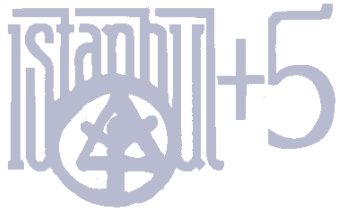


# URBAN MILLENNIUM

Special Session of the General Assembly  
for an Overall Review and Appraisal of the  
Implementation of the Habitat Agenda

NEW YORK, 6 - 8 JUNE 2001



## A voice for the voiceless

A MESSAGE FROM MRS. ANNA TIBAIJUKA,  
the Executive Director of UNCHS (Habitat)

*"In a room not thirteen feet either way, slept twelve men and women, two or three in bunks set in a sort of alcove, the rest on the floor."*

*These homeless children "are to be found all over the city ... where the neighbourhood offers a chance of picking up a living at daytime and of "turning in" at night with a promise of security from surprise. In warm weather a truck in the street, a convenient out-house, or a dug-out in a hay-barge at the wharf make good bunks."*

THESE QUOTES EASILY DESCRIBE CONDITIONS in slums and squatter settlements in any city in any developing country today, but, in fact, they were written over a hundred years ago by Jacob August Riis. Riis emigrated to North America from Denmark in 1870, and when he finally managed to get a job as a police reporter, he described the squalor and humiliation he had experienced in the slums and tenements of New York. Riis went on to become a leading social reformer, and his landmark book published in 1890, 'How the other half lives', inspired New Yorkers, including Theodore Roosevelt, to initiate long-needed reforms in providing housing and shelter for the poor.

Riis is not the only journalist to have given a voice to the homeless and to have fought for their right to better housing. In the 19th century, industrialization in Europe and America led to rapid urbanization. The

population of London went from about 800,000 in 1800 to over 6.5 million in 1900; during the same period, Paris grew from one-half to over 3 million; and by 1900 New York's population had swelled to 4.2 million. This explosion meant that the poor lived in dark, airless and unsanitary tenements, often without windows, where they were regularly exploited by rapacious landlords and politicians. With the advent of the mass media, the cause of the poor was taken up by many illustrious journalists and authors. Dickens, Mayhew and Zola, amongst others, wrote articles and novels that revealed to their readers the appalling conditions in human settlements. Such writers were instrumental in changing the policies of their time.

Today, over a hundred years later, the task is not over. At the start of the urban millennium, when over half of humanity will live in cities and towns, there is a pressing need for the public to be made aware of the problems of urbanization. Though rates of urbanization in the developed world and in Latin America and the Caribbean have stabilized at around 75 per cent or above, Africa and Asia – which are both still predominantly rural – face an explosive demographic shift, as their urban populations surge from about 35 per cent to over 50 per cent in the next 30 years. It is estimated that, between 1990 and 1995 alone, the cities in the developing world grew by 263 million people – the equivalent of another Los



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Angeles every three months. Every day there are an additional 180,000 people in cities and towns all over the world.

This process of urbanization must be viewed against the backdrop of globalization and the industrialization of the developing world. In today's international economy, cities are forced to compete with one another to attract capital. Local authorities everywhere are investing heavily in infrastructure and housing to attract multi-national investment. But evidence suggests that, even in cities like New York and London, globalization has led to an increasing polarization between the rich and the poor.

In the developing world, where migrants continue to flock to urban areas for jobs, the situation is worse. Over 50 per cent of the population in cities in the developing world lives in unplanned, spontaneous settlements and slums. It is also estimated that at least 36 per cent of all households, and 41 per cent of all women-headed households, live below the locally-defined poverty level. Though it is difficult to estimate, it appears that the urbanization and feminization of poverty have resulted in almost a billion poor people living in urban areas without adequate shelter and basic services.

Today, just as a century ago, there is a need for journalists to inform the public about the living conditions of the urban poor; to ask why such conditions continue; and to exchange ideas on possible solutions and proven best practices.

Istanbul + 5, the special session of the United Nations General Assembly that will be held in New York from 6 to 8 June

2001, is dedicated to raising awareness about the problems and prospects of urbanization. This is a critical time for the future of human settlements. The success of Istanbul + 5 depends as much on the participation of journalists as on Governments, representatives of local authorities and civil society actors like non-governmental organizations, the private sector and academic researchers.

As gate-keepers to the global and local media, journalists are essential partners in informing the world about the event and the issues involved. This is not just a matter of discussing the diplomatic background to the negotiations of international instruments in New York, it is about alerting local citizens to the conditions in their backyards and to what can and should be done to change them for the better. Important questions should be asked and answered: Have Governments delivered on the commitments made at Habitat II? If not, why not? We call on investigative journalists in the developed and developing worlds to find out more about the state of their cities and towns and the living conditions of the poor.

As Executive Director of the United Nations Centre for Human Settlements, I invite the media to join Habitat in the challenging task of ensuring adequate shelter for all and sustainable human settlements in the urban millennium. I call upon journalists to continue working in the tradition begun by people like Jacob Riis, Charles Dickens, Henry Mayhew and Emile Zola. We honour them best by giving a voice to the voiceless.

## Quotes by Executive Director:

*... The environmental future of the planet is closely linked to the management of our cities, towns and villages. ... The relationship between the environment and human settlements is like the proverbial chicken and egg paradox. ... Good environmental governance requires good urban governance and vice versa.*

*... We are in the business of promoting a culture of solidarity and inclusiveness in all human settlements. Cities will not become liveable places without learning from the solidarity which is practised in villages where everyone is provided for, however modestly. In my village, I never saw anyone sleeping under a tree.*

*... As humanity enters the 21st century – the urban millennium – a consensus is emerging that good governance will mean the difference between success and failure.*

*... There is a need for a sea change in the management approach of many city governments. We need a revolution in local government attitudes so that they become demand-driven and flexible, as opposed to bureaucratic and unresponsive.*

*... The welfare of over a billion people who are homeless or live without adequate shelter and basic services depends on the combined efforts of all our partners – Governments, local authorities, parliamentarians, non-governmental organizations and the private sector. Together we can improve the living conditions in our cities, towns and villages.*

*... The exclusion of the poor from the benefits of urban life is a daily reminder of the urgent need for greater social and civic responsibility.*

*... Partnership is indeed the key for successful implementation of the Habitat Agenda. ... It cannot be a matter of “our agenda versus theirs”. We must collaborate if we are to succeed.*

*... Poverty elimination starts with listening to the poor, fostering their initiatives and giving them a chance. Unless this is done poverty reduction efforts will continue to remain illusory.*

*... Good urban governance implies that Governments respond to and are accountable to all urban residents, including the poor.*

*... Globalization is making the 21st century the century of cities. The challenge is how to make cities a better place for the majority of the people.*

*... The poor are not just passive objects. Most often they are solving their own problems, but Governments are failing to recognize their efforts. Instead of harnessing their energy they are discouraging the poor from participating in the improvement of their own living conditions.*