robbed of an essential building block for peace and prosperity. If we are to support and promote families, we must support women and children. If we are to make the world safer for children, we must make our cities safer.

For this reason, UN-Habitat has identified women, in particular single, female-headed households, as both a priority group and a benchmark by which to assess progress in meeting the goals of the Habitat agenda. In the vast majority of world cities, women, especially poor women, have no alternative but to combine reproductive and productive roles. They manage home, family, and neighborhood. Women, often single mothers, have become the de facto guarantors of

urban household livelihood and the custodians of the community. It has been shown that cities and urban neighborhoods work better if women are included in decision making. Conversely, we found in cities of developing countries a correlation between poor quality of service delivery and the absence of women in public decision making.

In striving to meet its goals of “sustainable urban development” and “shelter for all,” UN-Habitat) decided, in its Global Campaigns on Good Urban Governance and Secure Tenure, to pay special attention to women's involvement in local governance. In trying to meet the goal of ‘shelter for all,’ the campaigns promote equal access for women to land and property rights, credit and finance, and other basic services. We believe that these services are critical contributors to the success of any effort to improve living conditions on a lasting basis. By enabling and empowering women to gain access to these resources, we enable them to lead more productive lives, more effectively cater to the basic needs of children, family, household, and community. Families are stable, strong, and prosperous if their women, of all ages, are respected, educated, and empowered.

In the past five years, UN-Habitat has documented the best practices in improving the living environment. Numerous examples from around the world confirm that the empowerment of poor women results not only in reducing poverty, but also in improving environmental health, as well as contributing to the more effective use of resources. The most compelling examples are in the area of microenterprise. Poor women, from Bangladesh to Canada and from Brazil to Zambia have proven that they are capable of saving and of servicing loans at rates that render any conventional banker green-eyed with envy. When we look at the use of these loans beyond the initial stages of ensuring a source of income and basic economic survival, we see a sizeable proportion of resources being devoted to shelter and improvements to the environment.

In our efforts to support countries, cities, and communities in attaining more sustainable forms of urban development, the second goal of the agenda—urban governance—is a key entry point. Sustainable development is not just about the ecology or the environment. It is also about how decisions are made—by whom and for whom—and about building sustainable partnerships and engaging in effective forms of participation. Here again, our Global Campaign on Urban Governance considers the participation of women in

decision making a key indicator and benchmark for measuring progress. As the primary caretakers of children, women are best able to grasp the concept of using resources to ensure and sustain human life and livelihood. As principle actors in the home and community, women realize the critical importance of maintaining a balance between production and consumption—of planting trees and not just chopping them down.

Many of you have heard about Porto Alegre's participatory budget, a portion of which the city's capital expenditure budget is decided each year by the poor living in previously disenfranchised neighborhoods. A more careful analysis shows that women play a crucial and important role in setting priorities, mobilizing additional resources, and ensuring proper monitoring and implementation. The results are nothing short of amazing, in terms of improved water and sanitation, waste management, health, and education. Not only has the city of Porto Alegre been transformed in a few short years, but the participatory budget has been transferred to over seventy cities in the Latin American region, introducing new levels and degrees of transparency and accountability to local institutions and governance.

Implementing the Habitat agenda is about improving life in all of its diverse dimensions. The basic units of society are the family and the local community. Thus, these units are the ultimate beneficiaries of our efforts to improve air and water quality, environmental health and sanitation, transport and mobility, basic infrastructure and services, safety, and social justice. However, we have to realize that the family, in most rapidly growing cities and metropolises of the world, does not usually fit its conventional image in everyday literature.

In many cities of the developing world, single, female-headed households are no longer an exception but a significant part of the population. Even as the guarantors of their urban households, they suffer from discrimination and hardship due to a lack of resources. Single women who head households are often victims of poverty and civil strife. Many of them are refugees or survivors of conflict. Many of them are rural migrants who have lost their land and homes. Many of them are victims of HIV/AIDS. They remain the guardians of their children and their communities, without the resources to look after them. These women need our support in their daily struggles to maintain their families.

In our efforts to improve the living conditions of the poor, we have much to learn from the men and women who live in urban poor neighborhoods. They ask us not to teach them, but to help them eliminate the numerous administrative and legislative barriers and preconceived ideas that hinder them in their daily endeavors to provide for themselves and to gain a rightful voice in decisions that affect them. If we are to make our cities and communities more healthy, safe, equitable, and sustainable, we must learn to work with them and

not against them, as we have done—despite the best of intentions—in the past.

The Habitat II conference held in Istanbul in 1996 was the first global conference to open its doors to civil society. We cannot begin to make a difference without working hand-in-hand with our partners. We must decide how best we can compliment each other in changing policies and practices, in designing and implementing projects, and in learning from each other's experience. We can do nothing less if we are to make our world and our cities safer for children.