



ECOSOC • Integration Segment (27–29 May, 2014)
SUSTAINABLE URBANIZATION

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**UNITED NATIONS
DIVISION FOR SOCIAL POLICY
AND DEVELOPMENT**

**Contribution to the
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Input on disparities within urban areas¹ from SPDB to the Note of the Secretariat

As the international community shapes its vision for the development agenda after 2015, it is important to emphasize that addressing inequality is not merely a moral imperative. Growing evidence and recognition exists of the powerful and corrosive effects of inequality on poverty reduction, economic growth, social cohesion and stability. Despite the comparative advantage of cities, urban areas are more unequal than rural areas. Social and economic conditions vary by city size. In general, larger cities (usually defined as those with a population of one million or over) are better served than smaller cities and towns in terms of social services and infrastructure, including safe drinking water, sanitation and electricity (National Research Council, 2003).

Within most cities and towns, high levels of wealth and modern infrastructure coexist with areas characterized by severe deprivation and lack of services in what UN-Habitat called the “urban divide” (UN-Habitat, 2010). Such a divide has economic, social and political dimensions. Economically, the Gini coefficient of income is larger in cities than in rural areas in the large majority of developed and developing countries, with the important exception of China (*ibid.*). Socially, rapid rates of urbanization combined with inadequate infrastructure have led to growing concerns about the urban poor, who, especially—despite achievements towards the Millennium Development Goals—often reside in slums, receive less in water and sanitation services and electricity than other urban residents (National Research Council, 2003).

Politically, persons from low-income households in both urban and rural areas have little or no political voice or formal representation, particularly if they live in settlements with no legal address. Differences in power, influence and access can reinforce the urban divide and tilt public investment towards the interests of the elite.

In order to strengthen the social sustainability of urban areas and address disparities within them, opportunities for decent jobs must be expanded along with efforts to promote social integration. In particular, greater investment is needed, especially in slum areas, in the provision of adequate and affordable housing, infrastructure and basic services, including in education, health, water and sanitation, as well in transport and ICTs.

A must for the sustainable development of urban areas is the need to recognize the specific needs of social groups, i.e. older persons, persons with disabilities, youth and indigenous peoples.

Older persons

With an unprecedented, progressive and irreversible global ageing trend, by 2050 older persons will account for more than 20 per cent of the world’s population. It is therefore crucial to reflect ageing and concerns of older persons in promoting sustainable cities that are environmentally sustainable, socially inclusive and economically productive.

¹ Based on: United Nations (2013). *Report on the World Social Situation 2013: Inequality Matters*. New York: Department of Economic and Social Affairs of the United Nations Secretariat.

There is broad agreement on the types of housing and community amenities that help older persons to live comfortably and remain active and engaged in wider society. These include, inter alia, dwellings that can accommodate those with limited mobility and strength, a clean and safe environment inside and outside the home, transportation that is both affordable and accessible, walkways in urban areas that are in good repair and free of obstacles, traffic signals that allow enough time for older persons to cross streets safely, places to rest outdoors, and public buildings that are accessible to those with limited mobility.

Youth

With over 1.8 billion young people in the world today, their number is at an all-time high today. Securing decent and affordable housing as well as access to urban infrastructure, education and employment is essential to the well-being of youth as they either establish themselves outside their family homes or as they move to urban environments as internal or international migrants.

Finding decent and affordable housing can be risky and time-consuming, affecting young people's health as well as their educational or employment prospects. Because youth and young migrants, particularly in developing countries, are often poor or have limited financial resources, cost and fear of exploitation are often major obstacles to securing decent housing.

Providing affordable and safe housing for youth in urban areas is indispensable to enable young people to take advantage of the opportunities cities offer in the areas of education, employment and development.

Persons with disabilities

More than 1 billion people around the world live with some form of disability². The expansion of urban areas serves as an unprecedented opportunity for the inclusion of persons with disabilities in all stages of urban planning. This universal aspect of disability and its relevance to all populations across national boundaries, generations, socio-economic status and different life stages require the rights and needs of persons with disabilities to be fully taken into account in planned urbanization to promote inclusive, productive and resilient cities. Accessibility must be an integral part of urban development policy and decision making, implementation and monitoring and evaluation, particularly in the areas of housing, public buildings and facilities, transportation, telecommunication systems as well as basic services such as health, nutrition, education, skill training and employment, social protection, R&D and dissemination of appropriate technologies.

Indigenous peoples

Like others, indigenous peoples are increasingly migrating to urban areas, leaving behind their traditional territories, cultures and extended families. Many are forced to leave their territories due to the militarization and conflict, climate change, natural resource extraction activities as well as poverty. In many cases indigenous peoples make up a disproportionately high number of slum dwellers. It is important that governments and urban planners cooperate with indigenous peoples to

² World Health Organization and World Bank, *World Report on Disability* (Geneva, 2011). Estimate based on 2010 population.

provide employment and economic development opportunities in urban areas. It is further important to ensure strong links between countries and regions of origin and destination, in order to ensure continuity in indigenous children's relationship with their families as well as their cultures and identities. Governments should, in cooperation with indigenous peoples, establish indigenous peoples' centers, bilingual schools in urban areas to address their medical and educational needs as well as to provide legal and other forms of assistance.